

# NEULAN

THE BEGINNING



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# PART I

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“Say it, reader. Say the word 'quest' out loud. It is an extraordinary word, isn't it? So small and yet so full of wonder, so full of hope.”

- Kate DiCamillo, *The Tale of Despereaux*



## Chapter 1

*IH330 A330, 37000ft, 480kts, flying over the Indian Ocean*

The passengers are settling in after a mid-flight dinner, some of them have opened up the folded blankets for a nap, some are quietly reading, while others scroll through the wide selection of movies provided by the in-flight entertainment package.

Five minutes later, the relaxed atmosphere turns into one of pandemonium when the airplane vibrates mid-air for a second before pitching downwards into a nose dive, without warning. The last message the Air Traffic Control receives from the IH330 is a Mayday distress call before it disappears off the radar.

## **351 days after the IH330 disappears, RECS ladies hostel**

An excerpt from Sid's original letter to the President:

Dear Mr. President,

Before this letter finds the pile of trash unread, let me quickly hope that it finds *you* in good health, sir, and dive right into the matter.

Sir, one of last year's top news stories was the disappearance of the IH330. As you know, throughout the year, the world has reportedly not left a single stone unturned in its search for the aircraft, scouring the seas, all the way from across the Indian Ocean to the China Sea. Sir, I know what happened to the aircraft. And I can tell you where it lies, at present.

It all started when Lexi joined our college, a whole month late. Right from the beginning, she was this enigmatic girl. Reserved and intelligent, she was different for a number of reasons:

- 1) She wasn't on Facebook (or any of the social networking sites)
- 2) She spent a whole lot of her time in the library reading about famous missing personalities! ~~(I found the second info through spy-work because you see I didn't want to appear too interested in her and thus put her off)~~
- 3) When she wasn't, in the library that is, she went around looking for danger.

It ends so because I tore out the rest and burnt it.

An excerpt from my own letter to *Ask Amy*:

Dear Amy,

Four months ago, I couldn't have imagined writing to an advice columnist. Not only because I am bad at writing letters, or anything emotional (my friends say that rocks show more emotion than me), but also because, for the then me, people who sought your help were self-assured losers. Loners who pitied themselves, youngsters who wanted to let the world know that they were depressed, and yet maintain anonymity.

I don't know if I was wrong or if I have become that kind of person.

But I write because I admire the sound advices you give on matters of the heart. I hope you will find time to read my story. And then to advise me, on how to deal with a one-sided love for someone, who is, literally, out of this world.

Please find attached the file containing my story, written from the day I started college, the biggest turning point of my teen years. Hoping to hear from you soon.

Regards,  
Alexcy

Of course, neither of the two letters was sent. It was just too risky.

### **358 days after the IH330 disappears, River's End Hospital**

Death...It's here. I know because of the memories.

They are being displayed one by one in reverse, each scene a split second long, the duration getting shorter. Or perhaps displayed in a haphazard way. I am really not too sure.

I have read somewhere, a hundred years ago, that you sort of take a sprint down memory lane when your end is near. So this is it, I guess.

The scene with the beast is playing now: It shuffled impatiently, twisting its huge neck and looking at me with menacing eyes. Something oozed out of its grimy mouth, and dribbled over its long canines. Hungry. For the beast I was not a human being, but most probably a piece of chunky raw meat.

Yet, as I stood facing the beast of my nightmares, fear topping the list of my senses, I was sure that if the myriad of thoughts that coursed through me could be summarized in a word, that word was not REGRET, (for my split-second decisions of the past few months that eventually had me knocking on death's very door, or for the very decision to pack my bags and come here, so far away from home), but the word was HOPE- hope that somehow I seemed to be on the right path.

Right path to where? I don't know.

Everything has a dark side. Even the best of saints have done something that they are ashamed to admit. But then the dark part is what

makes one a human. Or they wouldn't be here. They would be angels.

I know I must hold on to that thought. It's slipping away already. Who had said that...? What was that again...? What WAS I trying to hold on to?

Light is blaring against my closed eyes. I can feel it strive to come through. But I mustn't open my eyes now. There is a tugging from some part of my brain. "Lexi..." A voice from a tunnel calls out my name. Someone at the other end. His voice sounds familiar. There is something about the way he says it that I like. His voice echoes in the tunnel... Lexi...Lexi...Lexi..

The light is getting brighter. I shut them tight to hold on. A beautiful place. Wild and green and cold and fresh. The image is gone before I even try. I flinch at the next image of myself. I look grimy. Like I could use a good long bath. My hair is untied and all over my face. Yet his eyes are on me. Shining with admiration. I can only see the eyes now. I need to know... whose. They last a moment and they are gone. The light is now so bright that it aches to keep my eyes closed. Still, I strain. I can feel my eyelids quiver. It's hard to keep them closed. Any moment... But I must hold on. To what? A dark image of a formless thing, like a shadow, dances around against the brightness of the light, beckons me into the darkness. Against my will, my eyes open up letting in all the light that had been struggling for a way in. The dark image stays for a second before it disintegrates into thin air.

It takes a while for my pupils to get adjusted to the light. I blink several times before I can make out the faces peering at me from all sides. There is a woman in white. I try to focus on her face in an attempt to recognize who she is. No idea. My eyes move down to the stethoscope hanging loosely around her neck.

Am I at a hospital? I look around to make sure. Instead my eyes fall on the tall, dark boy on my right, peering down at me with tired looking eyes full of concern. Sid. Involuntarily, I smile at him. At least I try. I don't know if it did come across as a smile, or a morbid stretching of the lips in an attempt to smile. Whichever, Sid looks relieved and smiles back.

"Lexi?" The girl's voice is barely a whisper. I turn towards the voice. Before I see her I know who she is. Aisha. I reach out to her and she gives me her hand. That seems to put her at ease.

The doctor places a hand gently on my shoulder. "Sweetheart, what's your name?"

“Alexcy,” I croak. Embarrassed at my horrible sound, I clear my throat.

“Nice name!” She chimes, while she examines my eyes one by one. “Does it have a meaning?” she asks casually. “No,” I reply, just as a voice from a distant memory echoes the same question in my head, ‘What is the meaning of your name?’

Before I have time to ponder, the doctor says, “Tell me if it hurts,” as she touches my forehead, presses it gently. It doesn’t. I try hard to remember what I am doing here, unwilling to ask right away. I look around at the same time, searching. Sid casts a furtive glance at me.

“Where’s Mom?” I ask to no one in particular. If I am in a hospital she should be here. Maybe she hasn’t forgiven me.

The doctor gives me a wary look. “Um,” she sounds nervous, almost, “we haven’t notified her as yet... since you appear fine.” Again I try my best to recall what exactly had happened to me.

“Try to get up,” she says, a bit impatient, “so that we know for sure that everything is intact.” If that is a joke it is lost on all of us. I do as she says, my two best friends rushing to support me. Assuring them that I can manage, I walk across the room, getting steadier by the step. A light knock sounds on the door, and a second later Rhea barges in. She looks at the empty bed first. When she spots me across the room she runs to hug me.

“Easy,” warns the doctor.

Rhea stops a step away, looking questioningly at her. “She’s alright,” the doctor assured her. “Just be careful, that’s all.”

“Aaaalright,” Rhea said, placing a hand on her chest.

“You all can go now,” the doctor says, before she leaves. “I’ll send a nurse for the discharge formalities.” Casting a reassuring glance at me, she closes the door behind her.

My friends let out a collective sigh of relief. Rhea is the first one to speak. “So Madam,” she scolds, “Mind telling us what you were doing in the middle of the forest?” Her cropped hair looks ruffled, like she has forgotten to comb it. Yet, it accentuates her long face, giving her an intellectual look.

I don’t know what to say. I look at the three of them as they wait for my answer. Of the three faces, Sid’s was the most tensed.

“In the middle of the forest?” I repeat, feeling funny to confess that I had no clue as to what they are talking about.

“Yes, Lexi, you were found in the middle of the forest,” Aisha helps



out. Maybe she realizes that her guess is as good as mine here. Or maybe she just starts out so that I would follow her lead.

“I don’t know,” I say simply. Sid frowns while the other two give me dirty looks. “Oh no, you don’t!” Rhea says. No lying. Out with the truth.”

I squint my eyes and rack my brains. Rhea asks excitedly, “Were you meeting someone?” She wiggles her eyebrows up and down. “A guy?”

I shake my head. “I don’t know,” I insist.

Rhea turns serious. “Seriously?” she asks.

“Seriously,” I repeat, louder for emphasis. “I have NO idea.”

Three mouths go slack in front of me while three pairs of widened eyes fixate on me. “You are kidding, aren’t you Lexi?” Aisha says. Sid seems to be the only one with no questions. He just stands there looking shell shocked.

“No,” I say, irritated now. It is hard enough not to remember something so important without having to take blame for lying about it.

Aisha goes toward the door but Sid blocks her way. “Where are you going?” he asks.

“To inform the doctor,” she says.

“No!” Sid and I say together.

Aisha looks at the two of us as though we were crazy.

“Lexi,” she explains in a calm voice, “maybe you got a bump on your head that affected your memory. So let her just examine you, to be sure, you know.”

“Exactly, it’s probably just a bump,” I say, so not wanting to stay here another minute, “and I will remember everything once I am comfortably in my room.”

Aisha considers, pursing her lips. “Okay.” Sid lets out a visible sigh of relief. Not one to miss anything, Aisha watches him, thoughtful.

Rhea places her hands on her hips, turning to Aisha. “Okay, Miss Roly Poly,” she says “You have put on.” Aisha is on the healthier side, short and plump with a cute, round face while Rhea is lean and tall.

Aisha countered with, “Mom-made food for a month. How could I resist?” I do not know why she was at home for a month but I’m scared to ask. I will know when I remember. What I do know is that it is a privilege to be pampered by one’s Mom and not everyone is that lucky.

The hospital is pretty near our college campus so we walk. I am aware as I walk that I remember the premises pretty well. Yet, the beauty of the

campus with its pristine buildings and the tall well-maintained trees still take my breath away.

“Aisha,” Rhea says, pulling her, just as we crossed the main gate. “Just come with me to the store.” She grins at us. “I packed so quick when I heard about Lexi getting hospitalized that I forgot my toothbrush back home.”

Aisha rolls her eyes. “Rhea, you always forget your toothbrush.”

Something strikes me as I see Rhea grin and I ask, “Where’s Ryan?” It’s only a second after I ask that I remember that Ryan is her twin brother. They are almost always together. The others look simultaneously at me, as though relieved to see that my memory is slowly coming back after all. So am I, to be honest.

“At a Science Camp,” Rhea says, pulling her mouth to one side of her face, clearly unhappy about it. Pushing her sunglasses over her hair, she goes into the store, followed by Aisha.

Sid and I continue on our way to the ladies hostel in silence. Far away, quite near the hostel gate, I can see a tall guy, leaning against one of the oak trees lining the roadside. He seems to be looking straight at us. Squinting, I try to make out his face. A sense of *déjà vu* strikes me. Hasn’t the same thing happened to me before this? Urghh! It’s exasperating not to remember.

I am acutely aware that Sid keeps glancing at me every now and then. We are now only a few feet away from the guy under the tree. He is very tall, with chiseled features. I stare right back, taking in his wavy hair, brown eyes, straight nose. No, I don’t know this guy, I tell myself.

Yet, I am curious. Why does he stare so, making me conscious of myself? I tuck a strand of my unkempt hair behind my ear but it flies out again. I turn to Sid, whispering, “Do you know that guy?”

Sid stops in his tracks. He stands still for a while, his face blanched, looking nowhere in particular. Confused I stop too. And then he does the strangest thing. He turns on his heels and walks away, leaving me open-mouthed. I consider following him, demanding an explanation, but give it up. Maybe when I remember things better, I might understand all this.

I turn around, steeling myself, towards him, the guy under the oak. Should I ask him who he is? Or should I act as if I know him, so that...But he’s gone! Quickly scanning the area to make sure he is not around, I move forward and cross the open gate of the ladies hostel compound.

I have a slow shower, thinking hard all the time about what I could have been doing alone in the forest. Later, I sit on my single bed, leaning my back against the wall, deep in thought. My hope is that a lot of dedicated thought would make something click, revealing everything that's connected, like a single loose thread that unravels the whole fabric when pulled.

Aisha slips in quietly, shutting the door behind her.

"Hey," she whispers, sitting beside me, "How are you now?"

I smile at her, mouthing OK.

"Um.. any progress on the memory front?"

I shake my head No.

"We met Sid on his way back after dropping you off," she says, not meeting my eyes. "He was so shocked to see that you have forgotten Jay."

So Jay is his name- the mysterious guy under the tree. I figure as much. Lest my friend be alarmed so much that she decides to drag me back to a doctor, I decide to lie.

"I remember Jay," I say without batting an eyelid.

Her eyes wide, Aisha hugs me tight, chanting, "Thank God Thank God Thank God!" She pulls away to look at me. "You had us all worried sick. But now I'm relieved. Everything else should come back within an hour or two." She pats me on my head in a motherly way. It feels so good that I am ashamed that apart from her name, I don't remember any of the moments that we shared. Or how we first met. All I know is that she is a very close friend. Of course I don't tell her this.

She continues, "You sleep now. A good night's rest can go a long way." She tucks me in my quilt while she talks, something even Mom has never done. "You want to look fresh," she goes on, "when college reopens tomorrow after the Winter Holidays." Something heavy creeps up into the centre of my very being and stays there.

Winter Holidays came and went??? I joined on the 1<sup>st</sup> of September. What happened in the last 4 months?

## Chapter 2

To re-confirm, because I am sure that I have heard her wrong, I say, “What is the date today, Aisha?”

She doesn’t seem to think much of that or if she does, she doesn’t show it. Maybe she doesn’t, because to ask the date is pretty common even among those who have their memories – and sanities - intact. Unlike me. She replies, “January 5<sup>th</sup>,” smiles and leaves, closing the door softly behind her, while I stare ahead, wondering. My mind right now is like one of those puzzle books with pages and pages of questions, and a missing answer page.

Two of the prominent questions that I keep querying myself, again and again, are - who is Jay and how is he related to me. But the only memory I have of him is seeing him under the oak tree today – not only looking like a Greek God but proving he has powers too by vanishing into thin air.

I wake up much later to a scratching noise. I lie still, my ears perked up. It is dark and the noise seems to be coming from my room itself. I scramble on the bed on all fours, switching on my table-lamp. Greek God stares back at me, one hand in my bag, without an ounce of guilt for what he seems to be doing.

“What are you doing?” I ask. Stupid question perhaps since it is obvious that he is searching for something. On second thoughts, a comparatively clever question, asking him what he is doing, considering that I have no idea what *I* have been doing all these days.

I get off my bed, standing up. Not bothering to answer, he turns to leave, looking furious. Act like you know him, commands my mind. “Jay,” I call out immediately. He stops.

“You remember?” he says cautiously. I nod. The play of emotions on his face is something to watch... cute, actually. He walks towards me, his gait uncertain, stops and swallows. It’s weird that I know nothing about this guy and yet a spark is coursing through my body, leaving a tingling sensation in its wake.

He crosses his arms. “Why did you leave like that?” His tone has a hint of accusation.

“I had to,” I say with confidence, playing along, eager to snatch some clue about my past.

“Anyway, happy that you...I thought I had lost...” he went on, his stammer eating away at some of his words. “Which leaves us with a problem... as massive as the airplane itself. Everything has been sanctioned. But if they find out that you remember...” Finally he manages to say three full sentences together and it makes absolutely no sense, either. I blink at him in confusion. Airplane? What problem? He looks at me apprehensively, waiting for it to click.

“Oh,” I say, wondering what else to do to keep him going, revealing it all.

He frowns, taking two steps closer. Now he is so close that I can hear his breath as it comes in quick bursts. Tipping my head up with his finger, he looks searchingly into my eyes. I avert them, flushing, jerking his hand away.

He lets go of me, seething with anger. “You don’t,” he whispers, taking an accusatory tone again, as if it is my fault that I don’t remember. In one quick motion, he turns and jumps out of the window. By the time I lean out to watch how he is going to climb down, he’s already disappeared. I swallow my disappointment and shut the window. Shaking for no reason at all, I sit down for a while, trying to grasp the significance of what he had just said. Seemingly, a lot of unusual things have happened in the past few months, and apparently it has culminated into my losing my memory. Was I involved in a physical fight of some sort, that had resulted in me hitting my head somewhere, and blacking out? I dismiss the possibility as being too bizarre. And yet, I couldn’t shake off the feeling that I had not had a normal life for the past few months.

Getting nowhere, I switch track. Aisha had said that classes commence tomorrow after the month long Winter Break. Instead of wasting time mulling over the cryptic talk of a forgotten boy, I get busy dusting my books and packing them into a hobo bag (that I don’t remember buying) according to the time-table. I would rather use my back-pack, but it looks like it had been dragged on the ground in heavy rain. I know I never say no to an adventure, but I wish I knew how I had managed to do that. I open my cupboard then, to pick out a dress for tomorrow. I have never really been a dressy person, so choosing what to wear has always been easy. In fact I just slip into anything that my hands fall on and bundle out in a hurry, garnering disgusted looks from Mom. But not once does she say, ‘Lexi, go change that.’ Or ‘Lexi, what the hell are you wearing?’ Which suits me fine.

Pushing thoughts of Mom away, I concentrate on the clothes hanging

in front of me. I frown as I pull out a skirt. The floral printed flowing number is definitely not mine. I rummage through the others. Frocks, sequined Kurtees, Salwar suits, classy tops ugh! Where are my cargo pants and tee shirts? My overalls? I open a bottom drawer and find them all there, tucked away into a corner. I pull them out, ignoring the slightly dusty smell.

Stashing the girly dresses away, I rearrange my entire wardrobe. By the time I finish ironing, I can see the sky has changed into a deep purple colour. The dawn of a new day fails to bring about any joy. Because the way I see it, I am still stuck in the dark.

I can feel eyes on me as I walk to college. Boys and girls turn around to take a good look at me, their eyes sweeping over me. I hold my head high as I pass, heading straight to class. Aisha catches up from behind me, panting.

"I couldn't recognize you from behind, at first," she complains. "What's with the change of wa..?" She looks at my face and stops. I stare back at her, trying hard to read her expression so that I'm prepared for whatever she has to say. Surprise. That's what I see.

To make light of the situation, I say, "Have they revised the rules of etiquette around here?"

Looking a bit lost, Aisha asks, "Why?"

"Isn't it rude to stare anymore? First the others, all the way down till here, and now you." I purse my lips in mock ridicule.

Aisha doesn't smile though. Instead, she holds my hand and walks away from the crowded lobby. Our college mates make way for us, some of them whispering conspiratorially. We step outside in between the main block and ours. She faces me, ignoring a gang of boys who are laughing hard as they catch up on the past month.

"Something is up," she says, narrowing her eyes. "You," she points significantly at me, "are acting weird."

It is time now. There is no point hiding it from my friends anymore.

I take a deep breath. "OK," I say as I exhale. "Except for your names, the campus, the professors, I seem to have forgotten EVERYTHING."

Aisha scrunched her eyes in disbelief. "What do you mean?" she demanded.

"I mean I don't remember any event of the past months. The last memory I have is of stepping down the train at River's End, on the first day. After that, everything is blank." Even as I say it, I know it is a crazy situation to be in.



Aisha puts her right hand behind her head. She looks like she might scream. “No wonder,” is all she says, though.

“What?” I ask.

“The cargos, the tee with the rebellious quotes, eyes lined heavy with kohl,” She gestured wildly with her hands as she spoke. “Lexi, you are back to how you landed here first!”

“You mean I had changed?” I looked down at my dressing. I can’t imagine wearing anything else. I have always dressed like this since high school.

The bell rings making her jump.

She says, “Time for class now. Meet up at our usual....Oh!” She realizes mid sentence that everything needs to be refreshed for me now. “I mean meet up on the stairs behind our block.” Unsure herself on how to handle a case like mine, she looks elsewhere, adding, “That’s where we hang out, every day,” before rushing to her class.

By the end of the day, I am aware of one more peculiarity in my memory lapse. I remember everything that I studied in the past months. I am able to answer all the revisional questions that the professors throw our way. The only one that leaves me baffled is, “What were you doing in the forest that day, my child?” Mr Vida, our Mechanics Professor and College Head of Department for Physics, is the one who voices out the question that seems to be written on the other faces around me.

“Um...I don’t know Professor,” I reply, feeling utterly stupid. A few of my classmates exchange looks, while the others snigger at my answer. Mr. Vida peers at me for a moment over the golden rim of his spectacles, before he claps the class back to attention.

On my way to the so-called hang out point, I see him against the far wall. Jay. Staring at me like he had yesterday. As I pass him I lock eyes with him, but what meets my eye is the torment in his eyes. The sight of him seems only to add to my woes. And yet, I wish I could say with certainty that I do not want to meet him anymore. There is an inexplicable sense of security when he is around.

Aisha and Rhea are already by the stairs, talking quietly. They stop when I join them, and I know they were most probably plotting a scheme to take their psychotic friend to the clinic. Sid joins in, a second after I settle down. He sits down beside me, still looking forlorn.

Her expression carefully neutral, Aisha informs the other two about

my condition. I can tell from their reaction that it has been discussed already. Rhea suggests that we consult an elder but I wave it off, requesting a few days time. Call it intuition, but I know this had better be between us. Sid only asks if I remember Jay, to which I say no, and Aisha shoots me a glare for lying to her yesterday. Rhea points out that in a way it's a good thing that I don't remember what I was doing in the woods that day. "She could be dismissed for it," she tells Aisha.

"Why?" I want to know.

"It's off-limits for students," Aisha explains. "Now even more so, what with all the weird sightings and the eerie sounds."

"Oh you know that's crap. Some of our buddies do have wild imaginations," Rhea says. The conversation stirs up something at the back of my mind. But like before, I can't place it. I feel like someone who has blacked out on the day of an important exam.

"We'll think of something," Rhea gives me a reassuring smile. She glances at her watch. "Shane wants to meet up in an hour. So let's go to the canteen and get a bite by then. My stomach is grumbling like an old woman." She then looks at me questioningly. I understand her implication and assure her that I know Shane is her boyfriend. Inside me I go Whew!

The 4 o'clock news is on the television screen at the canteen. We order sandwiches and tea. While we wait for it to arrive, a feature program begins. It is about the international airline that has been missing, the IH330. It had vanished, mid-flight, into thin air. The whole canteen becomes quiet as images of the plane are displayed on the screen with the headlines - 'Almost a year now. One of the biggest mysteries of the world remains unsolved.' I can't believe it's already been a year. I do my mental math. Of course it's been a year. The IH330 had disappeared around 8 months before I joined college.

I remember how the news had rocked the world and how we had all remained glued to the television screen at home, waiting for some positive development. Apart from a few plausible theories, there had been no information about the whereabouts of the aircraft or why it had suddenly gone off radar while flying over the Indian Ocean. I realize then that Sid is staring at me with a weird expression. Rhea catches it too and says, "Lexi, you do remember the incident, don't you?"

"Yes," I say. She turns to Sid, "She remembers that. Now quit the pathetic stare." She pokes him on his side playfully. He forces a smile.

When Rhea and Aisha move to the washroom, Sid turns to me.

“The airplane,” he whispers gesturing towards the TV, as soon as he is sure that they are out of hearing range. “How come it is still missing? Lexi, do you remember anything concerning that?” There is an urgency in his voice while his eyes keep darting around. “This could be important,” he adds.

I shake my head, baffled to the core. What airplane?

I swallow. “Concerning what? The IH330?” I ask, feeling totally stupid.

Sid rolls his eyes. “Of course. What else?”

I peer into his eyes to see if he is being sarcastic. His eyes are serious, though.

Jay’s words of the day before hit me then. ‘Which leaves us with a problem as massive as the airplane itself.’

Could they be talking about the same thing?

If so, in some way, I am linked to the missing plane. But what it implied still made absolutely no sense. Jay had said that if I remember everything then we have a huge problem. He had also talked about something being sanctioned.

I decide that it is not necessary to pass to Sid my little talk with Jay. Instead I say, “Maybe if you share what you know, it can help me remember.” Pitiful as it may sound, I really do not have anything smarter to say. If there is something worse than not being able to remember things from your own past, it is the lack of self confidence that accompanies it. How can you speak in confidence when your knowledge is limited, because you have forgotten it? I am reminded of a thought-for-the-day that I had shared with my class in school long long back - It is better to keep quiet and be thought a fool than to open your mouth and remove all doubts. Again, it is funny that I remember all the ancient stuff but have forgotten the recent. Like an old lady. I cringe.

Sid shakes his head, glancing around like he was an undercover cop. “I can’t,” is all he says, before we are joined by the other two.

While they sit with their eyes glued to the feature on TV, I am trying to deal with my own mental turmoil. How I could possibly have anything to do with an international airline that seems to have disappeared at a point miles away from where I am is driving me crazy. To add to my irritation, Sid is looking increasingly constipated. Finally he excuses himself. The ever-faithful Aisha stands up in concern as he prepares to go. “Are you feeling

alright?” she asks, touching his forehead to check his temperature. He mumbles something and walks off. Aisha gives a long look at his retreating back before turning back to the TV.

The TV screen now shifts focus to an elderly woman, who repeatedly dabs at her eyes with a handkerchief as she speaks. In a broken voice, she speaks of how next Sunday would mark a year since she had seen her 20 year old son, ever since he had boarded the plane. She adds teary eyed that she is still confident that he is somewhere out there and that he will be back soon.

Aisha dabs at her own eyes as she watches the old woman. “I remember her interview from last year, when it had just happened. She was beyond control.” Rhea holds her in a bear hug, shaking her from side to side. I look away at the entrance of the canteen, wondering what my Mom would have to say about the scene. Girls tend to have, and show, emotions, she would say, unlike you Lexi.

Mom sees me as an unemotional detached kind of girl. Am I like that? I must be. I have always sucked at self-analysis as well.

Immersed in my thoughts, I am only vaguely aware of the lanky guy by the canteen door. It is only when Rhea cries “Ryan!” and runs to him that I realize he has been standing there all along, as still as a statue. Aisha and I follow her to meet him. Rhea hangs on to his arm like a small child. Though they look identical, no pair of twins can be as different in character as Ryan and Rhea. While she is bubbly and bold, Ryan is nerdy and shy. Right now, as Rhea prattles on about how she missed him during the holidays because of his Science Camp, Ryan’s eyes find mine. The unmistakable contempt in his eyes unsettles whatever little had settled in me. It is only a fleeting glance but it gives me goosebumps at the nape of my neck. After that he turns casual, inquiring mostly about the feature on the airplane that was still running on TV, but I couldn’t help notice a certain guardedness.

“What’s up with Ryan?” I ask Aisha as we walk back together to the hostel. Rhea had coaxed him to join her and Shane out on a drive.

Aisha shrugs. “He has changed a lot since I first met him. I mean he had always been obsessed with his gadgets and his computer. A total geek he is. But he was very close to Rhea. If he was not fiddling with a machine, he was with his sister. And then, when Rhea started going out with Shane, he would go missing for long periods. He started bunking a lot of classes even. Wouldn’t even tell Rhea what he was up to. And now, look at him. Totally aloof.”

“Does Rhea regret it? I mean being responsible for his change?”

Aisha takes her time to answer. “I have never asked her but I don’t think so. She considers Shane as the best thing that’s happened to her. He is very sweet. And he loves her to bits.”

I nod, unable to shake off from memory the look of intense dislike that Ryan had given me.

“What was my relation with him?” I ask, trying to appear casual. Aisha looks taken aback. “You guys were OK.” she frowns. “Why do you ask?”

“Nothing,” I lie. “Just asked.”

That night, after my bath and dinner, I sit down to make a list of the things I remember and the things I don’t. It is starting to worry me that maybe it was not just a bump in my head that caused my memory lapse. If the reason was a bump, it is high time I start remembering. Being more of a spontaneous person rather than a planner, I have a tough time making lists. But I persevere, because, paradoxically speaking, lists help remember things.

Once I am done my amateurish list looks like this:

List 1 -I remember:

- a. My name – Alexcy
- b. My family – Mom and my kid bro, Don. Dad who had been a scientist passed away when I was young (OK he had disappeared, one fine day, but he has been missing for so long that he was long proclaimed dead)
- c. My school-life in Dublin. Very few friends, Freak, unpopular
- d. My decision to join Mom and Dad’s Alma Mater after high school, upsetting her
- e. My friends – Sid, Aisha, Rhea, Ryan, Shane and Varun
- f. My professors at college and matron at hostel
- g. Lessons and information gained

List 2 -I forgot:

- a. Everything that happened after I joined college

- b. Jay
- c. Why Ryan hates me
- d. My connection with the missing plane

Of course c and d in list 2 are redundant in a way, as they can easily come under a. b stands out for being the lone case of a forgotten friend. On second thoughts, who knows who else I have forgotten. A chill runs down my spine.

Needless to say, my very first attempt at making a list is an utter flop. I fold up the paper and throw it in the trash, switch off the lights and lie down. Maybe if there is no light to distract me, I can explore the darkness inside me. When I try hard to think of my past, I am hit by a mind numbing ringing in my ears that is irritating. I give it up letting my mind wander, instead.

I think of Sid. He knows something but he will say nothing. God knows why. Aisha and Rhea appear as clueless as me. Ryan looks like he is hiding a deep dark secret of his own. Going by the look he gave me, he would be the last person to tell me anything. That leaves me with Jay. He knows, but whether he would tell me or not is another matter. Judging by his conflicting behavior towards me, I couldn't count on him, but then it was worth a try.

I keep the window open, hoping that he would drop in like yesterday. Technically, chances are high as he had not found what he was looking for. I wait in the dark. He doesn't show up though.

He is nowhere to be seen in college either, the following day. Dejected, I walk to our hang out point and wait for my gang. Aisha comes alone and plops herself heavily beside me. After inquiring about my health she says, "Lexi, I was reading about types of memory loss on the internet. It seems not being able to remember what happened right before an accident is a common thing, if you have hit your head. Concussion is another reason for memory loss but then we can rule it out because the doctor had said you were fine after the examination. So my guess is that something happened in the forest that caused you to hurt your head."

While she talks, I do what I am best at, these days at least— I stare blankly at her, unable to say yes or no. In fact I am such a pro at it that it won't be long before I am labeled 'The girl with the empty stare'. UGH!



Feeling revolted with the possibility, I decide to take an effort. I say, "Thanks Aisha... You could be right... but I wonder if...um... memory loss of my kind is common, even. I mean I have forgotten only the past few months. Only the *events* of the past few months. Except for Jay, who seems to be the only person who has slipped out of my memory. I have this feeling that if only I can catch hold of something... important, something connected, everything else would automatically unravel itself."

Aisha looks deep in thought. She looks up suddenly. "Check your phone, Lexi," she says, "maybe you will find a message or a photo that could be a clue."

My hand sticks to my forehead. "My phone! I don't even know where it is!"

"Let's go search for it," she says. We both head for the hostel. On the way, she tells me that she misses the time we used to spend together during the first term at our hang out.

"Where is everyone else, today?" I ask.

"Rhea is out on a date. Her brother, no idea. Sid is unwell. I had messaged him. I wish Varun would just get back," she sighs.

"What happened to Sid?"

"Loosies it seems," Aisha says. "But I doubt. He has been acting weird ever since you were discovered in the middle of the woods."

"Why?"

She winks in answer.

"What?" I prod.

"He has always had a soft corner for you," she says, as if that should be obvious. It takes some time for that to sink in. Sid has feelings for me? My own story only seems to get more complicated as things are revealed.

Together, we comb my room for my mobile phone. Several minutes later, we sit exhausted on my bed but my phone is still not to be found. We try ringing on my number but the automated voice message tells me that it is switched off.

"Maybe you have just misplaced it, Lexi. Think of places where you might have kept it." That helps. I open the laundry basket and empty its contents. The hooded t-shirt that I had dumped into it on getting back from the hospital lay on top of the heap. I retrieve the phone from its

pocket, and hand it to Aisha, with a jubilant smile.

## Chapter 3

With shaking hands, she presses on the power button and then moans in despair. “It’s dead. Charge it.”

While I connect the phone to a cable, Aisha goes to her room to change, promising to be back in a jiffy.

I dump the dirty clothes back in the laundry basket. Before the hooded t-shirt goes in, I check its pockets again. Empty. Having felt a lump when I had patted it, I re-check. The pockets are clean. It is only then that I remember about the inner pockets. I dig my hand into the pocket in the inside part and pull out the lump that I had felt. It is a small silver coloured cylindrical object, as small as a bottle cap, almost like a coin.

When Aisha comes in I show it to her. She turns it around in her hand quizzically and I know that she is equally in the dark. We then switch on my mobile and I check my messages folder. It is empty. I open the photo album, which shows up ‘You have 0 photos.’ Aisha takes the phone from dumbstruck me and searches my contact list. Again the same result. No contacts. Aisha tells me that I had downloaded the Whatsapp application on my phone. However my phone at present is devoid of any apps. It was as if my phone has been carefully stripped of all its data. For a while we both sit lost in thought.

Finally Aisha says in a low voice, “Lexi, this is just getting creepier.”

“I know,” I say, “Picture this - I don’t know who or what I’m up against. I don’t even know if I need to be scared or not.”

“We need to find out, Lexi. Someway or the other,” Aisha says with determination. I was surprised by the quiet courage my best friend possessed. Perhaps I myself was prejudiced by her salwar-clad simple girl image. We judge people all the time by their outer appearance, the clothes they wear, the way they speak, and we tend to be so assured of our judgment that we sometimes fail to see what they are like within. Like Aisha. She never shows it, but if you need her, she is there. Standing by you like a rock.

“But how? Where do I start?” I ask with renewed enthusiasm.

“Sid,” Aisha says. “He will do anything for you. You just have to command.”

I give her a look of shock. “You mean to suggest that I use him?” I say, though I am not as shocked as I sound.

“What’s there? He will enjoy it anyway.”

“Hmm. A chance to show off my acting skills. Sounds interesting,” I wink at her.

It is wrong. Definitely wrong. Planning to act coy to get our job done. But sometimes when girlfriends get together the lines of righteousness begin to blur and small acts of mischief seem okay. “Let’s discuss with our gang tomorrow,” she adds, “and don’t forget to take clue number one with you – that coin like thing.” Aisha seems to be in full sleuth mode. I am not so sure about our chances of finding anything though.

Sure enough, the next day by the stairs, none of the others have a clue as to what 'clue number 1' is so I place it back carefully into my bag.

Our plan too had started off all wrong. “Sid,” I had asked as soon as he had settled himself beside me, “How are you feeling today?” Aisha had started sniggering at this. That happened to drive home the plan that we had so deviously put together. I couldn’t do it then- couldn’t even talk normally to him, for fear of it appearing all fake. Something that had been alright yesterday felt horribly wrong today. I chuck the plan and feel much better.

Sid is looking like his old self, the quirky guy I had met at the station on my way to college on Day 1. I bet Sid thinks I am the quirky one.

“What are you smiling for, Lexi?” Sid asks.

“I was thinking of the way we first met, ironically the last thing on my memory,” I say quite honestly. Aisha looks up at the sky, suppressing a smile and I wish I could tell her that I am just being myself, and not the femme fatale that I was supposed to be.

“Sid,” I say, standing up, “I want to remember everything. It’s scary and it’s irritating not to.” He follows suit, brushes the dust off his back. As we slowly walk away from the others, I tell him about my phone. He doesn’t seem surprised. In fact he appears quite calm today.

“Lexi,” he says, pausing significantly. “I don’t deny that I know... a few things about what *might* have led to your... condition. But, like I told you before, I can’t tell you. I... am not allowed to. Some things had better be left alone. I suggest that you forget about it.”

I glare at Sid, but it looks like the pun ‘forget about it’ when my problem itself was that I had forgotten about it all, had really been unintended.

“It’s only the events that you have forgotten,” he shrugged. “We are there to help you remember them.” He gently hits his head playfully against mine. “Think about it,” he says. “If you are still hell-bent on figuring out immaterial things of your past, then we’ll think of a way.”

I do think about it. The whole day and the whole night. Needless to say, Aisha is against it. Still, I give it a good thought. Sid was right in a way. It is useless to dwell on the past. Past is past. Besides, there are two distinct ways of dealing with a nagging problem. Either solve it or get used to it. In fact *if* you can’t solve it, get used to it. Once you manage to do that, it becomes something that nags you in the back of your mind only.

Having decided that, I mentally prepare myself to concentrate on my studies – for my present and my future. We also have fun by the stairs, with Varun back in town after his cousin's wedding and Sid having gotten completely back to normal. I keep seeing Jay once in a while, in the distance, staring as usual. His demeanor reminds me of the literary character Heathcliff. Except that this Catherine Earnshaw does not ignore him for being below her, she just doesn’t remember him. Maybe I give myself more importance than I deserve, but the picture of having lead roles in a Wuthering Heights scenario with him as H and me as C is highly amusing.

One problem that keeps gnawing at my insides still is Ryan. He joins us at times but he always keeps quiet. And it is pretty obvious that he despises me. Another problem is Mom. Aisha asks me once, a little gingerly, why I would not keep in touch with Mom. Totally feeling averse to talking about it, I tell her that we are not close, that we have never been for that matter, and leave it at that. Aisha is quiet for a while. Then she says, “Lexi, sometimes we have to show our emotions, you know, or people wouldn’t know, that you are actually a gem of a person. Strong, and fearless on the outside, yet so sensitive on the inside.”

I am not sure about that, but it certainly feels good to be considered so.

She continues, “So go on, talk to your Mom. Message her often. Ask after her health. Show her that you care. She’s a mother and there’s

nothing more that a mother wants than the love and attention of her children. As the cliché goes, do it now or you will regret it when she's gone."

"If I do all this suddenly, she will be a goner," I say, laughing. Making light of the situation was an attempt to try to put it off. But Aisha wouldn't have it. She takes my phone herself and messages her. At first Mom's replies are monosyllables, then slowly, over the next few days, she starts to come around. We are not the best of friends yet, but at least we are cordial now, thanks to Aisha. So, I am at peace with myself. Until the fight.

It happens when we are returning from a day out. Sid, Aisha, Rhea, Shane and I had gone to the town to try out this cool place that serves awesome tea and snacks. While on our way back, Rhea who is driving, slams on the breaks, making us all experience a moment of inertia and bang our heads hard on the seats.

Heedless to our confusion, she jumps out of the car and runs to the other side. What we see when we lean out has us all scrambling out too. Jay has Ryan pinned to a wall, hanging by the neck a few inches high. Rhea, followed by the rest of us try to push him off, as Ryan struggles to breathe. "Leave my brother alone, you bully!" Rhea shouts while trying to pry Jay's fingers away. Jay doesn't budge, a murderous look in his eyes. Finally Sid places a hard blow right on the side of Jay's face making him stagger, thereby letting go of Ryan's neck.

"Are you out of your mind?" Sid shouts at Jay, while Ryan chokes and rubs his neck.

Jay regards him coolly. "He deserves it," he replies.

"Oh really," Sid sneers. "What about you, then? Who will give *you* what you deserve?"

Jay was clearly losing his temper again. "What did I do to you?"

"Not to me," Sid says, "To Lexi." I had not expected to be dragged in this. I glower at Sid.

Jay, on the other hand, advances towards Sid. "I will never harm her. *She* knows that," he says. Yes, I know. I blink twice. Do I?

"You can say that because she doesn't remember," Sid says, closing in, shoving Jay. Taken by surprise, Jay trips backwards, almost falling. Regaining his balance, he charges like a bull that sees a moving cape. Without thinking, I jump in the middle facing Jay, pushing Sid



back. Jay stops and our eyes lock, his shining daggers, mine pleading in silence. Finally, after what seems like an eternity, he turns on his heel and storms off. Sid curses under his breath while we disperse. Before being led away by Rhea, Ryan, still clutching at his neck, turns his head to look at me. The menace in his eyes is enough to curdle the blood.

“What was all that about?” Aisha says when it’s just us, everyone else having gone their separate ways. If her intention is to get a logical answer, she is asking the wrong person. But it isn’t. It is supposed to be an exclamatory statement to signify her incredulity at having witnessed an actual fight among our friends.

I say, “I don’t know but I have to find out. Especially since I seem to be involved.”

“Do you have a plan?” Aisha wants to know.

“Jay,” I say.

Looking dubious, Aisha gives me the thumbs up anyway, because she clearly had not been happy when I had given it up following Sid’s advice. She sends me his mobile number and I message him to meet me outside campus, near the college main gate where the woods begin, at 6 am the next morning, the venue and timing so chosen such that it’s easier for Jay to explain without being overheard. He takes a while to reply an Ok.

I am there at a quarter to 6 and there is no sign of Jay. I wait under one of the wider trees, devoid of any fear but alert all the same. 10 minutes past 6 and still no Jay. I start pacing up and down. Suddenly, he lands in front of me from above, making me jump. I look up at the tree from which he seems to have jumped. It is quite high.

“Sorry to make you wait,” he says in a dry voice. I wait for an explanation. “There was someone by the gate,” he says hesitantly.

“Oh! I didn’t see anyone.”

He looks up at the tree. “Logic. The view from up there would be better than the one from here.”

“Point,” I say, not wishing to start an argument.

He folds his hands as if to get to the point without wasting his time. It is then that I realize my stupidity. I am not prepared. I had spent all my waking hours yesterday thinking about the fight. Sid’s flare up, the certainty with which Jay had declared that I know that he would never harm me, and Ryan’s look. Perhaps deep in my subconscious mind, I trust Jay, or I

wouldn't be here, especially after Sid had accused him of lying.

Where do I start? There's so much to know.

Jay sighs impatiently, offering no help.

"Okay," I say, having caught hold of a starting point, "I only want to know how I am linked to the missing airplane AND to your fight yesterday." I look him straight in the eye. I can see amusement dancing in them.

"What?" I ask, miffed that he seems to be taking it light.

"You are too smart for your own good."

"That may be an insult, but I shall take it as a compliment," I say.

A corner of his mouth twitches in a suppressed smile, making me wonder if he ever even smiles.

"It is a compliment," he assures me.

"Thankyou, Heathcliff," I say and bite my tongue.

He narrows his eyes. "What?"

"Nothing," I say quickly.

Looking intrigued, he asks, "Heathcliff?" more to himself than me. "Isn't that a lovelorn literary character?" Something about it seems to wipe the amusement right off his face and he goes back to his uptight self. He says, "Your question is well put. Unfortunately, it is pointless because I cannot tell you anything. It is against our policy."

"Whose policy?"

He looks at me, anger and despair now clear on his face. He says, "Try and remember. There's no other way."

I shake my head. Been there done that. "You are always throwing these riddles my way." I take on an accusatory tone.

"I am not."

"Yes you are. You talked about an airplane the other day. Just tell me this – is it the IH330?"

He rolls his eyes. "Yes," he says, like it is obvious. So that's confirmed, at least. Consequently, the question rings out in my ear, again - WHAT IN THE WORLD COULD I POSSIBLY HAVE TO DO WITH AN INTERNATIONAL AIRPLANE THAT DISAPPEARED MILES AWAY FROM MY PLACE?

All of a sudden, Jay puts both his hands on either side of my face, taking me quite by surprise. "Why did you do it?" he asks, reminding me of one of those old time heroes, who used to overdo their portrayal of anguish. I immediately feel guilty for the lousy comparison. Just because I don't

remember, it doesn't make the situation any less serious. I wait for his description of the 'it' that I had done.

Meanwhile, something is stirring up deep inside me. His touch feels familiar. His hands on my face, it feels like they have been there before. Even the butterflies in my tummy feel familiar. It's like even though I don't remember, my body does.

Abruptly, he removes his hands, pressing them to his sides. "I know why," he says in answer to his own question. "Because you have to play being this miss goody two shoes." He stalks off then, leaving me open-mouthed.

I feel miserable for a lot of things:

- 1) Having no clue about anything that he was talking about
- 2) Getting stalked-off off-ed in such a disrespectful fashion
- 3) And the worst – for his impression of me. Was I really so bad? I do seem to have quite a hate club as proof.

On a whim I take out my phone and open Google Chrome. I type in 'Cannot remember my past', resulting in pages and pages of stuff. Most of them are on the early onset of dementia while a few came up with movies and books on the theme. I close Google Chrome in exasperation. What did I think anyway- that someone out there would have the same problem AND would have queried about it AND found a solution as well? It works when you are searching for that nagging pain at the tip of your pinky toe. You get some relief to find similar cases, along with a few advices on one of those crazy discussion forums. Apparently, one of the craziest of Google searches is 'what would the chair look like if your knees bent the other way?' And there are quite a few answers for it. Yet, no one seems to share my situation. Having reached my room, I sit down heavily on my bed, wishing that I could break something. Or pull my hair out. Or just scream.

Aisha walks in then. And stops. "Are you alright, Lexi?" She takes a cautionary step toward me.

I nod at her, pulling my hair up in a loose bun. "You look like..." Aisha says.

"...like I've lost it, I know," I complete it for her. Aisha keeps quiet, obviously agreeing.

"It's Jay," I say. I tell her everything that happened between Jay and me, as well as my searches on Google. Something strikes me then. "Aisha, I

knew I never had a Facebook account, or Twitter, or even that I was on Instagram. I had not been into socializing at all. Did I... happen to create one upon coming here?" I waited for her to say something, but she was just staring into space. I prodded further, "I seem to have changed a lot since I joined, like you said, so I was wondering if ..."

Aisha is shaking her head even before I am done talking. "You changed a lot, Lexi, for sure. But you still did not believe in Social Media."

Defeated, I slump down again. Aisha looks at her brand new watch. "It's almost time for college," she says, "We'll think of a way in the evening."

I pick myself up heavily. Putting a hand around my shoulder, she says, "Don't worry. Things will work out soon." On the contrary, things are just about to get worse.

## Chapter 4

While on our way to class, we see Rhea and Sid, leaning against the outside wall of our block. As we near them, I notice Rhea's enraged face, and I have a premonition that it has to do with me. Sid's looks passive, but there is an undercurrent of tension.

Sure enough, Rhea pounces on me as soon as we get there. "Ryan saw you meeting Jay outside campus at 6!"

So that's what Jay was talking about. The someone who was by the gate must have been Ryan. Jay took caution and yet we were seen. I squared my shoulders. I have done nothing wrong.

Aisha intervenes before I can reply. "Rhea it's not like you think it is. She was just..."

Rhea cut her short with, "You stay out of this, Aisha."

"Jay seems to know something about my past," I explain, "I was trying to elicit it out of him."

"He's just lying, Lexi," Sid says as he shakes his head.

Rhea fumes, "You saw how he was trying to strangle my brother. And yet you go and suck up to him."

That hurts. I wasn't sucking up. I lose it too and say, "Who knows why Jay was trying to strangle him?" I regret it the moment it slips out. I just went overboard in my anger, helped by the fact that Ryan didn't seem to be a nice person. At least not to me.

Rhea sees red then. I literally see it in her eyes. The same look of hatred that I had seen in her brother's. "So you trust that murderer!" she spat.

"Hey hey hey," Sid jumps in the middle. "Cool it you two." Aisha looks helplessly on to see her best friends quarrelling.

Tears in her eyes, Rhea pushes Sid away. Feeling bad for what I said, I try to pacify her saying, "Rhea, believe me, the meet-up was regarding my memory only. It's driving me crazy that I can't remember."

"You are the most selfish person I have ever met," she says before walking away. Aisha runs after her. It takes some time for her words to sink in. When it does, it stings me so hard that my heart threatens to explode, right there in my chest. I wish that the Earth would open up and just gobble me up, so that I could sit there in the darkness and let the tears flow. It's not easy to keep it in. But I do. Because that's the way I am.

I walk back the way I had come, back to the solitude of my room. Sid

catches up with me.

“Bunking today?” he asks.

“Hmm,” I say, afraid to speak lest my voice cracks.

“Don’t mind what Rhea said. She will come around.”

“Hmm.”

Silence ensues. After a while, he says in a low tone, “I thought you had left it. Running behind your past.”

“Easier said than done,” I say in a strained voice.

We reach the gate. Before we part, Sid takes me by my shoulders. Looking into my eyes, he says, “Like I have told you before, no matter what happens, I will be there with you.” Despite the foggiest in my brain, I know he’s right. That he has told me the same thing before as well.

Sid’s words have a nullifying effect on my gloom. The more I think of it, the better I feel. On a positive note, the ‘incident’ with Rhea has heightened my urge to know. Who knows, I may have wrongly accused Ryan, after all. The worst part was that my accusation was biased, sparked by his behavior towards me. What if I have indeed done something to deserve it? If my character were to be analyzed by how my friends have testified for or against me, my dark side seems to be winning. Rhea called me self-centered. Jay’s remark of me being a Miss goody two shoes had obviously been a sarcastic one. Ryan is quiet because he just can’t stand the sight of me, let alone speak to me. Before I lose what remains of my self-respect I need to know everything that has happened during the first term.

I flip my laptop open and go to my mailbox. I am told that there are 11942 mails in my inbox. That’s 383 pages of emails. Keeping aside a smattering of mails meant for the junk folder, my inbox is cluttered with countless social updates and scores of newsletters that I have unwittingly signed up for. My plan is to search for personalized emails that might put a light on my past. I begin with determination, scrolling page after page. Before long, I have had enough. There is not a single email that’s personal. While scrolling I had noticed that there are repeated emails from penzu.com, mostly titled ‘Alexcy, a gentle reminder from penzu.com.’ I open one. Sure enough, it is a newsletter urging me to pen down the ‘thoughts that are buried deep within’ since I seem to be ‘hidden in obscurity for weeks’.

Wondering why I had joined what looked like an online journal I open penzu.com and easily retrieve my password using my email address. Again, it only leads me to another dead end. I have not created even one entry



on my page. So much for that, I think. But then, I remind myself, I have never been a journal person anyway.

Bored much, I jump to the first page to start my search from there. The very first email has me sitting up ramrod straight.

**From: anonymousxyz@gmail.com**

**To: lexisam@hotmail.com**

**WHERE did your dad disappear to? River's End College of Sciences is the clue.**

Reading the email from anonymous hits me with a force that leaves me breathless. Like someone had punched me on the stomach. Dad, alive?? Is that why I came here, to hunt him down?

Ok...so I have always fantasized about Dad's return. That the world-famous scientist that he is, he has somehow managed to preserve his body and that he returns one day, making our family complete and normal, like the good old days. But, surely, this has to be a prank. This can't be real.

Another weird aspect of this is that I don't remember receiving the anonymous email, though I apparently received it months before my memory void. Not that it worries me. I have gotten used to all the weirdness. Like I said, it's only so long that a problem can bother you.

I search my inbox by using the keyword 'Anonymous'. Apparently, there is only one mail of the kind. I then open my sent folder to see if I have replied to anonymous. Sent folder is empty. Feeling dejected by now, like someone who had lost something that had almost been within grasp, I click on the Drafts folder. It has but one post. It is addressed to Unknown, which means that I have not specified a sender. Below unknown, it is written 'No Subject.' I have a feeling that this could be important. At the same time, pessimism sets in, reminding me that it could just be another dead end. With a trembling forefinger, I open the mail. There is an attachment in Microsoft Word, titled STORY, followed by the words:

Dear Amy,

Four months ago, I couldn't have imagined writing to an advice columnist. Not only because I am bad at writing letters, or anything emotional (my friends say that rocks show more emotion than me), but also because, for the then me, people who sought your help were self-assured

losers. Loners who pitied themselves, youngsters who wanted to let the world know that they were depressed, and yet maintain anonymity.

I don't know if I was wrong or if I have become that kind of person. But I write because I admire the sound advices you give on matters of the heart. I hope you will find time to read my story. And then to advise me, on how to deal with a one-sided love for someone, who is, literally, out of this world.

Please find attached the file containing my story, written from the day I started college, the biggest turning point of my teen years. Hoping to hear from you soon.

Regards,  
Alexcy

An unsent email to an online counselor. Excitement surging inside me, I double click on the attachment. Or try to, because my first two attempts at double-click are not fast enough. On the third attempt, I relax my fingers, take a deep breath and try again. A word file of 112 pages opens, which at a glance, looks like an account of my missing three months. It is a funny feeling, like I am standing at the door of my own mind, eager to go in, yet reluctant. Afraid of what lay ahead. Will I like what I encounter in there? I am not sure.

## Chapter 5

### STORY

#### First Day

September 1

Detached. The word kept ringing in my ears till I could take it no more. Was I just like my dad? Selfish? Detached? I shut my ears at the ringing. No. I chose to come because I needed my answers.

Detached. I wanted to scream. Mom's words, "I was sure she would leave too. She's exactly like her Dad."

"Mom! I'm just going to college!"

"Yes, you are, but that's the farthest college you could go to, really!" She had kept shaking her head.

"Mom," I had tried to be gentle, "I'm not going anywhere OK. Just to study. I chose that college because I liked the campus when I looked it up online." Of course, I didn't tell her about the anonymous email.

Her eyes had shone daggers.

"Mom I need to go. Plus you have Don. He will never leave you," I had tried to joke.

"Yeah he won't," she had snapped, "because he takes after me!"

I closed my eyes. I had heard this all my life. 'He takes after me...' 'She takes after her Dad...' 'Detached...' Was I?

I shook my head hard this time. I could hear the wheels of the train now, grinding against the metal track. CHUK CHUK CHUK CHUK. The sound helped drown out everything for a while. I hoisted myself up and climbed down the berth. I went and stood by the door, my body shaking to the rhythm of the train's motion. I could see the faint first rays of the sun in the horizon, a symbolic representation of the dawn of my hope.

"Hey careful!" Someone called out from behind. "Many cases of people falling to their death by the door".

It was the boy I had met at the Malta railway junction. He had heard me ask the directions to reach River's End College of Sciences (RECS) and had offered to show me the way as he was headed there too. I donned my best

plastic smile and turned to face him.

"You don't look like you are from here," he said. "Where are you from?"

"Dublin," I said after a pause. He narrowed his eyes, scrutinizing me.

"Higher studies in India?" Moving cautiously as the train rocked and swayed forth, he came and stood by me by the door, holding on to one of the vertical railings. "Why, if you don't mind me asking?"

"Why not?" I countered, folding my hands, actually in an attempt to avoid answering.

He grinned, saying, "I would feel way more at ease if you held on to something too." I clutched on to the railing on my side with one hand. It was rough, rusty. The blue paint had peeled off in many places, revealing the black metal underneath. He continued, "People in India, those who can afford it, jump at a chance to do their graduation outside. While you fly down here from Dublin."

I notice the lovely grassy meadows that whizzed past in relative motion. "Yeah, I guess the grass is always greener on the other side," I said.

"I don't know..." He was not convinced. "You could have graduated from any one of those prestigious colleges in Europe. And yet...why?" He held a more intense look this time, making me realize that he was not going to let it go. I decided to give him the truth, well, partially at least.

Gazing at the hazy mountains in the far horizon, I said, "This is where my parents graduated from."

"Ah, makes sense now!"

I looked him in the eye, with my eyebrows raised. "I like your patriotism," I said.

He laughed. "It's not that, In fact, ours is one of the best Colleges in the world and I'm proud of that. I'm also proud of the fact that Indians are supposed to be one of the most brilliant and hardworking people around and it's mainly thanks to our system of education."

I waited for him to go on with his explanation, his words having made me feel already unwelcome.

He swept his eyes over the length of me. "It's just the way you are. You might have trouble fitting in, with your skull cap, and your accent, and your attitude." He grinned and put up his hand in defense. "Don't get me wrong. Just a warning." He winked.

Someone had said, if you find it hard to smile, fake it; it helps,

apparently. I considered it, then decided against it. Fake was the last thing I wanted to be.

The train was moving over a huge bridge which was built on a lake. "That's our college." He pointed. I followed his hand and saw the most breathtaking sight.

Far across the river, perched on a misty looking cliff, half obscured from view by tall trees, was a pristine building, with a huge white dome in the centre. As the train rapidly changed its coordinates, several other buildings came into view - all of them gleaming a pompous white. To the south-east, a small waterfall gushed down, snaking its way through the thick green forest that shaded most of the mountain dark green. I could see the white buildings reflected in the clear blue water that lay below, lending the whole scene an ethereal feel. It looked like heaven.

"Looks like a piece of heaven, doesn't it?" he said with unmistakable awe. I looked at him. It was odd that we were thinking the same thing. I turned back to admire my new abode.

I couldn't quite explain the overwhelming sensation that took over me. The scenic wonder that I had just witnessed was the only link between me and Dad. What if I get some answers? Or at least an insight into the kind of person he was? I imagined him standing in the exact position and admiring the view. I imagined him taking in the same fresh air, fragranced by the damp earth and the lush greenery.

The boy snapped his fingers in front of my face, jerking me back into the present. "Oi! Dreamer girl! Almost time to get down." I pushed my mental images away and faced my new friend. Realizing that I still did not know his name, I extended my hand and said, "I am Alexcy." He looked happy while he shook my hand. "Hi Alexcy," he said carefully, his eyebrows going up as he enunciated my unique name. "I am Sid."

"Hi," I said, always awkward during an intro. "Call me Lexi," I said as an afterthought.

"Lexi," he said, nodding.

He gestured at a rectangular package lying on the seat, covered using the front page of a yellowing local newspaper. The main headlines blared 'DAY 12. IH330. THE HUNT CONTINUES'.

Sobering up, he said, "It's been months now. I can't understand how a plane can go missing without trace like that. Let's hope that they do find it, for the sake of the passengers' families, at least. Imagine their condition of

uncertainty!”

Yeah, I thought, I so get that!

The train halted to a stop.

As we pushed through the crowd with my luggage (all Sid had was a backpack), I had the weird feeling of being watched. I scanned around quickly and saw a tall boy on the opposite platform, across the tracks. I couldn't make out his face clearly from the distance, only his lean, muscular body and his dark hair. And he was standing there, leaning against a pole, hands in his pockets, one leg folded behind him, looking straight at me.

I stared back at him as I walked, biting my lip and wondering if I had seen him before.

Suddenly he straightened up and pointed at me, his mouth moving. I squinted to make out what he was trying to say and bumped into something. It was a long cylindrical bundle someone had packed and kept ready to load into the train. I tripped but was able to catch myself on time.

Sid swiveled around in surprise. “Are you alright?” he asked in concern.

I looked at the spot across the platform. No one was there. “I’m fine. I just lost my balance,” I said, a little embarrassed. Turning around again, I said, “Someone was there, a guy. He was staring.”

Sid guffawed. “Like I warned you. You will have a tough time blending in. Get ready to get stared at, stalked, ragged, etc.”

“Why?” I asked as Sid hailed the first taxi in the queue, and pushed inside to make space for me, having first loaded my bags.

“You stand out, Lexi,” he said, as if it was obvious. “People are either going to love you or hate you. There will be no in between.” Great, I thought, just what a girl who is on the hunt for her Dad needs.

As we taxied to college, Sid talked about his friends. He seemed to have a gang and he wanted me to meet them after college. He also informed me that our classes were in different blocks.

Once we started moving uphill, it turned into a rickety ride which had my shoulders banging against Sid's as we sat hunched up in the small car, my luggage taking up most of the space. After almost half an hour of having my insides churned to pulp, in the bumpiest ride of my life, we finally reached college campus. The campus was a pretty sight even up close. The Gulmohar trees planted at regular intervals, with their red flowers, were indeed a welcoming sight. There were green lawns everywhere, bordered by lovely

flowers. But what caught my eyes was the stretch of massive oak trees, watching over us like an army, silently imparting strength and support. I envisioned Dad leaning under one of those, bent over a thick book in his hand. He was a scientist. He had to be a nerd. I sighed, thinking, ‘Dad, what kind of a person are you?’ I still could not get myself to use ‘were’ instead of ‘are’.

We had started with the main building, the one with the big dome, and the taxi was moving along the road to the left. Sid explained that the ladies hostel buildings were at the end of the road. He pointed in the other direction and said, somewhat whimsically, that the men’s hostel was at the opposite end, as far apart as possible. I smiled in spite of myself.

Soon the taxi came to a stop. Despite Sid’s repeated appeals, I paid the driver for our ride and got down while he continued to his hostel. I crossed the open gate and eyed the three identical grey buildings, each of them looking equally imposing. Strands of ivy hung from the walls in between the many windows, thick in some places, sparse in others. I wondered how I had missed seeing the grey amid all the white. They would have stood out like ugly ducklings for sure. Maybe this was the backside of the campus, I decided.

“The juniors’ block is over there,” the thin old guard said as he pointed to the farthest of the three structures. “Don’t worry about your suitcases, beta. Aslam uncle will carry them up for you.”

I thanked him and moved on, now carrying only my backpack. Stepping through the narrow archway of the third block, I took in the massive lawn surrounded on all sides by the seven storey building, each layer lined by balconies with railings. The brooding, uninviting nature of the building threatened to suffocate me as I carried myself forward with heavy steps.

The matron was a burly lady in a white sari with round eyes bulging out of her face. She looked me up and down as I stood before her clumsily.

“My name is Alexcy,” I said, clearing my throat. She clicked on the keyboard attached to a yellowing desktop.

“Yes, I was expecting you. Where’s your mother?” She questioned, her eyes now glued to my details on the screen.

“She couldn’t come. My younger brother has exams,” I lied as casually as possible.

“Father?”

I rubbed my hands on my jeans. It was not necessary to reveal that my

dad was the famous scientist, Dr Sam Oze, whose strange disappearance a decade and a half ago had created more news than his work ever had.

“He.... passed away when I was young,” I replied. He had, for the world, at least. Matron peered at me for a moment before placing a key on the desk. “Room 421, 4<sup>th</sup> floor, at the end of East Wing. You are alone in your room as of now.”

I heaved a sigh of relief, took my keys and walked up to my room. Sharing a room with a complete stranger would have been awkward. A few girls were up already. They eyed me with a hostile expression, looking pointedly at my denim shorts. Sid’s words of warning echoed in my head.

The room was neat and well kept. There was a single cot on one side and a study table on the other, with a wide window in between. A small wardrobe stood in one corner flanked by a medium sized book rack.

I unpacked my clothes and showered in the common bathroom. I put on a casual blue tee-shirt and brown jeans and pushed the windows open. Beyond the high stone campus wall lay thick dense forest. It was a good thing that the boundary wall was taller than some of the trees and had barbed wire on top for extra security. The wind brought in the raw smell of leaves and bark and dew. It was enchanting. I sat there for a while, lost in thought, until I heard the rustle of leaves close by.

Fearing snakes, I quickly closed my windows and sat on my bed. For some reason, I remembered I hadn’t called Mom since I landed, and took out my phone from my bag. Fumbling on the dialpad for a few seconds, I changed my mind and opened my messages folder instead.

“Mom! It’s me. I reached. This is my number.”

“Ok,” came her immediate reply, and that was all.

I typed, ‘Btw the head matron at my hostel wanted to know why you did not come with me.’ I stared at the screen for a few seconds with my finger on the send button, deleted the message instead and put my phone away.

Forget ‘Lexi, how are you?’ There were so many other questions that she could have asked me, being an alumnus of the same college. “Is this building still there?” or “Did you see this....?” But all she had to say was ok.

Yet, for the first time since my decision to join this college, a part of



me began to understand why Mom was so dead against me coming down here, why she did not accompany me on my first trip to my home country.

Every nook and corner of this place would remind her of Dad and the fun times they spent together during their courtship days.

After a while I filled my hobo bag with my notebook, a few pieces of stationery, phone and purse, slung my jacket over my shoulder and headed towards college. Again, my hostel-mates either openly stared at me, or looked away highhandedly.

I was more than pleased to see Sid seated on the sprawling lawn right beside the main building, waiting for me. He jumped up as he saw me, taking in my change of clothes quickly, a look of appreciation in his big eyes. I noticed that the just showered look did wonders to his looks and garnered a few glances from giggly girls passing by.

“I need to get my admit slip from the main office,” I told my new and only friend.

“Sure! I’ll come with you. We have twenty more minutes to go before class starts.”

As we stood in queue outside the office, a boy came and slapped Sid on his back. He was tall and lanky, with a cheerful face. After some playful nudging, he introduced himself as Varun. “Lexi,” I said.

“Sexy?” Varun asked in mock seriousness.

Sid coughed loudly, clarifying, “Lexi,” while I looked around, slightly embarrassed, eyebrows raised.

“Where are the others?” Sid asked him, relieving me.

“You know Rhea. She reaches only after the first hour. Ryan is in class already.” He let out a loud yawn. “Aisha has reached hostel and will be here in five, she said.”

Varun turned back to me. He adjusted his expression to the part he played. Classic flirt.

“So.. where have you been all my life?”

I bit my lip, trying not to laugh at the cheesy centuries-old pick-up line. “Ireland,” Sid replied on my behalf.

Imploring his pal to stay out of this, Varun asked my permission to escort me to class. I looked at Sid and grinned at the open flirting. Humming a song, Varun showed me the way to my class while Sid walked by our side with an expression of ostentatious boredom.

As Varun’s vocal atrocities killed song after romantic song, all the way to my class, I kept scanning the faces of the students passing by. My eyes were searching for the boy at the platform.

Though I couldn’t spot him, finding my class was easy. It was the nearest to the main door. Since I was a month late, I had missed out on the intros, and all the lecturers started with classes as soon as they barged in. Lectures were long though a few were interesting. One particular professor, Mr Vida, who looked to be in his fifties, had the class in splits while he explained complicated theorems.

“Are you the Irish Indian?” I looked up when I saw a group of my classmates huddled on my right after the professor had left.

“Uh yeah.” I nodded slowly.

“We’ve heard about you. Didn’t know you would end up in our class.” Word does travel fast around here, I thought. After the initial round of introductions I began to shed my inhibitions. My classmates were warm, kind and funny. I felt like I was beginning to belong.

After class, as promised, Sid stood outside my block, batting invisible cricket balls in the air. His face lit up when he saw me and he ushered me to the flight of steps on the side of the main building. Seated there was his whole gang. He patiently introduced me to each of them. First on the steps was a boy-girl duo, both tall and slim.

“Hi Lexi, I am Rhea,” the girl in the capri pants said. “And this is my brother Ryan.”

They both looked exactly alike except that he had long hair that he tied at the back while hers was close cropped. Ryan was in funky clothes,

much like his sister. However, for all his outwardly appearance, there seemed to be an inherent shyness in Ryan's demeanor, that was lacking in Rhea's. While Rhea seemed to dominate, Ryan looked as if he was content being dominated over.

"We are twins," Rhea announced the obvious.

"She's elder to me by seven minutes. It was in those seven minutes that she acquired all her worldly knowledge which, according to her, gives her the absolute right to boss me around," Ryan spoke as if he was reading out of a book.

Rhea rolled her eyes and made a face.

Sid gestured at the bespectacled Ryan. "Don't be fooled by his appearance. The poor guy's wardrobe is completely managed by his sister," he said, confirming my suspicions. "He's our gang nerd, Ryan Einstein Mendak, aptly named for his interest in the species."

Seeing my confused look, he elaborated, "Mendak is Hindi for frog. Einstein here wants to be a scientist but is against experimenting on frogs. And ironically that's their family name too!"

Adjusting his spectacles, Ryan said, "The name is Ryan Mendek," he corrected, pronouncing it as 'Mendayk'. "And as far as frogs are concerned, they are an integral part of the ecosystem. Their numbers can influence the balance of nature. Due to the infinite tests conducted on them in the name of biology and other areas in science, some of their species are facing extinction."

He looked straight at me, ignoring Sid and Varun's hoot of laughter. "I feel that each of us must raise our voice against this practice to raise their dwindling numbers. We all must encourage methods for conducting tests that does not involve using these poor animals." He stopped abruptly, waiting for me to say something in response.

I nodded, realizing that all my thoughts had escaped at the onslaught. "Um..." I stalled, Einstein's expectant eyes on me making it harder to think of a sensible reply. "I second you," I managed finally, in a small voice, "Say no to frogs. In experiments." I felt my right fist go a little up in the air at that, to show my passionate protest. There was a collective sigh of relief from the

whole gang. Like I had passed some sort of test.

“Hi Lexi! I am Aisha,” chirped the girl who was seated alone at the back.

Aisha was a plump girl with twinkling eyes. She was dressed in a simple salwar kameez and had her long hair in a braid. She had pretty features and a dazzling smile.

“Hi!” I smiled back.

“I’ve heard so much about you in one day that I was dying to meet you!” She effused.

I glanced at Sid and back at her.

“Not just Sid! The whole college is talking about you. The gorgeous Irish girl.”

“And,” Rhea cut in, “there are already several rumours floating around about you.”

Uh-Oh. What rumours? “Like?” I asked, guardedly.

“One, that your parents are divorced, and you came to stay with your Dad who is an Indian.” Aisha ticked off one finger on her hand.

“Two,” said Rhea, “you live alone in Ireland.”

“Three,” Varun continued, “and the most filmy one, is that you came here to find out about your Great-grandmother who was an Indian, and from whom you happen to get your looks.”

“Wow!” I laughed, relieved.

“So, what is the truth?” Aisha asked.

“I live with my mom and my kid brother. Dad.... is not around anymore.” The truth, put in the simplest possible way.

“Oh! I am so sorry,” Aisha said quickly, her voice soft and warm. “Why did you choose to study in India?” She asked and then quickly added, “I hope I’m not being too intrusive.”

To find Dad, I wanted to say.

“No.” I looked down at my hot-pink shoe-laces that stood out in perfect contrast with my grey Adidas sneakers and mumbled, “This is where my parents met.”

Thankfully, Sid interrupted, “Guys, that’s enough. Let us not overwhelm Lexi. We have plenty of time to get to know her.” Varun got up, saying, “If you will excuse me peoples, I have a party at the canteen. One lucky fellow in my class won the lottery.”

“Wow! I wish I win the lottery too,” Aisha said in a dreamy voice. “I want to travel. See the world. Discover things.”

Varun turned to Rhea. “I am telling you, take this girl’s autograph. Now! She’s the one who’s going to find that missing plane, the IH330.”

Rhea folded her hands and gave him a dirty look. “No jokes on that huh.” That seemed to strike a chord with cool dude Varun. “Yeah, sorry, I shouldn’t.”

Rhea went on, “I can’t imagine what their family might be going through. Suppose Ryan were on it.” She shuddered. The entire gang had gone glum all of a sudden.

I straightened up from where I was leaning on the staircase wall like Sid. “I’ll get going now. I need to check out the library.” Without waiting for a response, I took my leave and headed towards the main building wherein the library was supposed to be. Sid appeared hesitant to let me go but thankfully he did not accompany me. I liked him for that. He was not clingy.

I could feel their eyes on my back as I walked off in a hurry. Perhaps they would judge me for my sudden exit, branding me as detached. But then that was nothing new.

## Chapter 6

The library was towards one end of the main dome building. It was a huge room, well designed and maintained as well. From the door there was a stone pathway leading towards the librarian's desk. On either sides of the pathway were indoor plants. Beyond the librarians desk, on the right side were rows of racks stacked with books. There were tables and chairs in the centre. On the left side, the pathway led to the magazine section, complete with plush sofas and bean bags. The whole room was filled with plants of all sizes. It exuded the feel of reading in a garden. Soft music played in the background. Talk about creating the need to read! No wonder this college had a reputation of producing well-read personalities who went on to become achievers in various fields.

I went ahead to the librarian and showed my student identification card. She scanned it in her machine and motioned with her hand to carry on. Everything in the college was connected to the id card. You could make purchases at the canteen or the bookstore, pay the fees at the office, borrow books from the library, swipe in to enter the ladies hostel, all by using the same white electronic card with a chip in it.

“Um... where can I find information about the college alumni? The famous ones?” I asked the librarian, my voice a soft murmur.

She smiled at me. “Come with me.”

She led me to the end of the first row and picked out two large books, bound hard and covered with a royal blue cloth. She gestured towards the small bench right next to the rack. “You can sit right here. These books are heavy,” she whispered and left.

I sat down, took a deep breath and opened the first book. It did not take me long to find what I was searching for. A full page picture of Dad as I remembered him, stood smiling at me. I brushed my hand slowly on the picture. Below it was written in bold his name - Dr. Sam Oze.

Two whole pages were dedicated to him. I read intently about him from how respectful he was towards everyone to how he used to spend almost all his time in the lab or the library. There were details about his

projects and inventions while at college along with his ingenious ideas. I read his testimonials written by the faculty:

Ex-Principal, Mr Sippy: Sam was a diligent child right from the beginning. He was a rare mix of intelligence, perseverance and humility. I was sure he would reach places no man has ever reached before. His disappearance was an unfortunate incident. He will be missed terribly.

Derek Vida, faculty: A great person, selfless and caring towards all, Oze was my best friend. I was sure he would conquer the world one day.

My heart beating fast, I bent to take a close look at the tiny photo of Derek Vida. It was the same Mr Vida, my professor!

After reading through the remaining testimonials, I shut my eyes. DAD, pounded my mind, loud and clear inside my head. Goosebumps had crept up all over my arms like tiny colourless granules, as I sat there hugging myself, the book wide open in front of me.

I kept the book back in its place on the rack and left the library quietly. Walking briskly in the direction of the hostel, I took a back route close along the high campus wall as I did not want to bump into any of my new friends.

WHERE ARE YOU, DAD, RIGHT NOW? My mind screamed.

I stopped when I noticed there was a small door on the campus wall. A back door. Without thinking I jumped over it to the other side.

ARE YOU EVEN ALIVE? The pounding wouldn't stop.

There was a path between the trees and I just followed it.

DAD. THEY SAY THAT BENEATH YOUR GRANDIOSE ACHIEVEMENTS YOU WERE SUCH A NORMAL PERSON AND A WONDERFUL HUMAN BEING. I WISH I HAD KNOWN YOU.

Driven by an alien impulse, I swerved on to a path that seemed to be less-trodden.

WHERE DID YOU DISAPPEAR MYSTERIOUSLY TO, JUST LIKE THE IH330?

I stopped in my tracks, my hands wound tight around me, to subdue my shivering self. I had never made such a comparison before. But it fit. Both Dad and the plane seemed to have had vanished off the face of the Earth, one fine day.

The solitude of the woods hung heavily in the air around me. The silence roared in my ears. I looked around. What was I doing?

I was about to turn around and go back when I noticed a movement from behind one of the trees.

Suddenly scared and fearing an attack from behind, I started backing away slowly. My leg hit the root of a tree behind me and before I realized it, I was falling. At the same time, I could hear the crunch of leaves as something closed in on me, fast. I closed my eyes in panic.

I hit the ground hard. When nothing more happened I opened my eyes to face whatever had run towards me, expecting a huge animal.

I opened my eyes and saw a pair of intense brown eyes. It did not take me long to register that it was the boy on the platform.

I took in his facial features. He had thick eyebrows. His hair was dark and wavy. The peppered stubble on his face complimented his straight nose and square jaw. Again came the nagging feeling that I have seen him before.

“Are you alright?” There was an unmistakable note of concern in his deep voice.

I nodded and tried to stand up. He offered me his hand but I ignored that, standing up and brushing fallen leaves and twigs off my back.

“We have to go. C’mon!” He seized my hand and started walking the way I had come.

“What are you doing?” I struggled to break free.

“What are *you* doing here, all alone?” he countered, as he stopped to face me.

I should have asked him who he was to act so bothered about me, but the reason why I had run to this place hit me with renewed force.



He looked around, his face serious and said, quietly, “This is not a safe place for you... or for anyone.” He looked behind me. “Go back to campus.” I observed him as he spoke. He looked like the kind of guy who chose his words carefully before he spoke. As if every word counts.

I opened my mouth to say something. But he cut in saying “Bye.” Then he turned on his heel and left, a blur of brown jacket and blue jeans disappearing between the trees.

I turned around as well and walked back the way I had come.

It was dusk by the time I got in. I realized that I had acted on a subconscious impulse to calm down my nerves, to release all that negative energy that threatened to suffocate me. I sat lost in thought for a long time, a stream of unanswered questions clogging my mind. Who was the platform guy? Was he a student of RECS? Why did he say the woods were dangerous? And then why on earth did he go back deeper into it if it were? What was happening here?

My train of thoughts was interrupted by a soft knock on the door. It was Aisha. She was dressed in loose pants and a brown and cream check shirt. “Lucky you,” she said as soon as she came in, “to have a room all to yourselves.” She plopped herself on the bed and looked at me closely. “Are you alright?”

“Uh, yeah, just tired. All that travel and then jet lag.” I said, without really looking at her.

“Did you have something to eat?”

“No, I am not hungry,” I replied.

She kept looking at me, as if she could see right through me. “You are home sick aren’t you?”

I just looked away, not wishing to disclose my problems. She must have mistaken my expression for being too emotional to speak. “I totally understand,” she said. “I was home sick for a whole week here! C’mon then, let’s go down to the canteen and have something, alright?”

She wouldn’t hear No for an answer. Forced to assent, I followed her

out. Her smile radiated warmth. I liked Aisha. She put you at ease with her hospitality and kind eyes.

As I locked my room, I asked, “Where is ....” I groped my memory for her name. So much had happened within a few hours that I had already forgotten Sid’s friends.

“Rhea?” Aisha offered.

I nodded and she continued, “Oh she’s out with the guys. It’s ok for her, having a twin brother who is always with her. If I went out after 7 pm here and my folks found out, I would be skinned alive.” She widened her eyes in mock horror.

“Is it dangerous to be out here, all alone?” I asked sounding casual, though actually referring to what the platform boy had said.

Aisha replied, “Not really. My parents are kind of traditional though many parents do allow their girls to go out after dark these days.” I realized that the context in which she took my question was completely different. I let her speak. “The problem is, our society has not changed much. Girls who go out alone or with friends at night are talked about. Ultimately, here in India, everything revolves around getting good proposals for marriage. If you happen to be out after 7 and Sheela Aunty sees you, you have had it!” She laughs.

“What happens?” I asked with interest.

“Well, for starters, you get a long lecture from your parents,” she said as she rolled her eyes, “about how no one will marry you, and how you will be stuck at home forever. I honestly don’t understand how that is a threat!”

We ordered a spicy paratha chicken wrap with steaming masala chai from the hostel canteen. It was Aisha’s suggestion in compliance with my wish to have something purely desi. The combination was yum.

“Actually you can’t blame the parents either,” Aisha continued from where she had left off, her mouth full. “There are countless perverts out there with the twisted notion that girls who are out after dusk are begging to be raped!”

“Eww!” I made a face.

“Yeah! I have heard some of my cousins actually speak in support of rapists. If a girl gets sexually assaulted by strange men because she is out with her friend at night, she is to blame!”

Aisha shook her head and sighed.

“At least now, thanks to social media, there is more awareness about abuse and women’s feelings. So we can hope for some improvement in the situation.”

“The benefits of social networking,” I agreed.

“Speaking of which,” she added as an afterthought, “what is your Facebook ID? Let me add you.” She took out her mobile phone from her pocket.

“I don’t have one,” I replied, my mouth full. She raised her eyebrows at me. Her expression seemed to say, ‘Are you even from this Planet?’ She didn’t comment on it, though.

She got busy with her phone while I finished my sandwich. I swiped my card at the counter and we headed back to my room. On the way, Aisha filled me in on how they had met each other and had become a gang over the past one month that I had missed.

“We have a friends group on Whatsapp,” she said as we stood outside my room, “Sid is the admin. Would you like to join?”

“Yeah, why not? I have the App, have to register, though.”

Once I was done registering, we quickly exchanged numbers and I was added in a minute!

You joined.

Aisha joined.

8376423285 joined.

8347667476 joined.

9378303030 joined.

9955599555 joined.

9955500000 joined.

9454489849 joined.

8376423285: Hey there Lexi! Sid here! (Hands wave emoticon) Guys please welcome Lexi and add her number! And introduce yourselves so that she knows who you are!

9378303030: Hi sexy! Varun here! (smooch emoticon)

Sid: Ahem ahem Varun! Behave yourself. Don't make her run away the first day itself.

Varun: Chill Sid. She enjoys it. What say Lexi?

Aisha: (Puke emoticon)

Me: (Lol emoticon)

Varun: See?

9955599555: Lexi Babe! Rhea here! Don't fall for Varun ok? He flirts with every girl!

Varun: This time I am serious. Lexiiiiiiii!

9955500000: Ryan here. Varun, I'm sure she enjoys it unless she is an eccedentesiast.

Rhea: Omg Ryan what the hell is that?

Me: Sorry I'm not that. I don't fake smiles.

Ryan: Impressed. U know the meaning of eccedentesiast!!!

Me: Google knows. I just asked her.

Aisha: ha ha

Sid: ROFL Lexi!

Varun: Good one Lex, but you know, Google is a 'he'!

Ryan: Varun, G for girl, G for Google. Google is a 'she'. In fact google reminds me so much of my sister. Especially when the moment I type something, she comes up with a million possible outcomes, and I forget my

very purpose.

Rhea: Ryan you wait!

Ryan: Na, I'm gonna sleep.

Me: I'm sleepy too.(sleepy emoticon) Goodnight peeps! Had a long tiring day. See you all tomorrow.

Sid: Goodnight Lex!

Rhea: Goodnight sweetie! (love emoticon)

Varun: Adios my love! (smooch emoticonX3, Love emoticonX5)

Sid: (Eyes rolling emoticon)

Aisha: Okay guys. Me too gonna shut-eye!

The gang was pretty much up to the same kind of stuff online as they were offline- cyber-loud talks that mainly consisted of pulling each other's legs, laughter and mischief. Basically having fun.

Aisha and I said goodnight to each other. Aisha turned to go, then turned back and gave me a tight hug. Smiling with a twinkle she said, "Whenever you need to talk, just text me and I'll come over." I nodded and we returned to our own rooms.

## **Second Day**

I thought I would sleep like a log. Instead, disturbing dreams kept waking me up. In the morning the only thing I could recollect was a scene where my mom was running away from something... or someone.

I dialled her first thing in the morning. And cut the line before it rang.

Classes were better that day since the time table had my favorite subjects -Math and Physics. I was waiting for Professor Vida, apparently our Thermodynamics lecturer as well as Mechanics. He walked in crisply, looking agitated, and started class right away.

"Professor Vida, you look serious today, sir!" Rohm called out from behind.

“Is everything alright?” That was Ann.

Professor Vida stopped teaching and took out his spectacles. Leaning on the teachers desk, he took out a handkerchief from his pocket, and started wiping his glasses with it.

“In one of the other classes, I caught a boy who appeared to be looking at me but was actually sleeping. He had on one of those eye stickers.” He laughed softly, in a fond way. “I was actually fooled for a while! It... reminded me of my own college days. Pardon me boys and girls, but I’m feeling very nostalgic today.”

I sat up straighter as he said this.

“Sir, we have heard that you were quite the prankster!” Someone from behind called out.

“Oh you would never believe the things we did. And no I am not giving you any ideas. Some of them were extremely dangerous.” He paused and sighed, a slight smile spreading across his face. “I had a partner in crime. Together we were undefeatable. But we always gave due respect to our teachers and performed well in the exams. As a result, we always managed to get away with our pranks!” He laughed, a far away look in his eyes.

I hung on to his every word.

“My brilliant friend... he went on to become a scientist.”

“Wow!” A girl’s voice.

I waited for him to continue. But the next moment, the professor put on his glasses abruptly and said with a smile, “That’s all! Let’s get back to where we were.”

‘Where is he now?’

‘Are you guys still in touch?’ Questions that could have been asked had I seized the opportunity, instead of sitting dumb as a Dodo, hung in my head.

Later, I promised myself.

After classes, during the usual hangout by the stairs, a message

popped up on our Whatsapp group.

9454489849: Hey Guys I'm on my way back ☺

I showed it to Aisha. "Who's this?"

Aisha peered at the screen. She made a face and looked away. Rhea peeped in and started laughing.

"That is the 6<sup>th</sup> member of our gang. Actually 7<sup>th</sup>, counting you. That's Kiara."

Intrigued by the unique name, I listened intently. Rhea went on, "She's .. different. In the beginning she felt like one of us but..." Rhea sighed. "Kiara's OK... just a little.. immature, at times." Rhea was searching for the right words to describe her. "Anyway she keeps getting into spats with our Aishu here," Rhea said, patting her.

"With Aisha?" I was surprised anyone could fall out with sweet Aisha.

"Oh you don't know Aisha. She's a sweetheart alright but rub her on the wrong side and you have had it. You see, Aishu is all for humanity. She wishes to join the UNESCO someday." She winked and continued, "She loves working for these causes –for humanity. And Kiara is all for saving Planet Earth."

"So what's wrong with that? To each his own. I mean all causes for a good purpose are good, after all," I said.

This time Aisha spoke. "Yeah but you see according to Madam Kiara, working for humanity is a waste of time. Save Planet Earth for the future, even if it is AT THE COST OF HUMANITY! That's her attitude. I mean even I'm for making our planet better. I'm all for reducing plastics and planting more trees in order to reduce the effects of ozone depletion and global warming. But it should go hand in hand with saving humanity as well. I absolutely do not agree to sacrificing human lives for any tests conducted for any cause. She was suggesting something like that."

"Oh," was all I could manage, totally agreeing with Aisha but not wanting to add fuel to the fire.

“So where is she back from?” I asked after a few seconds of silence.

“Oh they keep going away, her boyfriend and her,” Rhea answered. “This would be the third time since we joined.”

“She has a boyfriend?” I asked casually, wishing to take Aisha’s mind off the topic.

Sid who had been playing an online mobile game with Varun now sat stone-faced like Ryan, who had been grave from the start.

“Yeah. He hangs out at times with us here, you know. And all the time, he would just sit here and brood. He doesn’t talk much. After all, a guy ought to have some fault right?” She laughed looking at Aisha.

Aisha’s sullen face broke into a smile too. “I admit I had a crush on him, but so did almost all the girls here. So it is OK.” She was blushing now.

She looked at me. “You will know why when you see him.” I raised my eyebrows.

Sid got up and stretched. “I’m going for a walk.” He looked at me with hopeful eyes. “Coming?”

“Okay.” A walk would be good.

I saw Rhea nudge Aisha and the two of them giggled. Realizing what was cooking, I cleared, “I thought we are all going for a walk.”

Aisha replied, “Naw, I’m a lazy bum when it comes to walking.”

Rhea laughed, “That is so obvious, Aishu.”

Aisha ignored her jibe and continued, “And if Rhea walks she will disappear from the face of the earth.”

I laughed and hurried to catch up with Sid, who was already sauntering down the road, hands in his pockets.

I could still hear the friendly banter going on behind me, “You are J.” Rhea’s voice drifted to me.

“HA! Of skin and bones?” Aisha’s reply.

When I caught up with Sid, he was walking slowly, lost in thought.



“What happened?” I asked. “Is anything worrying you?”

“Nothing,” he said, looking away.

There was something awfully nice about Sid. He had been so kind to me ever since I came, making me feel better and in place. It was thanks to him that on day 2, I had a whole gang of friends, and an amazing one at that! I slipped my hand in his and squeezed it, smiling reassuringly when he looked up, startled.

Detached, Mom had called me. Was I trying hard to prove a point here?

He squeezed my hand too and smiled back, not letting go. We had stopped walking for a moment. I faced ahead again so as to resume walking and stopped short in my tracks. For there he was, walking towards us, his eyes serious, his lips a thin line, none other than the platform guy!

For just a teeny weeny moment, a split second, the world seemed to stand still. And then it passed.

He continued walking briskly in our direction. His eyes travelled down to our still enjoined hands. I don't know why but I let go of Sid's hand immediately. He then glanced up at Sid once, and then looked away pointedly as he stormed past us.

I started saying, “I kn..” but at the same time Sid cut in, having not heard me at all, “That is the guy. Jay. Kiara's boyfriend.” He was looking in the direction Jay had taken, the stony face back.

I was stunned. “Oh!” was all I managed to say.

I quickly pulled myself together, not completely sure why I had got flustered in the first place.

“He's always getting into spats with guys around here,” Sid muttered.

I looked down the road where he had disappeared. He definitely did look like he had a temper problem. Stay away from him, Lexi, my girl!

## Chapter 7

(I stop reading and sit back with my eyes closed for a while. It is an odd feeling, to read these minute details of my past, to hear the thoughts that I don't remember thinking, my relationship with Sid and Jay and my other friends slowly unraveling. I wonder if I would still have remembered all the small stuff had I not lost my memory. Shaking my head to myself, I continue reading my story.)

### Kiara

I was busy for the past few days settling into a routine of classes, studies, and hanging out with my friends after class. I also went to the library whenever I could but did not find anything more about Dad. Mr Vida too was away for a few weeks on a personal matter. I wish I had asked him sooner. I wonder how he would have reacted on learning who I am.

I did not see Jay after that but Kiara had shown up the following morning, just as I was setting out for classes. She was a beautiful girl with long legs and straight well-maintained hair. She had on shorts and a tee shirt and her smoky eye make-up highlighted her best feature- her cat eyes.

"You seem to be quite popular around here, already," she said, eyeing me skeptically. In one sweep, she took in my plain white shirt and blue jeans, my unruly curls that gave the impression that I never combed them ever and my bland face devoid of any make-up.

I laughed. "I wouldn't call it popularity. I guess it's the so-called aura surrounding a foreign girl."

"Is that why you came here then, so far away from home, for the aura?" There was a malicious glint in her eyes now. I was stumped, caught completely off guard. Undeterred, she went on, "People here are weird in a way. They like those who are different, the ones that stand out. The way you are dressed, no one would give you a second glance in another part of the world."

I knew she was right, from experience. Yet, her blow had touched such a sore spot that I couldn't think of anything to say. "I don't know what Jay sees in you," she finished, sweeping one more glance over the length of me, before strutting away.

Undoubtedly stung, I knew for sure that Kiara and I were never going to hit it. One more had just got added to my avoid list. And I was good at avoiding people. It was her parting words, though, that had a stronger effect. 'I don't know what Jay sees in you,' reverberated in my ear for a while, leaving me confused. I wanted to dismiss it as insignificant. At the same time I wished she had elaborated on it.

## **Jay**

During my third week in college, classes left early one day so I went straight to the library. The previous day, while I was about to leave, the librarian had shown me a book on missing personalities that she had found on one of the higher shelves. Since I had to leave for a pre-planned outing with the gang, I had promised her that I would be back the next day to read it.

As she handed me the thick book with its minuscule font, she smiled at me. 'All the best on your thesis, my dear,' she chirped in her perfect English accent. It was strange how people just came to their own conclusions regarding others, and believed in them too.

I had the habit of Google-ing up stuff. It had begun when I had started seriously thinking about Dad's disappearance as I wanted to know all the possible ways that a person could disappear. It had been just a sort of a craze at the time leading me nowhere. Eventually, I started following related links and came across interesting articles on missing ships, planes, money and treasure. In the process, I learnt about the mysterious Bermuda Triangle. I was hooked for a few days and lapped up everything I could find online on the subject.

According to several valid websites, the Bermuda Triangle is a very real place where numerous ships and planes have disappeared without an explanation. Scientists claim to have spotted unusual magnetic variations within the triangle. Also known as Devil's Triangle, the first mention of this area was reportedly seen in the Italian explorer Christopher Columbus' logs.

Many wave it off as a myth, spewed out of incorrect data penned by imaginative authors while many believe that it could be the work of aliens.

I had almost been sure back then that my Dad had ventured over the infamous triangle and was swallowed by it. However, as the years dragged on I had begun to see it for what it was - nothing more than a myth. And I had moved on.

The book currently in my hand, titled Famous Missing People, looked very boring. Holding the dusty book gingerly between my fingers, I came and sat on the chairs near the line of tables. There were very few readers in the library at that time; perhaps because classes were not yet done for the day. Towards the end of the tables sat a pair – a boy and a girl. They each had a book open between them but it was obvious from their expressions that they had not come to read. Their hands lay intertwined under the table while they whispered to each other, their eyes glued to the book, a smile playing on their lips. It was fun to watch couples in love, but since it interfered with my insistence on letting people be, doing what they want as long as they were not doing any harm, I looked away and started with my book.

Having no table of contents, I flipped through the pages slowly, searching for anything on Dad. I came across the disappearance of the aviatrix Amelia Earhart and was engrossed in her story when I became aware of someone taking a seat facing me, across the not-so-wide table. I didn't look up, though, until after I finished reading all about one of the most expensive searches, the one for Amelia Earhart. When I did, I was stunned.

Jay was seated directly opposite me, nonchalantly reading a book. His stubble was more pronounced now, making him look older, more desirable. The symmetry of his nose was obvious from this angle while his eyebrows seemed bushier. Even though I stared pointedly at him, his eyes did not leave the page he was on. I looked at the title of the book that seemed to entrance him so much. How To Train A Puppy? I blinked and re-read.

Frowning to myself, I turned back to my book too and resumed flipping pages, unable to register anything. A few minutes later, I gave up trying to concentrate and stood up. Returning the book back to the librarian, I thanked her and left the library.

Feeling too agitated, for no reason at all, I avoided my friends on the

stairs, taking a back route and quickly walked to the hostel.

As expected, Whatsapp notifications started pouring in after a while.

In the group:

Aisha: Where are you, Lexi? Missing you here.

Me: Not feeling too well. Headed to the hostel now.

Rhea: Oh! We were planning to go out. We'll cancel it then.

Me: It's ok guys, you go.

Rhea: Nooo you take rest now. And if you feel better we'll go.

Me: I insist that you guys go, or I'll feel bad. ☹

Varun: Take rest. Call if you need anything ok?

Aisha: Shall we bring some medicine for you?

Rhea: Take care.

Me: So sweet of you to ask, but no thanks.

In private:

Sid: All ok?

Me: Just a slight headache. I'll be fine.

Sid: Hmmm didn't see you at all today.

Me: Yeah.

Sid: I had planned for us both to go explore the woods today.

Me: Really??

Sid: Yeah. Really.

Me: Damn! Missed that. Let's plan for tomorrow?

Sid: HAHAHA I didn't expect so much of enthusiasm! Ok done!  
(thumbs up emoticon)

Me: I hope you are serious.

Sid: Very much. Don't tell anyone though. It is actually out of bounds for all, if rules are anything to go by.

Me: My lips are sealed. See? (lip sealed emoticon)

Sid: Great! Tomorrow, then.

I felt like kicking myself for faking a headache just then.

After that day of instinctual behavior resulting in Jay's warning, I had wanted to go back into the woods to find out what could be so unsafe in them. I knew it was too soon to trust Jay's words. I mean how many times have we met? And out of those chance encounters, how many times have we talked to each other? However, for some bizarre reason, I gave him the benefit of the doubt. And I was itching to know what lay beyond the campus wall.

## **Trip**

The next day was a long one. Classes seem to go on and on. When the bell rang, I half ran out of the class aiming straight to our meeting point on the stairs. Finding the main door jammed with students already rushing out, I took the lesser used side door.

I was surprised to find Jay seated on the steps there, alone. I slowed down. Since his back was facing me, he hadn't seen me yet. Instinct told me to leave. But I had a thing against Instinct, sometimes. She played too safe. So I stopped directly behind him. For some unfathomable reason I wanted to talk to him.

Unsure about how to start a conversation, I tinkered with the thick loom band bracelet that Don had fixed up for me. Don was an indoor person, unlike me. A Mama's boy by nature, his hobbies were watching TV, playing musical instruments, DIY creative stuff like Loom Bands, etc. As a result, he had always enjoyed a closer relationship with Mom. Closer as in, though she never coddled him, even as a young boy when he used follow her around after she got back from work, it was clear she favored him over rebellious me.

Still fidgeting behind him, I failed to come up with a topic. I gave up

and took a step in order to leave. He turned around then and looked directly at me. "Hi!" It came out of my mouth before I could stop myself. I felt like I had been caught red-handed or something. My cheeks felt hot.

"Hi," he replied, sounding intrigued.

"Even though we have talked, we have never been formally introduced. I am Lexi." I made a mental note to reduce the energy level in my voice, subdue it a bit, while waiting for his response. I moved past him and stood facing him. He kept looking at me, amusement dancing in his eyes. "Jay," he said finally.

"I am from Dublin. And you?" Subdued tone, but my palpitation was still too obvious in it.

He ignored my question and counter-questioned, leaning in front, "What are you doing here then?"

I pondered over his question. What should I tell him? I decided that since he had not answered my question I needn't bother either.

Looking at my watch, I muttered, "Oh, it's 4:15 p.m." The tone was perfect. I had nailed it. But the words were so stupid! Why on Earth would I read the time out to him? I heard him clear his throat and braced myself for his next question. But before he could, Kiara joined us through the same side door. She looked from me to Jay, suspicion brimming in her eyes. Then she recollected herself, smiled at me and plopped down next to her boyfriend. She instantly started whispering something to him. Though he listened earnestly, his eyes never left me.

I took a step back, preparing to leave.

"Don't go, Lexi," Jay said quickly.

Taken by surprise, I stood my ground. Kiara had a peevish expression on her face which she rearranged into a smiling one. "Yeah, stay," she piped in half heartedly.

Thoroughly embarrassed now, I mumbled something about important work to be completed, and fled from there. Until I rounded the corner, I had the distinct feeling of Jay's eyes on me, my retreating back, but I couldn't be

sure, unless I turned to check, which, of course I wouldn't.

When I reached the next block, I spotted all my friends spread out on the steps. They waved at me, urging me to hurry up.

Was that where Jay always sat with Kiara? – was the question that was playing on my mind, while I waved back.

Miffed with myself for being concerned, I shrugged it off visibly and joined the others.

Questions were flung my way from left, right and centre.

What in the world took you so long, Lexi?

Where were you? How are you today?

I patiently sat down and explained to them that I had bumped into Jay and Kiara sitting by the side door. My lousy first conversation with Jay was omitted on purpose.

“You mean you saw them by the L.C,” Sid enthused, “or in other words, the lover’s corner!”

A pang of something unpleasant shot through me.

“If it’s the lover’s point, then it should get crowded soon, shouldn’t it?” I asked a tad hopefully.

“There is an unwritten first-come-first-serve rule that assures privacy for the early lovebirds that catch the LC,” added Rhea.

“No points for guessing LC’s most frequent visitor,” she said with a wink.

“Varrrrrrunnnn!” Everyone else chorused.

My thoughts were elsewhere.

“By the way Lex,” Aisha tapped my hand with a finger, “we have traditional day next Thursday. Do you have anything to wear?”

Varun shook his head. “Someone rightly said that a woman has only two problems. One, she has nothing to wear. Two, she has no room for her clothes!”

Rhea turned to Varun. “Varun, quoting Caitlin Moran, ‘When a



woman says she has nothing to wear, what she really means is there's nothing here for who I'm supposed to be today.'"

"Caitlin who? Anyway, at least you agree that you have a million faces."

"Sure," Rhea tossed her short hair, "we are multifaceted."

We hi-fived and I turned back to Aisha, "Will a skirt count?"

"Yeah," Aisha replied, "if it is one of those desi types. You know, sequined, or embroidered with mirrors or stones."

I shook my head no.

"I thought so. Let's go buy then!" Aisha got up. "C'mon Rhea, let's transform Lex into a desi girl."

Varun put his hand up. "Can I come? I like to watch foreign girls in a Sari. It's fun to watch them struggle."

I made a face and said through narrow eyes that I was not a foreign girl.

Sid was quietly working on a Rubik's cube. I wanted to ask him about our plan. As if by telepathy, Sid looked up and shook his head ever so slightly.

Crestfallen, I wondered why our exploration plan had been dropped. There was no way that I could ask him then. In a way the shopping idea was good. I hoped it would take my mind off my disappointment.

We took Rhea's car and went to the market place, which was surprisingly crowded for a quaint little town like Malta.

Shopping was fun. We went to quite a few shops, compared the designs and prices and finally, came right back to the very first shop we had started with.

At each shop, Aisha and Rhea made me strut around in sari after sari after sari. They would pass comments while I struggled to balance my gait such that the nine yards of cloth draped around me would not come undone. Several times I stumbled clumsily, leaving the girls in peals of laughter.

Finally, at the end of a long tiring day, I was the owner of a beautiful sari. It was a simple and elegant piece of cloth of nine and a half yards. Royal blue in colour, it was laced with antique coloured golden sequined border. According to Aisha, it accentuated my flawless complexion. If I had my way, I would hand it back to the shopkeeper, say thank you very much, and leave. Unfortunately, my friends wouldn't let me, seemingly determined to see me make a fool of myself. I already envisaged a fall resulting in a tangled mess of me and my gorgeous sari. God forbid.

With enough appetite to eat a horse, we stopped by to have dinner at a dimly lit restaurant, named Dine Inn, situated on the outskirts of the town. There was a homely touch to the interiors as well as the food. Famished much, we ordered quite a lot and ended up with plenty of leftovers. Guilt-ridden about wasting so much of food when half the children of our country were malnourished and starving, we agreed on requesting the waiter to pack up what was left.

It was quite late by the time we started back. Having already informed our matron that we would be late, we stopped by a small shop on the roadside to recharge our SIM cards. I volunteered to get the coupons because Aisha and Rhea were too full to move. I bought the coupons, paid and stepped out. As I was about to cross the road, I saw someone lying on the ground covered in an old blanket, a little away from the shop. There was a blackish bowl in front of the person. Poor homeless man, I thought to myself as I walked up to where he lay, the change the shopkeeper had given jingling in my pocket. Seeing his empty bowl, I let the coins be and fished out 50 bucks from my purse. As I bent to drop it in to his bowl, the beggar moved the tattered blanket and looked up. He had an eerie face. It was puffed up like he had some rare disease. His eyes, set deep in his face, creeped me out. They seem to pierce right into my soul. And... they seemed oddly familiar.

I quickly dropped the money and backed off. But before I could leave, his hand was on my arm, clenched tight. As I tried to wrench my hand free, panic stricken, Rhea called out to me to stay where I was and turned her car around to pick me from where I was standing across the road.

The man got up, still holding my arm in his steel grip. He was huge. And burly. "Hey!" I called out to the shop, but no one heard me. Struggling to break free, I tried to turn around to look at Rhea but stopped when I felt his

grip tighten. Then, squeezing my eyes shut, I balled up all my energy into my right knee, and kicked him between his legs. Momentarily stunned, he hunched over, letting go of me.

By then Rhea had gotten the car to this side and I scrambled in. She sped away in the direction of the town. Through the rearview glass, we watched the man stare back at us. After going a short distance, Rhea turned her car back around and we drove back towards college.

We noticed as we passed the shop that the area was deserted again. The man was gone.

“Phew.” Rhea was the first to break the silence. She kept looking through her rearview mirror, checking to see if we were being followed.

“Do you know this guy?” Aisha asked me.

“I’ve never seen him before.”

“We saw you struggling. You had turned as white as a sheet,” Aisha said.

“He looked...creepy.” I shivered at the memory of his hands on mine.

“He must have wanted to snatch your purse from you.”

I kept quiet. He hadn’t tried to snatch anything. Neither did he attempt to molest me. He had just held me, looking at me with those dead pan eyes. Was there a warning in them?

I was looking out of the window that we had rolled up and locked after the incident. All our doors were locked in as well, and we vowed to do so every time from now. The landscape passed by as if it were being fast forwarded. To put myself at ease, I tried to concentrate on each object, as it moved from the left end of my window to the right. I could hold on only for a micro second until it moved out of the window-screen. This exercise always helped me put my mind off unwanted thoughts while travelling alone.

As I watched tree after tree pass over in this way, interrupted in between by an occasional building, I saw a glimpse of someone. He was leaning against a bike, just like I had seen him for the very first time, hands in his pockets, right leg folded beneath him. However, it was only after my eye

moved with him from left to right that it actually registered who he was. “Jay!” I exclaimed as I sat straight up and peered through the back window. He was too far away to make out by then. But it was him.

Aisha was looking at me. “You saw him here?”

“Yeah. He was all alone, leaning on a bike on the roadside!” I couldn’t control the excitement in my voice.

“Whatever, I am not stopping or going back to check. I have had enough for today,” Rhea muttered, more to herself.

Aisha said, “Lexi, I saw the kick you landed on the creepo’s groin. Superb, girl! I would have loved to see you bring him down.”

‘Bringing him down’ was out of the question. Perhaps throwing in a punch or two before jumping into the car would have been rejuvenating.

Aisha said quietly, “This is my first experience of a dangerous situation. Maybe it’s a warning from God for lying to Mom.” She looked ahead. “I told her that I have a class test tomorrow, I am going to turn in early and that she should not call and disturb me.”

Rhea glanced at Aisha as she drove. “Really? First experience, Aishu? Lexi and I are always getting attacked. Right, Lex?” She winked and I forced a smile at her.

At this, Aisha burst out laughing and so did Rhea. Unable to resist, I joined in too. It took a while of laughing for the pitch to go down from high-strung to normal.

## Chapter 8

### **Sore thumb (I don't want to stand out)**

The next day, I arrived late for our evening hangout by the stairs.

I came rushing to join in with a smile. My smile froze when I saw Jay seated directly behind Ryan, lazily scrolling his phone. I exchanged glances with Sid. What is he doing here? I gestured with my eyes.

Sid shrugged an 'I don't know' and got back to solving his Rubik's cube.

It struck me that I was thoroughly confused about my feelings for Jay. I was uncomfortable when he was close by. I felt self conscious for no reason. But at the same time a part of me was excited to have him around. The confusion was what irritated me the most.

I sat down next to Sid and took the Rubik's cube from him. Sid spread out his hands in protest. I smiled and continued from where he had left it, carefully turning each plane either clockwise or counter-clockwise.

Rhea and Aisha were seated behind me, solving crossword puzzles. Varun was sitting chewing on a piece of grass, lost in his world. No one said a word. It reminded me of one of those days in school when the Principal did his rounds.

"Where's the girlfriend?" I whispered to Sid.

"She's down with stomach cramps, apparently," he whispered back.

"He told you?" I whispered again, my eyes wide with surprise.

"No." he had a sheepish smile. "I saw her leave class clutching her stomach."

"Oh I forgot she's your classmate! Lucky you," I nudged Sid playfully.

I turned around to look at Jay. Our eyes met for a fraction of a second and then I looked away. I leaned my back on the wall, the way I always sit.

Occasionally, I could feel Jay's eyes on me, as the Rubik's cube moved easily in my hands.

After a while, Rhea cleared her throat. "Guys, guess what happened to us yesterday." She narrated the incident in a casual manner. Varun whistled. "I told you I'll come along," he said, wagging a finger at us.

"Oh hero, we managed, ok?" Aisha countered.

Ryan glared at Rhea. "Why didn't you tell me yesterday?"

Rhea shrugged. "It was no big deal. We got back safe and sound after a wonderful night out," she said as she hugged Aisha.

"It's a good thing you all got back unscathed." Sid said with concern.

Jay was quiet, looking straight ahead. I glanced at him, wanted to ask him what he was doing on the road-side, all alone. He shifted his gaze towards me and our eyes locked. Was he there to make sure I was safe? That was nothing but wishful thinking, I chided myself. And I was no damsel in distress. I couldn't help tossing my head in accompaniment to the thought.

I turned to see Aisha smiling slyly at me. "I know two things about you now," she said, winking.

I froze. My breath having caught in my chest, I waited for her to speak. "I know you can defend yourself, like, in a fight," Aisha said, laughing. "The poor guy must still be in pain."

Phew! I let out the air that I had been holding, even though I was not sure what exactly I had expected her to say.

"I would call it silly in the first place," Ryan was facing the other way as he spoke, choosing his words carefully, "to go near a stranger at night on a lonely road. Hope you learnt your lesson. You cannot be Mother Teresa around here."

"That's my second point," Aisha chimed in, while I was trying to gauge Ryan's mood, to figure out if he was accusing me or if he spoke in concern. "I know she's got a heart of gold," Aisha finished as she put her left hand around me and held me tight. Feeling awkward, I waited for her to ease her hold and then let go immediately. Her words, though, felt great.

“All *I* know,” Rhea piped in, “is that we can expect a call from the aging owner of Saree Sellers. He insisted that we write down our phone numbers. You guys should have seen the way he was gawking at Lexi.”

“I am sure he was wondering what someone so unfashionable like me was doing in his grand shop.” I shrugged, playing it cool.

“Maybe he was wondering how you would look in one of his wedding collections,” Aisha laughed. The whole gang broke out into loud laughter at my cringed expression. But not loud enough to drown out Kiara’s words ringing in my ears. “People here are weird in a way. They like those who are different, those who stand out.” It wasn’t the old shop-owner that bothered me. I was reminded of the way people on the streets stared at me. The memory disturbed me. I don’t want to stand out, I decided.

“Aisha,” I said later, as we were having dinner at the canteen, “Do I stand out?”

She was surprised at the blatant question. She chomped on, her mouth full, taking her time to reply. “You do,” she said, finally, “but not in a bad way.”

“I don’t want to,” I said. “Is it the way I dress?”

Again she took a big bite and mulled over my words before answering, “Well you are pretty much talked about around here. I can’t say if it’s the way you dress, or the way you are, or that you are technically a foreigner.” She drew two invisible quotation marks around the word foreigner. “Ultimately, it comes down to what you are comfortable about. Sometimes what you wear in one place may not be preferred in another. But if that’s what defines you then, in my personal opinion, you don’t need to change it at all. But then, if it makes you ill at ease, I suggest you invest in a little make-over.”

She winked and took another mouthful of her cheesy chicken burger.

The next day, Aisha slapped a few stapler bound papers into my hand and sat down opposite me. We were at the canteen waiting for the pasta that I had ordered. Aisha, who was on one of her diets, had opted to skip lunch. Anyone who was close to Aisha knew well about her ability to pick the best

of diets, and her inability to stick to them for more than a week.

There were about 6 sheets in the bundle in front of me. The topic was Choose your Cause.

“What’s this?” I asked flipping through.

“Cause Form,” Aisha replied, already filling in on the last page.

“And what is a Cause Form?” I prodded, curious, but not enough to read through the many sheets of papers.

Aisha looked up and slapped her head. “You don’t know? Sorry! I thought someone must have told you.”

I shook my head. Raju, the waiter boy came with my pink coloured pasta on a tray. He kept it in front of me and lingered, a shy smile on his face. Aisha gave him an impatient look and said, “Raju, we are a little busy. Not now.” Raju left, embarrassed.

I stared at Raju scurrying away and looked back at my friend, nonplussed.

Aisha said, rolling her eyes shaking her head, “Raju has a crush on you,” and bent down on her form.

“What?” I laughed. “How do you know that?”

She replied, her face still bent down, “His sister Disha works at the Hostel canteen. She told me.” She smiled as she looked up. “It seems he’s placed a wager with his friends that today he’s going to talk to you.”

I opened my mouth in protest. “So heartless of you! You just made him lose his bet!”

Aisha folded her hands. “Fill up this form first, madam. I need to submit it now. And then you can spend your whole life with him if you want to.”

I rolled my eyes and opened my form. “Explain.”

“Okay. This college requires that you be part of a cause. It is mandatory. You are supposed to fill out the cause of your preference in the given form.”



“That’s nice!”

“Yeah, it is.”

“Um, which one should I choose? And what do we do after that?”

“Oh, there are options. For example, I chose Female Infanticide because it is still rampant in my area. We will have monthly meetings with our team and we will help out, in the form of campaigns or by collecting funds, or whatever our team captain decides. Rhea chose Breast Cancer, because she lost an aunt she was very close to, to the disease. If you don’t have any particular choice then you can join one of us.”

I nodded. I really didn’t have any cause that I specially felt for. Even though I had always wanted to do my bit for others and for the environment and felt for the malnourished children of Africa as well as for the endangered animals of India, there was no specific cause that was close to the heart.

So I filled the form, wrote Female Infanticide in the blank near Preferred Cause, and handed it to Aisha. She was waiting for me to finish and left immediately to submit it.

I was confident that I had made a good choice, having recently read an article about it. According to reports, in the Indian state of Rajasthan, unwanted girl babies were left outside in the bushes or near temples to die. There were gruesome reports of infants mauled by street dogs. And the number of girls who died this way was a staggering 2500 per day. The reason for this sad practice was the extra expense that comes with a girl child, mainly in the form of dowry. The worst part was that the authorities were doing nothing to prevent it. A few private organizations backed by trust funds were the only solace. They picked these children up, cared for them and arranged for their adoption. Hence, female Infanticide it was!

I went up to the canteen kitchen and asked one of the boys for Raju. He came running and stopped when he saw me.

“Raju, you wanted to talk to me?” I asked my shy admirer.

He grinned and scratched his head, going red in the face.

“Lexi Mem,” he asked innocently, “did you like the pasta?”

“Of course I did, thank you!” I smiled.

I waved to an overjoyed Raju and left the canteen, collecting my papers from my table on the way. Cause or no cause, making someone smile always felt good.

In the evening, after clearing my bed, I took out the bundle titled Choose Your Cause from my bag and read through. All the available options were listed on the second page. I started scrolling through the twelve choices.

#### Choice 5: Climate Change

I stopped. Googling Dad’s name had brought up, among many other links, an article he had written titled - Let Not the CLIMATE CHANGE. He had mentioned that had he not been a scientist he would have been an environmentalist. Listing down the causes and the alarming effects of climate change, he had also expressed his wish to pioneer an organization to contain the problem.

It was a weird feeling, as if Dad was talking to me, across from wherever he was. ‘Choose Climate Change. There’s much to be done in the field,’ he was saying.

The next day, I rushed to the main office first thing in the morning.

“Excuse me, I need to change my preferred cause, please.”

### **The Meeting**

We had our first meeting for the cause CLIMATE CHANGE within a week in the mini hall. Our motto was written on the smart board. It read- Change yourself. Let the climate be.

As we were getting introduced to each other, I was surprised to see Jay walk in. He was wearing a black full sleeved buttoned up shirt and formal pants. I went up to him. My feet carried me to him would be a better way of putting it.

“Hi!” I heard myself say. “Have you signed up for this cause too?” I

hoped fervently that I didn't look as pleased as I felt.

Before he could answer, a voice boomed through the speakers requesting us to be seated. Jay and I took our seats in the third row, side by side.

"So, why this cause?" I asked when everyone had settled down.

"Because it's either this or find another Planet to live in. I chose the easier option." He smiled. "And you?"

I looked at him and replied vaguely, "I'm just following in the footsteps of my father."

He looked at me for a moment, an unfathomable expression clouding his eyes.

"Have we met before?" I asked him, interrupting his gaze.

"No," he answered and sat up straight, looking ahead.

Since it was the first meeting, after the formal introductions, wherein each of us stood up on the little podium and spoke about ourselves, specifying the reason for our choice, there was only time for a brief up about Global Warming and what we would be doing to help. The speech given by the president of our group, a girl named Sonia, happened to be so gripping and emotional that it was hard to shake off the hangover that followed.

After the meeting, Jay accompanied me outside. Sid, who was leaning on the opposite wall, waved when he saw me. As he pushed forward through the crowd, Jay leaned in and spoke in my ear, "Bye! See you later."

I watched his retreating back, slightly dispirited by the hasty goodbye.

"Hey," Sid tapped me on my shoulder. Gesturing towards Jay, he continued, "Look at him run away. Speaks volumes about his character."

I was surprised by the unmasked spite in Sid's voice, so out of sync with his usual mellowness.

Thankfully he did not dwell on the topic and said, "How about executing our plan today?"

I looked at him in anticipation. Woods, he mouthed. Yes, I mouthed

back, grinning excitedly. I hadn't asked him why the plan was dropped the other day. Since access was restricted for us I guessed that he must have put it off foreseeing some problem.

We split up as was planned before. I stepped out of the building and took the back route towards the back gate of the campus, trying to appear casual in accordance with Sid's instructions. According to our plan, Sid would be waiting for me on the other side, watching through the gate and would ring once on my phone in case I was being watched, or followed, in case of which I was to head towards hostel immediately.

Just as I reached the small iron gate my phone rang once. I checked it. One missed call from Sid, it read. I heaved a sigh of exasperation and stomped towards the girl's hostel, not even bothering to see who the spy was.

"Lexi!" It was Jay's voice. I didn't stop, totally bugged. He caught up with me easily and slowed his pace to match mine. "Your Parker pen is with me."

"Keep it!" I shot back.

"What happened?" He sounded amused.

I kept walking in silence. Sid joined us from behind. He must have slipped back unnoticed.

Seeing Sid, Jay stiffened, but he continued to walk with me.

"By the way, what were you doing there?" Jay asked in a strained voice deprived of its previous amusement.

I stopped walking and turned to face him. "How does it concern you?"

Jay looked hurt and angry at the same time. Beside me, Sid straightened himself, a contemptuous smile on his face.

Jay spoke, stressing on every word, "In case you were planning on crossing that gate, let me warn you, the area beyond the wall is entirely off-limits for students. Anyone caught red handed crossing over gets a suspension notice. That's the rule." Even though his eyes never left me while he spoke, I had a feeling that it was directed at Sid as well.

I glared at him. What were *you* doing then, that day in the woods? The question stood at the tip of my tongue. I gulped it down. Getting into an argument over this wouldn't be smart.

"Chill bro," Sid drawled, "we know the rules around here."

Jay shifted his blazing eyes from me to Sid. I was reminded of the phrase - If looks could kill...

Well, if looks could kill, there would be very few people left in college, going by how popular Jay was among the boys. As far as I had heard repeatedly, Jay was always falling out with someone or the other.

Sid was flexing his muscles now, bracing himself for a fight. I tugged at him. "Sid, please. Let's go."

This seemed to change his mind and he let me guide him back. Jay had his eyes on me, the mask back on his face.

## Chapter 9

At night, as soon as I was done with my bath, I got dressed in my pyjamas and sat by the window looking out. I had mulled over the day's events so many times that finally I had come to the conclusion that maybe I should apologize to Jay for being so rude when he had actually been right. The image of hurt-looking Jay had kept creeping back into my mind making me all the more restless. Finally I had taken out my phone, typed Sorry and had sent it to Jay. No reply had come but I felt lighter.

Hearing the heavy rustle of leaves, I leaned out gingerly. There was a sudden movement on the ground below, like something flashed by, and then everything lay still. I grabbed Mom's Pashmina shawl (something that I had slipped in to my suitcase on an emotional whim) and rushed out, locking the door. I ran down the stairs, taking two steps at a time, out of the building through the open archway, past the old security guard, Aslam Uncle, who was thankfully snoring away to glory, and reached the backside of the building in no time.

I stood there panting, looking around for the intruder. Even for a girl with a daredevil impulse, I was not too keen on poking my head into the pitch-black corners of the backyard. At the same time, I did not want to go back and stay up the whole night wondering who or what that was. I suddenly missed my unused pepper spray back home.

I stood still bracing myself for whatever lay in the shadows to come lunging at me. In my head, I went over the Judo moves that I had learnt as a child. I even planned out my exit path should the need arise to run to safety.

Chug. A sound from my left of something falling. I turned towards it, alert and poised to attack, my back facing the building. A hand clamped over my mouth and another one pinned my own two hands down behind my back as I was dragged into the shadows of the building. Even though I couldn't see his face I knew it was Jay.

Perhaps my brain was busy trying to deal with the weird tingling sensation in my body and a wild pounding heart, due to which it forgot to send signals to struggle against my captivity. Seeing that I was not putting up

a fight, Jay eased his hold on me. He whispered in my ear from behind me, "Don't make a sound." I nodded and he slowly let go. I moved back and we stood side by side leaning against the wall shrouded in darkness.

"What is with you and forbidden places?" Jay murmured, without looking at me.

"This place is not forbidden for us." I was still slightly panting.

"It's not safe at night."

"You keep saying this is not safe! Do not go here! Why won't you just tell me why?"

He sighed, looking at me now. "Why can't you just take my word for it?"

'Who are you? Do I even know you?' was the retort that came to my mind. I curbed the urge and changed the topic, asking him casually, "Did you come to see her?"

"Who?"

"Your girlfriend," I replied, looking directly at him.

My eyes having adjusted to the darkness now, I could see the amusement was back on his face.

"Yeah." A smile was tugging at the corners of his mouth. How happy he looks, I thought, when the topic happens to be Kiara.

"Did you call her down?" I tried to be casual.

"Her phone is off," was the prompt reply.

I was quiet, considering.

"I will call her for you, if you answer my questions."

"What questions?" he rolled his eyes.

"Tell me why the woods are not safe and what you were doing there that day."

He turned away at this, looking up now. His face had gone expressionless

again.

He shook his head. “You ask too many questions.”

“And you answer none,” I snapped.

I gave him a dirty look and stormed away. As I passed him, he moved as if to hold me back but he didn’t.

I went past the still sleeping guard and was promptly back in my room. After a moment of consideration, I picked up my phone to inform Kiara. Finding it switched off, I connected it to a charging cable. That’s when I remembered that Jay had said Kiara’s phone was off, which meant I would have to go and inform her in person.

I walked up to Kiara’s room. She opened on the first knock, dressed in camisole pyjamas paired with barely there shorts and curls in her hair.

I forced a smile, and spoke as casually as I could, “Jay’s down and wants to meet you.”

She looked taken aback. “Really? You met him?”

“Yeah. He tried to call you but your phone was off.”

“Oh, is it?”

I hated the way her voice drawled in a sleepy way. She checked her phone. “It is on,” she said, with an odd expression.

“Then it might have been out of coverage.” I turned to go. “He’s waiting in the backyard,” I spoke over my shoulder and went back to my room.

After a while, I was lying on my bed and my phone beeped in the darkness. There was a message from Jay. He had finally found time to reply.

Jay: I forgive you if the apology was for snapping at me in the afternoon. And I forgive you for doing it again, a few minutes ago. ☺

That was his response to my apology message. When a simple ‘It’s Ok’ would have sufficed.



Me: Forget that I ever apologized. I take back the sorry.

Jay: Sending sorry back. ;)

PJ! I smiled in spite of myself. Maybe I was wrong, but I had a feeling that it was his way of apologizing to me too, without sounding too obvious.

Jay: Kiara told me that you informed her that I was waiting.

Me: Yeah I did. I thought it would serve you right for being such a J\*\*\*!

Jay: Hahaha

I stared at the screen for a few minutes. Jay was still online. Is he chatting to Kiara? Or just staring at the screen like me, wondering what to say?

My restlessness was back in an instant, goaded on by a feeling of resentment. I was piqued at Jay, his attitude. "At least he could try and give vague answers, instead of ignoring them point blank," I muttered to myself.

After some more minutes of fretting, I had a plan. I would give Jay the cold shoulder. If he cared enough he would tell me what I wanted to know.

That night I dreamt that I was in a huge building with glass walls. I glided inside and ended up in a long corridor with many doors. Finding all of them locked I turned left to find another long corridor. Then I was running from corridor to corridor, taking turns in random until I found myself in front of a door. Beyond it I could hear a sound that resembled a low growl. There was a password locked security box on the left side wall. I typed in the password just as someone shouted "NO!"

I woke up, out of breath and sweaty. The dream had felt so real.

### **Ignoring Jay**

I woke up to a chilly morning. Winter was setting in, making days shorter and nights longer. I pulled a sweater over my kurti, adjusted my jeans, and stepped out.

I had slowly changed my dressing style, going from bold to desi. To

fit in. Simple as that. My wardrobe now had some colourful tops, two kurtis that I frequently wore, simple jeans, palazzos, even a simple salwar kameez. The old tee shirts were stashed away underneath my new favorites, unused, catching dust.

Aisha, being down with flu, was planning to sleep in while Rhea always raced to college at the last moment. It felt odd walking alone.

I found Jay leaning against one of the oak trees on the way. Probably waiting for his girlfriend. He smiled when he saw me. I turned my face the other way and continued walking. He sauntered over and stood in front of me, blocking my path. I side-stepped him and quickened my pace. Finally he fell in step with me and asked, “Now what did I do?”

I ignored the question. He tried again, “Ahem! May I have a word with you?”

“Okay, one word, no more,” I said. I could kick myself now. Here I was playing along with his histrionics. And there goes my plan out the window. I cried inwardly at my inability to stick to my resolve when it came to Jay.

“Go,” he said.

“Go where?” I asked, confused.

“One word is go. Can I say the rest?”

I rolled my eyes. I was actually impatient now.

“What is it, Jay?” I said, clenching my teeth. He grinned.

Then he took a deep sigh and arranging his face into it’s trademark serious look. In a no-nonsense voice, he said, “Okay. Listen to what I say very carefully. Don’t go beyond that wall, at any cost.” He went on, sotto voce, “Please. Stay safe.”

Now this was weird. A part of me wanted to punch him then, for his absolute adamancy that not only would he not reveal a thing, but he would also provoke me by saying the very thing that irks me over and over again without so much as a flinch. The other part of me, my foolish swoony alter ego, was exalted by the seemingly personal ‘request’ to stay safe.

“Why,” I pestered, “can’t I go beyond that wall?”

He came closer, his stubbles almost touching my upturned nose. “Because you are.... a girl.”

I opened my mouth in disgust. That’s his explanation? How lame! And misogynistic.

Enraged and disoriented, I nodded to myself, taking a silent decision never to speak to him again. When I spotted Sid in the distance, waving at me, I left without a word.

It’s so much easier handling myself with Sid. Enter level-headed thinking. Exit complicated feelings and emotional roller-coaster rides.

“What was he threatening you about?” Sid asked, perhaps gauging from my expression that Jay had managed to ruffle my feathers early in the morning.

“Same old,” I replied, “Don’t go to the other side.”

“He is just trying to show off, acting like he is all important,” Sid scoffed. Given my mood, I kept quiet, not trusting myself to talk sane.

The silver lining of his discriminating words, was that ignoring Jay became much easier. I spent the course of the entire week avoiding him and sucking up to Sid. It had not been intentional at first. With a flu-ridden Aisha gone home, I took to spending all my time with Sid to push Jay and his humiliating remark out of my head. Gradually however, intentions changed and it gave me grim satisfaction, seeing Jay look on while we walked arm in arm- Sid, who seemed to take advantage of the situation as well, and I.

Moreover, Rhea had started to go around with a guy who had proposed to her, literally spending all her time with him. Since then, Ryan stopped hanging out with us as well. At times we found him on his computer or at the lab, at other times he was like the needle in the haystack – nobody knew where he was. Varun too was busy with something or the other every day. So basically, it was mostly just Sid and I lounging around by the stairs or at the canteen. Given the state of affairs then, it suited me just fine.

The next week passed by uneventfully. I missed Aisha. Being in contact on phone and Whatsapp was just not enough. I wanted to tell her all

about my conflicting emotions, wanted to assess Jay and his mood-swings, discuss all the tiny sparks which shot through me for the microsecond that our eyes met. In short, girlie talk. But deep in my heart, I knew that, had Aisha been present, I would have shied away from anything like a heart to heart.

Detached. That's what I was. Mom knew me well. I was a girl crippled by her inability to talk about her feelings to anyone. A girl who looked tough as nails on the outside, in spite of how shattered and lonely she felt within. A girl who never shed tears in the presence of anyone, in spite of all the emotional baggage she carried. Which explains why I had never spoken about Dad yet. Back home, Dad leaving us had always been the elephant in the room. I just didn't want the same situation here as well.

The next cause meeting was scheduled for Thursday, on the same day as Traditional Day, and I was so not looking forward to being in the same room as Jay so much so that I considered bunking it, calling in sick. However, Sid advised me against it, explaining that to bunk classes were fine but not a meeting. Apparently, the authorities went the extra mile to make sure that you were really sick and not faking it. So much for that.

One afternoon, walking to the canteen with some of my classmates, to take a quick bite during the short break that we were given, I noticed a commotion where a group of boys were involved in a tussle. My heart sank when I saw Jay in the middle of it, looking red-faced and lethal. One of my friends, Diaz, went over to 'find out' while we continued to our destination.

While Raju took our order, I asked him if he knew what the fight was all about.

"Mem, I don't know the details, but the issue is over a girl." Raju replied.

"Which girl?" gushed Astha, one of the girls in the group.

Raju shrugged and Diaz, who had joined us by then, replied, "From what I learnt, it concerns that basketball player, Amish, his girlfriend Susan, and that douchebag Jay."

I winced inwardly at the adjective he used for Jay. He laughed

suggestively, in the way people do when the problem at hand has nothing to do with them or their loved ones.

After class, Sid was brimming over with the news. As I had suspected it was not the normal love triangle kind of girl issue that Diaz had seemed to suggest. Amish's girlfriend, Susan, had allegedly dared her friend Pia to cross the wall at night. Pia had and was subsequently found by Jay, unconscious, on the other side, right next to the wall. Jay had taken the matter to the college authorities, resulting in the immediate suspension of both Pia and Susan. Her boyfriend had not taken kindly to that, reasoning that Jay could have kept the matter a secret, since Pia was unharmed and only slightly shaken up. He had accused Jay of trying to play hero, knowing well the expected consequences of his actions, wishing to bring to everyone's notice about how he saved a girl's life, while it was actually not much of a big deal.

"He seems to consider himself the guardian of the college," concluded Sid.

My thoughts were on a particular part of the story that Sid did not seem to think much about. Why was Pia found unconscious? I considered my two options to find out, asking Jay who wouldn't answer, and Pia herself, who was on suspension. I decided to wait until Pia got back.

I promised myself this: I wasn't going into the woods anytime in the near future. Not because I was scared of some unknown danger. I just did not want to end up at home for two weeks suspended from college.

## Chapter 10

Traditional day came and the college livened up, with all the girls strutting their stuff in saris and salwars and all the guys ogling at them. I donned my sari too, but I kept it simple, ditching the matching heavy accessories that we had bought, wearing a simple pendant and earrings instead. Rhea scolded me for the same but I shut her up by explaining that there was no mood to dress up without Aisha. It was partly true, but it had more to do with the fact that it was just not me, the dressing up and the showing off. Not that I was against it though. I loved seeing other girls with elegant dresses and make-up on their faces. I admired the way they carried themselves with confidence. I just felt that if I tried the same I would only look clumsy and out of place.

Sid was looking like one of those Glam magazine cover models in a simple sherwani and kolhapuri chappals on his feet. He admired my desi look and called me ‘sizzling hot.’ I laughed knowing full well that he was just fibbing, considering how gorgeous the other girls looked with their straightened hair and heavy jewellery.

The day provided ample opportunity to take a multitude of photos, the main intention being to upload them on social media.

After class, I found Sid waiting outside class for me. We silently walked towards the block where the cause meetings were held. Jay was leaning on a wall outside our hall, in his usual stance. He was dressed in an ordinary shirt and patchwork jeans.

As soon as he saw Jay, Sid said to me, rather loudly, “Did I tell you that you look hot today?”

Playing along, I laughed and said, “No, do I?”

Jay walked in into the hall, miffed by the looks of it. I said bye to Sid and grudgingly stepped in.

I took my seat in the second row. Jay came and occupied the empty seat beside me. I moved as far away from him as possible and turned my face the other way. He did not attempt to speak to me either.

Halfway through the meeting, an iPad was passed around so that we could fill in our details to get enrolled on the international website for Global Warming. When it came to him, Jay asked me, “What’s your gender?”

“I can fill up for myself, thank you very much,” I shot back.

“I can type faster than you.” He smiled, the humour evident in his eyes. It was a remark intended to flare me up and it did too.

“You do have a misogynistic attitude.”

He chuckled and typed in F in the slot Gender. The next slot said Name.

“Alexcy J,” I declared with a toss of my head.

Jay looked at me, surprised. I stared right back, keeping my guard up.

“Alexcy Jay, I like that,” he grinned, nodding his head.

That was when it struck me. I momentarily opened my mouth and then shut it, trying to pull myself together, since he was intently watching me, thoroughly enjoying my confusion. I hoped that I was not blushing because my face felt hot.

“That’s my surname,” I said finally.

“I thought your Dad’s name was Sam,” he continued, eyes sparkling.

“Yeah, but J stands for Joanne, which is Mom’s name,” I said, not looking at him.

I wheeled around to face him again. “How do you know my Dad’s name?”

He shrugged. “Looked it up.”

I narrowed my eyes in suspicion. Before I could question him further, the girl behind me tapped on my shoulder. “Will you pass the iPad please?” We got down to some serious work then, filled in the required information, made sure we were registered, and then passed the tablet on.

“So, how do you know my Dad’s name again?” I asked him as soon as we were out and on our way to my hostel. I noticed that Sid was nowhere

to be seen.

“You know what, I think I will call you FAQ from now – ‘Female Asking Questions,’” he joked.

“Then I should call you Blank Page by the way you go blank whenever I ask you anything!” I quipped back.

He guffawed at this. It was great to see him laugh, unguarded and natural. For some reason though, I was reminded of the fight he had had with Amish.

“Because of you, two girls have been suspended from college. What do you have to say to that?”

Slowly, his laughter came to a stop. “Nothing,” he said softly, “since I did what had to be done. No one who knows the truth will blame me for the complaint.”

“What truth?” I asked, my voice equally soft.

He sighed condescendingly. I looked at him with anticipation. His eyes reflected a myriad of emotions: defeat, impatience and ... fear. I could sense him give in to his resolve. Finally.

But as quickly as it had come, it passed. He spun around and bundled off, leaving me completely baffled. I had to get to the bottom of this. Jay was not being helpful in the least. Instead, each time I asked him, I only ended up more clueless than before.

My curiosity got the better of me. During the weekend that followed, I learnt from my hostel-mates that Pia lived not very far from college. According to her friends, her house could be reached in less than 2 hours by bus. Convincing Sid that it was important, I planned for us both to go visit her at her house.

On the Saturday that followed, Sid brought his own car to college so that we could execute Pia’s house visit plan. We set out early in the morning. The alternative personality of Michael Schumacher that usually takes Sid over behind the wheel, one that, undeterred by the Indian roads, should have landed us at our destination within an hour, was missing for some reason. Sid was in no hurry to get there. We took three hours.



Pia's mom, a stout lady in a salwar kameez, looked us up and down before calling Pia down. She bundled off into the kitchen while we stood awkwardly at the doorstep. Pia came down in a minute, slowed down when she saw us, wary. Her reaction was no surprise considering how little we had actually talked to her before this. Nevertheless, she invited us in and we sat across her in the living room – Sid and I on the handcrafted Diwan, Pia perched on the handrest of a single sofa.

On inquiring after her health, Pia curtly replied that she was fine, which didn't leave us with much choice than to dive straight into the topic. Sid's idea was to begin by blaming Jay in order to get her to talk about her ordeal in the forest. Clearing his throat, Sid said, "It's not at all fair that you got expelled for no fault of yours. Jay shouldn't have complained. I apologize on behalf of my friend." His plan worked. It loosened Pia up considerably.

Smiling sweetly she said, "Oh that's fine."

"No, it's not," Sid insisted. "We feel bad. We are trying hard to make the college authorities take back your suspension." I stared at Sid for the whopper, hoping he would stop pushing the envelope.

Pia's smile turned into a smirk. "My Dad has it totally under control," she said. "He has contacts in the Ministry. In fact, he might shift me to another college." She folded her hands, giving a wounded girl look. "He is very angry that they actually suspended me."

Sid was speechless for a moment. I sniffed, trying hard to suppress a smile. So much for his fib about 'trying hard' to take back her suspension!

He tried again. "Of course your Dad would be mad... um... angry. It's not like you have defied college rules. Aren't they aware of how clean your track record has been so far?!"

Pia laughed at this. "Clean track record? Bah! This is my second suspension," she boasted. Sid was flabbergasted by now. His expression looked so comical that I had to turn away. Or else I would have burst out laughing.

"Really?" he spluttered. "Yeah," said Pia, enjoying herself, and described at length about her previous suspension, back in school, for ragging a junior.

Her mom came in with snacks, and stared down at us while we nibbled on a biscuit. We were thankful for her entry or Pia's ragging story would have gone on and on. Once her Mom was back in the kitchen and we could hear the clang of pans, Sid steered the conversation to her 'dare'. I let Sid do all the talking, because I was, for all intents and purposes, non-existent for Pia. On the other hand, she seemed to be overjoyed that someone like Sid was interested in her story. She told him everything that happened on the day, in a loud voice with expressions to match her narrative, how her 'dare' had initially surprised her but how bravely she had stood on the other side of the wall having jumped the small gate, how she had heard footsteps behind her in the dark and had been so sure that it was one of Susan's friends pulling a prank on her, how she had followed the shadow of a man that had eventually led her into a deeper part of the forest. Her account sounded well rehearsed, with her coming across as innocent and courageous.

She lowered her voice, and went on, "I took out my phone and switched on the flashlight because it was too dark to see anything. When I realized that I was lost in the forest I rang Susan up." She paused for an affected gulp. Putting up her hands, she said, "Susan said she did not send anyone behind me. She really sounded scared then. She told me to stay where I was so that she could send her boyfriend to pick me up. For the location, she asked me to send her some photos of the area around me." Dropping her voice to a whisper, her eyes wide and round, she said, "As I was taking photos, I felt someone behind me. Then there was a hand on my head and before I knew it I was out." She stopped, watching us to see the effect of her story. We tried to arrange our faces so that we had an alarmed expression to match hers. I was doubtful about mine. Sid's, however, was perfect. She poured herself some water from a jug on the side table and gulped it down. For the first time, I spoke. "Can you show me the pictures that you took on your mobile?"

Pia looked at me as though I had just appeared out of thin air. For a moment there I was sure she would say no or make up some excuse not to show. Then Sid intervened, saying, "I can't imagine being all alone in the middle of the forest, and having the presence of mind to take any pictures. I mean, I would be so scared." This made Pia beam. She excused herself to get her mobile phone from her bedroom.

“She seems quite smitten by you,” I teased Sid when we were alone.

“Girls,” Sid sighed in his usual comical way, making me giggle. Pia came in breathless just then.

She sat next to Sid and showed him her photos. We had to put up with a plethora of her selfies first, and admire them as well while she put on a shy girl facade, and acted as if we were not meant to see them. With a dramatic swish of her head, she opened the last photo and pushed the phone towards us. Sid held it in his hand while I peered over his shoulder. It was the last photo that she had clicked before she fell. It was focused on the ground showing Pia’s sandals. Beside her feet, was the tip of one bare human leg. Only the toes could be seen. Pointing to it, Pia said, “Look at that leg. That belongs to the person who had struck me unconscious.” She sounded like an excited kid sleuth showing us her first clue. “Susan suspects Jay,” she added, “since he was the one who found me and all that, but I am sure this is not Jay’s leg.” I couldn’t help the sudden jerk of my head as I thought, ‘Of course it is not Jay.’

Just then Pia’s Mom called out from wherever she was in the house, “PIAAAA! YOUR UNCLE FROM US WANTS TO TALK TO YOU ABOUT THE INCIDENT IN THE FOREST!” Sid and I exchanged looks as Pia, swelling with pride walked out to receive her uncle’s call.

This gave us the opportunity to scrutinize the photo. While Sid was wondering aloud if the leg could be of someone from our college itself, I saw something else. In the background was the bark of a tree. On it was etched the word, “ALIA.”

Alia was the name that Dad used to call me.

## Chapter 11

“Alia?” Sid asked again, astounded.

I had been quiet on the way back. Sid had gone on and on while I stared ahead, still in shock. He had glanced at me several times before inquiring what my problem was. I knew that I owed him the truth, for taking all the trouble for my case. I had told him everything then. Starting with Dad’s disappearance, growing up with Mom, the anonymous email, taking the huge decision to study in RECS, and ending in what I had seen in Pia’s photo. Though his eyes were mostly on the road as he drove, he listened intently. I liked him for not offering any sympathetic words, for taking it all in, in silence, with the seriousness it deserved.

I nodded, replying, “It’s what Dad had wanted to name me. But Mom won.”

“And they named you Alexcy,” Sid said as he swerved to the right on a sharp bend.

“But he used to call me Alia all the time,” I said, clutching the overhead handle hard. “After Dad disappeared, the name was forgotten.” I closed my eyes. But not the loving way he used to call me his preferred name. I could never forget that.

It was dusk by the time we got back. As he dropped me off at my Hostel gate, he said, “Lexi, I feel privileged... that you... shared such an important part of your life with me. I want you to keep in mind that, any time you want any help, do not hesitate. I will always be there for you.” I was touched, that for a detached girl like me, I had such steadfast friends. I knew that Sid really meant it.

“To be quite honest,” Sid continued, “I always knew, that there was something about you, like a secret, or a mysterious past. See how well I had nailed it.” He tugged at his collar. I laughed, getting out of the car. Then, leaning into the open window of the passenger side, I said, “Thank you Sid.”

“My pleasure,” he replied, and then shaking his head in disbelief, “But really, what a story! If this leaks out, I vouch that you will be the most

popular girl in college. Which you are, already, of course.” I rolled my eyes at him, laughing. “Popular? The girls here hate me.”

“That’s because they envy you. I am sure they already want to trade places with you,” he said earnestly.

I replied in a quiet voice, “If only that were possible Sid. If only I could swap my messed up life with an ordinary one.”

Sid was at a loss for words then. “Lexi...” He fumbled about for something to say.

I grinned, waving him off. “Good night Sid,” I called out, already walking towards the gate.

The photo still haunted me, though, back in my room. I kept thinking of it, the word ALIA so clear on the tree, near the roots. Who could have written it, but Dad? No-one else had called me that. I wanted to see it with my own eyes. I paced to and fro in my room. I stopped. My mind was made. The next gargantuan task was to convince Sid. I looked at the time. 7:23 pm. I picked up my shawl, threw it around me and went out. Before I locked the room, I rushed back inside, snatched a textbook from my bookrack and raced out again.

Upon reaching the matron’s room, I slowed down, took a deep breath and stepped in. I explained to her that I needed to meet a classmate at the boy’s hostel to discuss a few theorems that I needed help in since internal exams were around the corner. I said all that in one breath and waited. I knew that the matron liked me. Otherwise I wouldn’t even have considered the option of visiting the boys’ hostel alone after dark. It was okay to stay out till 10 pm if you inform the matron beforehand but visiting the boy’s hostel after 7 was generally disliked – questions were asked and eyebrows were raised.

Matron assented, warning me not to make a habit of it and also ordered me to wake up old Aslam Uncle and tag him along as well for ‘safety’ since ‘weird things are happening these days’. I agreed, a bit skeptical about the ‘safety’ part since I had no clue as to how I could save my ass as well as Aslam Uncle’s in case of any attack.

On my way walking with our aged guard, I imagined a pair of eyes

lurking in the shadows, watching me. But I was not scared. Perhaps it would turn out to be the one failing which would do me in one day. There was a fine line between bravery and foolhardiness. I guess mine was the latter.

Once we were outside the men's hostel, I called Sid on his phone and asked him to come down. Aslam Uncle settled down under one of the trees a few meters away. Sid came in a jiffy, pleasantly surprised and a little out of breath.

“Hey!” He grinned widely, displaying his perfect set of 32. “What’s up, Miss Enigma?”

Ignoring his dig, I opened my book and pushed a page out in front of him. I pointed to it and spoke, in low tones (my old companion was out of earshot but I was taking no chances), “I am here to talk about something urgent, couldn’t risk it on phone.” I looked around to check if anyone was listening in. In Sid’s hostel building, which was closest to the gate, I noticed faces sticking out of some of the windows on the third floor, observing us. Sid followed my gaze and laughed. “Those are my friends, wondering what brings you here at this hour to meet me.” He winked.

“Tell them I came to confess my lub,” I joked, pushing the book again towards him. “That would make them happy, wouldn’t it, now?”

Sid looked at me, an odd expression on his face.

“What exactly is this all about?” he asked, copying me and looking down.

I continued, in low tones, “Let us execute our plan tomorrow. You know what I am talking about.”

Sid jerked his face upwards.

“Don’t look up, and act normal,” I hissed.

He obeyed and hissed back, “Are you out of your mind? You know the consequences of getting caught.”

“We won’t,” I reasoned, “I have a plan.”

“Sorry.” He shook his head, looking down.

I closed the book and said in a calm voice, “It’s Ok. I don’t want to drag you into this. I just thought you might be interested.” I smiled.

He put both his hands on my shoulders and whispered, “We will do it together as planned. But not now. Let things cool down a bit. Please give me some time.”

I started shaking my head before I replied, “No.”

Sid took a deep breath, took the book from me, opened it and said, “Tell me the plan.”

“No Sid, you don’t have to come for my sake. I can manage on my own without getting caught.”

Sid folded his hands, the book still in his right hand, and narrowed his eyes into slits. “If you go alone, I’ll go complain about you.”

“What a loyal friend you are,” I said, pulling his leg.

“What did you think, that I am going to sit pretty, while you take away all the glory?”

“I stopped thinking about you. It hardly gets me anywhere,” I laughed, wishing I could say that about Jay with conviction.

He scowled at that. “So tell me the plan.” He re-opened the book.

I lowered my voice to just above a whisper, “Let’s go out after college. Then we get back right after dusk.”

“After dusk??” Sid echoed, with a double take.

“...and without entering the Main gate, we inch our way along the campus wall on the outside till we reach the back gate, you understand, from outside. Then we can safely explore and get back soon. After dusk means no light hence lesser the chances of getting caught,” I said firmly.

“But it would be dark. Hardly fit for any exploration. Plus double the danger.”

He drew invisible quotation marks in the air when he said the word danger, the scoff aimed at Jay.

I ignored that and said, “We have our Smartphones for torchlight. Plus we will carry some sort of weapon with us, like a knife. And when we go out tomorrow, let us buy pepper spray, for extra safety.” I beamed.

Sid looked lost in thought. Coming out of his reverie, he whispered, “Lexi, this is very serious, I hope you realize that. If we get caught...”

I interrupted in a breathy voice, “Let’s be positive and hope that we won’t.”

“So we have to be extra vigilant. I haven’t heard of wild animals in these woods. I guess we don’t have to worry about that. By the way, why all the risk? Is this for some sort of adrenaline rush?” Even though Sid looked as if he was concerned for my mental well-being, his eyes shone with admiration - the sort of admiration boys have when girls do “boy” stuff.

The word ALIA on the tree-trunk flashed across my mind. How the hell I was going to find it was another matter.

Aloud I lied, “To prove Jay wrong that there is nothing out there, by getting back safe and smiling.” I knew this would shut Sid up, if nothing else would. “Let’s take a lot of selfies in there as proof, which we will show him after a day or two.” Sid gave a thumbs up, looking pleased, more with the reason than with the actual plan.

“So do we tell our friends or not?” Sid asked.

“Not. It’s risky; don’t you think so, now that our gang has new members?” I was referring to Rhea’s boyfriend.

Sid nodded. “You are right. So what do we tell them when we go out after college, in case one of them asks?”

I shrugged. “I don’t think they will. Everyone is busy these days. If they do...” I racked my brains for a good excuse. “Can’t we just say that we need to buy a few things?”

Sid shook his head. “That has the possibility of at least one of them tagging along, in which case we would be forced to postpone.”

“No, we can’t postpone. What if we say we are going out?”

Sid looked at me, blank.



“That you are taking me out, duh,” I added.

Sid was still not convinced and asked, hesitantly, “Like...on a... date?”

“Yeah,” I said, matter-of-factly.

Sid did not say anything. I realized that the idea of lying to his besties about something like this had not appealed to him at all.

I looked at my watch. “Please,” I implored, “say yes. I need to get back now. The plan is perfect so let us not worry through the small ifs and buts.”

“Okay,” he agreed, still not looking too happy.

“Good night and keep the book till tomorrow.”

“Lexi,” Sid hesitated. “If this is about the photo, on Pia’s phone, there’s no way we can search for a word etched on a tree in the woods at night using flashlight. It’s impossible.”

“I know.” I said, biting my lip. “I just want to give it a try, Sid.”

“Fine,” he said. “Remember what I told you. I will always be there for you. However crazy your ideas may be.” He laughed then. Feeling a tad guilty for dragging Sid into this, I took his hand in mine and squeezed it before sprinting back to Aslam uncle who had fallen asleep under his blessed tree. Moments later I was trotting back to hostel, excitement manifesting itself as a spring in my step, my groggy guardian trailing behind.

Early next morning, there was a knock on the door. I sprang up, confused. My digital clock glowed 5:35 am in the dark. Has anyone found out about our plan? Who could it be at this hour?

With a deep breath, I opened the door. Relief flooded through me when I saw Aisha. I noticed that the flu had affected her bad going by the deep dark circles under her eyes and the amount of weight she had shed. I hugged her tight and held her there for a while.

“It’s been two weeks!” I exclaimed. “You missed so much, including Traditional Day!”

She sat on the bed, still looking haggard, and smiled weakly.

I asked her about her family. She replied that they were all doing well.

“Look at you,” I said, “you look like a zombie, like you died and woke up. Does flu always do this to you?”

“I got engaged, Lexi,” Aisha said, her voice so quiet that I thought I heard her wrong.

“What?”

“I got engaged. It wasn’t the flu that kept me home for so long. There were some small functions.”

I whistled, too stunned to speak.

Finally, I said, “Congrats! Tell me about your fiancé!”

She smiled, a smile that did not reach her eyes.

“He’s a distant cousin, has a business in London, is filthy rich and plays soccer.”

“Wow!” I gushed, exaggerating my enthusiasm for her sake. She clearly did not look happy. “Lucky you, to have found your Prince Charming! Do you have a pic? Of course you have! ShowShowShow!”

She showed me the photo of a fair, slightly hefty guy, leaning against a Maserati.

“Ooooh! Is that his car?”

Aisha nodded.

“Awesome, Aisha!” I tried in vain to lift her spirits. She sat looking down at her feet.

Finally I gave up, and went and sat down beside her.

“What happened, Aisha? You don’t look happy at all.”

“Lexi, I don’t know this guy at all. He is a complete stranger. Arranged marriage is like a bargain. Sometimes you get good stuff but what if you lose the bargain? Then you lose your life.” I was thinking, ‘Stuff?’

This doesn't look good at all!

"You are only engaged. Plenty of time left for you to get to know him until you tie the knot, am I right?" I tried to reason with her.

Aisha gave an impatient sigh. "It is not that easy. Our families are so involved by now that breaking it would mean bad feelings and a blotch on our family name. I will be threatened that no one will want to marry a 'second-hand' girl so I had better adjust and get on with life. What am I saying, not easy? It is impossible."

"Don't say that," I said gently, "Think positive. What if he turns out to be a gem of a guy?"

"Well and good. What if he doesn't?" Aisha shot back. I didn't have an answer to that.

News of Aisha's engagement spread like wildfire. Before class we got together at the canteen. While I sat slumped in a chair, Aisha was busy explaining the events that led up to her overnight engagement. Sid pulled a chair close to me.

"What's up with you?" He enquired in a low voice.

"Poor Aisha. I can't imagine getting married to a stranger," I murmured in answer.

"Hmmm. Welcome to arranged marriages."

"She's not happy. I feel so bad for her."

"Don't be. You wait and see what happens in a few weeks. She will forget that she ever had any problems. This kind of thing is very common in arranged marriages."

"Really?"

"Yes, Ma'm." He came closer and whispered in my ear, "What about our plan?"

I whispered back, "Not today, sorry. I am so low that I will get caught if we go today."

"What about our date?"

“Mock-date,” I corrected.

“My friends are waiting for details. I have promised them I will tell them after the date.” He winked.

“You told them??”

“They wanted to know why you came to meet me yesterday at the hostel. I didn’t tell them anything, but I didn’t deny either.”

We kept our whispering act going on and I leaned in towards him, feeling at ease on his re-assurance about Aisha’s condition, “Tell them...” when my eyes fell on Jay, standing at the door of the canteen, watching us. There was no anger in those brown eyes but there was something else, something disturbing. The worst part was that his disturbance was contagious, because apart from me I could see my friends getting affected as well.

He took a step towards me, changed his mind and left abruptly. Amid my dumbfoundedness, I saw Aisha look from me to Jay and back at me again. Sid had lost his good humour as well and muttered something under his breath.

Much later, I was reading in my room and Aisha was busy talking to her fiancé on phone, when my phone vibrated on the table. Remembering then that I had forgotten to change the silent mode that I activate during lectures, I picked it up and checked. The lock screen flashed: 1 Message from Jay. With mixed feelings, I unlocked the screen and opened the message.

Jay: Lexi, come down in 5 minutes. I’m waiting in the exact spot where we met last time.

My heart did a thousand somersaults as I re-read the message, to make sure that my eyes were not deceiving me and that it really was from Jay. In my palpitated situation, I forgot my shawl and raced downstairs, leaving Aisha behind in my room.

Jay was seated in the shadows this time. He stood up when he saw me while I looked up to make sure that I was not being watched and slipped in to the dark in front of him.

He looked down at my night dress. “You are in your favorite

pajamas,” he observed.

I frowned at him and stuttered, “How do you...” but he cut me short and got to the point.

“Listen, FAQ, I came to tell you that I will answer exactly one of your questions.” I couldn’t believe my ears. He had come in person to indulge me? I stared at him, his comment on my pajamas already forgotten.

“But,” he continued, “I have a condition.”

Of course! How stupid of me to think that it would be that easy.

Somewhat crestfallen, I eyed him warily, waiting for him to continue.

“Stop hanging out with Sid,” he said at last.

What?? What was this all about? A thousand questions of the kind popped up in my head.

“Why?” I asked simply.

“He...uh.... is not good for you.”

I narrowed my eyes at him. “He’s my friend. I am not trading him for any answer of yours.”

“Fine,” he snapped and stormed off, leaving me there, just like that.

I walked slowly back to my room, lost in thought. Jay was really acting weird these days.

Aisha was waiting for me outside my door, looking over the balcony overlooking the lawn.

“Why did you run off like that?”

I joined her and leaned over the railing. A few girls were huddled in a group on the lawn, playing a game of dumb-charades.

“Jay had come.”

“Oh,” was all she said, suppressing a smile.

I faced her. “That’s all? I thought you would scold me.”

Aisha contemplated before she replied, carefully, “I like Jay. He may be at loggerheads with Sid and disliked in general by half the guys in college but I think that has to do more with his looks than his attitude. I mean who would like a hot looking super achiever for a friend? Especially when the girls are all pining for him. So these guys, they keep finding excuses to fight with him and make him look bad.” She sighed. “Typical human behavior, I say.”

Even though pleased with Aisha’s good opinion of Jay, I declared, “He is pretty hot-headed,” nursing old as well as less-than-five-minutes-old wounds.

“True,” agreed Aisha, “His attitude problem does seem to alleviate his lack of support, giving all his haters an edge over him. But... I always feel Jay is a genuine guy. When he says something, he means it. There’s definitely more to him than his looks.” I looked at her profile, wondering if she hadn’t yet gotten over her infatuation for Jay. Her phone rang then, a full-screen image of her fiancé’s smiling face blinking with the ring tone, and she answered quickly, a slight blush appearing on her cheeks, just as my doubts of her harboring feelings for anyone else vanished. I had believed Sid when he said her feelings would change, but so soon?

I had wanted to tell her what Jay had said about Sid. Surely it is another form of the prejudice that Aisha was talking about?

Feeling restless, I went in to my room, ready to call it a night. It was while lying down on my bed in the low bedroom light that emanated from the new bedside lamp that I had installed, that it struck me that Aisha hadn’t asked me why Jay had come to meet me. Did she think that this was my new nightly routine or something? Something I had developed during her absence?

The next day in Chemistry class, the last hour of the day, I was struggling to remain awake as the Professor droned on and on, when the girl seated on my right nudged me on my side, passing a chit to me that she had hand-written.

It read: Your boyfriend is waiting outside for you. Look! ;)

Passing chits was the norm during Chemistry lessons since the

Professor imposed extra written work upon students who ‘disturbed’ his classes by opening their mouths whilst he uttered gibberish chemical laws.

I followed her order to see Sid flailing his arms around, signaling me to bunk the last few minutes of class and join him. I wrote- He is just a close friend. ☺ - passed it to her side before raising my hand and excusing myself from class.

Sid put his arm around me, and started to guide me outside. Maybe he only meant to quicken my pace but I squirmed away from his hold, and explained what my classmate had written. He shrugged. “I thought you didn’t care what people thought about us.”

“I don’t but... why keep giving them reasons to talk?”

Sid regarded that. “So do we change our date excuse to something else? To our friends I mean? Since we are going today.”

“I was thinking we will wait out for things to cool down like you said the other day.” Suddenly the process of lying about dating Sid didn’t sound too appealing. Because I didn’t want to add fuel to the fire created by the rumors, I decided, and not because it visibly affected a certain someone. Of course not!

“We won’t get a chance like this, with our arch-nemesis away.” Sid beamed, his eyebrows dancing up and down.

“I didn’t get you.”

“Jay came to my class during the first hour and whisked Kiara away. They have both been missing since. So we can wander around in peace without the guardian breathing down our backs.”

I was unable to ignore the sudden formation of knots in my stomach, at the thought of Jay and Kiara having fun together.

Sid shook me out of my reverie, urging me to take a quick decision. I nodded a yes, his point driving home finally that it was indeed a good chance to execute our plan. We discussed our plan of action in detail, looking for and clearing loopholes till the others caught up.

“Date?” Varun asked incredulously. The others stared at us, mouths

agape. Sid had just announced that we were going out.

Varun whistled. “So all the rumours were true after all. I kept assuring my friends that you were thick friends and nothing more. The cat is finally out of the bag, huh?”

“You both,” Rhea’s tone was accusatory, “kept a huge secret from us!”

I flushed, having realized too late what Sid seemed to have had foreseen, that it was a stupid decision after all. After the initial shock, however, the atmosphere changed. Amid the backside-thumping and poking-in-the-ribs, hoots and whistles that followed, I made up my mind about one thing- that that was the last time I was lying to my friends.

Aisha was quiet, though her eyes kept wandering back to my face, scrutinizing me. Finally, she called me aside. “Lexi, what are you doing?” She sighed. “I know I am not the right person to ask that, having gotten myself engaged to a stranger within a week. But still, what are you doing, going out on a date with Sid?”

“It’s not a date date,” I said, avoiding her eyes that tried to bore into mine, “it’s just a mock date. Just for fun.” I shrugged.

“You are not attracted to Sid, and you go out with him. You have a connection with Jay, and you ignore him. What’s up?”

I was taken aback. I had never expected something so deep within me to be brought out like this. In fact, she had nailed it right on the head, with a hammer.

Unable to tell her the truth, I kept quiet. “I only hope you know what you are doing,” Aisha said quietly and left it at that.

Everything had gone as planned, and we had successfully slipped into the woods at dusk, a little away from the campus. After that we had traipsed along through the trees, keeping the big white wall well within sight. I had kept making sure that the pocket-knife was still there, hidden in the inside pocket of my denim jacket, along with the newly-bought pepper spray. I had opened the seal so that it was ready to be used if needed.



Sid had forgotten his worries once we entered adventure mode. I tried to push down my Voice of Reason that kept springing up, asking in vain the point of it all, the huge risk that we had taken. Finding the particular tree was next to impossible, as Sid had pointed out. And what if we did? What good would it do to me? I squashed the voice down with all my force and concentrated on my trail, keeping close behind Sid.

The forest had kept getting eerier as darkness crept in, the voices of several male crickets stridulating together, in their bid to call out for mates, adding to the effect.

It had gotten really dark by the time we reached the point where the gate stood.

That's when we heard it. CRUNCH. A few feet away. Another CRUNCH, much closer. We both froze in our respective places. I did. I was guessing Sid did too since there was no sound of his movement. I wondered if I should switch on the light. What if it were one of the authorities? Or Jay? We would be goners.

I moved deeper into the shadows, willing Sid to do the same. Dammit! I saw Sid step into the moonlight. Move back into the shadows, I tried to telepathise. I saw then the silhouette of a man, taller than us by a foot or so and broader too, just behind Sid, but in the shadows. It was not of anyone I had seen before. Bile rushed to my throat as I stealthily took my pepper-spray out, opened it and...

At the same time, strong hands took hold me, one of them hard over my mouth, lifted me off the ground and started inching back. I knew it was Jay and I was caught but I resisted still because Sid was in danger. I wanted to alert him about that man. But something strange happened. The man placed his big hand on Sid's neck and he crumpled to the ground. My flailing legs stopped moving. I found myself go limp too as Sid lay limp on the ground.

Jay was still gliding back carrying me. Maybe my senses had stopped functioning properly because I could hear nothing as he moved. No snap of twigs, no crunch of dead leaves and absolutely no footsteps. Suddenly he stopped and placed me softly on the ground, but his hands stayed around me, steadying me. Somewhere in my brain, presumably the right side, my

subconscious signaled that I was on familiar ground. Inside campus wall, facing the gate.

Sid.. A sob escaped my throat.

I struggled again against Jay to run towards Sid. But he wouldn't let go. Damn you, Jay, I thought.

“He will be fine, trust me,” Jay whispered in my ear, holding me tight. Sid's attacker stood facing us now, but I was not concerned. I struggled against Jay's firm grip as the silhouette looked on. He took two steps forwards, stopped in uncertainty and then abruptly turned around disappearing into the shadows. I got a clear view this time. It was no human being.

## Chapter 12

It had the body of a man. A very fair man. An albino. It could easily pass off as a human being in dim light. But for its face. The face looked eerie, deathly pale, with red eyes and a slit for a mouth. And it was stark naked. My blood ran cold.

Jay ordered me to stay where I was. He didn't need to. My hands and legs had gone numb with fear. He darted outside the crack and dragged Sid's body in. He stuck a hand under Sid's nose and nodded reassuringly at me.

"He's fine, as I had told you."

A loud half-sob half-laugh sound escaped my throat. Relief washed through me. I could feel it coursing through my veins as the numbness vanished.

I fell on my knees and hugged Sid tight. Had he been hurt, I would never have forgiven myself since I was the one responsible for bringing him into the woods.

"Lexi, don't worry about Sid." Jay's voice was gentle but constrained.

I looked up at him, tears on my cheeks. "Can you help me carry him to his hostel?"

In one swift, effortless motion, Jay bent down, picked up Sid and hauled him onto his shoulder. We walked towards the men's hostel in silence. After we crossed the gate, Jay made me sit in the security's room and went up to drop off Sid.

"Please don't run away now," he had plead-ordered, "Stay here until I get back!"

As usual, I could see eyes prying at me from many windows. Thankfully, Jay got back soon and we headed towards my hostel.

What was that human-like being? What did it do to Sid?

"You do realize that I am going to have to complain about both you and Sid, right?"

We stopped in front of the gate and stood facing each other. “Sid?” I asked, furious. “Why Sid? It was my idea. In fact, he was against it and I was the one who coaxed him to this. So please, leave him out of this.”

“Just as I thought,” he muttered, looking away, “only you would go looking for danger like that.”

He turned to face me again. “You were nowhere to be seen and your phone was off, so I had asked Aisha where you were. She told me that you went out with Sid. I didn’t know that you were crazy enough to plan a date in the forest!”

I kept quiet.

He sighed. “Since you are unable to provide a good enough reason for breaking the rule, which stands ‘Crossing the back-gate is prohibited,’ get ready to go back home and stay there till you are called back.”

“We did not break that rule,” I blurted out, thinking of it only as I said it. “We did not cross that damned back gate.” This time my voice was firm.

He gave me a bored look, waiting for an explanation. “We just went for a walk outside campus and got lost within the woods.” I clarified my face calm and my voice cool. Remind me to message Sid to say the same thing, I told myself.

He narrowed his eyes and considered me for a moment. “Okay,” he rasped, voice suddenly gone business-like, “Go straight to your room now. Don’t tell a soul about this and also tell Sid to keep his mouth shut.”

“What was that creature, Jay?”

Jay’s brows knitted together once again. “What creature?”

“The one who made Sid unconscious. Is it not the same thing that had attacked Pia too?” I knew it had to be, because its fair body matched the leg that I had seen in the photo.

“Lexi, when one is delirious, one tends to hallucinate, at times.”

Too tired to argue but knowing full well that he was lying, I started towards the gate. I had taken not more than 5 steps when Jay called from behind, in hesitation, “Lexi....”

I stopped, not turning around.

“Regarding your questions...” he stopped again. I turned to look at him. Now what?

He cleared his throat, while closing the gap between us.

“Lexi, I know you will not be satisfied till you get your answers, but believe me, I cannot tell you anything. Because...that could put your life in danger. I...” He hesitated again, swallowing hard. “I am scared of losing you.” The last six words were almost a whisper. He gazed at me for a second with those eyes which seemed to hide a gazillion things. And then he was gone.

Even though my heart was crying out to dwell on those precious words, to examine them left and right for the actual implication, perform the silly ‘He loves me, He loves me not’ ritual, my practical self managed to override and pointed out that he really did have all the answers but preferred to keep me in the dark. Ever since I saw Pia’s photo, I couldn’t help thinking that maybe all that was happening was connected to Dad and his disappearance somehow. I wondered if Jay knew. Thinking of the albino creature again sent a chill down my spine and I involuntarily glanced back to make sure that I was not being followed. My eyes fell on Jay instead, through the grills of the heavy gate that I had pushed close, far away under one of the oak trees, watching me off to safety. He loves me, because he cares so much. He loves me not, he loves Kiara. Ugh!

As soon as I got into my room, I switched on my laptop and googled ‘human like creature huge albino’. Up came a million search results. I read about the pig man of Guatemala and the monkey pig of China. There were reports of strange creatures spotted, some carcasses that showed up on the shore and went missing in a while again. Reports of various creatures but nothing like the one I had seen. Reliving the scene made my hair stand on end. What was that strange creature? Whatever it was, I was not going back into the woods to find out. Ever.

I went to bed soon but couldn’t sleep, haunted by images of the creature. Finally I switched on my bed lamp and curled up with a book. Eventually, I dozed off with my book still in my hands.

I sat up on my bed, staring ahead in the dark. I had felt a hand on my forehead. A cold hand. I looked over at the window. It lay closed. I always closed and locked my windows before I went to sleep. A habit I had acquired watching Mom, who used to lock up all the doors and windows before we turned in, even the ones on the second floor. Ever since Dad left.

Chiding myself for being on the verge of paranoia, brought on by the sudden loneliness, I eased myself back on the bed and pulled up my single quilt all the way up to my chin. I closed my eyes, turned the other way and tried to count sheep. Mindlessly counting on, I had reached 35 when I sat up in bed again.

My bedside lamp had been on when I had fallen asleep.

I switched it on and looked around. I checked my cupboard. There was no one. That's when I noticed what I had missed in the dark. My window was unlocked. How could I have forgotten? In three big steps I reached my window and locked it. Something moved outside. Were my eyes playing tricks with me? Was someone really there in the room a while ago? Who switched my bedlamp off? Was I going crazy?

I should be because I dozed off immediately after that, when I was expecting the contrary and had braced myself for a long night, almost wishing that I had never come to this place.

I had a strange dream. I was standing near the back-gate when I saw Jay disappear along the path in the woods and I started following him. He kept going deeper and I kept following him, taking good care to keep a distance. I wondered why he was so preoccupied, since he didn't even turn around once. He swerved to the right into a thicket of trees. I turned cautiously to my right too and stopped short. A few feet ahead, there was a wide opening between a few old trees. The forest beyond it looked dark and forbidden. And Jay had disappeared.

As I stood rooted to my spot in front of what seemed like a door into a lost world, I noticed the changes. The ground looked highly uneven. The trees had clawy branches, some of them stooping low enough to touch the ground. The darkness caused the holes in the thick barks to grin like evil faces. An unnatural breeze which had not been there before swayed the leaves and branches, making an eerie sound, like a banshee wailing and

sashaying through leaves.

My mind screamed, “Go back!” while the evil forest seemed to invite me into its deathly trap. I stood frozen, unable to take a decision.

I noticed something etched out on one of the tree trunks in large letters. It looked like ALIA from where I stood. I went close and read. It read WHERE. I tried to rub off the grime on the bark surrounding the word in the hope that it would reveal the rest of the question to me, but alas, there was nothing more.

I stepped into the ‘lost world’ and kept going straight, searching for Jay. I saw the same word WHERE carved out on several other trunks. I went from tree to tree searching for other words, but it was the same thing again and again, huge letters that screamed out WHERE. Where what? I had no clue. This time I followed the trees with this peculiar word. Going fast from bark to bark, I reached a clearing. As I moved forward, I noticed that it overlooked a cliff. A sound behind me caused me to turn around. A creature stood looking at me. The same one that had made Sid drop down unconscious. It slowly moved towards me. I knew I was cornered, with the cliff behind me. It jumped so suddenly that my knee-jerk reaction caused me to step aside to my right. I watched as its body hurled past me and right over the cliff and disappeared into oblivion. I moved away, backing into the trees. Just then, Jay ran into the clearing from another part of the woods. I was horrified when I realized that he was headed to the cliff. I tried to shout out but no voice would come out. As he ran, he looked directly at me, and said something in a muffled voice. All I could make out was, “[www.neulan.onuniverse.com](http://www.neulan.onuniverse.com).”

While he uttered those letters, I could see them in written form, like subtitles. It seemed to be a URL.

After that he said, “User name is Where, password is Soul.” Again subtitles appeared out of nowhere. Saying so he leaped into the air, a few feet before the cliff gave way to the void beyond, and.....disappeared - MID-AIR!

JAY!! I woke up screaming, my body covered in sweat. I panted, rubbing my hands over achy legs, almost as if it had been real. I didn’t remember having such a vivid dream ever!

Thoroughly shaken, I switched on my lights. I wanted to try out the URL before I forgot the address. I took out my laptop. In the web browser I typed in [www.neulan.onuniverse.com](http://www.neulan.onuniverse.com). I had to be a lunatic to do so, I told myself while I waited for the page to load. A black page loaded, with words in red flashing across the top, 'SWITCH ON YOUR LOCATION SERVICES BEFORE YOU CONTINUE.'

Feeling psyched out as it was, I switched off the laptop. The last thing I wanted was to invite trouble by giving away my location on an unknown site.



## Chapter 13

Sid was waiting outside the gate for me in the morning. It felt great to see him looking like his fresh and healthy self again. Aisha, who was with me, greeted him and continued on her way, while I stayed back with Sid. I was puzzled by Aisha's behavior until Sid explained, laughing, "We are now officially going around, remember?"

I was in no mood to play it along, after everything that had happened.

"So, where would you prefer to go today?" he added, jokingly.

"Shut up," I said.

He grinned, putting a hand around my shoulder. "We sure had a wonderful time out yesterday, didn't we, getting drunk?"

"Excuse me?"

"That's what Jay told my roomies when they wanted to know what happened."

"Jay and his stupid excuses!"

Sid shrugged. "So did you find the tree trunk with your name on it?"

"Nope. Silly me. Tell me, how are you?" I asked.

"Never felt better!" I knew that he was exaggerating to relieve me.

"Sure?"

"Positive. Except...."

"Except?" I repeated, quickly.

"I was wondering what happened. I remember feeling this cool breeze on the nape of my neck, and feeling faint after that."

I was prepared for this one. "I have no idea why you fainted. But Jay came by and he carried you to your hostel."

"Hmmm.. How come we aren't dismissed? Or are we going to get the

letter today?”

“No!” I winked, “Since we did not go through the back gate at all. Oh by the way, in case you are asked, we got lost in the woods. Alright?”

Sid whistled. “Phew! Okay whatever you say, tiger!” He added, frowning, “Why is he the one who always catches everyone who goes across? Methinks he is spying.”

I changed the topic on purpose. “I went berserk when you fell like that. Glad that you are alive.” I pushed him playfully.

He, on the other hand, winced. “Don’t say that. I hate to think that I fainted, like a girl, while you didn’t.”

Normally I would have countered such a statement with, ‘Like a girl? Girls are not standing around waiting to faint, given a chance.’ But I kept quiet, still guilt-ridden for almost putting his life in danger.

During the second period, we were notified by SMS about a short ‘cause’ meeting after classes. I was slightly crestfallen to see that Jay was not in when I got there. He hurried in, just as the meeting kicked off, apologized and went on to sit somewhere at the back. We were informed that we would soon be holding public awareness talks in nearby schools for the children, at Panchayats (village councils) for the grown-ups as well as collecting funds. We were divided into groups based on where we were seated, each group was allocated an area to handle, and a leader was assigned for each. I looked back at Jay, condemning him with my eyes. He stared back, looking confused. We got busy planning within the groups for some time.

After we had dispersed, Jay caught up with me.

“Why the dirty look?” Jay asked, with a puzzled expression.

“We are in two different groups, thanks to you.”

“Oh.” The amusement was beginning to shine in his eyes. “I thought you despised me, Lexi J,” he said.

“I do,” I said, ignoring that he stressed on the J.

He laughed. “If you want I can arrange it.”

“What?”

“Shifting to your group.”

I kept quiet.

“Shall I?” He asked calmly.

Yes, please!

Aloud I said, “No need.”

“Alright.” He said, the corners of his mouth twitching.

Dammit!

“How are you feeling? You seemed shaken yesterday.”

“I am good. I met Sid in the morning and he seemed fine too. Jay....”  
I stopped, ego taking over.

“Yes,” he said, gently.

Something in his tone seemed to trample down my ego, for I found myself stammering, “Thank you for everything,” and smiling up at him in gratitude too.

Winter holidays were due in 2 weeks with most of the students planning to spend the festive season with their family. I had decided that I was not going.

Fund raising and awareness campaign for our cause turned out to be fun. The first part of the week went in making placards and deciding on slogans. During the second half of the week the actual campaigning started. The icing on the cake was that Jay had managed to squirm into my group.

On the second day, while returning after a busy day of marching and giving talks and planting trees, I noticed that Jay was seated alone in the bus. I got up from my seat in front, walked through the shaky moving bus and occupied the back-row seat next to him.

He smiled at me. “Hey.”

“Hey. Had a good time, didn’t we? I’m feeling productive, finally,

like I am doing my bit for Planet Earth,” I said happily.

“Our contribution is only a drop in the ocean, no doubt, but then it is the little drops that make the mighty ocean,” Jay said, philosophically.

“So, what are your plans for the holidays? Going home or staying back?”

He stiffened a bit. I wondered if going home was unpleasant for him as well, whether he got into tiffs with his mom, like me.

“I... guess not,” he responded, sounding unsure.

“Where’s your house?”

“Not very far.” He was vague.

“You never talk about your family. Do you have any siblings?”

“No,” he replied, and then silence.

A moment later, he turned to face me. “Lexi...,” he hesitated.

“Yes.” I didn’t know what to expect when he called me by my name like that. He was so unpredictable.

“Never mind,” said he. Okay so we had this game of calling each other by the name in turns and it was his turn now.

“Jay what is it?”

He stood for a moment, unable to make up his mind about something.

Finally he said, “Lexi, promise me something.”

“What?” Please don’t say something weird like last time!

“Promise me that you will not venture into the woods, ever, alone or otherwise. I know I keep bringing this up, but please take it seriously. Something is up but I don’t know what.”

That was an easy one, having already made up my mind on the same ground.

“I promise,” I said, looking deep into his eyes, because I meant it.

With Aisha back, our fun gang times are back, with an extra member, Rhea's boyfriend. At times, our gang would split up in order to give Sid and me our 'space'. I tried to avoid it, though I was not always successful. We still found ourselves stuck with each other on movie dates. On one such date, we happened to watch a comedy movie. I was in splits, and so was Sid. I didn't remember when I had laughed so hard last. Looking over at me during the interval, grinning, he had said, "You should laugh often. You look..." Sid hesitated, most probably thinking of a befitting word, and then finished with, "awesome when you do."

Awesome. One of those 'safe' words that people use to fill in a sentence, when they are unable find a suitable word, or when they are reluctant to use a bold word or a direct word. I wondered what he would have used if awesome, or superb, or cool had never been invented. I wished I could ask.

Instead, I changed the topic. Complaining about how awkward it was getting with the others, being considered a pair when we were not, I convinced Sid to start planning a 'break-up.' He promised to do so, once the exams were over.

Jay was never around except during the meetings, and on a few occasions when I spotted him at a distance, watching us. Internal exams were around the corner, so it was time to get serious and study. While on my library visits, I had noticed that the number of students in the library had already doubled. I abandoned the thick 'Stranger than Fiction' and 'Mysteries of the World' books and concentrated on my studies instead.

Once the exams started, everyone, even the ones who used to make paper rockets in class and pass messages all the time, could be seen with books as heavy as dumbbells. Everywhere, be it on the college lawns or inside the hostel, the canteen as well as the lover's corner, students could be seen either devouring their textbooks alone or sitting in pairs or circles and doing a combined study. The fever continued, right until one day before the exams, when it was replaced by an impatience to get it over with.

On the last day, there was a spring in every step, a cheerful disposition on every face. I could see how unlike I was from the others, for everyone loved to go home for the holidays. I, on the other hand, had not

even informed Mom about the 20 day leave we were getting. And she never asked me either where I planned to spend Christmas and New Year. She could have told me with authority that she was going to book tickets for me to Dublin to spend Christmas with her and Don, like all mothers did, in their self-righteous manner. I buried within me my deep rooted hurt and anxieties, as always. My basic plan was to stay on for the time being, spend time at the library, tour the town and if things got too monotonous then maybe go on a trip to Delhi.

All my friends except for Sid were going home for Christmas. Aisha, when she heard that I was going to stay back alone, offered to give me company. I knew she was dying to go home so I assured her that I would be fine and that I would mostly go home too.

She had then said, regarding me, “You look so different now, from the day you first came.”

I laughed. “I guess my style has completely changed. Your girly-girly influence...”

Aisha shook her head. “It’s actually the influence of our society, Lexi. Somewhere in your subconscious mind, you had always wanted to fit in, to be accepted and loved.” I knew that Aisha was right.

“For most of the people around us, Lexi, it is only the outer appearance that matters. You may well hate everyone on the planet, but put up a show that you care, and voila! You have people literally eating off of your hands. Haven’t you heard - All the world’s a stage and all the men and women merely players.” Aisha spread out her hands, as she quoted Shakespeare’s famous line.

Done with the dramatization, she continued in a serious tone, “However you may change your appearance, do not change your inner self. Stay the same. Stay real.”

“Don’t worry, Aisha, I will,” I said, laughing.

Aisha smiled. “On a positive note, Lex, you do laugh more these days. You have really opened up, you know. It’s like you have bloomed,” she said, hugging me.

Uh Oh! This was where I prove that I had not changed, not one bit. I turn rigid, unable to handle intimacies with ease. Aisha grins, winking, “Remind me to teach you how to hug. You will thank me for it one day.”

I grin too hoping she was done. The seriousness persists on her face though. I braced myself for the next piece of advice she was going to dole out.

“The whole college is talking about you and Sid. I don’t know what our gang thinks, but I know that you are not in love or anything, that you consider Sid as a good friend only. You know, Lexi, here in India, college-going boys and girls are pretty serious about their relationships. Most of them culminate in marriage.”

I frowned at her, unable to see where she’s headed. “Don’t lead Sid on.” She said, hesitantly.

“I am not...” I started but Aisha cut me short, “I know you are not doing it consciously Lexi. But the closeness you show might mislead him into thinking ...you know...So take care.” I nodded, touched by her concern, and by how well she understood me, at the same time aware that she had a point there. No more leading Sid on, I promised myself.

## Chapter 14

During the last week of exams, Mr Vida got back. I wanted to talk to him about Dad. But each time I saw him, I hesitated, unsure about how to approach him. I promised myself to think of a way once the exams were done with. As it turned out, I didn't have to.

While I was hurriedly working out my last internal exam, Mr Vida, who was on the rounds as invigilator, stopped and stood beside me. My main sheet was open on my right while I scribbled away on an extra sheet. He picked it up and kept it back in a short while. Too engrossed in applying the theorems that I had burnt the midnight oil on, I did not give it much of a thought.

The last exam ended with hoots and calls from all around. As I walked with my classmates to the canteen to celebrate, most of who were headed straight to the railway station from college, a peon came with a note for me. It was from Mr Vida, who wanted to see me in his office.

I went to the main block where his office was located. Attached to his door was a wooden plank with a golden border. On it was written in bold,

Mr. Derek Vida

Head of Department, Physics

I knocked and entered. He was seated behind a large mahogany desk. He smiled warmly at me and gestured at me to be seated on one of the cushioned chairs opposite him. Pulling one of them towards me, I set myself on the edge.

“Alexcy,” Mr. Vida spoke in his no-nonsense crisp voice, “how did you find today’s Physics test?”

Uh-Oh. What about the test?

“I actually found it easy, Professor Vida,” I said carefully. Since it was over and done with there was no point beating about the bush.

“Good. I can see from your school records that you are a diligent



student with a scientific temper.”

Whew!

“Thankyou, Professor.” I eased myself a little on the chair.

“So,” he paused, looking at his fingertips in front of him, “you are from Ireland, am I right?”

I nodded. “Yes, sir.”

“Your mother is Irish, I presume? What about your father?”

Dad. This is about Dad. Finally.

“Indian,” I said, a little too quickly.

“What,” he asked, looking me in the eye, “is his name?”

“Dr Sam Oze,” I replied.

The air had gone so still that I didn’t miss the professor’s sharp intake of breath.

“The scientist?” He asked softly.

“And your best friend.” I confirmed.

He stared at me for a few seconds. He then opened his topmost drawer and took out a photo frame and passed it to me. It was an old photo of my Dad and he, both grinning like there was a private joke between them. “You resemble your father a lot you know. I am wondering why I took this long to figure it out. It was when you wrote Alexcy Sam on your paper that I began to have my doubts. I knew that my friend had a girl whose name was Alexcy and that she should be of your age. But none of the work you submitted till date had your full name on it.” He paused.

I placed the photograph on his table. “Mom doesn’t like it when I write my name in full because....”

“I understand,” he got up and placed his hands in his pockets. He was looking ahead, his eyes transported back in time. “I still remember how they were when they first started dating. In fact, they were very much in love the last time I met her too. That was during the trip they had made together after

marriage.”

“So have you met Dad after that?”

“Yes, years later. He had come down for a meeting with someone. Your mom could not travel because she was carrying your brother. He came to meet me while I was in the middle of a class. He told me about you. We talked for five minutes and he promised to meet up later after his meeting. He didn’t. A week later I heard that he’s gone missing.” He fell silent after that.

“Any idea who he was meeting?” My voice was almost a whisper.

“No, but I wish I had asked.” Silence, again.

I decided to prod, utilizing my chance. “What was Dad like?”

He looked at me and smiled. “A brilliant scientist, a shy, kind-hearted soul, a true friend, a devoted husband and father. I don’t think he left willingly like the newspapers seemed to suggest back then.” He shook his head at no one in particular.

“You know, right from the first year, he was head over heels in love with your Mom but was too scared to propose. She was this outgoing girl, a college Diva. After practicing for days, he would go up to her and tell her something else instead. This continued for months. Finally we all gave up hope and guess what happened- Joanne went ahead and confessed her feelings for him!” He laughed at the memory.

I could sit there and listen to the old stories forever. I was quiet, lest I interrupt his recollections.

“Because she was the one to confess first, Jo always felt that your Dad was a bit removed. Detached.” Something like a whimper escaped my throat. I hadn’t expected that. Mom’s words rang in my ears, ‘She takes after her Dad...’

My Dad’s best friend was too engrossed to notice. He continued with his reminiscences. “Jo always complained that his first love was Science. His escapes into the woods all by himself only added to her woes. His excuse was that he needed that time alone to think and study. He was an active participant in the cause for Climate Change. Apart from that, we knew that he was researching on the existence of a fifth dimension. We used to have long

discussions on the subject that would reach nowhere.”

He sighed deeply. “After he... went missing, I had called your Mom. She was hysterical. She kept telling me that she always knew in her heart that he would leave. I tried to pacify her but she wouldn’t hear. She went on about how he had gotten extremely secretive about his work and on a few occasions she had even suspected that he was seeing someone. I flew down to meet her but she had shifted by then, leaving no address behind. Being in a devastated state myself, I didn’t try to hunt her down to her parents’ address. I flew back directly.” He sighed again and turned to me.

“I am sorry. Perhaps I shouldn’t have revealed so much. I just got carried away.”

“Thank you so much Professor Vida,” I said, struggling to keep my face straight and not get overcome by my emotions. “This means so much to me.”

He patted my back and said, “You would have made him proud.”

After a moment’s hesitation, he said, “Alexcy, I have something for you.”

He finally seemed to make up his mind and walked over to his desk, taking out a small notebook. He handed it to me, saying, “These are Sam’s notes in Physics that I sometimes use for reference.”

I tried to contain myself while Professor Vida continued, observing me, “Take care, my child.”

I wanted to give him a long hug. But I didn’t. I just walked out, closing the door behind me, while he stood looking down at the framed photo in his hand.

Once outside, I stopped and leaned on a wall. Some of the things the professor had said reverberated in my head.

HE HAD COME DOWN FOR A MEETING WITH SOME ONE.

A DEVOTED HUSBAND AND FATHER. I DON’T THINK HE LEFT WILLINGLY.

HE WAS RESEARCHING ON THE EXISTENCE OF A FIFTH

DIMENSION.

HE HAD GOTTEN EXTREMELY SECRETIVE ABOUT HIS WORK.

JO ALWAYS FELT THAT YOUR DAD WAS A BIT REMOVED. DETACHED.

HIS ESCAPES INTO THE WOODS ALL BY HIMSELF.

I wondered what he did in the woods all alone. Where did he sit? Did he have a particular area, a favorite tree?

I looked down at the book in my hand. On the cover he had scrawled, Sam Oze. Inside I found a handful of theorems, equations, diagrams and explanations scribbled in shabby handwriting. I wondered how Mr Vida managed to refer to these notes.

There was an interesting write up about the ‘Pillars of Creation.’ It looked like he had done a lot of research on these fascinating structures in space, made of intergalactic gas and dust that the Hubble Space Telescope had captured in the year 1995. I knew about it as well because it was recently revisited by Hubble as part of its 25<sup>th</sup> Anniversary, providing a sharper, wider, High Definition image of the three giant columns of cold gas bathed in the scorching ultraviolet light from a cluster of young, massive stars in a small region of the Eagle Nebula, which is a star cluster also known as M16, situated 7000 light years away from us.

What drew my breath away was the new theory concerning the ‘Pillars of Creation’- that even as the Hubble telescope sends pictures to us captured recently, the pillars might already have been destroyed years ago. Only, the image has not reached us as yet because it is situated light years away from us. And it might actually take 1000 years for someone on Earth to see it as it is today, probably blasted to bits!

I have written down the explanation for the new theory below this. You may skip that and move on. Believe me, you won’t miss a thing!

[We know that the Pillars live 7,000 light-years away from Earth. The light we see from them departed from the cluster in the year 4985 B.C.E., traveled at the speed of light toward us, and arrived here 7,000 years later.

We thus see the nebula as it looked 7,000 years ago. And 7,000 years ago, the Pillars were fine. But images taken by the Spitzer Space Telescope, and released in 2007, seem to show their impending doom. In those images, a wave front from a supernova explosion is shown in still-frame, bound on a path towards the Pillars. We would know the extent of damage done only 1000 years from now, when the light from the scene finally reaches us. Fascinating, isn't it?]

As was obvious from his notes, back when Dad had studied about it, the new theory was unknown. Below the write up, he had made a beautiful drawing of the pillars. As I was admiring his work of art, the ghostly image he had so well duplicated in pencil, I saw something that at once had my heart hammering away in my chest. Doodled on the bottom of the page was one word. WHERE.

I knew exactly where I had seen that! THE TREES! IN THE WOODS! IN MY DREAM! Engraved on the tree trunks!

WHERE. What in heaven does that mean?

Wait a minute, I said to myself. Something else was nagging me at the back of my mind. I quickly took out my mobile phone and opened my mail. I scrolled down until I reached the anonymous email. With shaking hands I opened it again.

**From: anonymousxyz@gmail.com**

**To: lexisam@hotmail.com**

**WHERE did your dad disappear to? River's End College of Sciences is the clue.**

Until now the irregularity in capitalization had not struck me at all, because the message itself was so strange. But there it was, the word WHERE.

My heart was in my head now, pounding hard like it would explode. There has to be a connection.

I closed my eyes, reliving the dream again, going over the minute details, surprised that unlike most dreams this one was still fresh in my memory. I remembered the clearing. Was there such a clearing in the forest in

reality? Was that where Dad used to spend all his alone time when he slipped off into the woods all by himself? Has Dad inscribed WHERE on tree trunks too? What was he searching for? There was only one way to find out. I had to go, alone this time, come what may.

The hostel looked more brooding than ever now, its deserted corridors echoing my footsteps as I walked alone. I hadn't imagined that I would miss the pitter patter of my hostel-mates or their loud calls for each other that had escalated in the past one hour as they bustled about in a last minute hurry to pack up and catch their respective buses and trains, now replaced by a sudden stillness that threatened to smother me.

While hugging my friends good bye, promising to keep in touch, and making a pact with Sid to hang out by ourselves in our usual corner, I had been aware that Jay was nowhere to be seen.

I prayed I would manage to steer clear of Jay while I roamed the forest the next day.

At the crack of dawn, I slipped into a faded blue denim, beige Tshirt and a sleeveless hooded jacket. I pulled out my 'weapons' from my suitcase on top of the rack- the pepper spray and the pen-knife - and shoved them down my pocket. I wrote a letter that I was going over to a relatives place and handed it over to the new watchman at the gate. Aslam uncle at this time must be snoring away on his bed at his house instead of his favourite chair by the gate. I smiled at the thought.

I went outside college campus and followed the route Sid and I had taken to reach the back-gate. In no time I reached the point where Jay and I had talked for the first time. The talk had been nothing but a warning that the woods were not safe for anyone and having said that he had strutted off deeper into it. I smiled at the irony of it. So like Jay! Remembering my promise to him, guilt clawed at my insides, for here I was doing exactly the thing he had admonished me against.

I pushed thoughts of Jay away, thinking along the lines of Scarlett O Hara in Gone with the Wind, who very famously thought, "I'll think about it tomorrow. Tomorrow is another day."

I traipsed along joking to myself that I was no Scarlett now but Jane of the Jungle, fully capable of taking care of myself in the forest, and patted my pocket of 'weapons'. Looking around, I imagined myself in my Dad's shoes. Could he have had similar silly thoughts during his so-called escapes into the forest? Or did he have serious stuff to think about? Obviously he must have, I thought. He was after all the greatest scientist of our generation. If only I...

I stopped and froze. A pathway opened up in front of me between a few old trees, beyond which the forest turned dark and forbidden. Highly uneven ground, trees with clawy branches, some of them stooping low and touching the ground, thick barks with evil grinning faces, a breeze making an eerie sound like a banshee –all the details of my bizarre dream stared mindlessly at me.

Petrified as I was, I reminded myself the purpose of my foray into the unknown - WHERE. I approached a few of the trees and scanned their trunks. No words were carved into them. I couldn't quite explain the effect it had on me- that one difference in detail between my dream and reality- I couldn't say if it relieved me or disappointed me.

I hovered at the entrance, unable to move further.

GROWL. That was from behind. I swirled around to face whatever caused that sound in this no man's land. Grunt. Sounds like bad news. I took a few quick steps backwards. GRUNT. Louder this time, closer. I kept moving back, my heart in my throat. Snort. Snarl. I waited. With a thud something bundled around the corner and came to a halt in front of me. A (hold-your-breath) smilodon?!?! And I thought it got extinct 10,000 years ago!

My fascination for extinct animals had started on watching Ice Age part 1. I remember devouring books after books about mammoths, giant sloths, dodos, sabre toothed cats etc. As a result, I had no doubt that the bull-sized animal that stood a few feet away from me, panting and grunting and snorting was a sabre toothed cat, a smilodon to be exact.

It shuffled impatiently, twisting it's huge neck and looking at me with menacing eyes. Something oozed out of its grimy mouth, and dribbled over its long canines. Hungry. For the beast I was not a girl, but most probably a

chunky piece of raw meat.

Yet, as I stood facing the beast of my nightmares, fear topping the list of my senses, I was sure that if the myriad of thoughts that coursed through me could be summarised in a word, that word was not REGRET, (for my split-second decisions of the past few months that eventually had me knocking on death's very door, or for the very decision to pack my bags and come here, so far away from home), but the word was HOPE- hope that somehow I seemed to be on the right path.

After what seemed like an eternity of staring at each other, though I knew it could well have been just a few seconds, I turned and ran as fast as I can, right into the thicket, my pace made slow by the fallen branches and the entangled roots. Thankfully the creature seemed to be facing the same problem due to its size. Somewhere in the recesses of my brain, I was aware that going deeper into the dark forest meant getting deeper into trouble. But I dared not turn back. After a while I realized that I had lost the beast but I kept going at a slower pace to find some place to hide for the time being. Feeling out of breath, I halted when I saw it. The clearing in the middle of the woods that ended in a cliff overlooking an abyss!

A roar sounded through the forest, informing me that my prehistoric predator was not far behind. Spotting a climbable tree, I hurled onto its lowest branch and pulled myself up. For safety, I shinned up until I reached a high branch, and clutching onto the strong branch I arranged my body parallel to it hoping that I wouldn't be seen. I had a clear view of the clearing from where I lay.

A few seconds later, the animal sprang into view from somewhere behind me. It strolled around, sniffing, its sharp eyes scanning the area for me. I stuck my head down. That's when I saw it. Etched on the branch below mine, in bold letters, was the word WHERE. I stifled the cry that escaped my throat.

Leaves rustled from somewhere behind me. There was a swish and a pad as someone landed gracefully in front of the animal. It was a young woman, dressed in a black jumpsuit, with short close cropped hair. The beast charged towards her while I tried to cry out 'Careful'. Nothing happened because what came out of my throat was a low croak. However, she hardly



needed my warning having avoided the animal with ease. She swirled around, her back facing the cliff on the edge of the clearing. I could see that it was slow in its movements, maybe that explains why I was able to outrun it.

It flamed in anger now and leapt into the air towards her just as she ducked, covering her head between her knees. Silence ensued for a few seconds while I forgot to breathe. The creature had disappeared. I scoured the area again carefully trying to make out if it stood camouflaged somewhere. It was nowhere to be seen. Just like Jay had in my dream, it had vanished into thin air. As I lay hidden on my branch, perplexed, the woman, original Miss Jane of the Jungle, came backwards, way backwards, took off in full speed and leaped, exactly like the creature had done. And disappeared as well.

INHALE, EXHALE, INHALE, EXHALE. I had to remind myself to breathe. This was not real. I just had to keep going and I would wake up soon.

As soon as I regained coherence, I ran back all the way to my room in the hostel and locked my door. Convinced now that my dream was no ordinary dream, I plopped on to my bed with my laptop and typed in [www.neulan.onuniverse.com](http://www.neulan.onuniverse.com), switched on my location services, and entered the login details summoned from memory.

Nothing happened other than the message 'You are logged into Neulan.' I waited, but the screen remained the same.

(Present)

And that is it. The last page of the word file ends like that. So abrupt that I keep trying to scroll down, in vain. That is it. I feel hollow. I feel restless. I feel desperate.

## Chapter 15

As soon as Aisha arrives I pounce on her with my story. I tell her everything in detail. She sits lost in thought when I finish, still as a frowning statue with only her eyes moving.

“Lexi,” she says finally, “I can’t explain how overwhelmed I’m feeling right now!” She shakes her head in disbelief. “I can’t even imagine what you must have gone through,” then going sotto voce, “on learning that your Dad is alive.”

I am unable to tell her what I am going through at the moment. It still does not feel like I have read my own account of my own past. Because it doesn’t connect. Other than a few similarities, it feels like someone else has just narrated a story. There was not a single instant in which I felt ‘Ah I remember that!’ There was no moment that something clicked, no moment in which it all came back. I found myself wondering if all that is written did really happen, or was exaggerated, or entirely fabricated. And yet, the thoughts are similar to my own. It’s just the way I would think in such a situation. Besides, there is proof that the journal is mine. The emails in my inbox.

At present I feel the way I used to do when, having finished part 1 of an eBook, I couldn’t find the download file for part 2. To add to the urgency was the fact that in this case, I happened to be the heroine of the eBook series.

“Let’s try the website again,” Aisha says. “What was it? Neulan.onuniverse.com? Since you have not written anything after you logged in, something must have happened to stop you.”

I shake my head. “In that case I should do it alone. I don’t want to put your lives at risk, in case there’s some danger.”

“No,” she says firmly, “this time we will all do it together.” I stare at her. Explaining how five is stronger than one, and how if we stand together we can bring down the world, she announces that she will inform the whole gang. No, I tell her.

Apart from the safety of my friends, the idea of telling Ryan anything about my life doesn't appeal to me at all. Finally it is decided that we will let this be between ourselves for the time being.

After dinner, I turn my location services on and log into Neulan, with Aisha by my side. And wait. Just as was mentioned in my story, the screen showed that we have logged into Neulan and nothing more. After a while, we keep it on and go about doing other things, Aisha plays on her phone, while I stare at the mysterious coin-like object in my hand, wondering what it is and how it is connected to my past. Hours pass and yet nothing happens.

"What can happen through a website anyway?" Aisha asks as the analogue clock on her mobile phone strikes twelve, stifling a yawn.

I look at the screen. It remains the same, with the words, 'You have logged into Neulan' written across it in red. "I was hoping that some sort of instructions would pop up, guiding us on what to do next," I say.

Aisha lies on my bed. "I imagined some stranger will try to chat with us, or send us an email, like the one you received from the anonymous person." She looks very sleepy.

"Go to sleep, Aisha," I say. "I'll call you if we get a message or something."

Aisha shakes her head, insisting that she is not sleepy. Five minutes later, I can hear her soft steady breathing.

Tossing the object down my pocket, I sit by Aisha on the bed and wait, trying hard to keep my eyes open. I think that maybe it will be easier to lie down and wait. For a while I stare at my ceiling, going over my journal entries again. But even that is incapable of keeping me awake for long.

I wake up much later to a buzzing sound, like a bee is hovering over my head. I swat it in my sleep but that doesn't stop the buzzing. I can feel cold wind brushing against my cheek. My windows are open again, I curse in my sleep. I get up to close it, glancing over at the computer screen that I had left on. The message has changed. It now reads in blue: **Cosmic rays dispatched to lat 30.21 long 78.780010566. Einstein Rosen Bridge opened at 4:46:19 am. Closing time: 05:15:00 am.** I rub my eyes and read again. No, it still doesn't make sense. It might as well be Greek. Great! Now my PC

is also behaving like Jay. All cryptic talks and ... I really should not be thinking so much about Jay.

Aisha is fast asleep on the bed. A gust of cool air makes her shiver. First, I pull up the quilt and tuck her in properly. She snuggles inside. Then, I face the window to shut it. It is closed and latched. I blink.

Confused and a little wary, I look around the room to see what is causing the wind. That's when I see it. On the wall to the left of the window, there is a movement that resembles the dancing reflection of waves. Images flash in my mind. They are gone before I can grasp them. Memories?

The waves are barely visible in the dark. I switch on the lights, losing sight of them completely. Putting the room into darkness again, I move in the direction of the waves, step by step. The images flashing across my mind stay longer now. I can see myself in the same room, staring at the same phenomenon. The next one shows me throwing something in the direction of the waves. Following the cue, I pick up my rubber lying on the table and throw it at it. My rubber disappears. Next I crumble a piece of paper and hurl it in the same direction. It disappears too. The next flash is of me stepping towards it. I recoil at the image.

Taking a few steps back, I observe the waves again. They are more like a presence. A disturbance in the air, that seems to dissipate cold energy. It occurs to me that it has to be a force field of some sort. Was it created by logging on to the website? I have to find out.

I pick up my phone to Google - Einstein Rosen Bridge. The network seems to be down. I also want to Google my location coordinates to see if it matches the latitudinal and longitudinal points shown on the screen. I try switching off my network services and then turning on again. The message –‘You are not connected to a network’ has me ditch my phone and try the laptop.

But the laptop is stuck on the current page.

I think hard. I have come across that term before. Einstein Rosen Bridge. If I am not mistaken, it is the scientific term for a wormhole. I know that a wormhole is a hypothetical connection between two distant places in space. Mr. Vida's words ‘Your Dad was working on the existence of a fifth

dimension' reverberates in my head. Wait a minute, I have never heard him say that. Only read. And yet, I could hear his voice in my head. For the first time since I read my journal, there is a feeling of déjà vu. Again the image of me stepping right into the forcefield strikes. Bizarre though it may be, I know that I am getting flashbacks. I must have gone right IN that day.

According to the message on the screen, a wormhole has been opened in my very room, and it would close in exactly 2 minutes 12 seconds. I have no time to waste. In order to find out which part of space it is connecting to, I know what I must do. I push my pepper spray deep down into my pocket. Pepper spray? There is no pepper spray. Instead, my hand touches the coin like thing. Was that a flashback too? Is my past catching up on me in a weird way, making me do the same things I have done before?

There is only one way to find out. I walk steadily towards the force field.

# PART II

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*Every experience of love, bliss,* belonging, inspiration & insight  
provides a stepping stone back to your true self – Deepak Chopra

## Chapter 16

There is only one way to find out. I walk steadily towards the force field. A distinct feeling of suffocation engulfs me and then my feet leave the ground. It only lasts a microsecond. Still, it is enough to make me lose my balance. Sharp pain shoots down my back as my bottom touches hard ground. My fingers can feel damp soil.

It is dark. Something long and sinewy dance in the darkness. I give my eyes a few seconds to get adjusted. A 3 dimensional view of a dark forest appears in front of me.

It's like a cloud has lifted off the sky. Like the fog has cleared. The page that was blank has been decoded. I can see it all. All that was written in the diary.

Maybe it's the familiarity of the surroundings. Or the impact of my fall. Or the intense energy of the forcefield. Or all of them together. Like a key securely in place, it clicks. Memories of the last time I had walked in through that wormhole flash through my mind as though it had happened only yesterday.

(Flashback)

I was alone in my room at hostel. The message 'You are logged into Neulan' was printed on the screen. I waited in patience, but the screen remained the same for hours. I kept it open in case something came up. My spirits low, and with sleep catching up on me, I switched off my lights, promising myself that I will check out the clearing again tomorrow. Later, I woke up to find a message in blue on the screen. Pressing on enter, I took a step back. The screen looked the same. The air though, felt unnaturally cool. I noticed the strange waves reflecting whatever little specks of light there was in the room. When I was about to touch it, my mind screamed not to. So I threw in things first, testing the waters, watched them disappear. Eventually, curiosity got the better of me and I stepped into the pool of light.

In my memory, I find myself in the same spot as I am now, sprawled on the muddy floor, with the forest spread out before me. I clambered up when all my senses had woken up. As I turned around in a full circle, I realized that I was standing in the middle of woodland that seemed to stretch on forever. Like Alice, I felt as if I had entered a secret land. Hers was full of talking caterpillars and disappearing cats and card people. What could I expect here? But I knew I was being silly. I did not believe in fantasies. Or magic. So what rational explanation could there be for my situation? My eyes having got totally accustomed to the darkness, I carried myself forward, determined to find out the truth.

The soil got wetter as I went on. I tried to ignore the fact that my bare feet would soon be caked with mud. Daylight was seeping through the trees. I had covered no more than a kilometer when I heard a familiar snorting sound. *Oh no*, I thought. *That sounds like bad news!* Could it be the smilo-dude? I took a peek in the direction of the sound to confirm it. It is. As fast as a bullet, I shot through the trees and stuck myself behind a thick trunk, wide enough to cover seven of me. My heart hammering in my throat, I told myself that that thing was my own share of fantasy creatures in my secret land. I wondered what or who will come next. Thor? Not that I wouldn't be happy meeting him, but my sanity would become questionable to a great extent.

I could not waste time thinking about the absurdity of it all. Right



then I needed to think of a way to avoid being the main course lunch of a prehistoric creature I had only seen in movies previously, but seemed to be bumping into quite often during the last 24 hours. The sound of heavy paws in damp sticky mud could be heard getting louder and louder while I desperately tried to find a place to hide or a tree short enough to climb. With a thud, it came to a stop. I could hear its low snarls from the other side of my tree. Fearing an attack any moment, I frantically looked around for an escape route. That's when I noticed a hollow at the base of a huge snag a few feet away on my left, big enough to hold me. I burst forth and scrambled into the hole. The beast could be heard ambling towards me a few seconds after I had backed off into the farthest corner, twisted and uncomfortable, hands and butt stuck in the grime.

It put its large ugly head in and tried to inch its way through, baring in full its upturned fangs dripping with slime. Without a second thought, I pulled out my pepper spray and sprayed away to glory, right into its mean looking eyes. It worked. It pulled its head out, bellowed once, and bolted away in panic.

I wanted to extricate myself from the hollow and take off too, without waiting for it to come back with its herd, or pride, or whatever. But first I had to make a plan. Roaming aimlessly in a dark forest which had predators of the ice-age on the prowl isn't such a great idea. Unless you want to be dead meat. Literally. I leant back, exhausted, trying hard to collect my thoughts. Suddenly a head popped in through the opening. I snatched up by reflex the pepper spray that was lying on the ground. I was going to spray when I realized that it was a girl's face. The same girl who had disappeared behind the creature while I looked on in the clearing. She appeared to be dumbfounded by my reaction.

"Hey!" she said, her skin shining an eerie white. "Aren't you Lexi?"

A ghost like girl who knows my name in the middle of a forest inhabited by strange animals of the past in the wee hours of the morning. There is a limit to the amount of ludicrousness that a practical girl like me could handle. I pushed myself back further, my backbone grinding against the course trunk... and screamed.

"Shush!" she gestured with her hands, trying to calm me down.

“Don’t be afraid. I am Jade’s friend.”

I didn’t use the pepper spray on her. Maybe I had decided that she was no human being for the pepper spray to have any effect on.

“I mean,” she clarified, looking alarmed, “Jay. Jay’s friend. I am Jay’s friend.”

Hearing Jay’s name calmed my nerves considerably. I realized my mind had slipped for a moment there. Though I stayed where I was, inside the hollow, I stopped screaming and observed her. She had a small pixie like face, with big eyes. “I had heard a lot about you from Jay. I knew you would be coming one day, but I hadn’t expected you to get here alone. We have to get moving. Quick!” she said, giving me a hand to pull myself out. She had a loudish, squeaky voice and a strange accent. She spoke fast, yet each syllable was clear and pronounced. I hesitated at first, and then gave her my hand, trusting my instincts.

She talked non-stop as we walked, perhaps to put me at ease. “Lucky that you came in today. Everyone’s gone for the big meeting, leaving me to man the surveillance cameras. Of course the helpers are around.” She made way for me through the thicket, so that I could pass through easy, while I hung on to her words. “My name is Sky,” she said. Considering how it had been one weird thing after the other for the past two days, her unique name didn’t surprise me at all. Had she told me an ordinary name like Sarah or Mary, THEN I might have been surprised, perhaps.

“I saw you in one of the Neulan Eyes...” she said, adding quickly, “I mean one of our surveillance cameras.” She pointed up to the branches of a tree. At first I saw nothing other than leaves and a type of pink fleshy fruit shaped like a tiny brain, that I had never seen before. Then my eyes focused on a small white orb with a moving black centre, that bore a semblance to a human eye, stuck on the trunk. I averted my eyes when the freaking black part moved from the centre of the orb to the left, looking right at me.

So this was some place called Neulan, I said to myself, looking around in wonder. Logging into the website [www.neulan.onuniverse.com](http://www.neulan.onuniverse.com) must have transported me here, weird as it may sound. Sky continued, “I rushed to the place right away. I got scared at first when I couldn’t find you,

then I saw the sabre tooth pull its face out of the hollow and run away in an odd way, so I came to check. I hope it didn't hurt you."

"I'm Ok," I said. I still was not sure about whether or not I could trust her so I kept quiet, and vigilant. One wrong move from her and I would kick her in the shin.

"Oh, by the way, welcome to Neulan," she said, "The alternate future." She did a sweeping gesture with her hands. "You will find it quite different from your place."

She was right. Neulan looked like a rainforest with leaves that were a perfect shade of green and barks such a healthy shade of brown. The trees brimmed with life, swaying to and fro in the breeze like happy dancing children, unwary and ignorant of the harsh ways of life. Quite like the deeper part of the forest at River's End but possessing something else I couldn't exactly put into words. A certain virginity. Pure and untouched.

A number of questions swam around in my head about Neulan. However, I didn't voice them out because showing a stranger that you were clueless about your surroundings could be a foolish thing to do. I clumped through the thick forest behind Sky, pushing away the low branches of trees standing like guards with their arms outstretched, blocking our way.

The forest started getting sparser as we ploughed on. The ground had dried up.

I cried out suddenly. Something had stung me on my leg. I shook my leg hard. Sky tried to make me sit so that she could examine my wound. But I didn't let her. She looked way too concerned for a stranger, making me suspicious. Of course she claimed to know me, but I didn't know her. Having shaken the insect off, I insisted that I was alright, trying my best not to writhe in pain.

*Get back, Lexi!*

*No! Don't quit now!*

My daredevil self seemed to be at war with my voice of reason. My voice of reason lost, as always in my case, as it must have in the cases of all the people who took risks, died, killed, robbed, eloped, etc. *There is a thin*

*line between bravery and foolhardiness-* the favorite quote of my voice of reason beeped on in my mind all the time.

I took my phone out and found myself offline, indicating that I was in an out of coverage area. A chill ran down my spine. I felt all alone and for some reason, I missed Jay. I had taken his presence for granted, especially in situations like this.

My throat felt dry and I cursed myself for not bringing a water-bottle along.

With trees getting sparser, giving way to shrubs and bushes, I felt vulnerable, walking in the open. My senses were turned on extra alert, my limbs agile, despite the throbbing wound.

Finally, the forest ended and we stopped, at a point that overlooked a valley. What I saw in the valley and beyond made my heart skip a beat. The whole valley was carpeted by bright green, neatly trimmed grass. Cows and sheep grazed here and there. There were square-shaped farms at a distance, with perfect looking crops growing in them. A few people, looking like white ants, could be seen busy working on the farms. Horses strolled about in their green enclosures. Well kept barns and stables built in perfect uniformity. The picture-perfect farm looked like one of those online farms on my iPad that I manage with a swipe of my thumb, not one that was grown toiling and digging and ploughing. The whole scene looked like a picture. Unreal. A pleasantly cool wind caressed my skin, making it tingle. *A weather to match, I must say.*

We started our climb down the gentle slope. Sky kept her banter up explaining how all the farms were entirely organic. As I passed the nearest farm on my right, one of the workers lifted his head up. Shock waves coursed through my body at the sight of his face. The same human like features, red blinking eyes, and slit mouth that I had seen outside college campus, ages ago. A feeling of heavy dread crept through my insides. My feet felt wobbly, making me stumble. I wanted to get away from the place, badly. Sky, who had been observing me stuck a hand out to break the fall on time. She was pretty strong for her delicate looks.

“Creeped out by the farmers? Don’t be!” she squeaked. “They won’t harm you unless they have been programmed to do so. You see they are

humanoids, and have been built for our help. Hence we call them helpers.” I stared at her, taking in what she says, processing it.

I knew it. I was in a science fiction dream. My sleeping brain had entered REM (rapid eye movement) stage. As a result, it was cooking preposterous things up around its number one concern. I was sure if someone was watching me asleep at that time they could see my closed eyes go blink blink blink in rapid succession. I pinched myself hard. Ouch! That hurt. *Not a dream.*

Sky stopped in front of what looked like an elliptical ball made of glass, about 5 meters high, standing at the gate of one of the farms. Inside it, I could see two seats back to back. As if on cue, one of its glass sides slid in and Sky hopped in, taking the front seat.

“C’mon,” she said, while I stood there hesitantly. “Too long a distance to walk.” It occurred to me then that the ball is a vehicle. I still didn’t feel like getting into that thing with her, so I said, “Let’s walk.”

She jumped out gracefully, took out a piece of transparent paper from inside the vehicle and unfolded it. It was an A3 sized thin film. She steered me around till I faced a mountain-range quite far away and placed the film in front of it. The mountains looked closer now. Much closer. I looked over the paper once to make sure that it was indeed the same mountains that I was seeing, up close, and then gazed through the magic binocular paper again. Sky hovered her fingers over the film, making an enlarge gesture, without actually touching it. A closer view of one of the mountain tops emerged, on which I could see rows of square buildings neatly placed like a model. Tiny cars could be seen moving fast, climbing a straight pathway.

“That’s our city. The city of Neulan. Built on that mountain. Jay’s there, at the conference site,” she said. Relief washed over me. *I hadn’t realized how much I really missed him.* I looked through the film again. It was indeed a beautiful city. “We need to hurry and get there before the meeting is over.” She appeared impatient.

This time I climbed in behind her, seating myself at the back.

“Is this the future?” I asked her my first question. “Have I been time warped?”

“No.” Sky laughed, as the engine revved to life. “This is very much the present. Year 2017.” The glass screen in front of her displayed a console. An image of two wheels sprouting steadily from the underside of a ball beeped on the screen, just as we were being lifted up slowly by about a feet. The image now resembled an oddly shaped bike. “Ready?” Sky asked. I nodded uncertainly. The door snapped shut and we sped off. The view outside became a blur. I clutched tight on the handles on the side of my seat. The digital speedometer on the console went up to 500 kilometers/hour. That was literally half the speed of sound. Once the tumultuous first minute had passed, I noticed that the bike seemed to maneuver by itself. It was a self-driven vehicle, a technology that was still in the initiation stages as far as I knew.

Sky eyed me with an odd look and said, “You might have a lot of questions.” Perhaps I appeared a little too awe-struck. I adjusted my expression to a nonchalant one. She went on, “I don’t know how much I am authorized to tell you. But let me assure you – we are humans too. Just way more advanced than you people on Earth.” The unmistakable pride in her voice put me off. Though I knew I couldn’t blame her for it. Pride is part of basic human nature. The more superior you are, the more your conceit. I turned my head, looking out at the blurry green of the forest, through which we sped, all the unasked questions itching to come forth now resolutely pushed to the back of my mind.

In no time, we were on our way up the mountain. The city looked even better as we drove through it. The buildings were perfect glass and metal structures, the roads straight, neatly paved, and there were plenty of trees and plants all around, neatly trimmed and full of sway.

We stopped in front of a huge glass block building, shaped like an upside down pyramid. As Sky guided me towards the door, I happened to glance at my reflection in the glass. A gypsy girl stared back at me, in soiled pyjamas, blackened mucky feet, her long hair having escaped its knot flying all over her face. I imagined my mother’s reaction on seeing me like this.

This was not the time to think of Mom. I looked on as Sky placed a hand on the door at the vertex of the central pyramid, the one that touched the ground, causing it to slide open. I took a mental snapshot of the angle of her hand, its position on the door. I stepped in after her, cautious. We were now

standing inside a box like room. Sky said aloud 'Control Room' and the lift started moving up. I noticed that the glass panel lit up when she spoke showing several levels underground as well.

We stepped out on the top most level onto a long corridor with doors on either side, placed at periodic intervals. It was darkish inside. Deserted. Spooky even. We walked to the third door and Sky placed a hand on it too, at the same skewed angle making it slide open with a buzzing sound. The room was bare except for a rectangular trapdoor on the floor made of glass. Sky opened it in the same fashion. Telling me to excuse the architecture, she jumped in. A few moments later, I gingerly craned my neck to see what lay beneath. A medium sized room connected to our level by 4 poles, each on one corner of the trapdoor. It was even darker than the room I was in.

*There was no way I was going in there.*

## Chapter 17

Even if I slid down one of the poles, I had no way of bringing myself back up.

Just then I heard faint footsteps from somewhere in the building. Fearing the helper robots coming in and finding me alone, I got on my knees, and hung my legs down the trapdoor in a precarious position, till I managed to get proper footage around the pole. Once my legs were looped around the pole, I let go of my firm hold and zoomed down.

Along the way, I kept on pressing on the pole with one of my legs so as to slacken the speed with which I slid down. To avoid crashing down and breaking my neck. Neulan was certainly not where I wanted to die.

Safely down, I looked around. The whole room was filled with a huge circular window that stretched out on all sides, as high as the walls itself and as long as the circumference of the room, providing a view of the outside. Wait a minute, I said to myself. It could not be a view, thinking logically, for two reasons. One, the room was not in the centre of the building. We had to be on the right side. Two, had it been a window, the brightness of the outside would have been enough to illuminate the room. Which meant that the window was not a window but a screen.

I figured that I was standing in something like a surveillance room. The view on screen shifted- from farm to forest to city. Sky was kneeling down under the lower part of one side of the screen, working on one of the panels.

Struck by the crystal clear clarity of the screen, I gazed in wonder as the scene shifted to a grassland. A family of lions lay down lazily under the shade of a tree, feeding on the remains of a deer. The master of the herd jerked its head up in my direction. Its penetrating eyes looked straight at me. My heart skipped a beat as it held its gaze for a second. I imagined it coming towards me. In two long leaps it could have my throat between its teeth. Then, it hung its head down to take a bite on the poor dead deer again. I heaved a sigh of relief, reminding myself that I had a view of it through one of the Neulan eyes, whereas it could not see me.



Going by the high resolution UHD televisions available nowadays, I was under the impression that we had reached the summit as far as clarity was concerned. However, the screen that lay in front of me was unlike any that I had seen. It was exactly like looking out through a glass window.

A 3D surrounded view of a part of the farm came up on screen. A horse stood chewing on hay a foot away from me. Involuntarily I put out my hand to touch it, momentarily forgetting that it was not there. Suddenly, a loud beep resounded in the room making me recoil. I looked around in fear. The farm view on the screen had got replaced by the words 'Station Name: Worm Hole East River's End'.

Sky who had been tinkering till then, jumped up at the sound. She placed her hand on a part of the screen and it moved aside, sliding behind the rest of it, revealing a corridor. Beckoning me on, she darted inside. I turned to follow her too but something stopped me. Through the corner of my eye, I noticed a formation in the middle of the room. At first I see only a few dispersed particles, about as high as me. And then the particles added up swiftly, taking a human form.

The final image shocked me to the core. *An older version of my father stood in front of me, his face creased into a smile.*

"Welcome," he said, in the same deep voice that I had heard so many times while watching his interviews on Youtube. I took a step in front.

"Welcome to Neulan. The alternate future." He did the same sweeping gesture that Sky had done previously, less dramatically though.

Walking up to him, I stretched out my hand towards him.

"NO!" Sky leapt forward, pushing my hands out of the way. She dragged me and I let her, feeling disoriented. I never took my eyes off Dad, who was looking all around him as if he was bored, perhaps waiting for someone to speak.

She was leading me along another corridor, darker than the first one, holding me by the hand. It felt as if a gong had been set off in my head, over which I could hardly hear my own thoughts. *Dad is here.* She opened one of the doors lining the corridor, and pulled me inside. *I have found him, finally.* Having closed the door, she held me by my shoulders and shook me hard.

The action jolted me back to my senses. The gong had come to a sudden stop too. I stared at her.

“That was a 3D image that you just saw,” she said, eyeing me with a guarded expression.

I nod, having deduced that already somewhere in my subconscious mind. *Still, a 3D image of Dad was still better than nothing.*

“I’ll be back in a jiffy. Stay right h...” Before she could finish her own sentence, Sky had already breezed out of the room.

I observed my surroundings. It looked like a restroom of sorts. I was thankful that at least this room was bright enough. In fact the whole ceiling was a flat lamp, with a soft glow emanating from it. There were cushioned benches in a corner that seemed to grow out of the wall. The other side had two rows of cubicles, facing one another.

Sky came back into the room, as soundlessly as she had left.

“In the surveillance room, I had been tweaking the security system so that you don’t appear in the records, when your hand touched the screen and the welcome talk came on. I just went back to reconfirm that your footage has been erased.” I sighed in desperation. My security was hardly my concern at that point. I could sense a growing bubble of restlessness within me.

“Is this....,” I ventured, unsure about the terminology, “An alternate world?” The welcome tagline – The alternate future, had the word alternate stuck in my mind.

“You can say that.” She beamed, looking delighted to see me speak.

“My Dad... He is here, isn’t he?” I got straight to the point, unable to wait anymore.

Sky swallowed, staring at me, a sympathetic expression dawning on her face.

*Say yes Say yes Say yes*, I prayed fervently inside my mind.

She shook her head slowly, my heart sinking by a level with each shake. “Where is he?” I asked, bracing myself to hear unpleasant news.

However, just like Jay always did, she ignored my question and said, “You have to leave soon, before the others get back.”

I could actually feel my anger surge all the way to the surface. My cheeks felt hot and I folded my hands and turned my face away, muttering, “I am not going anywhere. Tell me where Dad is, first.” I had reached here. All the way. It had been a game of chance. Of life and death even. I knew that there would be no second chance if I let this one go.

She looked at me helplessly, her eyes filled with what looked like concern.

There was a light knock on the door and we both stiffened. Sky pointed towards the cubicles. Taking the cue from her, I quickly slipped into the last one, closing the door softly.

“Jay,” I could hear Sky stage whisper, “Oh Thank Heavens you are here.”

“Where is Lexi?” Jay’s low voice was full of authority, making my heart flutter. Sky must have answered in gestures because Jay came right up to my cubicle and knocked twice.

“Lexi, you need to leave now.” His voice sounded taut.

I figured that it was best to stay where I was for the time being. Inside the cubicle.

“I won’t,” I replied with matching obstinacy.

He was silent, but I could almost hear his brain working away, thinking of a way to make me step out. Then he spoke, “I will give you all your answers, I promise. But please leave.”

“It is not about answers anymore, Jay,” I replied, struggling to remain composed. “I know Dad is here and I want to see him.” I couldn’t help my voice cracking up just a bit. I hoped he didn’t notice it.

Silence again. Jay’s heavy breathing was the only sound in the room, as we stood only a feet apart separated by the cubicle door.

“Okay,” he said finally, “Whatever you say. Now would you please come out?”

“Promise?” I asked.

“Promise,” he replied, in a voice which, though quiet, conveyed his frustration.

I opened the door and stepped out coming face to face with Jay. A rush of energy surged through me, filling me up, making me want to skip, or dance, or just let it out. To think that it had only been two days since I saw him. It felt like it’s been ages.

Jay’s face was clouded with worry, his lips were pressed together and his eyes kept darting towards the door. He was dressed in his usual attire, deep grey formal shirt and black pants.

“How did you get here, Lexi?” Going by his tone he obviously didn’t share my excitement.

“Um.. through the wormhole?” I half asked.

“How do you know about it?” His brows creased even further as he prods.

“Um....it’s weird. Promise me you won’t laugh.”

“I won’t,” Jay spoke through clenched teeth.

“I had a dream. In it, you were telling me to login to this website called [www.neulan.onuniverse.com](http://www.neulan.onuniverse.com).”

Jay and Sky exchanged a long look. I had an odd feeling that a telepathic communication was going on in front of me.

I asked, clearing my voice loudly, “Does Dad work here?”

He didn’t answer, but at least their eye contact was broken by my question, and I had his attention back. He seemed to be contemplating something in his mind. Finally he said, “Lexi, something is up that I’m not aware of. I need to take a few measures for your safety and it would be much easier for me if you co-operate.”

“What do I have to do?”

“Leave for now. Go back to your hostel, or better still go back home.”

Frowning I shook my head No.

He faced me then, his expression having changed, his Adam's apple moving up, then down.

At that moment, Sky placed something small in Jay's hand in one quick blurry motion. I curse myself for not having grasped it, due to Jay-induced-weakened-senses. The next thing I knew, Jay's hands were wrapped around me. Totally confused by an unnatural show of affection, while I was still trying to gather my thoughts, Jay whispered in my ears, "Sorry," just as a needle pricked me on the side of my neck. The last coherent thought I had was 'Traitor' before everything went black.

## Chapter 18

I sat up groggily and looked around. My wardrobe cast huge shadows on the wall in the semi-darkness. I could feel the softness of my bed cushioning me. Feeling bone-tired, I lay back on it closing my eyes.

“Lexi,” Jay whispered my name from somewhere on my right, and I opened my eyes with a start. All the events of the day came flooding back to me like a huge wave, making me feel small. Powerless.

I faced his silhouette seated on my chair. “How are you feeling?” He asked, leaning forward.

“Traitor,” I hissed, facing the other way, ignoring my palpitating heart. Of late, my heart seemed to have a mind of its own, like it was estranged from my own mind and its decisions. “I shouldn’t have trusted you.”

“I never go back on my word,” he said curtly.

Without meaning to, my voice rung out a high-pitched, “You had promised that I can meet my father!”

“And I intend to keep that promise.” His, on the other hand, was cool. Composed. What did it matter to him anyway? I thought.

Aloud, I said, “But you brought me back.”

“Lexi,” he said in an impatient tone, “I know you have a penchant for doing things off-the-cuff. FYI it doesn’t always work that way.” I cringed inwardly. He knew me well enough by now, especially my shortcomings.

“Sometimes,” he went on, like he was explaining something to a child, “especially when you are playing with fire, you need to plan out a few things, whether you like it or not. I have been waiting here for you to wake up all this while so that I can tell you my plan. I apologize again for the...,” he stopped mid-sentence, but I knew that he was referring to the shot.

“What was in the syringe?” I asked, rubbing my neck at the memory.

“Don’t worry. That was just a sleep serum so that I could carry you

home before the others got back and found you.”

“You carried me all the way up here?”

“Yeah,” he replied in a passive voice. I couldn’t help wondering how he carried me up through the window. He must have used the ivy but it was still too high.

“What is the plan?” I asked.

“We will go the traditional way, which requires a passage at a certain speed, point and time. The way you came is via a ...new system. I think you should be one of the first persons to enter through that. It is a closely monitored system. In fact, you were lucky to get off unnoticed.” He rubbed his chin with his hand.

“Anyway,” he said, standing up, “another reason for bringing you back is so that you can inform your matron that you will be away for a few days, to avoid a search party being sent out for you. Tell her that you are leaving tomorrow morning to a cousin’s place in Delhi for a few days, By then, I’ll go get dinner for us.” I stood up as well. Having had nothing to eat since morning, I felt weak, my head throbbing. Jay seemed to sense that and was with me in three quick strides.

“Are you alright?” He asked, holding my arm. I jerked his hand away, not quite up to trusting him yet.

“I’m fine. I’ll feel better after a bath.” In the moonlight that crept through the partially open windows, I could see Jay’s hurt expression. He turned around to leave and said, with his back to me, in a voice that made you sit up and take notice, as if each word he uttered mattered, “I am sorry for what I did, but whatever I did, was to keep you safe.” With that he was gone. Deep inside I knew that he meant what he said, though I wished he would tell me what exactly he was protecting me from. Who wanted to harm me in Neulan? I had heard of people having international enemies. What did I have? Inter-galactic enemies??

I dragged myself to the washroom with my soap and night clothes. A whole day of running up and down had taken its toll on my body. My muscles felt stiff, my joints hurt and all the cuts and bruises on my legs and hands seared in pain. I started visibly when I saw myself in the full size

mirror in the washroom. I looked like I had been to hell and back.

Yet, in a way, I was glad about all that happened. Looking on the positive side, I knew that Dad was alive. In that case, there is a possibility that whoever sent me that anonymous email might have meant well after all. Who could it be? I wondered.

Since that track was reaching nowhere, I steered my thoughts down a different path. I imagined my meeting with Dad the next day. Several questions popped up in my head. *Will it be a happy reunion? Will he recognize me? Or will he turn away from his daughter, not wanting to have anything to do with the family that he had deliberately left?* More than anything I was afraid of creating a scene and thus making a fool of myself. But I had to take that chance too didn't I? I scolded myself for my negative thoughts. Be positive, I reminded myself. *I will convince Dad to return home with me. I will tell him that we all need him. That we miss him terribly. After all Professor Vida had said that he was a devoted father and husband. Dad will come. I will beg of him till he agrees to come home with me, by melting his steel resolve that had kept him away all these years.*

Following Jay's orders I informed the matron about my pending visit to my cousin in Delhi, which had been overdue. She told me that as long as I submit a letter requesting her permission, I was free to go anywhere and that it was for the official records. I promised her in turn that the letter will be on her desk in the morning. Before I leave she said, eyeing me over the rimless glasses that she sometimes wore, "Miss J, I trust you." I knew exactly what she meant by that, and even though I was being dishonest with her as to where I was going, I nodded reassuringly at her, as my intentions were not in the least wrong.

Back in my room, I found a stuffed paper bag, warm to the touch, attached to which was a note in Jay's handwriting.

'Have your fill. I have packed all your favorites. Have proper breakfast tomorrow. Then meet me at 9 am in the clearing. Keep your phone with you and don't forget your weapons either. ;) ' was scrawled neatly across the small sticky note.

Feeling a bit disappointed that Jay was not coming back then, I opened the bag, suddenly aware of the ravenous acids gnawing away on the



inside wall of my stomach.

I took out the containers made of aluminum foil and placed them on the study table in front of me. There was clear soup, pasta in pink sauce, grilled chicken, vegetable salad and orange juice. In a separate box there was a big piece of rich dark chocolate cake. *All my favorites*. Once again, it unsettled me to think that he knew me so well while I didn't know much about him. But the first sip of the soup itself made me forget my worries, scrumptious as it was. At the end of the day, I did just what Jay had ordered me to do; I had my fill!

Feeling refreshed and replete, I took out my long forgotten phone to thank Jay for the food. On a whim, intoxicated by the food, or feeling sorry for my rude behaviour towards him, or both, I changed his name in my address book to Guardian Angel, and saved it.

I typed a Thank you message addressed to Guardian Angel and sent it, smiling to myself at the private joke.

Sid had sent a quite a few messages since morning. I replied back. His response beeped immediately.

Sid: LEXI!!! WHERE WERE YOU ALL DAY?

Me: I had gone to meet a cousin in town.

Sid: I didn't know you had cousins down here.

Me: Not here. He lives in Delhi. He had come here today for a meeting.

Sid: Okay. What plans tomorrow?

Me: Going with the same cousin to Delhi in the morning. Thinking of staying there for a few days and coming back.

Sid: So you are leaving me alone here. ☹

Me: Sorry. Things happened so fast that I couldn't inform. We will meet up after I get back Sid. I am sleepy and I gotta go early. So good night. Take care.

*At least that part was true.*

Sid: Good night. Keep in touch, alright. I'll miss you. ;)

Me: Same here. ☺

Lies, lies all lies! Even for my noble cause of finding Dad and getting him to come home, I could not justify all the lies that I kept telling.

Still seated near my study table I went over in my mind the events of the day. The 3D image of Dad flashed in my mind. *Maybe that's how he looks now.*

Neulan. A new land. A new world. Similar to ours. Yet so different. What they did there with all the advanced technological equipment and the perfect organic farms looked after by humanoid beings was still a mystery. I wondered if Dad had stumbled upon the dimension or was taken there for a purpose. I imagined him as a young boy of 20, sitting in the clearing and doodling WHERE in his books, breaking his pencil in the process, throwing it into the abyss and watching it disappear. I smiled when it struck me that I myself had doodled WHERE behind Jay's sticky note. Hit by a sudden brain wave, I wrote the station name again, Worm Hole East River's End, highlighting the first letter of each word. Voila! The word WHERE stood out! Overcome with excitement, I realized that Dad had not been searching for something after all, he was just obsessed with having discovered a worm hole entry into another world!

The next day, I was in the clearing even before 9 am. On getting to the thicker part of the woods where swishes and crunches could be heard in plenty I am wary of encountering wild animals that I may not be able to outrun. I hastened on without looking back.

Jay was waiting for me when I got there.

He detailed out to me what we were going to do. Hand in hand, we raced towards the abyss. Then he increased the speed a bit, I did the same and, before the cliff gave way to the abyss, we leapt into the air as high as we can, such that had we landed, our toes would have touched the edge once before we toppled over and fell to our death on the sand below. I guess we must have vanished into thin air too by now, for an onlooker in the clearing. What happened in the 'thin air' remained to be seen.

Once we had shot through a trajectory path, I was not surprised that our toes did not find ground. Still, it made me feel queasy for a few moments, having no ground under my feet. We then entered free fall. He released me from his hold and let me float beside him. It was an exhilarating experience, free fall, much like the articles I had read about it. It was like moving fast, floating in space, the wind blowing on your face. But while the ones I had read about were safe, with a parachute ready to be used attached to your back, safety wasn't an assured thing in this case. The scariest part was, even though I faced the ground, there was no ground. At least I couldn't see any. My only solace was that Jay hovered close by.

Then things got worse. Free fall stopped, and I started floating. Like gravity had ceased to exist. What surrounded me was a deep grey fog. I flailed my arms about for Jay, but my fingers grazed only air. My mind stopped working too. It felt like the fog has gone right in. Dark shadows... Eerie sounds... Floating like a leaf... Dead for sure... Good bye... Dad... I tried... Then Jay's familiar fingers found mine and I clasped on to it.

I was so sure that I was dying, for a moment there. Until my bottom hit something hard yet soft. The mist cleared up in the blink of an eye, a true vanishing act on its part, bringing my vision back to me. *Thank goodness for eyes!* If not anything else, the experience had taught me to be thankful for my senses.

I looked around. I had landed on damp soil. The rainforest of Neulan surrounded me, yet again. Only this time, Jay was with me so I was carefree. A bit. *Quite* a bit.

He put a muscular hand around me and easily lifted me to a standing position. To keep my mind away from the close proximity with Jay I tried to think of something to say. But when I glanced at him, looking serious, all I could think of was how devastatingly good-looking he was and how secure I felt with his hands around me. *But I can take care of myself!* – raged out from somewhere inside me.

Disgusted with myself, I loosened myself from his grip. He shot me a quick glance then and sprinted off into the forest beckoning me on with his hands. I took off too and then doubled up, in an attempt to keep up with him. It was hard, though. Maybe it was a speciality of this world. Even Sky had

seemed to be extra agile; going by the way she had landed lightly on her feet from high above.

After a while, he started moving uphill at a pace I could easily keep up with. As we hiked our way up what looked like a mountain in the middle of the forest, I asked him what our plan was.

Jay pointed ahead and said in reply, “There is a cave up ahead. We can rest there for a while.”

“Why?” I asked, wondering if he considered me one of those frail girls who needed to rest every once in a while. The only answer I got for my question was a facial gesture pointing ahead. Perhaps he meant to say, wait till we get there and I’ll tell you. *You wish, Lexi!*

I crinkled my forehead, eyeing him suspiciously. Fortunately, before I could formulate too many theories, we reached the cave he was talking about and crouched in through the small opening, covered completely by creepers. Unlike the size of the opening, the interior of the cave was humongous. We kept walking, taking a few seemingly haphazard turns until Jay stopped in a large room, with a stalagmite in the centre, and sat down in a corner on the ground, patting the ground with his right hand as a sign for me to sit beside him.

I sat and he turned to face me, smiling through his eyes.

“You don’t look scared,” he observed.

“Should I be?” I asked, genuinely surprised.

He laughed at this, explaining, “You are alone with a guy inside a cave, deep inside the woods, miles, no, not just miles, a whole dimension away from your home. And yet, you look so cool.”

*Because I am with my guardian angel.* I suppressed a smile at the thought.

Almost as if he heard that, his expression changed to a serious one. Brown eyes clouded with... I couldn’t say. He gazed at me intensely, seeming to search deep within me for something. The atmosphere had suddenly become chilly, and I inadvertently inched closer to him in order to get some warmth. But he broke the spell, turning away, clearing his throat

and saying, “You can freshen up in that cubicle over there. If you want to.” He pointed to a part of the cave that I could not see. I got up to examine it. There lay an enclosure with a narrow opening. It was big enough for 3 people to stand inside without feeling any suffocation. There was a wooden door attached to the opening. Inside the enclosure, there was a bucket of water with a mug.

I was surprised that there was a washroom in the cave. Coming back, I asked him who had built the door. “I did,” he replied, stretching his legs out in front of him, leaning his head against the wall, as if he had come home.

“Do you come here often?” It was nice to see him like that, completely at ease.

“All the time. This is where I have spent half my childhood. All by myself.”

I could picture him as a young boy, feeling lonely and bored, sitting exactly the way he sat now, reading, or dreaming. In a way, I connected to him a lot then. The loneliness. That was our common thread. I looked around the cave again. There were engravings on the wall. As I bent close to observe one, he said, “This is the only part of the forest that is not under the Neulan Eyes.”

I jerked up my head. “You mean all the other areas are under scrutiny? Even the houses?” It looked like privacy was certainly not a priority to Neulanites.

Jay shrugged. “Everywhere else we are watched. Everyone else is used to it.” *Except me.* The unsaid words hung heavily in the air. “The main reason for it is to ensure that no human gets through and goes back unnoticed.” I knew then why he took me back to the hostel yesterday. I asked him if we wouldn’t have been already spotted when we came via the worm hole. He assured me that Sky was manning the EYES this week, and that he had informed her to watch and delete out footage.

We were silent for a while, each absorbed in our own thoughts. I was wondering how I would stay here and meet Dad if the security measures were so strict. As if sensing my worries, he fished out a pouch from his pocket. He extricated a tube from it and held it out for me to see. “What is this?” I asked.

“A form changing serum. It bloats you up considerably, making you unrecognizable.” As the implication struck me, I shook my head and pushed it back towards him.

“I don’t want that in my system.”

“It’s unpleasant for a while. I suggest you sleep while it takes effect, say a few hours. And you may look...not too pretty, I am afraid. But then again, Sid is not around, so chill.” He winked, trying hard to act cool, overdoing it in fact, as if to cover an undercurrent of...something.

I scowled at him. “Will I get back into my original form?”

He shrugged, “Maybe.”

I deepened my scowl even though I knew that he was just joking. Looking suddenly serious he said, “I don’t know..but something seems to be up. We need to be careful. Even with your form changed, I am not taking the risk of taking you into the city in broad daylight. I’ll bring your Dad here.”

I shook my head harder. “I am not changing the way I look. I want to see if Dad will recognize me.”

“He is not going to recognize you, Lexi,” Jay said in a low voice.

“He will, you wait and watch,” I said obstinately, my chin going up.

Jay lost his temper then. “Lexi stop behaving like a small child.” I lost it too. Furious, I said, “I don’t need your help. I can manage alone,” and tried to storm off but Jay caught me, holding me firm in place.

“Lexi, people are not allowed to come here like that.” He stood there panting, waiting for my reaction.

“Sorry,” I said reluctantly. “It is just that this was not how I had planned to meet my father, after 15 long years.”

“I understand. But we have no other choice.” I knew I had to give in. Maybe he did have a point. Or else he wouldn’t be so adamant.

He got up, collected a few sticks from here and there, pulled out a match stick from his pocket, and got busy lighting a fire. I leaned against the wall behind me, watching him work.

“Where’s Kiara?” I asked, and regretted the question immediately. *Miss foot-in-the-mouth, think before you speak!*

He glanced sideways at me across the cave and answered, casually, “No idea.”

“You both had a fight?” I tried to sound as casual as possible like him but perhaps my voice fell too flat.

“Contrary to the image you seem to have about me, I don’t go about picking fights with everyone around.” His eyes twinkled as he spoke.

“Not everyone, I was just talking about your girlfriend.”

“Who told you that Kiara is my girlfriend?” he countered, laughing shortly.

I gaped at him, wondering if he suddenly went amnesiac. “The whole college knows,” I blurted out.

“The whole college *thinks*, you mean. That way the whole college thinks that you and Sid are together. Is that true?” *Casual sounding question. Is that a bait?*

“Sid and me? Noways!”

Jay shrugged, his fire crackling now. He beckoned me to sit nearer to the fire. As soon as I was settled in front of the fire, I continued with my probing.

“Then why do you come to visit her at the hostel?”

“Whoever told you that?”

“That evening behind our hostel building, you asked me to call her for you.”

“I didn’t.”

I looked at him indignantly. “Of course you did!”

“It was you who asked me if I came to meet my girlfriend. You assumed the rest.”

The conversation was not reaching anywhere.

“What about sitting together at the Lover’s Corner?” I asked, triumph glowing on my face.

Jay sighed. “Kiara’s life has not been easy. If you knew her story you would feel sorry for her too.”

*He hangs out with her because he feels sorry for her? Certainly rules out any possibility of love.*

While I pictured myself doing a little jig, Jay continued, “And most of the time, we discuss aspects of our mission.”

“What mission?”

“The mission of Neulan.”



## Chapter 19

My eyes glued to him, I waited for him to enlighten me. He seemed to take the cue and went on from where he left off. “Do you know what WHERE stands for?”

“Yes,” I said promptly, “Worm Hole East River’s End!”

“Smart,” he applauded. “As you might already know, a worm hole is a link between two worlds. So theoretically speaking, this point, WHERE, is one of the many links between your Earth and my Neulan.”

“Why do you say theoretically speaking?”

“No-one has found out the truth about worm holes as yet, Lexi. This world looks a lot like Earth, and our astronomers have established that we are in a planetary system much like the Solar System, all revolving around a star having the same dimensions as that of the Sun. The theory is that, since everything else have been created in pairs, so is the universe. There are two Milky Way galaxies, each having their own Solar System on their respective outer edges. Hence the Earth has a pair, which is similar to it, though not exactly alike, because there was no life on it until we inhabited it. Scientists here deviate a little from your Big Bang Theory. According to them, the Big Bang explosion was two sided, each side moving exactly alike, only the other side happens to be in a different dimension. Hence we can find a pair to each of your planets, stars, and Galaxies in this dimension, behaving in exactly the same way.”

“And of course merging it with the paper theory, it is believed that the entire universe is like a folded piece of paper. Some parts of space, which when unfolded would be too far, are in actuality so close that worm holes have been created between them, making travel possible. The Earth and its pair, that we have named Neulan, are two such points. The cliff that you saw is one of the worm holes that connect the two planets. Again, all these are theories, nothing definite have been found as yet. Our scientists are working on it day and night.”

“How were these worm holes discovered?” I asked, as curious as a child who had reached wonderland.

“They weren’t. Hundreds of years ago, a group of scientists stumbled upon this place through the worm holes, by accident, and didn’t know their way back. They slowly built their empire here, and finally, when they did find a way back, they chose to stay back. They used their prior knowledge plus new skills that they learnt in the solitude of this place and did great things here, as you can see for yourself. They created an organic forest, labs to create all kinds of devices useful to mankind, ranging from memory altering tubes to anti-ageing pills. It was easy to transform this place for them because it was untouched. Then they...we... had a vision. It was to take our home planet, Planet Earth back to its prehistoric purity. Of course it’s not easy, with the many problems Earth is facing now. The use of plastics, water and air pollution has done severe damages to our planet. There is a growing hole in the ozone layer. As a result, there is the issue of Global Warming and climate change. The ice is melting, water levels are rising, the balance of the ecosystem is affected, animals are going extinct, natural calamities are increasing, so on and so forth. Ultimately all this is going to affect the human race. The possibility of an extinction cannot be ruled out.” He paused for effect. Fascinated, I hung on to his every word.

“Our mission is to overcome all these problems. It is no walk in the park, but then it is not impossible, either. One of the main challenges that we face is working in secrecy. People on Earth must not know about the existence of this planet. Things are surely going to get complicated then. Hence, whoever happens to come by accident, is released only after wiping out their memories. Which is why I am taking so much of trouble to keep you out of their eyes.”

“That’s not fair. Memories are precious for people and not to be tampered with,” I cried out in disgust.

Jay closed his eyes. “I agree. But according to the authorities, it is all for a greater good.” It was clear from the anger in his tone that he opposed the idea.

“So where does Dad come in?” I asked, my voice soft again.

“A few exceptional scientists known to be concerned about the environment, like your Dad... were approached with the mission. Some of them agreed and are here now, working hard for the future of Planet Earth.” It

still hurt a lot that Dad chose to leave us. I tried to console myself that it was for a great cause.

“What about you, Jay? How did you get here?”

“I am one of the successors of the original scientists who ‘founded’ this place.” He drew invisible inverted commas in the air when he said founded.

“Sky too,” he added.

“Is that why you both have special abilities?”

“Hmm. Quickness of mind and body are a few of the evolutions...” he paused, correcting himself, “positive evolutions... that happened to us over the years.”

“So you have evolved negatively too?”

He didn’t say anything for a few seconds. He closed his eyes and sat there, looking sad. “Everybody has a negative side, Lexi. Everyone, even the best of saints, have done something that they are ashamed to admit.”

“You are right,” I said, wondering what he was so ashamed of.

“To make things worse, we live longer.”

I couldn’t help laughing. “Isn’t that a good thing? People everywhere are trying hard for immortality. Haven’t you heard of the mythical Elixir of Life?”

“We have the Elixir of Life too.” He said softly. “The anti-ageing pill combined with the Long Life Diode. It does not ensure immortality, but a longer life, yes.” He looked at me sadly. “Immortality is not always a good thing. A life cycle with a mortality of no more than a century is the ideal way, believe me.”

I creased my eyes at him. “How old are you, Jay?”

Jay smiled, though the smile did not reach his eyes. “I haven’t and never will, use any anti-ageing products. The life here itself ensures a longer life. And I’m all of 25 years old.”

I smiled up at him, feeling like I was beginning to know him. The

person that he was. Behind the mask of aloofness that he always wore.

He got up and gave me his hand. “C’mon, it’s dark now. I’ll take you around and show you the place.” He took me in a different direction in the cave. We walked for around a minute, taking two turns, getting to another larger enclosure. A sleek looking bike, much larger than my uncle’s Harley Davidson was parked in the room.

Jay was on it in a jiffy and he waited in patience as I got on, a tad gingerly. We rode slowly inside the cave until we reached outside. I kept my hands on the handles beside my legs. Once we were out, Jay said, looking over his shoulder, “Hold hard on to me.”

I held tighter onto the handles, assuring him that I had a firm grip on them.

“Lexi,” he spoke with laughter in his voice, “I am not trying to take advantage of the situation here. Or hit on you. We are going to fly. You need to hold on to me strong.” *Fly?*

Embarrassed, I put my hands on his shoulders and gripped hard. He rode on for a while at a slow pace, increasing the speed until wing like flaps stuck out from the two sides of the bike, and with a VROOM, it took off from the ground. I looked down and notice that the wheels had turned sideways as well. It was a fascinating vehicle.

“What is this called?” I spoke in Jay’s ear or he wouldn’t hear me over the wind.

“Flike!” Jay shouted back.

“Very creative, the name,” I said in a sarcastic tone. We were ascending slowly. I gripped him harder as the height increased.

“We don’t waste time on trivial matters here.”

“Ha ha.” I said, my voice strained. I was finding it hard to hold on to his shoulder at a 30 degree angle. I kept tightening my grip. Finally fear of falling off got the better of me and I slipped my hands under his arms one by one and looped them around his chest. He seemed to stiffen a bit for a second. Relaxing immediately, he accelerated, making me realize that he had been going slow for my safety.

Soon we were passing above the trees. From up I had a remarkable aerial view of the forest. In the moonlight, I spotted a herd of elephants splashing about in a stream, lone bison munching on leaves, monkeys swinging from tree to tree, and peacocks. We were steadily moving towards the city. On the outskirts, there were rows of flat buildings. Pointing out to them, Jay explained that they were the cloning and mutation centers. Clutching him tighter, I put my face over his shoulder, to hear him properly. He explained that extinct creatures were created from DNA samples obtained from fossil fuels, released into the wild, and monitored to see if they would survive. Like the Smilodon that I had seen, I exclaimed.

“Hmm Sky told me about it. How did you drive it away?”

“Pepper spray,” I said, laughing. “Jay, I saw it in our woods as well. Behind our college. How is that?”

“It had escaped, apparently,” Jay replied, shaking his head, “and was brought back by Sky.”

“Yeah I saw that,” I said. He turned to look at me as I said that, his eyes reproving. “You really should stay away from forests.”

Grinning sheepishly, I asked him what else was done in those labs. He answered that they also clone endangered species, and release them one at a time into the Indian forests, through the worm hole. Small steps to ensure that the ecological balance is maintained, he added. We were passing over forest again, a sparser one though, with smaller trees and shrubs. The breeze that blew on my face felt fantastic. I felt like letting go of my hold and taking it all in, as much as I could, while it lasted.

Jay slowed down, looking down. I followed his gaze and my mouth fell open at the sight. Parked in a clearing right in the middle of the woods, was a large airplane. Written across its body in block letters was – IH330. The missing aircraft. THE missing AIRCRAFT!

## Chapter 20

It stood there in all its majestic grandeur, without as much as a crack on its body, like it was standing, not in the middle of the forest, but at the airport terminal, ready for takeoff.

Jay drove the flike in circles while descending until it touched the ground with a soft thud. As I stepped down, I noticed a tiger staring at us from a distance of 10 meters. My hands flew to my pepper spray by reflex, but Jay stamped his foot down like he was scaring a kitten, growling once, and it scampered off, much to my amazement. Practice makes perfect, Jay explained as we walked towards the clearing where the plane stood.

“Jay,” I asked, breathless, unable to contain my excitement, “isn’t this the plane that was missing?”

Jay nodded, frowning. We were standing directly below its nose.

“It had an engine failure mid way,” he explained, “and while it fell, it crashed through a worm hole above the Indian Ocean, one which we ourselves had been unaware of. Because of the anti-gravity effect the crash was subdued, except for a few minor damages that was caused from landing on the trees. The passengers and crew are all safe. Your dad and his team are working on it, fixing it so that it can be sent back home.”

I liked how he explained things now. It almost made up for all the times he had bugged me through and through with his tight lipped monosyllables. I whistled, still awe-struck by the sight of the plane.

Still struggling to contain myself, I watched as Jay gazed up at the airplane, holding his hair back with his hands. He looked like a bundle of nerves. His eyes were on the orb located on one of the wings. It was inactive. Idle.

“I have asked Sky to switch this one off for a few minutes. But I am afraid someone will notice it’s off any moment and look into it. Since it is guarding the plane. C’mon let’s go.” He held my hand to guide me back. I let go and moved around the plane, still unable to believe my eyes. Here was the plane that the whole world was searching for, I thought, right in front of me.

“Lexi, all this might be an adventure for you.” Jay looked like he was on the edge now. “You don’t realize the danger involved. Even with my safety precautions, you cannot be out and about all you want. The security system is strong. It’s DNA level.”

I sobered up for Jay’s sake, dismissing his worries in my mind. I knew where Dad was and was on my way to meet him. I knew where the missing plane was and it would soon be sent back, and all the passengers would be back in their respective homes as well. I had more than enough reasons to grin from ear to ear. Still, I sobered up for Jay’s sake.

We were back on the flike, flying above the trees again. He reduced his speed a bit and pointed ahead. “Do you see that?”

I strained my eyes in the direction he pointed to. We were headed towards a mountain range. Somewhere in the middle, a cliff jutted out. Amid the trees, I could see a lot of towers. After a few seconds, I realized that it was a castle. Jay hovered in the area, not going any nearer.

“That’s where the passengers and crew are, safe but held captive.”

“When will they be released?” I asked.

“Soon. Let’s turn back now. This place is heavily guarded,” he said, gravely.

As we rode back in the direction that we had come, I asked Jay why there was a Victorian castle here, when everything else was so futuristic. “That’s where we unwind,” he said. “Monthly parties, or any celebrations happen here.”

“How does it look on the inside? I am sure it has beautiful lawns, ponds, spacious rooms.” I imagined the people wandering around in there, happy and carefree, almost enjoying their captivity even. I liked the fact that the hapless passengers were being taken care of.

“So I have heard,” he paused, before continuing, “I have never been there Lexi. I am not a party-person.” With my face over his shoulder, I could see his face. He was staring ahead, as though concentrating hard on the driving. Again, a mental image of young Jay, sitting alone in the cave flashed across my mind, while the others partied on in the castle. Unable to help it, I

leant my head on his shoulders. I didn't look at him then. I stay put.

An hour later, we were back inside the cave. Jay had lit the fire again while I washed myself in the washroom. From inside a wooden crate that I had not noticed before he pulled out a sleeping bag and blankets. Instructing me to use the sleeping bag, he lay on the ground on the other side of the cave, covering himself with the blanket.

I did not feel so safe anymore. My imagination ran wild and I found my eyes flicking over to the dark pathways constantly. My mind invented carnivorous animals watching me from the dark. But I was not going to reveal my weaknesses in front of anyone. Not even Jay. I shut my eyes tight and willed myself to sleep despite the growing trepidation. Thankfully my fatigue ensured that sleep closed in quick as if a black cloak was thrown over my eyes.

When I woke up, I noticed light coming in through the opening making the cave as bright as my joy of getting to see Dad. Jay was nowhere to be seen. Close to where I lay, I noticed a big leaf with a few small stones strategically placed on top of it so that it didn't fly off. I picked it up, examining it. Jay had bore pin sized holes into the leaf to make words. "Be back soon with your Dad. ☺ "

He was back soon, as promised. Alone, though.

Seeing the evident question in my eyes, Jay said, "He is in a meeting with ... the authorities. I have informed one of my friends to let me know when he is done." He stood still, having changed into trousers and a shirt, looking impeccable albeit somewhat defeated.

To make him feel better, I said, "It's OK! I can wait."

He glanced at me once and then looked away, fixed his gaze on one of the wall carvings for a long time, while I wondered what was on his mind. *I wish they had a mind-reading tube. I would use that to go deep into Jay's complicated mind and figure him out!*

Jay caught me watching him. This time I averted my eyes to the wall carvings, going near one of them. Etched on the wall possibly by a splinter were the words-



Heaven is a shade  
Of blue green like Jade.

I cocked my head to ponder on the deeper meaning that the engraved words seem to carry. Jade was his original name. Jade was also a stone – a bluish green coloured one. Whatever did he mean...

Jay cleared his throat loudly, making me turn my attention back on him. He held out a metal Tiffin box with a spoon tied on to it. I could figure the rhyme out later, I thought as I opened it carefully. Even before I saw what was inside, the aroma of warm potatoes filled the air. Hunger taking over etiquette and table manners, I started devouring the creamy mashed potatoes right away.

“What about you? Had something?” I asked as I spooned a helping into my mouth.

In answer to that, Jay took out a packet of capsules from his pocket.

“Tablet? Are you not well?” I asked quickly, my voice thick with unplanned concern.

“Food,” Jay replied, slipping a capsule into his mouth and gulping it down with water.

“That?” I asked, my eyes wide, pointing to the packet in his hand.

“This one gives the daily dose of vitamins and minerals. I already had my carbohydrates pill and my proteins pill early in the morning. Easy does it, no time is wasted cooking and eating,” he shrugged.

“Wow!” I was struck by the simplicity of it all. Moreover there was no fear of overeating this way and hence no danger of any unwanted fat!

Midnight came but there was still no call from Jay’s friend. Tomorrow, Jay promised me, assuming that Dad must have slept. As an afterthought, he asked me if I would like to explore the city. I jumped at the chance. Jay went first to tweak the security system and got back soon to fetch me.

Going over the city on the flike, I was once again bowled over by the

unique designs of the buildings. Spheres and diamonds, curved cylindrical tubes that looked like upside down 'u's', giant robotic spiders, all glass and metal. I wondered how some of them stood on their vertices, like the surveillance head quarters, almost defying gravity.

We parked in one of the dark alleyways and started walking. Watching me gaze at the dim street lamps, Jay revealed in low tones that they used only natural energy sources for all their energy requirements, adding that all the buildings had solar powered ceilings and tiny wind mills as well. In case of shortage of power, he described how they used man power to harness energy, by literally burning off some fat. I listened as Jay spoke, trying to ignore how our hands occasionally brushed against each other as we walked side by side, though this time the tingling sensation was coupled with a strange itchy one.

The night was cool, like the temperature was controlled. I asked Jay whether it was. "Of course," Jay chuckled. "We control it with the help of plants."

I smile, a little embarrassed. "After food pills, elixirs and magic form-changing pills, a climate controlled environment is not an impossibility."

He went on to explain, "We plant a lot of trees here. They are natural air purifiers and great air conditioners as well. The evaporation from a single large tree can produce the cooling effect of 10 room size air conditioners operating 20 hours a day." He looked at me, letting me digest that.

"Unlike how you think," he went on, "there is no magic involved here. The form-changer works on your tissues, cheating them to send wrong emergency signals to your brain, bloating the body's cells up the same way they would have, had there been an inflammation. It's like fluid retention, or edema, but on a much larger scale."

Again, I was astounded by the simple logic. Then, I asked him a question that had been on my mind for a while.

"Jay... Can dreams be...induced?"

Jay stiffened. He stopped walking and turned to face me.

"Lexi..."

“Ouch!” I yelped as I felt a prick on my hand. I noticed a mosquito and swatted it away. I nursed the little red itchy bump with my other hand, cursing it under my breath for such a painful bite, aware now why my body had been itching here and there. Smaller bumps were visible on other areas of my arm. I controlled the urge to scratch as Jay examined the bite closely, and spoke urgently, looking wildly around him, “We have to get back. That was no mosquito. It was a DNA extractor. Something is wrong if these things are flying around at night.”

As we hurried along a narrow alley between block-shaped buildings similar to the one I had been in the other day, Jay suddenly stopped, motioning me to stop as well. Looking ahead into the shadows, he pushed me behind him, one hand protectively around me, his body tense and slightly arched forward, his head up.

This time I saw it - a movement in the shadows. One hand still around me, Jay placed his other hand in a horizontal position so as to shield me from whatever it was that lurked in the shadows just as the figure in the shadows jumped out.

“Sid!” came out of my mouth before I could stop myself. *What the hell was he doing here?*

Disheveled and wide-eyed, Sid looked from me to Jay, and back to me again. He recognized Jay alright, but when he looked at me he shook his head, as though assuring himself that it couldn’t be me.

I stepped forward just as Jay tightened his hold on me. Prying his fingers away, I walked over to Sid, who was taking backward steps.

“Sid, it is me, Lexi.” His eyes widened even more at that, as if I were a ghost of his best friend. He stumbled as he kept moving backwards before turning around and taking off in full speed. I started running too but was caught by Jay, and dragged into the shadows. He kept a hand firmly on my mouth, and whispered, “Something is seriously wrong. I am sorry but we have to head back to WHERE now.” I started to shake my head vehemently but he tightened his grip on my mouth, saying only one word, “Please.” I knew it was not a plea but an order. There was a finality to it, from the way his eyes had flashed. I succumbed, despair hitting me for the first time since I had begun my search for Dad. I followed Jay quietly, like a mindless zombie,

as he moved in stealth.

My proximity with Jay brought me back from zombie hood, when I perceived myself being towed by him, his hand in mine. Maybe he had found me too slow. I looked around at the now familiar surroundings. *Turn back*, I wished in my mind. *Be careful what you wish for*, warned my voice of reason, that irritatingly surfaced whenever I least wanted it to.

My wish came true in a minute. Jay turned right back, turning me around as well, cursing under his breath. I looked behind and saw then the reason for our retreat. Someone was guarding the area.

Moments later, we were seated facing each other on the low branch of a tree. I was leaning against the trunk, my feet dangling down. My bitten spots had been itching terribly as we ran and Jay was worried stiff. Perhaps he did not have other, bigger things to worry about. Like I did.

“I am a bad girl,” I was speaking more to myself, “Why else would I be punished so....ruthlessly?”

Jay sighed, gazing at me with strained eyes. He moved closer to me, whispering, “You are not a bad girl, Lexi. Maybe there is something really big in store for you.”

I shook my head. With quivering lips that I couldn’t help, I said, “I don’t want something big. I just want an ordinary life like that of my friends. Small things. A family, a loving mom, an ordinary Dad who works at a bank or something, and comes back home to his family every evening.” Tears welled up in my eyes.

He put his hands on my face. “A day will come,” he whispered, “when you will have your small things. I promise.”

The gesture was so soothing that I relaxed, closed my eyes, feeling protected and safe and less lonely. His right hand slid into my hair. Not for long though. The next moment, Jay stiffened, loosening his grip. As I pulled back to look at him, he fell backwards, to my horror. I tried to grab on to his shirt but he was falling down, down to the ground. A scream escaped my throat and I jumped down the tree. The cloddish jump sent a sharp jolt of pain across my knees. Ignoring it, I crawled on all fours towards Jay’s body, as he lay on the ground, with a square band sticking to his neck. I pulled it out - a

needle. I flung it away in a fit of rage and clutched him close to me. Jay's voice was inside my head, screaming, "Lexi, run!" I ignored that as well. Even though I was sure that the shot must have been meant for me.

I knew it then, knew it with a certainty that I was in love, hopelessly in love. It was an absurd place and situation for a revelation of the kind. But then that's how life is. Things are not planned. They come as they do. Some hit you in the face. Some slide into place. That's how life is. Why else would I realize it there, at midnight in the middle of the forest, that I was in love with Jay, with my guardian angel who now lay as still as the night itself. Would he ever know? *Detached*. Mom was right. I was detached. I never ever let him know I had feelings for him.

Tears streaming down my cheeks, I prayed fervently, *God, it doesn't matter if we aren't together at all, just let him be alive. It doesn't matter if he doesn't love me back, just let him be alive*. I could feel someone directly behind me but I couldn't care less. A world without Jay was not a world for me. I had no business being in it.

I love you Jay, I whispered, before a sharp pain shot through me and I keeled over.

## Chapter 21

(present)

“Lexi,” Jay’s hands are on my face, both of them on either side. I try to look at him. At first my eyes won’t focus. His face looks funny, with two sets of everything, two pairs of eyes, two noses, two lips moving this way and that. I put both my hands on two sides of his face, and then his dancing features come together. He only has two eyes now, as is right. In them I see pain, a longingness that makes me want to weep. I am aware that I am on a bed in a dim-lit room.

I didn’t want to waste a minute. “Jay, I love you,” I wanted to say. But no voice comes out. I choke, coughing weakly. Looking pale, Jay slips a glass with a straw into my mouth. I take two sips and stop, feeling nauseous.

He whispers, “I thought you had gone into a coma. You have been unconscious for hours.”

Embarrassed, I look around. Across from mine is another bed on which lay Aisha. I start to get up but my head feels so heavy that I think it will burst any moment. “She’s alright,” Jay says, easing me back. “She came to hours ago. They only sedated her.”

I look at him questioningly. “You both were caught on one of the Eyes,” he explains. “and carried here.” Searing pain hits my skull. I clutch my head hard to make it go away.

Looking down at me with alarm in his brown eyes, Jay rubs my forehead ever so gently. “Go back to sleep. You are safe now,” he says. “Go on. Close your eyes.” Clasp his hands in mine for assurance, I close my eyes.

(Flashback)

I woke up in a cold sweat. I could sense the scent of wet mud before I perceived myself lying on it. *Where was I?* I opened my eyes and looked around. Still in the forest.

*Lexi!* Jay's voice resonated from somewhere deep within me, and I stuck out my hands to see if he lay close-by. Nothing but cold wet soil greeted my hands. When I tried to get up, dizziness took over and I lay back exhausted. 2 days of improper sleep, constantly on the move, poor diet, were taking their toll on me. Still, I pushed myself up wearily, determined to find him.

I staggered on for a while, unable to hold myself steady. Several times I turned around at the sound of footsteps behind me, but could find no one. The vast density of the forest stretched out before me. It looked like it had just rained, going by the damp earth and the watery leaves, but strangely I was not wet. I figured that it could be the sound of the fat drops of water trickling from the leaves that my paranoid mind morphed into footsteps.

I had already walked for about twenty minutes but there was no sight of Jay. Beginning to panic, I wondered where he was, what had caused me to pass out. There was someone behind me. I remembered a searing pain. After that it had all gone blank. What did they do to Jay?

I stopped, straining my ears. There was a faint rushing sound coming from the east. Clutching my dry throat, I followed the sound, guessing, hoping that it was the sound of water beating against rocks as it meandered down its path. The sound kept getting louder and louder, almost shutting out the eerie sounds of the forest, until I came upon a small waterfall. A few meters to the south, the water gained momentum in its downwards journey, responsible for the rushing sound. I placed my hands under one of the rocks at the base, collected handfuls of fresh water and poured it into my mouth. I could trace its way down my throat, cooling my dry insides as it went down, pure and natural.

I washed the grime off my face and hands and turned back to hunt for Jay. Directly below me, I saw it again, the same sabre toothed cat. Or another one of the same species. Before it started its climb towards me, I took off,

confident that I could outrun the laggard beast. And so I did. Having lost it, I slowed into a walk, keeping an eye out for Jay.

I glanced at a mound of leaves under a tree and passed by, doing a double take when I saw it move. I observed it from a distance for a while. Yes, it was definitely moving, slowly though. I fished inside my pocket for my pepper spray, dug it out and gingerly approached the moving mound, the spray held out in front of me. I knew that after my relentless spraying on the smilodon, the small can might be almost empty. When was it, 2 days ago? So much had happened during the last few days that I had lost track of time. I advanced, simply because that mound could very well be Jay, half-conscious and covered with leaves.

As I stood a few feet away from it, contemplating my next move, it moved completely to one side, making me jump, revealing Sid's face. Popping my sole weapon back into my pocket, I ran to him and pushed off the leaves from his body. He lay in a heap, moaning. I shook him hard, calling out his name and he opened his eyes, a flicker of recognition in his eyes.

"Lexi," he croaked and spluttered. I helped him stand up and supporting him on my shoulders, half dragged him towards the waterfall. Washing his face and drinking from the stream seemed to revive him a lot. We sat on one of the rocks as he cupped the water and drank at intervals.

"You look cute," he said, sheepishly. I laughed, more out of relief at having him back to his normal self, than his humorous remark. I knew I looked far from cute just then, my clothes in tatters, my hair a tangled mess and my face in-God-knows-what-shape. I resisted the urge to look at my reflection in the water. I laughed because just yesterday Sid had run like a madman when he saw me.

"What are you doing here, Sid?" I asked him.

Sid did not meet my eyes as he replied, "I came in search of you."

"How?"

"When you spoke of meeting your relatives, I knew something was up your sleeve. In fact, I have been watching you for the past few days and I was certain there was some secret that you were hiding from us." He paused,



smiling weakly.

“So I slipped into your room the night you messaged me.”

I opened my eyes wide. “But I locked that window.”

Sid wiggled his eyebrows. “I came in through the door. I read your diary which you had left open on the screen, and took down the user name and password. I logged into Neulan. As soon as I set foot here, I got caught by these cyborgs.”

“Hmm they must have tightened security. Even I saw them guarding the forest.”

“I was interrogated about you. I said I have no idea and escaped from there. That’s when I met you guys in that alley. I ran away then, not wanting you to get caught.” He shook his head. “And then back in the forest, I was chased again by those things, and I passed out.”

I quickly briefed him in on everything that I knew about the place. He listened open-mouthed as I spoke.

“Whoa!” He exclaimed when I had finished. “A whole new dimension, existing parallel to ours, unknown to us. How unbelievably cool is that!”

Unbelievable yes, but certainly not so cool after all that we both have been through since we jumped through. With a heavy heart, I looked around, wondering where Jay was, whether he was even alive.

Sid, though, was still taken in by my information. “The missing plane crashed in here! Who would have thought? It’s way beyond everyone’s wildest imaginations!”

I nodded absently, my eyes on the peak of the rocky mountain, on the slope of which we sat. Jay’s cave had been on a mountain too. Was he inside it by any chance? Even if he was, it was impossible for me to find it in this huge forest.

Suddenly, a burst of water rushed down somewhere from the peak, as if someone had dumped a humongous bucket of water from up. Acting quick, I pulled Sid and sprang in the opposite direction, moving away just in time,

as staying there would have caused us to slip and fall right into the waterfall, taking us down with it as it gushed down. We got completely drenched in the spray of water though.

“Not so cool, huh?” I asked Sid, as he stood panting, ribbing him for his earlier remark. Sid nodded a yes and then his eyes went wide. He murmured, standing stock-still, gesturing only with his eyes, “Lexi, there is a tiger standing behind you.”

I had enough presence of mind not to make any quick movements. I turned around slowly. Sure enough, there it was, crouching near one of the rocks, a few feet away. Sid and I inched backwards, while the beast walked slowly, doing a perfect cat-walk, closing the gap between us. I considered our options. There was no chance that we could outrun it. Pepper spray was not going to work from a distance either. We were done for.

The regal feline gave one massive shake, reminding me of a cat trying to dry its coat. That, for some reason reminded me of how Jay had scared it off. Taking a chance, since there was no other way, I copied what Jay had done that day. I took a step forward and growled as fiercely as I could, lifting up my hands for added effect. After the recent tiger mauling man incident that had happened at a zoo, there were tips to save oneself from a tiger floating around all over the web. One of them had been to stand with your hands raised to intimidate the tiger by giving an impression of being big and powerful. At the time, I had wondered whether it would work. It did. The tiger took a step back. Encouraged, I lifted my hands a little more higher and took one more step towards it, growling again, feeling like the character Neytiri in the movie Avatar. The striped beast moved back, an unsure look in its golden eyes. Thankfully, Sid picked the moment to imitate me. Feeling overpowered, fooled into it rather, the tiger turned around and sprinted away. We followed its example, taking off in the opposite direction.

“Wow!” Sid said, after a while, panting, “Where did you learn that from?”

“Jay,” I said simply, missing him all the more then.

Sid appeared thoughtful. “Where is he?” he asked as we hiked on.

“I don’t know,” I said shortly, afraid that my voice would break and

the tears would break free. However, I guessed I needn't worry as I was an expert at appearing impassive when, and especially when my heart bled.

The forest ended and we strode on a dry stretch of land hoping to reach the city.

We had hardly walked a kilometer when something white and cold fell SPLAT on my hand. The next one dropped on my upturned nose making me sneeze. Sid felt the ice cold powdery substance in his hands. "Snow?" He exclaimed, bewildered.

And then it was snowing, hard. Flakes after flakes were pelleting from the sky as we ran for cover. Soon the ground was a white sheet just like our countenances. Our teeth chattering, we plodded through the snow, unable to understand the sudden climatic change. Things couldn't possibly get any worse. Or so we thought.

The ground split up. Yes, a huge crack formed itself on the ground a short distance away from where we stood and the other piece began to slowly drift away.

Sid and I stood, a little away from the precipice, numb with cold and fear. "What the... h-h-hell?" Sid chattered. I wondered if these were common everyday happenings down in this universe, thanking my stars for my own, promising myself that as soon as I hunt down Dad and Jay I will head right back with them never to return. *Dad and Jay, that's two in my list of missing people now. Wonder if it's me. The ill Omen.*

"Look," Sid's shout brought me back to our immediate problems. I followed his gaze and knew we were doomed. Far away on the snow-covered mountains was a misshaped moving array of small dots. I forgot to breathe for a moment when I realized what the array was. Animals. Hundreds of them. A stampede. Coming towards us. And fast.

Panicking, I clutched Sid's hand and turned around. "Lexi, we have to think of a way, quick!" I knew that there was no point running as I looked helplessly around. The other piece of land that was drifting away was too far for a jump. Any attempt to cross would only throw us down to our death. I looked longingly at the other side, wishing to get there somehow. Then... I saw Dad.

## Chapter 22

Dad was standing on the land directly opposite to where we stood, beyond the yawning fissure. He looked much different than when I had seen him last – his 3D image. He looked older, sporting a long beard, thin in his white coat and trousers. He was beckoning me towards him, while I gazed at him, no wanting to take my eyes away from what I was sure was an apparition, sure that he would disappear. He was motioning me to jump over to the other side. *Yeah right.*

Sid tugged at me in urgency and I pulled my eyes away from Dad's apparition, thoroughly unsettled. "Lexi, we have to run. NOW!" I looked back at the approaching stampede and was horrified at how close it was now. Something else had me rooted to the spot, stupefied. I could see some of the animals in the front then, as they raced towards us, splattering snow around. THEY WERE ALL PRE-HISTORIC. Mammoths, dinosaurs, panthers, and several others that I couldn't identify were the front-runners. My throat dry, I let Sid drag me along the length of the fissure, in a futile attempt to escape. As I picked up momentum, matching pace with Sid, I looked to my right to where Dad, or rather his phantasm had stood. To my surprise, he was still there, still signaling me to jump.

I wondered as I ran if the chasm was another worm-hole. As the ice-age stampede closed in, I knew that we had to take that chance, as well. Life was becoming a game of chances. It was weird that Dad would tell us to jump. Maybe my panicky state of mind had conjured up an image of Dad trying to save us. But I had to give it a try. Since we had to nowhere else to go.

So I steered myself and Sid towards my right. He resisted, shouting, "Are you crazy?"

"Trust me," I said. If you are out of your mind like me, I didn't say.

Sid looked one look at the stampede, which was now only a stone's throw away, and turned, the wretched look on his face distorting his features. Hand in hand, we jumped into the crevice. Mid-jump, Sid looked at me, shouting, "Lexi, I..." the rest of the sentence swallowed by the howling wind

of the chasm.

The next moment I was on soft ground again and Sid was shaking me. I opened my eyes and saw him let out a sigh of relief.

“I thought I lost you there.” I sat up and looked around. We were on the edge of a small patch of land surrounded by clear blue water. An island. Maybe a kilometer wide.

“What’s happening, Sid? Do you have any idea?”

“I was going to ask you.”

“Are we passing from dimension to dimension? Going back and forth in time?”

“That is a possibility.” Sid let out a nervous laugh.

“All that ice age thing and then the chasm opening up, and the prehistoric animals. What’s next?”

No more had I said those words than the sea sent a huge wave in our direction. Sid and I got up and ran towards dry land. There was a sign board in the distance. We barreled towards it despite the sand. North Pole. It read. Sid and I gaped at each other.

“No ways.” Sid exclaimed. “We can’t be at the North Pole.”

“Sid,” I said, looking behind him, “this island seems to be sinking.”

The water had closed in rapidly from all sides, making the island half its size already. Sid looked around, wide-eyed.

“No, Lexi. The water level is rising. Fast.”

And then it all fell into place. The sudden snow, prehistoric animals and the split, and now the rising water. Ice age, continental drift and global warming. Somehow we had seen it all in the matter of a few minutes.

The water was lapping at my legs now. I looked down at it and up at the sky, wondering if the hole in the ozone layer would show up too. It didn’t.

“It’s doomsday Sid,” I said, quietly, taking hold of Sid’s hand. “We

have saved ourselves from the animals and every other problem we have been in. But this...is the end. We humans have killed our planet. Global warming is causing the water level to rise.”

“Can’t we do something?”

“The damage is done. It is irreversible. There is no way out.”

We were neck deep in water now and I took a deep breath as my feet lost contact with the ground. Struggling for air, I clasped Sid’s hand tight and closed my eyes in defeat.

Bright light was straining through my eyelids like a prolonged, painful flash. *Maybe I had reached heaven. What else could be so bright? I didn’t meet Dad after all. And Jay. I missed telling him I love him.* I sighed, closing my hand around Sid’s, thankful for company, at the same time chiding myself for being responsible for his death as well as mine. My fingers touched my own palm.

I threw my eyes open. I struggled to open my eyes in the glaring light, shutting it tight again in pain. A few moments later, when I was finally able to keep my eyes open, I saw myself on a narrow bed in a huge hall. My bed, the countless controls and the wide screen on the wall, almost the size of the wall itself gave the impression of a hospital room. *A futuristic hospital room.* I tried to get up but found myself fastened to the bed by the waist and the neck. It was suffocating to be tied down like that. Tugging at the corners hurt my neck and I lay back, exhausted. I struggled again at the metal binding eager to know where I was. *Where am I? Where is Sid?*

A loud clicking of heels sounded from outside. Clip clop clip clop. I craned my neck to see who was coming, but my position made it unable to see as far as the door. The soft sound of the door sliding open, and then Clip clop clip clop again. The person was getting nearer. I waited with bated breath for the heeled visitor to show up so I could see her face, assuming it was a ‘she’ because of the heels. The clip clop sound stopped and yet no sign of my visitor. I craned my neck again to see what was happening, just as the bed started to move with a jolt.

## Chapter 23

Petrified, I watched as my bed slowly rotated from a horizontal position to a vertical one, my shackles still intact. At the same time, the owner of the heels came into full view. She was moving her hand in air as if to make my bed move and when she stopped, my bed stopped as well, having moved to an upright position, my legs touching the ground.

“There,” she said, smiling at me, “Now we can see each other. And I hope, get acquainted as well.” She was somewhere in her thirties, with beautiful features, her dark hair in perfect contrast with her complexion. She looked slim and trim in a funny looking white suit that resembled a tailcoat with two flaps at the back extending all the way till the ground, and tight trousers. Her soft brown eyes held a warmth ill-suited for the situation. She had an uncanny resemblance to someone I knew but I couldn’t place it in my grogginess.

“Alexcy,” she extended her hand, “it is a pleasure to meet you, finally.” She spoke in deliberate tones, her voice thick with authority.

Even though my hands were free from shackles, I refused to move them. “Who are you? How do you know me?” I didn’t like the tremor in my voice.

She lifted an eyebrow in admiration. “Steadfast and stubborn. I like that. And let me tell you, you were brilliant in there!” *Where?*

She turned around and conjured a virtual image of one of the control panels in the air directly in front of her. Her hands moved in the air as if she was performing a magic trick. A view of the forest came on the wide screen on the wall, almost like the whole forest has been summoned to the room. She eyed it with satisfaction, lazily scrolling, again in the air with her finger, giving the impression of actually moving through the woods. All the while she hadn’t physically moved an inch. As she scrolled, she asked me, “So, my dear, how was your experience?”

She faced me, continuing in her pseudo-friendly manner, “Did you have fun?”

Nothing she said made any sense so I chose to ignore it, having other concerns on my mind.

“Where are Sid and Jay?” I asked.

Something passed in her eyes then. A flash of something unpleasant. It was there- for a blink-and-you-miss-it duration. And then she was back to her smiling self.

“Jay is well, why thank you,” she replied cordially, cocking her head to the side. “And your friend, Sid, is recovering in the next room. Doctors are attending to him right now.”

“I want to see them,” I said, obstinately. She stopped what she was doing and jerked her face in my direction, calculating. She watched me, strangely looking older, as I looked right back at her.

“Great!” she said. “You disappoint me somewhat, though, at this point. You did not ask me what had happened to you. I was actually so impressed by the way you had it all figured out in the end. You will go places.” She beamed.

I kept quiet. She raised her eyebrows at me. “How did you like the Smilodon? We created it.”

“Too slow,” I said.

She looked amused. “You are right. No wonder it got extinct, isn’t it? Survival of the fittest, anywhere, anytime. And you, young lady, will survive anywhere.” She patted my hand. “You were in one of our virtual worlds, my dear.” She spoke as if that was a privilege instead of the life and death situation that it actually had been.

“I had put you and your friend in there to gauge the survival instincts of intelligent but normal human beings, in a prehistoric world. You were doing so well that I got carried away...I wanted so badly to see how far you would go. But you surpassed my expectations. Mind-blowing.” She clapped, her hands high in the air.

*A simulation. So that’s what it had been. Not real, but so damn realistic.*



I kept my hostile eyes on her. “This simulation,” she continued, as excited as a mother gushing about her baby, “is designed to make you realize just how bad the situation is. How humans are destroying the planet. Once you realize it, you are safe in there. Alexcy, in there you had said it is irreversible. That’s where we come in. We, humans of Neulan, are working towards saving Planet Earth.” She waited for it to sink in, her eyes never leaving my face.

I still did not get the point of putting me in there for all this.

“Please take me to Jay,” I said. “I just want to see that he is alright.”

This brought her out of her madness. “Oh no! I am sorry.” Her face was serious. “I cannot bring him here or take you where he is. He needs rest now. He’s been through a lot.” She sighed.

“What I can do.... is this,” she said as she swiped on the virtual controls again, replacing the forest on the wall with a dim-lit room. Jay was in it, stretched out on a wide bed, sleeping peacefully. The screen behind him showed his heart rate, beating at a steady rate. I noticed a band on his arm and figured that to be the wireless connection to the heart rate monitor. He twitched twice, making my heart beat soar, worried that all was not as well as it looked. But he settled back again with a sigh. Maybe he was just having a bad dream.

I could sense her eyes on me all the time.

The scene on the screen shifted to another room, where Sid was bound on a bed like me.

He looked all around nervously, scared out of his wits.

I struggled against the binding metal on my body. My captivator spoke coolly, “He seems to have followed you down here. One of my Humanoid guards caught him the other day. We are unsure about what to do with him.” She looked at me with a helpless expression. I knew what she wanted.

“I’ll do anything, without any complaints. Just let him go home please.”

“I admire your attachment to one another. I really do. This guy, I was

told he is Sid, wouldn't reveal that you are here, when we first caught him. Protecting you even when he was in trouble. And now you do the same." She cocked her head, with her dazzling smile showing off equally dazzling teeth.

"Unfortunately," she continued, "letting him go home is not that easy. But I promise you he will be taken care of for the time being."

She swiped in the air once again, this time like she was directing a musical. She then spoke loudly into the air, looking up. "Agent Carbon, would you come down to the Simulation hall please?"

"Give me a moment, Ma'm," a familiar male voice replied. I searched my memory for the owner of that boyish voice, but gave up. I decided to wait out till he came in, shifting my thought process to Jay and how glad I was to see him alive.

The door slid open and in walked a grotesque looking man. Looking at him, my mind screamed, 'I HAVE SEEN THIS GUY BEFORE!' The scream died when I saw who followed. Dad. And my mind entered a state of stupor.

He looked just as he had in the simulation. But his eyes were not on me. Instead, he searched around the room, saying something I couldn't register. Too emotional to speak, I watched him as he crossed over to my side, saying, "This is downright illegal. The simulation is dangerous. You cannot put anyone in it, till it has been tested for safety, especially not a human girl."

I heard the woman say, in lazy tones, "The girl agreed."

Ignoring her, he started unstrapping me, muttering under his breath.

"She would have figured out a way for sure. Haven't you seen how amazing she was?" She went on.

"Rules are rules," said Dad. He then dipped his voice into a whisper, looking up as if he was not speaking to me. "Don't tell anyone I helped you in there." His voice was so low that I had to strain my ears. *So it was him, and not an illusion, or a spectre.*

"Rules are rules, then, for the other humans as well," she drawled, and then dropping her voice to a whisper, said, "The people of the aircraft."

Dad had a pained look then. He eyed her with extreme sadness.

“Dad,” I whispered, finding my voice finally.

He looked at me strangely. Something stirred in his eyes for a microsecond. And then it went blank. Emotionless, except for something that resembled pity. He patted my head and started unfastening my shackles.

“Dad,” I said, more urgently. “It’s me, Lexi.” I could feel her eyes on me, but I didn’t care. This was not the kind of response I had expected from Dad.

He smiled, sadly. “You have been through a lot. The simulation can be very strenuous on the mind.” He shot a dirty look towards her.

Turning back to me, he said, “I am not your Dad, child. You will be back in the safety of your home, soon.”

“In that case, her memory will have to be erased,” she piped in.

“Rules are rules.” He said again. “Queen Soul, we don’t alter the memory of one person who enters here. We make them promise that they will tell no one, and that they will not come back. And we let them know that they are being watched often along with the consequences if they do tell. Not that they are going to be taken seriously by the people on the other side anyway.”

Tears were brimming in my eyes. I had never imagined Dad to not recognize me. Somewhere else in my mind, I noted how he had called her ‘Queen Soul.’

He turned to leave, after ordering the humanoid to take me to the hospital to be examined for internal injuries.

“Dad,” I tried again, one last time, unable to believe what was happening. “It’s Alia,” I whispered.

He looked at me, pity and concern shining in his eyes, but no recognition, no excitement, no love.

“Don’t you remember me? And your wife, Jo? Your son, Don?”

He patted my hands, and turned away. I blinked back the tears.

My mind was transported back to that day in the cave with Jay. He is

not going to recognize you, Jay had said. And I got it then, what he had meant. He doesn't remember us. And that's why he never came back. And that's why I was summoned here, by my unknown email-er. Jay. To finally learn the truth. And to realize that Dad was not detached. He never was.

I was in a daze for the rest of the day. I let the people in white coats examine me and transfer me to the people in cream suits. They massaged me till every bone that wasn't aching before ached, till all my muscles turned sore. I sat through it all, like a good girl, only half aware of my surroundings. Dad's blank expression popped up every now and then, causing the heavy lump in my throat to stay put, bringing bouts of suffocation. The look of sympathy he had given me would stay with me forever if I left just then. I couldn't decide what was worse, a father who left you for selfish reasons, or a father who no more recognized you. Maybe I had been better off not knowing the truth of his disappearance. Or maybe not. At least now, I wouldn't blame him forever. And neither would I let Mom. But Oh, to live with this hopelessness! It seemed too heavy a burden to bear. Maybe I had been better off not knowing. Or maybe not.

It was getting harder to keep it all in, the mental turmoil that I was in, without screaming out. Dad had forgotten us. His memory has been tampered with. How dare they do that to him? Or to anybody for that matter? I had to track down the person responsible. And get them to reverse it.

With renewed energy, I got up, pushing the people in cream away. Baffled at the sudden resistance, they tried in vain to subdue me. I outplayed them and managed to stomp away like a mad person, without too much of a struggle. Perhaps they had underestimated me as I didn't come across as being as strong as I really was, or perhaps all the anger inside me had boiled to a Hulk-ean rage. Whatever it was, my act of fury lasted only until the humanoids came. I was then overpowered, and consequently ended up slumping over.

I dreamt of being surrounded by zombies. Not the gory ones with blood on their faces. The zombies in my dream went about mindlessly around me, with blank faces, doing their chores, while I ran frantically in search of someone. Familiar square shoulders loomed large in front of me, making me realize who I had been searching for. Relief washing over me, I closed the gap between us, hugging him, and then pulling back because he didn't hug

me back. One look at his ashen face and I could tell that the unthinkable had happened. Jay had turned into one of them too. Mindless. I screamed.

(Present)

Strong hands hold me in place.

“Lexi, it is OK,” Jay’s voice. I open my eyes. Jay’s intense brown eyes meet mine. There is concern in them. And recognition. I can feel the sweat on my brow. I reach out to him, thankful that what I saw is just a dream. Jay just sits by me, quiet, his hands brushing my hair. I am still in the same room. I want to check if Aisha is still there, but I am having trouble keeping my eyes open. I close them. Again.

(Flashback)

I opened my eyes. I knew I had just screamed. I looked around frantically. I was in a room with a bed and a window and nothing else. I sat up.

“It is alright, my child,” Dad said as he came in through the door, looking alarmed. “You are safe.” “Dad,” I said, automatically. He was walking in my direction, carrying a covered plate in his hands. In spite of my bitter experience, hope bubbled within me and I waited in anticipation for him to call me by my name. Nothing of the sort happened.

Instead his next words burst the bubble. “Fine. You may call me Dad, for the time being.” He smiled. “How are you feeling?”

I was quiet, unsure about how to answer that. My body felt fine now, though my head felt heavy. And my heart was weighed down by a feeling of dread. Getting no answer, Dad said, “I am told that you and that boy, what was his name – Sid- are here for some college project.” I looked around the room. Where was Jay? Was Sid alright? Dad seemed to make out who I was searching for. “Your friends are fine. They will be here soon with you. I have been requested to keep you with me where your safety won’t be an issue. So unless you want to end up in new simulations, stay with me till you are done with your work.” His eyes crinkled as he said this, making even more fine lines on his already lined face. The past fifteen years had aged him remarkably. I wondered if that had anything to do with us, whether deep down in his sub consciousness he felt a void, which had once been occupied by his family.

“I have some work to look into but I will be in the next room if you need me.” He placed the plate on my lap and ordered, “Eat, first.” Then, moving his hand in the air causing the door to slide open, he disappeared behind it.

Keeping the plate on the bed, I walked over and looked out the window. There was a lawn outside. Beautiful apple trees lined the edge. A horse strolled by. A butterfly flew so close to my window that I looked for the handle to open the window so that I could let it sit on my hand. But I could not find one. There was a knock from behind and Sky walked in with

Sid through the open door. I had been so engrossed in the view, and my grief, that I had not heard the door slide open.

“That is not a real window,” Sky said. “It is just a screen that gives you a view of one of the orchards on Planet Earth.” She smiled, adding, “Nice to see you again, Lexi.”

“Hey, Sky,” I said but my eyes were on Sid. He looked beaten, pale.

“Sid, how are you?” I asked him, moving across towards him.

“I have been better,” he said, winking. He took a deep breath. “I was waiting for you to wake up, so that we could go back, Lexi.”

“You go ahead, Sid. I need to get something sorted out first.” I hoped he would listen because it was entirely my call.

“No,” he said, much to my dismay but just as I had expected. “I am not leaving this place without you.”

I turned to Sky. She was observing me with a sympathetic expression. “What?” I asked.

“I heard about your meeting with your father,” she said, holding my hand.

Sid shot a look at me. “You met your Dad, Lexi?”

“Yes,” I replied, gritting my teeth, “but he doesn’t recognize me, because his memory has been tampered with.”

“Why would anyone do that?” Sid asked.

“I don’t know Sid, but I intend to find out.”

“You can count on me. No matter what happens, I will be there with you.” I really did not want Sid’s help here for two reasons. One, I did not want to put his life in jeopardy. Two, I knew that he wouldn’t be of much help in this....place. But I couldn’t tell him that. So I let him be.

I turned to Sky, who had a weird expression on her face. Like she was guilty of something. When our eyes met, she turned away hastily, busying herself.



She swiped on the wall and out slid an opening behind which was a coffee machine. Two more swipes, a circular motion in the air and a whole dining table and chairs rose up smoothly from underground. She got busy preparing coffee while I closed Sid's open mouth.

"Sky, who told you? About my meeting my father?"

"Jade." Sky said casually.

"Jay? Where is he? Is he alright?"

Sid turned away in obvious disgust, moving towards the window.

Sky looked surprised. "What had happened to him?"

I related to her how he had fallen off the tree following a shot in the neck.

Sky laughed. "Oh that's nothing for Jade." She paused. "I heard you met Queen Soul too?"

"Queen Soul? Who is that?" Sid turned back, the exotic name having piqued his interest.

I quickly told him about my meeting with her. Sid was so confused and new to all this that I felt like someone who belonged here while explaining things to him. Since Sid was bent upon playing accomplice, I figured that I might as well fill him in on everything.

Sky was thoughtful while she poured coffee into mugs and handed them to us. "She doesn't meet anyone from your dimension unless it is really important. Wonder why she took the trouble." Sky frowned, her lip lop-sided. "Maybe Jade told her to meet you." She was speaking more to herself.

"Why would he do that?" Considering what she had put us through, there was no chance that Jay had anything to do with it.

"I wouldn't put anything past him," Sid remarked, the same spite evident in his voice whenever the topic of Jay came up. Sky, who was going to answer my question, stopped to give him a look of reproach. I pressed her, asking again, "Why, Sky?"

She turned back to me, shrugging, "Why? Because she is the...soul of

this place. She makes the rules around here. The be all and end all of Neulan. That's her. Queen Soul. Doesn't the name say it all?" I could see the significance of her name now. Maybe she had herself named her that. That would be so like her. However, I found the name ill-fitting in terms of spirituality, for she didn't look like she had much of a soul.

"So like Jay not to tell you anything about his Mom!" It was as if someone had punched me on the stomach. I stared at Sky in disbelief. *Jay's Mom? That woman?*

## Chapter 24

Slowly however it began to click. I realized that I had been a fool not to realize that myself. Why, the lady was a dead ringer for Jay. She did look too young to be a mother, though. *Anti-ageing pills?*

“Does that mean Jay is the Prince of Neulan?” I asked, trying hard to imagine Jay with a crown on his head.

“Haha,” Sky couldn’t help laughing. “Technically yeah, but then try calling him that and you get to see the fabled bear with a sore head.”

“Talk about having evil in the genes,” Sid muttered under his breath.

Afraid of a tiff-off between Sky and Sid over Jay, I changed the topic to one that lingered on the back of my mind, all the time.

“Isn’t there some way, Sky, to bring Dad’s memory back?”

Sky shook her head apologetically, “Nothing as yet.”

“Who did it to him? Do you know?” Sky hesitated. She looked like she was involved in an inward battle with herself.

“Lexi!” Jay’s deep voice rang clear from behind me. I whirled around. At the sight of him, my heart rate plummeted to a thousand beats per minute. His eyes locked with mine. In my mind, I was running towards him, almost colliding with him, getting swept up in a hug. But I stood my ground, staring at him. I swallowed, and tried to concentrate on what he was saying-

“Lexi,” Jay’s deep voice was tight. “Go back home.”

That was so not what I expected to hear from him. “No!” I said, “I am not going anywhere.”

“It was a mistake bringing you here,” Jay said in the same tight voice.

I thought of Dad and his blank look. Yes, it was a big mistake, what they did to Dad. They are going to pay, I thought.

My face must have mirrored my deadly intentions, because Jay looked alarmed. “What are you thinking?” he asked.

I gave him a scathing look. "I am sure you already know this. I met Dad yesterday. And of course, he didn't recognize me, because..." My voice broke. Jay looked away while Sid placed a hand around me.

"There's nothing you can do about it, not anymore," Jay said, still looking the other way.

"This is important," said Sid, talking to me with his eyes on Jay. "We need to find out why your father's memory was tampered with."

"Have it your way, then," Jay snapped as he walked towards the door. He lingered, speaking with his back facing us, "Good Luck!"

"Good riddance," Sid, muttered under his breath.

In the middle of my mental disorder, something Jay said reverberated in my head, urging me to consider it. *There's nothing you can do about it, not anymore.*

I looked up at Jay. I could see his profile as he hung at the door, his face impassive. "Was he planning to come back to us?" My voice was a whisper.

He turned only his face sideways to look at me. For just a moment, it seemed as if he cared. Cared enough to tell me the truth. As if his well hidden emotions rose to the surface. A guilty look passed over his face, probably for ditching me when I needed his help. And then he switched back to mask mode again. He stormed out of the room, leaving me baffled. The past few days had shown me a different side of Jay's that I had almost gotten used to. Seeing him like this again set something within me on fire. I stared at the open door, considering following him and shaking him hard. *That's not Jay, but Prince Jay, with all his princely airs.*

Sky kept a reassuring hand on me. "It's Ok, Lexi. Calm down."

Shaking all over, I turned teary eyes towards Sky and asked her my question, again. "Was Dad going to return to us, when...when this happened?"

Sky nodded, her eyes cast down. "We were very young then. But as far as I have heard, your father was here on a 6 month contract, after which he was to return to his family."

Feeling cold, I wrapped my arms around me. I didn't know who I was fighting. Someone had been determined to tear my family apart. And they succeeded too. With irreversible effects. It was better to leave and get on with my life. Back to my broken family. I made up my mind to spend two days with Dad for the last time and then leave for good, never to come back to this wretched place again. I would consider him dead. And I would forget Jay as well. It would be painful at first. But I would succeed eventually. I really wanted nothing to do with this place or the people here. Sid had his arms around me, pressing me to his chest. I hugged him back, welcoming my new decision with a heavy heart. *I know Sid likes me. A lot. I like him too. He is a good guy, after all. Easy to be with. A good friend, who stands by you. And someday, when I am ready to move on, we could be together.*

Dad's house was much bigger and well equipped than Sky's. Everything was either automatic or voice controlled.

In an attempt to buoy me up, seeing me slouch and look as dull as the humanoid that stood guard outside Dad's main door, it's slitty eyes unblinking, Sid led me to a square shaped simulation gaming area devoid of any visible controls. Once Sky switched on gaming mode the square shaped area transformed into a dungeon, obviously only virtually, where we had to run a lot in search of hidden treasure and fight off and kill demons on our way. Running was strenuous though the blows from enemies were painless. However the moment we received three blows the virtual world vanished leaving us back in the small square. At least we managed to kill time till Dad got back. Once he was back, Sid and Sky remained in the square trying out other games while I followed Dad around, under the pretext of working on my project. Before I went back, I wanted to see if there was something that would trigger his memory. I did not want to leave any stone unturned. More than that, I just wanted to be with him while I was there.

He showed me on the wide-as-the-wall screen in his workroom, a slide show of the different projects that he was working on. He explained each one in detail with the same enthusiasm displayed by Soul, driving me to accept the fact that he belonged here, that there was no taking him back now. *Don't give up yet, Lexi*, my mind goaded me on.

In spite of myself, I found myself mesmerized by his new ideas and the ones already achieved. One of the new concepts he was working on was

mind-blowing. Since the issue of climate change that seemed to be wreaking havoc on our planet centered around the growing hole in the ozone layer, he proposed synthesizing ozone in his lab and infusing it into our atmosphere, thus mending the hole. The idea was still in its initial stages. As he showed me his presentation like an excited child, I looked at him with mixed feelings. Pride and awe mixed with despair.

When he asked me the topic of my project, I floundered a bit at first. Then I told him what was foremost in my mind. I bluffed that it dealt with memory alterations, for medical purposes. I told him that I was researching on how the lost memory of Alzheimer patients could be revived.

This seemed to unhinge him for a moment. Worry lines deepened on his forehead. And then he revived himself, explaining to me the working of the memory alteration tube. He showed me how the correct amount of infra-red rays had to be passed through a tungsten at a 60degree angle to create the device. He gave me one of them to have a look and cautioned me about its use. Inexperienced hands may ruin the entire memory of a person, he told me. That it had to be used in such a way that only the part of the cerebrum that deals with episodic memory is affected, or a person can become a complete vegetable.

“This is my brainchild,” he said, frowning. “Something that I am not really proud of. It is a dangerous thing, if misused. Memories are the most precious non-material thing a person possesses. Everything, including all his knowledge, how he has to behave, what he has to eat, what time he has to sleep, moments spent with loved ones, has to be conjured up from memory. Imagine losing it. So... I am very particular about the usage, and do not let it be used unless absolutely necessary.”

I held it in my hand, away from me, as if it were a venomous snake. “Nobody else has access to one of these?” I asked him.

He shook his head No. Anger boiled inside me. He wasn’t even aware that it had been used on him.

Jay came in later, closely followed by Sid, who came around to my side and stood close by, eyeing Jay with contempt. Ignoring him totally, Jay spoke, “I need to speak with you in private.”

I followed him to the next room, Sid close on my heels. Jay looked irritated by Sid's presence and addressed me again, "I said private."

I held Sid's hand firmly and said, "This is as private as it can get." When I needed help it was Sid who had promised to stand by me, while Jay had ditched me.

Jay's eyes flashed in anger. Taking a deep breath, closing his eyes, he said, "I came to say that I am...sorry for my behavior yesterday."

I did not want to forgive him yet. I folded my hands and waited until he finished.

"I know how important your father is to you. If there is anything I can do for you, to ease your pain..."

"Help me revive his memory then." I challenged him.

He looked at me helplessly. "Lexi.."

"Forget it, Jay." I turned to leave. He caught my hand to hold me back. I ignored the shivers his touch sent down my body and shook his hand off.

"No listen," he said with urgency in his voice.

I folded my hands and looked at him with a hostile expression.

"Your father and I, we were working on such a device. We were almost there, so sure of success that I emailed you in order to bring you down here. I wanted you to be here, the very first time I tried it on him. But then things have a way of going wrong when you least expect it."

My heart was already melting. "So you *are* the anonymous emailer. I had that figured out." As an afterthought I asked, "Did you induce that memory as well?"

"What memory?"

"To show me the path to this dimension."

Jay hesitated before replying. He was so on the edge as it was that I wished I had not blurted that out. Running his hands through his hair in exasperation, he said, "Yeah. But this was not the way I had planned it."

Sid who had been silent all along, spoke up, "If coming here is so dangerous, why couldn't you have just brought her Dad over to our side?"

Jay looked like he couldn't be bothered answering any of Sid's questions. Knowing it was a valid one, and in an attempt to patch them up, I echoed Sid, "Yeah, why couldn't you?"

"That would have been suspicious. Unlike here in Neulan, over there, I have less...control."

Squeals of laughter could be heard from the hallway outside. One was Sky but I could not make out the other girl. A moment later, Kiara's voice sounded, "Jay? Are you here?"

A look passed between me and Jay. I knew he was thinking what I was thinking, about how I had suspected them to be together.

He stepped out first, followed by me and Sid. Kiara took one look at Jay, and seemingly oblivious to our presence, ran into his arms. What I had the courage to only envision, she did. She saw us over his shoulder and pulled back.

"How come these two are here?" She had trouble keeping the disgust from her voice.

"It's a long story Kiara." I hate the way he drawled sometimes when he talked to her, exactly in her style. "I will explain everything to you."

"Yeah, come on. Even I have loads to tell you about my visit." Kiara pulled him away. He looked reluctant to leave but still let him be guided away by her. Half way through the door, she turned around, addressing Sky, "You joining?"

Sky waved them off, urging them to go, promising to catch up later. After they left, Sid asked her, "Those two are in it thick, aren't they?"

Sky frowned. "Well, Kiara would certainly love to be, but as far as Jay is concerned, I am not so sure. I think he has feelings for someone else." She gave me a discreet half-glance then, making me wonder if a hint was intended. Not that I wanted it to be.

I went back to Dad's lab but he was not there. After searching



everywhere, I found him in the sitting room, slumped over in a chair, rubbing his forehead like he had a headache. Alarmed, I rushed to him, and went on my knees in front of him. I checked myself before the word Dad slipped out of my mouth. There was no self-pity for having to bow down to circumstances. Instead, what I felt was contempt. I couldn't help feeling that just because he had forgotten, it didn't mean that I was not his daughter! I still was his first child, and will remain so forever, and that position cannot be forfeited from me by anyone, nor can it ever be replaced, however advanced they may be technologically and otherwise.

"Mr. Oze," I said. *Dad*, said my contemptuous mind.

He looked up suddenly. His forehead appeared even more creased, making me worry that the lines would stay for good like it did on once folded paper, adding on to his already aged look.

"Are you okay?" I asked, unable to stand the anguish in his eyes.

"No one here calls me by my Surname," he said quietly, a little lost. I wondered if it felt as terrible as it seemed, to not remember your own identity. I wondered if sometimes something stirred at the back of his mind, a part of the deleted memory, and he felt sick for not being able to put a finger on it. I wondered if his own blank eyes that reflected in the mirror bothered him. I guess I would never know.

"Can I be of any help ....." I didn't know how else to address him anymore.

"I doubt it, my child. I feel... as though I am in a losing battle...once again. Though I don't know that I have been in a situation like this before." *You have, Dad. You have.*

"Why then, the déjà vu?" he continued. Something stirred alright. That answered one of my questions, at least.

"What déjà vu?" I prodded, hoping against hopes, that some miracle would ensue, that that one memory would trigger it off, opening up all the locks, and he would call me Alia like he used to, and ask me about Mom and Don, and....

"Ah, I don't know," he replied, as he straightened up wearily. He

pointed to a drawer in the corner and asked me to fetch a small box for him from inside it. I did as told, and he opened the box, instructing me to take the small round glass-like bulbs from inside it. Artificial lenses. He instructed me to wear them. I did.

The whole room lit up with blue specks of light.

## Chapter 25

A closer look revealed that the blue specks were actually commands. All sorts of commands, the kind you would see on a computer, strewn about in the air in chaotic order. And everything was suddenly brighter. I now knew why they had dim lights here.

“Think of something,” said Dad.

“What?” I could feel a surge of adrenaline.

“Anything.”

*Mom.* That happened to be the first thing that came on my mind when he said that. The very moment it formed itself in my mind, the definition of Mom popped up in the air in front of me.

***Mom -***

***A mother in relation to a child or children to whom she has given birth.***

Just like Google search, I thought at first. Maybe a bit more advanced because this information was suspended in the air that I breathed. But I was wrong. The picture that opened out a moment later had my heart racing. It was a photo of Mom, wearing her favorite suit.

“Now share it,” he said.

“Huh?” I was staring at the image, thoroughly shaken, wondering how their search engine had access to it.

“Give a thought command. Just think ‘Share’”

Seizing an opportunity at helping him with a memory recall, I gave a thought command to share.

“Ah!” He nodded, looking ahead, eyes twinkling. I figured that Dad could see it too now, that I had virtually shared something I had thought in my mind.

“Your Mom is a pretty woman,” he said. The words stabbed at my

insides. How could his memory have been wiped so clean?

I asked Dad how the system had displayed Mom's photo since I had not uploaded family pictures in any social networking sites. He explained that while the definition was taken from a central database, the photo was retrieved from my own memories.

I cringed. I wasn't comfortable wearing anything on me that had access to my memories. Unaware of my discomfort, Dad went on. "Your thought signals are decoded, by particles in the air," Dad explained. "So basically, be careful what you think!" He winked.

I imagined it would be a pain to live in here forever, where you need to be careful about the only thing that was private back in our own world – our thoughts and our feelings.

"Don't look so alarmed," assured Dad, "You just need to know how to control your thoughts. The key is to be alert at all times. It's just a matter of practice."

I knew that he was right. Everything could be mastered by practice. But for the time being I felt vulnerable.

"Now, wait, let me share something with you." He looked ahead intensely, moving only his eyes, obviously giving thought commands.

A moment later, the wreckage of the IH330 came up on the screen. It lay askew on top of a clump of trees, one of its wings hanging down loose. He gestured towards the screen. "Do you know which plane this is?"

"Yes," I replied, wondering if I should admit that I already knew it had fallen through a worm hole into Neulan. Before I could decide though, Dad explained how a plane was detected in their forest by the mosquito sized robo-guards that roamed the forest during the day. The passengers and crew were alright but scared to death. He talked to them, assured them they will be safe home as soon as their airplane was fixed without revealing that they had landed in an entirely different realm.

"The mysterious disappearance of this plane has created a lot of unrest back home," I said, "so the sooner they go back the better."

"Is it so? Well, you as a human would understand the urgency

involved. I feel for them too, but might not as much as you, since I don't belong there."

I kept quiet. Poor dad! He did not even know where he belonged anymore. All because of... I felt the bile rise in my throat.

Oblivious to my inner fury, Dad spoke, "The issue is this- the authorities here had agreed on letting them go. I have developed the device that would only clean their memory of the past few days. That would safeguard the anonymity of Neulan. And get these poor people across to where they belong." He paused. I fought to control myself. How much he felt and did for others, unaware of what was done to him!

"But now," Dad continued, the signature worry lines drawing parallel creases across his forehead, "they don't agree. They say that it would look suspicious. That if a plane that went missing suddenly shows up months later, the people on Earth would probe into it, and finally stumble upon our parallel existence. And then they would want to unleash their powers on us, tap into the resources here, basically look for ways to mint money. Crux of the matter- the authorities are unwilling to let them go now." The scene on the screen shifted to one where the passengers were having lunch in a huge hall. Even though they looked bored, their eyes carried hope. Dad gestured to them as he spoke, "They plan on erasing their memories and making them useful to us in some way or the other. If you and that kid could try and talk to them about it... maybe you would be better at conveying the misery of the families back home as they wait for their loved ones to return."

Until he said so, I didn't have an inkling of why he would detail out everything to me.

"The authorities... you mean .."

"It's a panel led by Queen Soul."

I couldn't imagine meeting the despicable lady again. But I had to do it for Dad. And for the hapless passengers of IH330. I updated Sid about everything Dad said and without wasting any time we went in search of her, Soul the soul-less. *Hmph.*

A typically sour looking Jay was walking in our direction. We ducked behind one of the doors but we were a second too late. Jay's sharp eyes had

detected us.

“What are you doing here?” Jay asked, addressing me, furrowing his bushy brows. As usual Sid didn’t exist for Jay.

“Just taking a walk,” I said as I sidestepped him, taking hold of Sid’s hand in exaggerated defiance. Feeling smug at the flicker of jealousy that passed over his face, I walked away. At first I thought we were free of him but there he was matching steps with us, seeming to have joined after a reconsideration of sorts.

I gave him a look which I hoped looked antagonistic. With Jay around I really didn’t trust myself anymore. I must have looked the part I played because Jay said spitefully, “I have no wish to come after you two. I have better things to do, believe me.” Sid snorted so loudly at this that I had trouble suppressing a smile. Jay gave one nasty look in Sid’s direction, not quiet looking directly at him, and spoke to me again, “Unfortunately for me, I have a duty to get you back to your hostel in one piece, being responsible for bringing you here in the first place.”

Our moments together in the woods flashed through my mind, creating a deep rooted ache. Jay must have felt something too, from the way his eyebrows slanted slightly as he glanced away.

Sid cut in, his voice loud, “You needn’t be bothered about that anymore, I am there for Lexi,” to which came Jay’s reply, “I think Lexi is perfectly capable of taking care of herself.” In spite of myself, I liked that. I really liked that. I melted like snowflakes on a palm. I forgave him, well almost.

Sid started saying, “That’s not what I m...,” but was again cut short by Jay who went on, “It’s not that. Neulan has never taken kindly to trespassers. People from your planet are treated with suspicion, our privacy being our first priority. So if you go around snooping, the consequences might not be all too favourable.” I perfectly knew what he was attempting to sugar-coat the actual situation. But I was not ‘snooping around’. I clarified that. “Dad sent me on this errand.” Jay raised his eyebrows ever so slightly. I knew what he was thinking. ‘Errand and you? Here?’

Before he could accuse me of telling tall tales, I explained what I had

come out to do. Jay considered it for a moment, before saying, "I'll come with you then," adding tongue in cheek, "Whether you like it or not." I didn't particularly mind. Hell, I liked it, to be cared for by someone who thought that I was otherwise 'perfectly capable of taking care of myself.' In fact I was so glad that I had to try hard not to smile. Sid, on the other hand, looked like he had just swallowed his own phlegm.

The awkward threesome - us- trudged along in silence. A group of men and women in white, observed us silently as they passed by. Words in blue started forming in the air directly in front of them. Mind Talk. No wonder this place was so quiet. No wonder no one ever seemed to talk. They passed a lot of messages to each other that normal humans like us could not see. Now that I could 'see', thanks to Dad's lenses that still clung to my irises, I glanced back to see what they 'talked'. I mean 'thought'. Or....never mind. I was never going to be able to coin perfect phrases for all the absurdities of this place anyway.

'Look at them. Humans. Frail creatures. Why are they here?' The lady in the centre looked bored.

'Jade brought them for some project at their college.' The blonde in the middle.

Jay turned too then, watching them, making me wonder if he had a device in his ear to hear them as well. Couldn't put anything past these people. Name the technology, they have it.

The man near the blonde. 'Girl's a photon.'

On seeing that, Jay turned back, the corners of his mouth twitching. I wished I could ask him what that meant. It had to be an offensive remark if he was trying so hard not to smirk. But for some reason, I was not ready to let him know that I could see blue too. It was my little secret.

Jay led us to a wide steel door manned by a whole row of humanoids. As we passed each humanoid, their eyes moved over us, from top to bottom. It was obvious that they were scanning us. I felt like I was being stripped naked. I wondered if they could read my mind too. I was scared I would get caught and be charged guilty for something. I quickened my pace, catching up with Jay, while Sid trailed behind.

Jay placed his palm on the door and pushed. “JADE,” said an automated voice, and the door slid to the side. A massive room opened up in front of us. It was big enough to be an auditorium. It also had a podium in front like one. The sides of the room were lined with statues of various prehistoric animals. Sitting down on the podium, meditating, was Soul. She was dressed in a white gown that added to her flawless looks. Had she tried to sell her anti ageing pills on Earth, she would have become the richest and the most influential person on the planet by now.

Jay looked at her and turned around, whispering, “She’s busy. Let’s come back later.”

As we turned, a shuffle could be heard from behind us followed by, “Jade, wait.”

As we faced her, she gave us one of her sweet smiles, so sweet that it made me sick. “I was just winding up anyway.”

We walked up to her and Jay hugged her. “Mom,” he said, gesturing towards me, “Lexi...has something to tell you.”

His mother regarded me, cooing “Lexi! Jade I must say, what a girl!” She looked at me admiringly, shaking her head. I felt myself go red in my face. To appear normal, I said, “Hi Queen...Soul.”

She clapped her hands, exclaiming, “My! Aren’t we learning fast!” Her eyes fell on Sid then. “And how are you, Sid?”

“I am good,” Sid replied, ogling at her, blushing. *Wait till we get back Sid. I will give you a piece of my mind for this.* “Ozum,” she cooed. What the hell was ozum? Ozone + awesome? I rolled my eyes. Jay interrupted, “Ma, Lexi has come to ...” but Jay’s Mom cut in, scolding him, “Jade, I know they are your friends, but you don’t have to play spokesperson for them. Let them speak up.”

Jay hung his head and stepped aside, a gesture that annoyed me a bit. His mom shifted her gaze and waited for me to speak up. Was it my prejudice or was there a masked mockery in her eyes, I wondered.

I cleared my throat, and started from the beginning – how the airplane’s mysterious disappearance had flabbergasted the world leaders, how



everything had been done to hunt it down, how distraught the relatives of the travelers were and how they were still hopeful for the safe return of their loved ones after all these months.

She listened me out, her face a passive veil. I ended up almost begging her to not change their previous decision of sending them back. She got up and started pacing to and fro, looking like she was deep in thought. Jay was still looking down and standing. Sid stood there, drooling. She finally settled herself down on the podium, and asked me, “Did Sam not tell you the risk involved if we let them go? How suspicious it would look?”

“He did,” I replied.

She folded her arms and cocked her head with a questioning look.

“That’s too far-fetched,” I said, trying to control the anger in my voice. “For a chance consequence we cannot let 232 people suffer.” Jay jerked his head in my direction. I gave him a cool look, expecting to see his face contorted with anger for not seeing eye to eye with his Mom.

But I was taken aback when I saw the pleading look he had. He did not want me to continue on this topic with her. Why?

“Chance? You take my word for it they will come hunting. The mystery of what happened to a plane-ful of people who had gone missing and suddenly appear a year later, with no idea whatsoever about where they were, is going to intrigue them more than ever. I cannot allow that.” She sounded determined.

I bit my lip. “Let me know if you can think of something,” she said dismissing us. “Come back when you have.”

Jay quickly turned around and started ushering us out. He looked like he was in a hurry to get out from there. “Jade,” she called from behind, “stay back. I have something to discuss with you.” He looked at me. “Yes, Ma,” he said, his eyes never leaving mine. He came close and whispered, as discreetly as possible, “Go straight to your Dad’s. Don’t loiter around here for God’s sake.” Then, turning his face a bit in Sid’s direction, he said, “Please, Sid,” before walking off to where his Mom stood, watching like a hawk.

Just before I left, I glanced back at them. Soul had a piercing look on

her face that seemed to cut through Jay. Words in blue started forming in front of her. It read, 'Do you love her?' I froze on the spot. Sid was tugging at my hand from outside. I refused to budge. Did I really want to know this? What difference did it make? I was going to leave anyway. For good. Never to see him again. I stayed put, waiting for Jay's answer with bated breath. Big blue letters formed above Jay's head - **'No.'** The door slid shut between us.

## Chapter 26

Jay's No had struck a big blow. Not that I was hoping for a life together. But somewhere deep down, in the recesses of my heart I had felt that Jay reciprocated my feelings for him. No, he had said. The finality of it crushed me. *More hopes than one had been shattered in Neulan.*

I went immediately in search of Dad to inform him about Soul's reaction. He wasn't there in his lab nor was he in his room. I decided to wait for him in the sitting room and sat lost in thought. Sid came with sandwiches for us but I pushed it away, having had food pills in the evening.

"Let's leave tomorrow," I told him firmly. Sid, who was just about to take his first bite, stopped to stare at me.

"Why tomorrow?"

"There is nothing much for us to do around here anymore," I said as I slumped back on the lush seating.

Sid shook his head, his mouth full. Losing my cool, I said, "You stay then, and gawk all you want at that lady."

Sid almost choked on his sandwich. "Whaaaat?"

"Anyone could see that you were drooling over her, you @#@!"

Sid spluttered, "I .... No...she.." while I folded my hands and waited.

He took a deep breath and stared at his plate. Having composed himself, he tried again, "I couldn't help it. I felt dumb inside that room. Like my brains had gone for a walk without me. I could feel it too but there was little I could do about it. In fact, ever since I came here, I have been fighting this languorousness." I glared at him with narrowed eyes, though my instinct told me that he sounded honest.

"Wait a minute," Sid said, an infectious smile slowly spreading across his face, "Are you J?"

I stopped to ponder over that. No, I was not jealous for Sid drooling over her like a faithful puppy. But she was Jay's Mom. Much older, for one.

Second, what kind of guy hits on his friend's Mom? Especially when he can't stand the friend.

Sid was observing me closely. When we met eye to eye, he said, "Lexi, ehmm...can I ask you something personal?" I nodded.

"How do you.....Have you...." He stammered, searching for the best way to put it. I knew what he was getting at, having expected this question sooner than this. "Do you love Jay?" He finally managed to get it out in one breath.

Jay's No in blue appeared before me digital clear like it was still there in the air. "No," I said. Because it had only been a passing thing, a crush. Because lying to myself was the first step in getting over.

Telling Dad that I had failed to convince Soul was the tough part. I just couldn't get myself to do it. I had to think of something, I thought. Taking Sky's help, I used the available resources to do some research. Coming up with nothing useful, I discussed some possible solutions with Sid. Later when Jay came to meet Dad, he stood awkwardly by the door of the room we sat in. I was aware that every single part of me longed to be with him. However, I ignored him. I must have done a good job of acting nonchalant, because Jay left soon. I went to my room after that and shut myself in, wishing to think things over in solitude.

The next morning, I was in Jay's house, waiting for him in their sitting room. Sky had dropped me here. Sid was at Dad's, still fast asleep.

Needless to say, his house was huge, state of the art. It was noteworthy that whichever dimension we were in, however futuristic and modern, some sort of inequality persisted. Ironical it was that though money had no power here, importance of a particular person manifested in the form of bigger houses and better facilities. Food for thought.

Jay came in, a little breathless. There were dark circles under his eyes, like he had not slept the whole night.

"Jay," I started right away. "I... I have an idea, for the airplane, to send the people back without any harm for your ...planet."

He seemed to relax a bit then. "What's the plan?" he asked, turning to

aloof mode.

“I’m not so sure about this. It’s just a theory,” I said. Jay sat facing me, but avoided looking at me.

Taking a deep breath, I said, “Have you read the notebook by Nicholas Sparks?”

He shook his head No.

“I thought so. It's not a guy book at all, being a bit on the cheesy side.” I let out a chuckle. “The storyline, though, is beautiful. It’s a love story, love-that-crosses-all-barriers-kind.”

He gave me a quick look, but remained silent.

“The story ends on a passionate note, where the heroine is struck by Alzheimer's, the hero and heroine having grown old together.” Apart from a flicker of his eyes, Jay’s face remained straight.

“I had quite a hangover after that, but for a different reason. I wondered if...if...”

“..... if your father was somewhere out there, struck by Alzheimer's.” Jay finished for me.

“Yeah,” I said. “I researched a lot about the deadly disease. And I remember reading about a phenomenon called confabulation - defined as the production of fabricated, distorted or misinterpreted memories about oneself or the world, without the conscious intention to deceive. That is to say create fake memories.” Jay slowed down, looking like he was cocking his ears up.

“My theory is – what if confabulation can be induced?”

I knew Jay was hooked now by the way he looked straight at me, his inhibitions forgotten. He seemed to be thinking hard. “I think it can,” he said slowly, “By using the simulations.”

“That’s what I thought too!” I said.

“Hmmm. So you are suggesting we induce a particular memory in those passengers’ brains to mislead them?” he asked.

I nodded fervently.

“Can you present it to Mom?” Jay asked.

Even though the prospect gave me the creeps, burdened by the fact that the happiness of 232 people depended on how I put the idea across, I agreed. Because I really didn’t have a choice.

“I don’t know whether she will be convinced, but it’s definitely worth a try,” he muttered, as he left the room to call her down.

Soul came in a few minutes, looking irritated, as if she couldn’t be bothered about petty things like this. Jay sauntered in, holding a mug in his hand. He handed it to me. It was hot coffee. Just what I needed then. Before I could thank him, there was a knock on the door and in came the grotesque looking man. The one who had walked in with Dad on the day that I had seen Dad for the first time in 15 years.

This time I recognized the huge giant of a man right away. He was the one who had given me quite the scare while coming back from town with Aisha and Rhea. The one who had tried to grab me. Yes. Those pudgy eyes were the same. And so was the build. The question was – what was he doing in Neulan?

I stared at him while I debated within me whether to ask him or not. He passed me a seemingly cursory glance. But I didn’t miss the expression in those eyes during that one glance. He was nervous.

Soul was addressing me. “Lexi, you haven’t met Carbon have you?”

Carbon furtively licked his bee-stung lips before turning to me. “Hello.” His voice was thin, unlike his self. It was boyish. I couldn’t shake off the feeling that it sounded awfully familiar.

“Hi,” I said, scrutinizing him openly while I got the chance. It pained to look at him. He was so obviously deformed. His looks might not have been repulsive to me had I not had that bitter experience with him. Wonder what he had wanted from me that day on the road-side.

Jay was leaning against a wall, staring straight ahead like he often did.

“So what is it Lexi?” Soul asked me, forcing me to tear my eyes off burly man Carbon.

I hesitated. I looked at Jay questioningly as his eyes met mine. I didn't know if I should speak in front of Carbon who was a mere side-kick to Soul as far as I knew. Jay gave a slight nod as if to go ahead.

I cleared my throat. "I have a proposition for the release of the humans that are stuck here in your dimension."

"Oh," she exclaimed, looking astonished. Something about her expression told me that Jay's mom was not too happy with what I had said.

I told her my plan. When I finished, Soul stood up shaking her head, making my heart sink down to my toe tips.

"It's still risky. Our forefathers built this place with a mission. The care and perspiration they put into it will turn out to be of no use if we are discovered. Hence my verdict is no. We are not sending the airplane back. We can put the humans to good use. The more the merrier, isn't it?" She beamed at me.

For some reason a chill ran down my spine. As if he understood, Jay took an involuntary step towards me.

I tried again, suggesting that the risks could be controlled by being extremely vigilant, but to no effect. Subsequently, she started getting impatient and started a pointed discussion with Carbon on some other topic, signaling to us that the meeting was done.

I felt a surge of hatred for this lady, who could be so heartless. I felt like going right up to her and wringing her beautiful neck. Without her around, things would be so much better. However, I curbed my murderous feelings, knowing that they were not going to get me anywhere. To get things done, you need to be poised, persistent, prudent, patient, and all the other p's that were difficult to be.

I cleared my throat again before speaking up, loud and clear. "Queen...Soul, I understand your concern for your land. I also appreciate your dedication towards your work." She cocked her head towards me, curiosity etched over her face.

Encouraged, I continued, "I have not been able to explore much of this dimension, but whatever I saw took my breath away. You are way more

advanced than us in everything. What you are doing for the human race is amazing. And the best part of it all is the selfless attitude. I know that you are not gaining much from this except for self-satisfaction. Wish we humans would get the opportunity to learn a thing or two from your motto – All for humanity. I may not show it, but I admire you immensely.” I paused a while to gauge her mood. She put on a cool face, but her eyes were sparkling with interest.

“Hence, I was feeling a bit let down that you, who has sacrificed her life for humanity, fail to understand the feelings of human beings. But now I know how much it hurts you, to be so helpless. I understand that you want to find a feasible solution, else you would never tell me to try, and would never agree to this meeting in the first place. It’s killing you that you have to keep those innocent people back while their relatives and friends are grieving their disappearance. But I beg you that we give it a try, in keeping with your motto – all for humanity.”

I stopped. A deafening silence ensued. Jay’s mom’s expression was comical. She really looked torn – between her own desires and trying to appear as the person I had just projected her to be.

Eyeing her long, graceful fingers, she spoke at long last. “Alright then. Let me discuss this with my panel and see what they have to say.”

It was all I could do not to whoop from joy. It was not a definite yes, but at least there was some hope. Jay’s face twitched. He looked pleased.



(Present)

Muffled voices can be heard from outside. I can hear a door sliding open. Two people are conversing in soft tones just outside the room.

“How did she get here again?” The lady has a clipped sound. There is power in her voice and conceit to a degree. It’s her. *Queen Soul*.

“By the website. The helpers brought them in, her friend is with her too, when they saw them in the forest.” The boy stammers. Carbon.

“Then she must remember everything. Which is not a good sign. We need to hold the release of the others till we are sure.”

“You are right, Mam.” He hesitates before saying, “I...I will see to that.” He appears to be very scared of her. Footsteps echo as they enter the room I am in.

“Jade...” Soul sounds impatient now. “She came in through the portal, apparently. You know how nosy she can get.” I don’t like her tone when she says that. There’s spite in it. It’s amazing how, when you can’t see and you have to rely on your ears, you can gauge the mood of a person from his/her tone. Had your eyes been open, you stand a chance of being fooled by the face the person would put up. Voice however, is not easy to mask. Or perhaps, people don’t bother masking, because normally, seeing is believing.

“You can’t blame her.” Jay’s voice is flat. “It’s all my fault...”

“Oh stop blaming yourself, Jade. Currently we have a problem at hand. If she remembers.”

“She doesn’t. She never will.” Jay cuts her short.

She sighs audibly. “You have to get over, Jade. This... this attitude... of yours...will not get you anywhere. It will ruin you.” She paused. I could see her in my mind, frowning at Jay, almost in disgust.

“When she...comes to,” she goes on. “Let me know. And make sure she doesn’t leave this place. Until...you are sure she doesn’t remember.” The door closes and the room goes quiet.

I wait for a minute and open my eyes. I can see him standing at the

foot of my bed, looking at his hands. “Jay,” I rasp. “I remember.”

Jay’s first reaction surprises me. He takes an involuntary step back and stares at me in disbelief. I nod at him to ascertain what I said. He casts a nervous glance around the room. Why is he afraid? I stretch a hand towards him, to bring him closer. Glancing once at my outstretched hand, but not taking it, he whispers, “Everything?”

I nod, though I am not sure about that. How will I know if I remember it all or not, unless I tally with someone who has been with me every minute of every day?

He inches closer, his eyes clouding. He takes both my hands in his. He presses them against his eyes. The gesture is so simple and yet so heart-wrenching. I can feel his tears on my fingers. I lie there transfixed, while he stands in front of my bed, trembling, crying into my hands. I wish to say something, but I can’t think of anything sensible to say.

A moment later, he leaves my hands, exposing his red eyes, smiling in a crazy way. He whispers, “You remember... and you forgive me?”

“Mmmmm...” I don’t know what he is talking about. But I don’t care. I know he can do me no harm. He’s crazy that way. Apologizing for everything. Most probably we had a tiff off before my memory went. I am sure it’s all there somewhere in the recesses of my memory now. All I need to do is take some time out and access it. But not now. Now, I need to prove to Jay how much he means to me. Too much time has been lost fighting over things, giving priority to ego. Now is the time to make up for all that lost time. I try to get up but my head still hurts, so badly that I clutch it hard, in an attempt to stop it from going round and round.

Jay urges me to drink water. “I guess it’s a side-effect of the memory recall,” he says. “When changes are taking place here.” He taps his head, handing me a glass of water.

“Aisha?” I ask, looking around as I sip from it, realizing that she is not on the adjacent bed.

He assures me that he will take me to her in a while.

He tells me to act like I don’t remember anything. “Don’t ask me why

now. I will explain later,” he whispers. Whatever you say, I thought.

We hear voices outside, loud this time. Both Jay and I look at the door. It slides open and in comes two helpers, dragging Rhea and Sid. Jay, rolling his eyes, signals the humanoids to let go. They release the two, and stand back, their slitty eyes trained on their respective captives. Rhea, nursing her wrist, looks over at me and Jay. Her expression turns to disgust. She has not forgiven me. Sid walks over to me. “Are you alright, Lexi?” “Yeah,” I say. He must have come through the portal again like last time.

I put up a good act of my pre-Neulan Dementia-stricken state. When I see Dad, I resist the urge to run into his arms, call him Daddy. Soul examines me personally and declares that the passengers be released as has been decided earlier. The declaration reminds me of their conversation earlier in the day and I know that there’s more I need to remember. Though most of it has come back, a gap seems to remain. But I gauge from their talks that the release had been out on hold in order to give me some time to see if I remember or not. If I don’t, then the memory alteration device is safe. I now know what caused my memory wipe out. Like Dad, the device he so dreads has been used on me as well. But why? I’ll just have to wait a while before it strikes me.

Later, when Sid, Aisha, and Rhea are crowded around Dad, listening in rapt attention to the various aspects of Neulan, Jay and I are seated together on top of a table.

I can clearly remember the last time I had sat like that with Jay, here in Neulan.

## Chapter 27

(Flashback)

“What’s a photon?” I asked. We were seated in the common area in the headquarters. People sat in clusters here and there, unwinding, some mind-talking, some openly chatting.

Under the pretext of going to the loo, I had slipped on the lens that Dad had given me. Fascinated, I watched the conversations that were posted in the air. It had reminded me of the term they had used for me – photon. And I had put it across to Jay as noncommittally as I could.

Jay narrowed his eyes at me, making me bite my tongue. He did not know yet that I had access to the lens. I was tempted to tell him but not trusting the air around, which should be tapped, I kept mum.

“Umm I just overheard someone say that, about someone else,” I said, making my tone as casual as possible.

Jay laughed. “Let me see, in your dimension the equivalent of photon would be...” he tapped his finger on his chin and scrunched his eyes in thought, “...Chick.”

I frowned in embarrassment. *Time for topic change.*

“Jay, the day when the humanoid touched Sid, why did you drag me to safety and leave Sid behind, assuring me that he’ll be safe?”

“Those things can read minds Lexi. They have been equipped to convert the nerve impulses of our body by touch. Of course they are controlled by us but I was unsure about who exactly was behind the whole thing. Since your Dad was in your mind a lot, I kept you hidden from them in case they read that and brought you down here.”

“But you brought me here anyway.”

“Trust me, it wouldn’t have been the same,” he said, suppressing a smile. “Come to think of it, you might have enjoyed their company more, since you crave all the adventure you can get.”

I pouted but was determined to hang on to the topic as Jay seemed to be in a good mood. Good mood was when he answered all my questions.

“One more thing. If you wanted me to come here so bad, why did you try to put me off in the beginning by saying it’s unsafe? You kept sending me back to campus whenever I entered the woods.”

Jay was getting restless. I could see that. He said, “Suppose I tell you to not touch something. What would you do?”

“What would I do?” I asked, before it hit me. Widening my eyes, offended, I said, “Of course I wouldn’t touch it.” I crossed my arms and turned the other way. Some gall he had to imply I would do the opposite of what I am told!

Jay cleared his throat. “Okay, that’s not the only reason.” I glared at him. He laughed, saying, “Fine, that’s not the reason at all. Happy?” I gave him a condescending look out of the corner of my eye. He said, “To tell you the truth, I did try to bring you here in the beginning but I did not want you to wander here by yourself. Plus during the past two weeks, I have felt that something is brewing around here. Something that had to do with you.”

“Hmm. So you wanted to bring me here so that I could see my father. Thankyou very much. But why?”

He looked reluctant to answer that. He fidgeted with a small cylindrical coin-like object in his hand. I tried to snatch it from him but he was too quick for me. He shoved it into his pocket.

“What is that thing?” I asked suspiciously.

“Later,” he replied hastily, looking around him at the same time.

Before I could prod further, Dad interrupted, plopping himself right next to us.

“What’s up with the plan? All good?” he asked, wiping sweat off his brow.

Jay sat up straight, like he had been caught in the act. “Yes, Sam,” he replied, army-man style, “All good.” I looked away, failing to suppress the smile that tugged at the corners of my lips. My eyes fell on Soul, who stood

in the farthest corner of the room, watching us. She turned away and got busy with some virtual dropping and pushing of images with her hands, appearing casual.

“So, what does the master plan look like?” I could hear Dad ask Jay.

I was thinking, *‘How long has she been watching over us?’*

“Lexi,” Dad was calling. “Yes, Dad,” I said and bit my lip. Laughing, he waved his hand to show it was alright, and said, “Jay says you explain better.”

“Ah, OK,” I said, trying to put Soul out of my mind. “We put the passengers in a simulation, resembling the very surroundings they are in now. We make them believe that they crashed in a forest, were held hostage by some unknown people, but a team of good people came to their rescue, fixed the airplane and fed them well. When they wake up, the team has disappeared leaving behind some food. Their mobile phones have started working so they arrange an SOS. During the simulation they should be administered a sleep pill, so that they wake up only once they are safe on a large island that resembles this dimension. While they sleep we should pilot the plane to someplace like that. Maybe Sri Lanka. Beautiful place I have heard. And where riots and abductions are not uncommon either. And the world leaves them alone. Finally, they would be home. Except for a few blogs and some thoughtful opinionated articles in the newspaper, most of the people wouldn’t give a damn about what actually happened, as long as the supposedly dead people were safely back with their respective families.”

Dad nodded, pure joy evident on his face. I thought as I looked at him that I couldn’t be as joyous until one more supposedly dead person was reunited with his family. Dad himself. Jay patted me on my back bringing me back to the common room.

“Well, that’s the long and short of it! I hope it does not end up being a flight of fancy.” I finished with a flourish and a pun that I could not help.

Grinning, he gave me the thumbs up and said, “Lexi, you sure are one tough cookie.”

Laughing at the sudden praise, I asked, “Why, Da.. I mean Mr Sam?” I bit my tongue.

“You still think I’m your Dad?” he asked.

I was caught off-guard for a second. “Um no,” I lied, “It happens by slip-of the-mouth, because you resemble him so much.” I swallowed.

“Where is he?” he inquired gently.

“He is no more,” I choked. *I better believe this if I want to get on with life. He is not coming back. He is no more. What is the difference?*

Even as I thought this, my alter ego countered me, convincing me that there was a huge difference between the two. It was soothing to know that my father was alive somewhere, and spent his time doing good for others. “To be honest, he disappeared... 15 years ago,” I corrected.

Dad nodded sympathetically at the news of his own disappearance.

The situation goaded me to test the waters. “Mr. Sam, do you happen to know anything about the Pillars of Creation?” I ventured, taking a bold step by asking him about things connected to his past, something that he had mentioned in his notebook, the one that Professor Vida had handed me. Jay kept a restraining hand on my shoulder. When I looked at him, he shook his head ever so slightly as if to say, “Don’t.”

Pushing his hand away, I turned back to Dad, determined to see how he would react. If there was a flicker of remembrance in those grey eyes, I missed it because Jay’s Mom chose to barge in at that very moment. She whisked Dad away, without any excuses or cordialities whatsoever.

(Present)

“Hey,” Jay is saying. I focus back to the present. I feel like I am in a time machine of sorts, going back and forth in time, not physically though. Each and everything is as clear as crystal, even the minutest of things. I wonder how long it will be before the details fade, thanks to our natural ability to forget things.

He seems different. Jubilant, almost. Jay’s version of jubilant. Relaxed and bright-eyed, with a smile playing on his lips. I am reminded of Aisha’s words a while ago, as soon as she had caught me alone. “Your Jay has changed,” she had said. I liked the phrase ‘your Jay’ and even though he is not mine technically, not yet anyway, I didn’t refute her. “He seems kinder...” she had elaborated. “And he actually smiled at me today!” Needless to say, my heart had welled up on hearing that. With pride. And love.

“I love happy endings,” Jay murmurs, leaning towards me. I can’t say if he’s talking about the IH330 and its passengers, who will be released tomorrow, or us. Even though I am content, I know that I will never be at peace until Dad is back where he belongs.

Sid keeps glancing at us from where he sits with Rhea and Aisha.

“Jay,” I say, in a low voice since I am not allowed to say it out aloud, “How did I recall... things... the moment I landed here?”

He considers it for a while. “I have been thinking about it too. It is only my guess, but maybe it was the exotic matter of the wormhole, a kind of dense negative energy, that must have fixed the harm done by the memory device. You know, like an undo function.”

I look on with a straight face because I know for sure something I had an inkling of until now. I do not remember everything. If what Jay says is right, my memory was tampered with using the memory device. I don’t remember that part. Still, I don’t say it out loud. I know I remember the important parts of my life. And I know that as a general rule, people are not allowed to leave Neulan without having their days here wiped off from their brains, as must have happened in my case too. In fact, when the device has done its job, they should not even be aware of the existence of such a world.



So, I guess I should be content knowing what I know.

Instead, I ask, “Will I forget it when I go back?”

He laughs softly. “I doubt. But, you never know. I know a way to ensure that you don’t.”

“What?” I ask, intrigued.

“I will give you tattoo ink. It’s permanent and painless. You can use that to write down on your wrist, or wherever you please, the 3 magic words - Trust Jay. Always.”

I narrow my eyes. He continues, “That will remind you to ask me whatever you want to know.”

“Like you will tell me. I will have to spend my nights deciphering your cryptic sentences.”

He chuckles, saying, “C’mon, let’s go sit where we cannot be heard.”

“The cave?” I ask, knowing that as the only place that was not in the ‘eye’.

“The cave...” Jay shakes his head. “It has been invaded. There are several eyes in there now.” I feel sad to hear that. I remember the time spent there with Jay, vivid memories of the day when... No. I say to myself. I shall not dwell on it now. I will do it when I am sitting all alone, later in the day, trying to sleep.

One of the humanoids come in to deliver a message to Jay, that he is needed somewhere. Promising to meet me in an hour, he leaves, whispering something in Dad’s ear as he left.

Lost in thought, I move to the window and sit on the sill. It's cozy here at night. It’s like sitting in a semi circular glass alcove where you can gaze at the stars or out into the night. Sid disengages himself from the group on the floor and comes to sit on the sill with me.

Both of us are quiet for some time. Finally he breaks the silence, saying, “Lexi, be careful.”

I stare at him, sure that this is related to Jay, not wanting to ask

anything, not wanting to hear anything negative about Jay for now. He tells me anyway. “It’s the way he looks at you, like he’s guilty of something, like he’s done something wrong and he’s trying to make up for it.”

“I know,” I tell him, “I have seen it too.”

Sid looks a bit relieved.

“But then,” I go on, choosing words carefully, to get the message across to Sid, “I trust him. He wouldn’t have done me any harm, ever, not knowingly at least. So whatever it is that he has done, I forgive him for it.” I turn my face away saying so, looking out into the sky. Sid fidgets for a while and then leaves me alone. My mind drifts back to that day at the college canteen with Sid.

(Flashback)

“Mmmm this tea is heavenly,” Sid said, closing his eyes as he sipped from his cup of *kadak chai*.

I nodded. Five days have passed since we got back from Neulan. Even though technology was far more advanced on the other side, making everything way easier, we were glad to be where we belonged. Sid claimed to feel alive again, and out of his drowsiness. I tried not to think too much about the chunk of my heart that I had left back there. With Jay. And his denial of any feelings for me. I tried not to think that Dad was never coming back. Nor were the travelers of the IH330 who were now stuck away from home forever. I shut them out completely, the somewhat safe distance helping me in my ordeal. No, it was a good decision.

“It is a wonder they let us go so easily, you know,” he said, making me cringe.

Trust Sid to bring it up every now and then. It was difficult to avoid the topic altogether, much as I wished to. Sid liked to hark back to it every once in a while. Like we would be seated in the library going through books when Sid would suddenly gush about how Sky had showed him that any information required could be conjured from the air around, rendering books useless. And then we would hang out by the stairs fiddling with our phones and he would suddenly remember our horrific experience in the simulation. If so much of obsession amounted from barely scratching the surface, I shudder to think what he would do had he been as deep in it as I had. At least he stuck to our decision to not reveal anything about Neulan to anyone, not even Aisha, abiding by the rules of Neulan.

“Lexi,” Sid placed his hand on mine, “you have changed, you know, ever since you got back.”

I knew. Even Aisha had told me on phone that I sounded different. Morose. Distant. But then I had always been morose and distant, hadn't I? Or had I become worse?

“I am sorry, Sid,” I said simply, promising myself that I would make an effort to at least keep it within me until I was able to forget.

“Nah, don’t be,” he said, waving his hand in dismissal. “I’m sorry. For bringing it up often. After everything that happened. And your Dad...”

*Sid, please don’t go there.* It had been hope that had always kept me going. With my hopes drowned in every possible way, I had chosen to run away. I was a weak person, that way, unable to stand a situation which offered no hope, a problem that had no solution. I couldn’t face them or it would suck the life out of me. I remembered all those years that I had hid myself in my room, or at my friend’s place, or out on some social service, just to be away from Mom. To me, her loneliness was a problem for which I had no solution.

Sid placed his hand on mine again, and squeezed it gently. “Don’t worry, Lexi. I promise you that we will go back someday, maybe years later. Together we will do something so that he remembers you. And then we will bring him back with us.” I nodded, touched by the conviction with which he spoke rather than the over-promise itself. He cared for me more than what I deserved. I lowered my head onto his shoulder and we sat in silence for a while.

The day’s newspaper lay on the table adjacent to ours, read and discarded by someone. Sid picked up the supplementary pages and started scrolling through.

“Lexi,” he said, his face buried inside the sheets, “it says here that the meaning of your name could say a lot about who you really are.” I glanced at the article that he was reading over his shoulder. It looked like one of those fun articles that you read at your leisure. Disinterested, I looked away, focusing on the pattern of the wooden pieces that lined the ceiling in a criss-cross way, with my head still rested on Sid’s shoulder. He wiggled his shoulder a bit as he asked, “What is the meaning of your name, Lexi?”

“Man’s defender or something,” I said absently. “Alia means heaven.”

*Heaven is a shade*

*Of blue green like Jade.*

Jay’s cryptic poem flitted through my mind. I sat up straight.

Sid went on, “Man’s defender... can’t find it here. Heaven... that’s a common meaning. It says here that...” but my mind shut it out, working furiously.

Heaven is a shade of blue green like Jade...Alia means heaven. Was he talking about me by any chance? If so, what does his poem mean? That we were similar? Similar in what sense? Ah. Maybe I was just over-scrutinizing things. Maybe I was going crazy.

And the very thought of Jay came with its own share of heavy-heartedness.

## Chapter 28

“Are you alright?” Sid asked. He had stopped reading and was peering at me. Before I could stop myself, the words were out of my mouth. “Sid, how do you know if a person is in love with you or not, for sure?”

He searched my face before answering, quietly, “Love is a strong word, Lexi.” He swallowed, still looking intently at me. “I guess if a person is really in love with you, he would do anything to see you happy, to make you smile, unless your happiness should pose a health hazard for you yourself.”

I mulled over it. I could feel the restlessness seeping through my body, twitching my muscles. I got up, flexing my legs. Sid stood up too, placed the supplement inside the newspaper and kept it folded neatly on our table.

The front page headline blared ‘Quake in Indonesia.’ A small headline below it would have gone unnoticed had it not spelled the word IH330 in bold print. I snatched up the paper.

### IH330: HUNT TO BE DISCONTINUED

Despite the exhaustive search for the International airline airbus IH330, which disappeared last January during a flight from Sydney to New Delhi, no trace of the jet has been found. The government has formally declared the incident to be an accident, and that all 232 people on board are presumed dead.

“Oh Sid,” I said, showing him the article, “Look at this!”

He pushed it away, saying, “Lexi, leave it. There is NOTHING more we can do. We tried, alright? Remember how after everything was planned to perfection Jay’s Mom had just cast it away?” He shook his head firmly. “There is nothing we can do anymore.”

I didn’t leave it, though. I couldn’t. I had to do my bit for kids like me, who might be waiting for their parent(s) to return. I knew that there had to be some way to release them. With a certain dogged determination that

comes out of a desperation to make sure that no one else is made to suffer what I suffered, I called on Jay's mobile number. It had been almost a week since I saw him last. Just as I expected, the message returned was - 'The subscriber you are calling is currently out-of-coverage-area.'

Since my plan was anything but conventional, I did not want to log into Neulan to get to Jay. There was only one way to go.

I met up with Sid as early as 7 am at the canteen. He walked in, wearing the shorts and tee shirt that he had slept in by the looks of it, groggy with sleep. He yawned noisily as I pushed towards him the hot coffee that I had ordered while I waited for him. Trying to keep my voice low, I said, "Sid, I need to go to Neulan!" Sid rubbed his eyes and lifted the coffee cup. "SID!" I said shaking him.

He nodded, putting up a hand signaling me to wait. He seemed to be thinking hard. Looking at me with a confused look, he muttered, "Why are you going back, Lexi?"

I thumped on the table, immediately looking around to make sure no one was watching. Apart from the cashier, the canteen was deserted. What Sid had said earlier when I had called him on his mobile, woken him up rather, and asked him whether he was sleeping, proved to be true. Except for crazy people like you, he had said, whose holiday destinations were other dimensions, people liked to sleep in during holidays.

The cashier seemed to be engrossed in his mobile phone and didn't look up at all. "I have a solution," I whispered, "for the IH330."

Sid slumped on the table in mock-tiredness. "Again?"

"Yes," I beamed. "Again."

Sid looked away, seeing how serious I was, while shaking his head. "Lexi, no!"

"Sid, please. I want to give it a try. It might not work. But what if it does?"

With a sigh, Sid gave in. "Knowing you Lexi, if I don't agree you will go alone. If you do that and something happens to you, I will be this zombie

for the rest of my life.” He rolled his eyes up and stuck his hands out. I laughed at his mime, and also to deflect the hint of romantic feelings conveyed in his words.

I told him the problem at hand – that I did not want to get caught by entering via the website.

“We search for the traditional path,” I said, “the one that Jay showed me.” Sid slumped against the wall. “There goes tomorrow morning's sleep as well,” he quipped in a slurry voice.

“Not tomorrow,” I laughed. “We are going now, into the woods.”

“Nooo!” Sid wailed, but I knew he was in.

4 hours later, we were back near our college gate, having gone a full circle and not found the path to the clearing. Panting profusely, we sat down for a while to catch our breath. We spent two hours there, discussing aspects of our trip, studying it from several angles and finally, seeing that it was getting us nowhere, we dragged our famished selves back to our respective hostels.

Later, he came to meet me again. He looked elated, as he stood under the nearest oak, with an envelope in his hand. I slowed my pace when I saw that. I found it hard to keep moving. The bright look on his face, and the letter in his hand. I was really really really scared. As I dragged myself towards him, I tried to think of what to reply in case he proposed. I wished fervently that he just gave the letter and left, which would give me some time to think and respond in the best possible way, without hurting him.

No sooner was I in an arms distance from him, when he pushed the envelope to me, and said, “My letter... to the President!”

All the air that I had been holding in whooshed out in an instant. “Who?” I asked, sure that he was leading me on.

“Go on, read it,” Sid said, pride evident in his voice. “This is the only way we can help the IH330.”

Eyeing him skeptically, I carefully opened along the freshly stuck seal so as not to tear the envelope. In it was a hand written letter.



Dear Mr. President,

Before this letter finds the pile of trash unread, let me quickly hope that it finds *you* in good health, sir, and dive right into the matter.

Sir, one of last year's top news stories was the disappearance of the IH330. As you know, throughout the year, the world has reportedly not left a single stone unturned in its search for the aircraft, scouring the seas, all the way from across the Indian Ocean to the China Sea. Sir, I know what happened to the aircraft. And I can tell you where it lies, at present.

It all started when Lexi joined our college, a whole month late. Right from the beginning, she was this enigmatic girl. Reserved and intelligent, she was different for a number of reasons:

- 1) She wasn't on Facebook (or any of the social networking sites)
- 2) She spent a whole lot of her time in the library reading about famous missing personalities! ~~(I found the second info through spy-work because you see I didn't want to appear too interested in her and thus put her off)~~
- 3) When she wasn't, in the library that is, she went around looking for danger.

It was on one of her danger hunts that she stumbled upon this whole new world called Neulan. (Later, I came to know that enigmatic Lexi was actually looking for her long lost father – that explains her interest in missing people – which was why she had come down in the first place, and which eventually led her to Neulan, via a web-portal.) Well, she not only found her Dad there but the IH330 as well.

Let me take a moment to assure you, sir, that the aircraft and its passengers and crew, though held captive, are all safe. In fact Lexi and I had worked out a plan for their release. But we failed, and that's where I need your help, with all due respect.

Neulanites, you see, are very secretive people. Unknown to us, they work for the improvement of our planet Earth, with a mission to eventually take it back to its prehistoric purity, minus plastics, and global warming, and the like. But they are suckers for anonymity. They absolutely refuse to let our people go and spill the beans about their existence. And the Queen of Neulan,

Queen Soul, ~~though hot and all that~~, is one adamant lady.

And then there is her son Jay, who ~~kisses the ground Lexi walks on, and who I hate with a passion.~~ He made a great show of helping us, which was obviously not enough, because our people are still stuck in Neulan.

Sir, I take this huge risk of writing to you (by putting my own life, and Lexi's in danger) to seek your aid in the matter. Kindly dispatch your military, not to take the Neulanites down, for they are not bad people, but to subdue them only. Be warned, however, that they are technologically way more advanced than us.

Thanking you for your time and consideration,

Respectfully,

Sid Stevens

Parts of Sid's letter made me want to laugh. But he was looking intently at me as I read, so I tried to keep a straight face, with great difficulty. Finally, when I had proper control over myself, I tore the letter into two, and put it back inside the envelope. Sid's eyes went wide in indignation. "I took an hour to write that!" he whined.

"Sid, you are crazy. This letter could put us behind bars," I waved the envelope in my hand as I spoke. "Why would they believe us?" I asked, folding my hands. "Tell me how you intend to prove to them that Neulan exists!"

That was when it struck Sid. Since we were unable to find the way to Neulan, and even the portal seemed to be down, or maybe they made it inaccessible for us, there was no way to get into Neulan. Sid left, a little crestfallen, promising me that he will think of something better. I went straight to my room, and burnt the bottom part of the letter, the one that mentions Neulan. The top part I folded and placed in my drawer, because the letter *was* kinda cute.

That evening, I was depressed. Nothing was going right. I felt like a *panauti* – a symbolic representation of all the bad luck, according to Hindu scriptures.

So depressed that I did something that I had never done before. I decided to write a letter too. Not to the president, but to an online advice blogger, on a teen's blog under the column - Ask Amy. Until I opened a new email and began, I didn't know just what I was going to write. I let the words flow free between my mind and my fingers working on the keyboard. Once the first paragraph was done, I knew - that I wanted to tell her my story. So I figured that attaching a word file containing it would be the best. I started on Microsoft Word right away, in a file I saved as STORY, and typed ferociously until long after midnight. Somewhere in the middle I fell asleep on my keyboard.

It must have been my poor posture that tugged me awake, two hours later. I checked my watch. It was 5:12 am. After rubbing my eyes, and stretching myself, I tried to make sense of what I had written. The last few lines were a slur, where I seem to have rambled about worm holes and green trees with a lot of spelling mistakes. I erased all those lines that didn't make sense. The word file now ended at the point where I was waiting, having first logged into [www.neulan.onuniverse.com](http://www.neulan.onuniverse.com).

I saved it and closed it. Having slept on it, it didn't seem like a good idea after all, sharing this with someone so remote. I decided against it. However I didn't have the heart to put the file into the recycle bin either, thus letting 117 pages of my spontaneous writing turn into bits and bytes ready to be rewritten on. However, I couldn't risk storing it on my computer, either. So I opened the email that I had typed out and attached the file STORY to it. Clicking on the save button placed the email in the Drafts folder. And then I went ahead and deleted all traces of STORY from my computer's hard disk, so that, nobody, other than hard-core techies with a motive, would be able to access it. I guess I didn't have to worry about that, I thought to myself, as I logged off and shut down my laptop.

Just before daybreak, I gave a letter to the watchman (not quite having the guts to hand it over to my matron with her round watchful eyes, again) and, with a small bottle of water in my backpack, set out into the woods on my own. I hoped to see at least one of the humanoids so that I could follow it into the clearing. Or the smilodon, with whom I had become so well

acquainted by now that I could try and maneuver it to show me the way.

Much later, I sat under a tree, emptying the contents of the bottle into my throat, exhausted. I had no idea of the time, having forgotten both my watch and phone in my room. When I looked up, the forest spun and darkened. Regretting not having had a proper breakfast, or sleep for that matter, I decided to turn back slowly. Dizziness struck again. Feeling sweaty and cold at the same time, I tried to concentrate on finding my way back before the dreaded thing happened. Before I passed out.

A human form was walking towards me in the haze. I knew I should run but there was no point. I would fall and black out and then heaven forbid! As the figure approached, I leaned against a tree and waited, my hand loosely around the pepper spray hidden in the pocket of my hooded jacket. The gait was definitely familiar.

He came closer. The earth wobbled. *No... the earth is not wobbling... I am passing out... I need to sit...*

He caught me before I fell and I knew what I had known right from the beginning. It was Jay.

*Jay, my guardian angel.*

“Lexi.” Did he say that? It sounded too far, as if he was calling from the other end of a tunnel. But I loved it. My name sounded best when he said it. He was easing me against a tree while he popped something sour into my mouth. I tried to spit it out but he placed a hand firmly against my mouth giving me no option but to swallow the bitter thing.

“Didn’t you have breakfast?” Again, his voice was too far. *Maybe this was all a dream.* I put my arms around him. At least that’s what I intended to do. In reality, he jerked his head away by reflex because I must have clawed at him.

“Lexi, what happened to you?” Now he sounded closer. I could feel my energy getting replenished, spreading across my limbs, the darkness in my eyes was dimming, the humming echo in my ears was getting replaced by proper sounds. I hadn’t realized that his hands had slid around my waist. I decided to let it be.

I felt refreshed as if I had just scarfed down a whole meal. The magic pill he popped into my mouth had to be the carb one. Magical because it had worked within two minutes. “Jay, take me to Neulan again,” I pleaded.

“Why? I thought you had run away?”

“It was a mistake. I.. I felt so hopeless when Queen Soul rejected my idea.”

Jay gave me a long look. He shifted his hands to a more comfortable position, since supporting me was not the required thing anymore. The highlight was that it remained where it belonged, around me.

Just then, his cyber-printed No pulsed in my head as a random reminder of what was not meant to be. I pulled back, prying his hands away. He appeared to be startled while he straightened up.

He still looked removed, serious. “How come Sid’s not with you like yesterday?”

I gaped at him. “You saw us here yesterday? Why didn’t you help us then?”

He shrugged. “You didn’t look like you needed my help.”

Narrowing my eyes at him, I answered his previous question in a flat tone, “Since yesterday was a failure, I didn’t want to trouble him today for nothing.”

“Did you call me yesterday? I received a message now saying I missed your call.”

We seated ourselves under the tree, our legs stretched out in front of us. I told him why I had tried to call him. I told him about the newspaper article, confirming that the search for the IH330 was going to end, the authorities having come to the conclusion that the plane had sunk in the Indian Ocean, and was way beyond any help. He listened me out, as I imagined aloud what the state of the families back here would be.

“Lexi,” he said, when I had finished, “I know why you are so attached to their case, but really, you have done your best. And so have we. There IS no way.”

“There is,” I said, sitting up straight, so that we are eye to eye. “We have to smuggle them out.”

“Whaaaaat?” Jay almost shouted. “Are you out of your mind?”

“Listen,” I said, shushing him. “We don’t have to worry about their memories. We can induce confabulation in a simulation. Since it has all been already planned, it should be easy. All we need to worry about is getting them over to the wormhole.”

“And how exactly do you propose to achieve that, Madam?”

I shrugged. “Shut off the eyes, for starters. We need Sky’s help for that. Someone should keep your Mom and her monster of a side-kick busy. The helpers can also be programmed to do as we say, can’t they? Oh, and Dad and Sid can help us too. They are trustworthy.”

Jay shook his head, the corner of his lips twitching. “Trust you to come up with such ideas, Lexi,” he sighed. But I knew he would agree. There was that glint in his eyes, the one that shone when faced by a challenge.

Soon we were back in Neulan, Sid, Jay and I, having a hushed discussion with Dad and Sky in Dad’s quarters. We had come via the traditional route. We hadn’t been able to find it the day before because it had been tweaked for human eyes.

There was no way simulation could be used in secrecy. So the plan was to convince Soul to try it out on the passengers, just to see if it works, without letting her know of our plan. Dad said he could manage that. Then Sid posed a valid question. Once all the passengers were back on Earth, then what? How would we explain to Soul and her panel the missing passengers? Jay replied that he would shoulder the responsibility for that. I loved him for that. All the more. If it were possible.

I went to visit the passengers that day with Jay and Sid, all 3 of us on Jay’s flike. I wouldn’t say we were huddled. Jay’s flike was so huge that there was room for one more person. Sid couldn’t stop openly admiring the bike, though he hated its owner. And I couldn’t help grinning at the thought.

The castle, where they were kept hostage was, to say the least, luxurious. There were helpers to look after all their needs, plenty of place to

stroll around, royal bedrooms that they shared with one or two of their co-travellers.

Yet, there was no happiness on their faces. Some of them, who were accompanied by their spouses and children, seemed a little more at ease than their lonelier counterparts. Looking at them reminded me of a pet parrot that my Aunt had gifted me when I was 10. Unable to see it confined in a cage, I had let it free one day. Freedom was indeed the greatest asset that a man possessed after his family and friends.

I wanted to talk to them, wanted to assure them that they will be home soon, to tell them to be brave and patient for a while longer. But I didn't. It would be like spilling the beans too soon. You be patient first Lexi, I chided myself, and keep your big mouth shut.

After an exhausting day, we returned to Dad's quarters. We wished each other luck for the smooth execution of the plan, because one wrong move would not only ruin it, it could mean getting punished in unfathomable ways. I knew that Jay was safe. So were Dad and Sky. I was not bothered about my safety. It was Sid I was worried about. I shuddered to think what they would do to him. As we bid goodnight to our little team, Jay slipped something into my hand. I didn't look at it then. If it was something that he was okay with the others knowing he wouldn't be so secretive about it. Once I was safe in my bedroom, I opened it. It was a note. 'Meet me at the Mangrove near your Dad's' – it read.

(Present)

“The Mangrove?” I ask. Sky is in front of me with a message from Jay to meet him at the area called so for its Mangrove like appearance. It is funny that I was thinking of it only a moment ago. What is even funnier is that I just can’t remember what happened after I had read the note. Did I go and meet him? Or did I get caught? Is that why the airplane is still here, because I got caught? It is obvious that the plan had gone horribly wrong. I rack my brains for the rest of it when Sky shakes me back to the present with Jay’s message.

I follow her outside. I can feel Sid’s eyes on us all the time, though. Once out in the cool open air, I quicken my pace, impatient to be with Jay.

The pseudo-Mangrove has thick rows of trees that stand like a majestic bunch. I enter the abundance of stilt roots and look up. It is hard to spot anyone up there through the thicket of branches and roots and leaves. Then I hear a soft thud behind me and even before I turn I know it is Jay. I try to re-arrange the goofy grin that spreads across my face into something more ladylike. However, the moment he holds my hand I forget all that. Now it is just Jay and I in this Magical Mangrove.

I climb one of the trees and hoist myself onto the bottom most branch, the one that should be the most obscured from view. In no time, Jay is seated by my side. I regard him, and then with a jolt, I can see it all. The last time I was here flashes in my head, the same way it had when my body had touched the forest of Neulan. I can’t help but remember the day.



## Chapter 29

(Flashback)

“Hey,” someone whispered from up, making me jump. I was standing in between the roots that dangled all the way down. The beautiful Banyan-like trees looked eerie up close. All dark and mysterious and ready to eat you up if you dare to enter the enclosure. I wouldn’t have, had I not trusted Jay. I craned my neck as I looked up. He beckoned me from there and I gave a sweeping glance around me one last time before I caught hold of the stem.

He had chosen a relatively easy tree to climb. With the help of its many roots, I reached up to where Jay was. Soon I was comfortably seated beside him on a strong branch, our legs dangling down.

Looking around admiringly, having lost my jitters now that Jay was so close, I said, “I must say these trees are beautiful.”

“These are the Calvaria trees, an endangered species on Earth. Also known as the Dodo tree, they are believed to have dwindled in number considerably when the Dodo birds died out, as they relied on the birds for their germination activities.”

“Dodo trees! Interesting,” I said, “But why here, of all places?” I asked. The cornucopia of leaves, roots and branches completely covered us. Yet, I felt like I was being watched.

“The only place where we can’t be heard or seen. The nearest microphone is still too far away.”

“What happened to your cave?”

“I saw one of the helpers there, yesterday, crouching in the shadows.” He looked sad as he spoke. It had been his go to place for so long. It reminded me again of the little poem that he had scrawled on the wall. Its implication made me blush.

“We can still be seen, though not as clear as the other places,” he warned, bringing me out of my reverie.

“God, you people have absolutely no privacy.”

“Don’t worry, sweetheart, you people are getting there too,” he laughed.

I knew that he was right. What with drones and the new craze of uploading anything and everything on the social media, our life on Earth was soon going to want for privacy as well.

We were silent for a while; me, enjoying the cool air, the fresh dewy smell, Jay’s company; him, most probably involved in some cryptic jargon with the self.

“Lexi, the last time we talked... you wanted to know why I tried to bring you down to meet your Dad, given the volatile situation here.”

“Hmm..” I said, not concerned about my answers for the moment, having let my mind wander in peace.

He was, however, feeling all generous and explanatory. “I... We have met before Lexi.” He said in a rush.

I snapped my face to my left, towards him, my interest piqued by the new information.

I said, “I always knew it. That I had seen you before. But trying to remember only results in a brain fade.”

“And what’s that?”

“I mean, my brain would just stop thinking when I try,” I said in explanation. Narrowing my eyes at him, I asked, “Did you by any chance tamper my memory so that I forget you?”

I meant that as a joke. But he seemed to go serious all of a sudden. “I would never do that...to you.” He paused, on the verge of looking forlorn. “You think of me as this villain don’t you?”

“No, I do not,” I replied playfully, “I actually like guys with shades of grey.” It was an attempt at light hearted comedy in order to steer the conversation away from any serious talk.

“Makes sense,” he quipped, “why else would you hang out with Sid?”

*Oh well, it worked.*

I folded my hands giving him a dirty look. “Sid’s a sweetheart, unlike you.”

“You mean to say that *I* have shades of grey.” He arched an eyebrow, back to the jovial mood he was in, teasing me. “And you like guys with shades of grey.”

“Uhh no, I mean,” I stuttered, “Whatever. Tell me where we have met before.”

It was his turn to look embarrassed. He ran his fingers through his hair. “I don’t know if you remember an exchange student in your school named Rick.”

My eyes went round as I gaped at him in surprise. “Don’t tell me you are Rick.”

He bowed slightly. I still had my mouth open as I said, “But Rick was obese.”

Jay shrugged, as if it were no big a deal. It struck me why, a second later, making me inhale so loud that I had to cover my mouth with my hand.

“The form-changer pill!!!” I whispered, living an Archimedes moment. “You were this sweet guy. I really liked you,” I gushed.

“I am still the same, Lexi,” he said, a tad too serious, again.

“Figures from your popularity at college - everyone just adores you, don’t they?” I laughed while he continued to look serious.

“Screw everyone,” he said, looking intently at me, “What about you, Lexi?” It was the first time that he was throwing a bold question my way. If this was his way of opening up to me, it left me feeling awkward.

“I was just kidding,” I replied, desperate for a topic change. “So what was all that about? The Rick issue I mean.”

Not looking too happy to let go, he nevertheless complied. “I had heard a lot about you, from your Dad, before...” He stopped for a few seconds, looking away. I know he meant to say, before he lost his memory.

Maybe he did not want to upset me by bringing up the topic.

“I wanted to see you,” he continued, “get to know you, so I came by. After that,” he looked me in my eye, “I used to make it into your neighborhood once a year, for 2 or 3 days, in different disguises.”

Dumbfounded at this new revelation, I averted my gaze, trying to fetch from my memory all the boys that I had met that remotely resembled Jay. Finding me racking my brains, Jay said, “Temporary video library guy one year. Santa Claus another.”

“Oh,” was all I managed to utter. The video library guy...the one with the long beard? Was that him? Santa Claus, on the other hand, was always the best costume for a masquerader, since there was very little of your face that was exposed, and there was a definite requirement for at least one in every neighborhood at the end of every year.

Silence ensued again. I was feeling weird though I didn't want to show it. Jay shifted his position by 90 degrees, leaning his back on the bark, one leg under him, the other dangling down, gazing at me. Having no other topic to talk about, I said, “Where's Kiara? Haven't seen her around lately.”

“She's busy...in search of her roots,” he replied, his eyes on one of the overhanging roots of the tree we were on.

Not quite knowing what that meant I said, “Where?”

“Where she belongs,” he said. “She can be difficult, at times, Lexi. Her ideals may sound wrong. But do not judge her because... she's seen the worst. Be kind to her.”

As I tried to make sense of his words, he continued, dreamily, “We were wrong to take time for granted. We were under the misconception that with control of time, we will have the ultimate power. We might, but it comes with catastrophic consequences. Like the old saying that goes – Don't play with fire, an equivalent one for the future would be *-Don't play with time.*”

I shifted my other leg and let it down the other side of the branch, facing him, and said, “Don't you think that, had we listened to all the 'don'ts' we wouldn't have got anything done?” I was in a retrospective mood too. “No one would have dared go the extra mile to achieve anything. I wouldn't

have got here had I listened to Mom's don't. You wouldn't be sitting opposite me right now either." I bit my cheek. Maybe that was too bold a statement. But I was only practicing what I was preaching – ignoring my own don'ts!

Jay looked amused. "Who wants me to stay away from you?"

"Your inner self, I guess" I said, swallowing 'you duh'. Chuckling, he said, "So you think that my heart has issued out a list of don'ts when it comes to you, and you want me to ignore them."

"I ... um.." I stammered, realizing that the conversation was heading in the wrong direction. Or perhaps it was the right one. *Don't*, warned my own mind once again, *play along*.

Jay suddenly pulled me towards him, with a subdued grin. Again, I didn't resist. The air that had emboldened me was now charged with electricity. "In keeping with your suggestion, I shall ignore all the don'ts pertaining to you from this day." He pushed away an unruly lock of my hair from my face, tucked it behind my ear. In the half-light that streamed through the thick leaves of the tree, I noticed the mischievous glint flashing in the depth of those intense brown eyes. I liked the look on his face. It seemed to say, 'You are mine.' My hands seemed to move on its own as I slipped them around his neck.

"Prince Jay," I smiled, "Prince of Neulan." Jay's expression clouded. He looked up, eyes tense, strained on something up on the nearest pole. Following his line of vision, I recognized the red light of the eye, blinking through the leaves.

When he looked back at me, his expression had changed. The old, guarded Jay was back. Something was troubling him. Like he was in a fight with his internal demons. Finally he whispered, looking down, "I have...a confession."

A trembling hand still around me, eyes back on the camera, he muttered, "Get back to your room." He slipped a coin like thing and something else into my pocket as discreetly as possible. When I looked at him questioningly, he hissed, "The metal thing is my memory stick. The other, a headband. You will find a slot in the headband on the inside where

the coin fits. Put it in and wear the band around your forehead. You can see into my mind.” I took in all that he said. Under the eyes of the camera I dared not take the memory storage stick out for a scrutiny.

I was back in my room, feeling restless, agitated. Jay had looked so weird all of a sudden when I had called him Prince Jay. I fretted, kicking myself for saying it, when Sky had warned me not to. Pacing around for a few minutes, I finally made up my mind on what was to be done. I set out in search of Jay. I had to apologize or I couldn’t sleep that night. I passed street after deserted street. I peeked into some of the buildings. Everyone seemed to have tucked in early.

The imposing dome like building that looked like the headquarters loomed up ahead. I went in through the automatic shutters. I stood looking down the dark corridors of the buildings and turned around to leave. A clicking sound stopped me in my tracks. As I pricked up my ears, a muffled male voice echoed down the hall. I followed the sound.

Half way through, I recognized the burly man’s sound speaking loud and clear, “I am sure that they are up to something.” The door to the room in which the speaker was, lay open. I crept slowly wondering who he was addressing. Peeking in I wasn’t surprised to see Soul. She was sitting as if in deep thought. I couldn’t see burly man from where I was standing.

“We cannot let them execute any of their plans. We need to wait, till we get the new memory device tested...on someone who is willing,” he said. I could hear his footsteps on the metal floor as he moved into view, standing right in front of Soul.

It didn’t even occur to me to stifle the cry that escaped my throat. Burly man was not burly anymore. He was lean – wiry to be exact. He had a cleft in his chin just like my friend Rhea. He was... Ryan. As I stood there too stunned to move, Ryan and Soul stared at me. If she was startled on finding me there, she did not show it. She sat as cool as a green cucumber. Ryan, on the other hand watched me warily.

Soul was the first one to speak. “Lexi! Come in dear. We do have quite a problem here.” As though they had kept the door open on purpose for me.

Ryan thrust his fidgety hands into his pocket. I stood my ground, not wanting to enter the fox's den. Soul strode toward me, with her usual smile plastered across her face, screaming PLASTIC. I considered going away, at least to collect my thoughts, but then I figured that wouldn't be a smart move either. It would be easy for them to bring me back by force.

Ryan spoke then, considerably different from the way the Ryan I knew used to speak. "Hey, Lexi!" I now knew why burly man's voice had always sounded familiar. I had never been good at identifying voices. Or faces for that matter.

"Hey Ryan!" I said, still at the door.

"Oh, you are friends!" said Jay's Mom, in a sickly voice. "How nice!"

Not anymore, I thought to myself.

"Like I was saying Lexi, we need your advice. Agent Carbon here has engineered a device. Modified one of your Dad's memory devices, to be more specific." I looked sharply at her. She had never acknowledged before this that she knew Sam was my Dad. Was it a slip of the tongue?

If it was, she didn't seem to show it either. "This new memory altering device has the ability to alter specific events from your memory. Or specific places. People. Whatever you want. It's a brilliant invention, really." She beamed at him.

Turning back to me, she continued, "I liked your idea too, Lexi. You know, the confabulation one. But then Ryan points out that it is risky still. It can all come back and then we would be in trouble. So, I would suggest using Ryan's tool in conjunction with your idea of simulative memory creation. For added security. So that we can rest assured that no human comes here digging for gold."

I stood there, wary of a catch in her story. It came the very next moment.

"We have only one issue though. It has not been tested, yet," she finished.

"Maybe we should consult the others tomorrow," I said, turning to leave.

“Lexi, you know something?” I stopped, turning back to look at her. “A single electromagnetic pulse can destroy the world,” she whispered, loud enough so that I could hear her, her eyes full of madness and wonder.

I could only stare at her. INSANE was the one word that came to my mind. Here was a lady dedicated to saving our planet. Doing so much of good. And yet, there was something immensely distasteful about her. A dark side. Just like this place she had created. It was perfect and yet, dark, and brooding. Why was she talking about destroying the world? I didn’t want to ask.

I should have run. Instead, I hesitated by the door, a hundred other questions on my mind. Finally, I turned to Ryan. “Why did you try to ...to restrain me that day?” Assault was the first word that had sprung to mind. He smiled. He actually smiled, in a slimy way. “I had just tried the transformation,” he explained without an ounce of guilt. “I wanted to see if one of you girls would recognize me.”

He must have meant Rhea, by ‘one of you girls’. Only, before Rhea had gotten closer, I had kicked him and got away.

Assuming he must have followed us there that night, I didn’t question as to what he was doing at the exact spot that we had stopped for a recharge.

Instead, I asked, “Does Rhea know?” A simple question. Some strong emotion clouded his face. Guilt? Pain?

He turned away. A few seconds passed before he replied, “Not yet. I hope this remains between us, Lexi,” his voice so low that had the atmosphere not been as quiet as a grave, I wouldn’t have heard him at all. Something about it urged me to flee from there. I walked away as fast as I could. Half way along the corridor, I started running. But my legs felt heavy.

With a hundred questions on my mind, I went around looking for Jay. *Why did Ryan agree to be Soul's sidekick? Is he the one who wanted me in Neulan as well? But why?*

I didn’t find Jay anywhere. I checked in on Sid. He was fast asleep in the guest room. Back in my room, I paced wildly, itching to tell this to my team. I knew that we would have to discuss everything, now that Soul knows, and make a new plan. My only hope was that we wouldn’t have to drop it



altogether. I sat on the bed, took a few deep breaths. I had to keep myself busy till morning or I would go mad.

Suddenly reminded of Jay's memory stick, I took it out from my pocket. On any other day, getting into his mind would have been fun. Feeling all those emotions that he never gave away, reading all those thoughts that he was so bad at conveying, finding out his true feelings for Kiara, etc, would have made my day. But now, I was too agitated for any enjoyment. On second thoughts, maybe his confessions would be a distraction. My hands shaking, I turned the headband in my hand till I found a 'seat' for the coin like storage. I stuck it in. Pressing on a small blob on the side lit up the band making me jump. I felt a little apprehensive about wearing it then. I trust Jay, I said to myself firmly and put it on.

## Chapter 30

At first there was nothing. Then slowly I felt it, a movement, like I was sitting on a wave. The room spun round and round. Unable to handle it, I closed my eyes. Jay's face loomed up in front of me. My eyes flew open. The room was empty. I shut it once again to find his face still there, his eyes intense, looking deep and piercing, so close that if I reach out I could touch him. He started speaking. It was not loud. It was like he was speaking in my head.

"Lexi.. you know how I suck at talking about my feelings. So I thought of this..." He paused to take a deep breath. "I have a confession to make. Actually, I have two. First of all," his voice went lower, deeper, "I love you. I have loved you for a very long time." He stressed on each word, like nothing he had ever said meant more than this. My heart did a series of somersaults as he spoke them. "There. I said it. Finally. I never thought I could summon the courage to." He smiled. His voice had gone hoarse.

He swallowed visibly.

"My second confession." Now his face turned grave. "This one is even more difficult to...let out. So I have collected... a few of my memories... which will...I hope... convey it to you." One more sigh. "I am sorry Lexi." He paused for a long time, his perfect face contorted by pain. "It... **breaks** my heart to see what I have done to you. And... there is nothing I can say in my defense. Except... to beg of you...beg for forgiveness. And one day... I will make it up to you. I promise."

His face faded and was replaced by vague images. It felt like I was watching a movie. The picture was a little hazy but I could see a boy of around 10. He was tall for his age and had dark hair. He ran into a room full of huge machines. There was a desk in the room behind which sat a man, writing something in a book. He looked up as the boy entered. It was Dad. A much younger Dad. His face lit up and he said, "Ah, Jade. I have something for you." He pulled out a small gift wrapped box and handed it to the boy. Overjoyed, the boy laughed and skipped out of the room.

The machine room faded out to be replaced by another scene. In that I

could see the face of the boy clearly. He looked a lot like Jay. A younger version of Jay, to be exact. He was beside Dad, lying on the grass, while Dad pointed out at the sky, teaching him about the constellations. Little Jay was counting the stars. Another scene emerged in which Jay listened, rapt while Dad talked. “Alia is a naughty one,” Dad was saying. “To surprise me, she would hide my favourite chocolate bar for me in the pantry and stand in front of it, barring the entry and say, “There’s nothing in the fridge Daddy!”” Dad guffawed and Jay giggled. In the next scene, Jay watched from behind as Dad gazed at a picture of me, while a tear trickled down his face, and he said, “Daddy misses you, Alia, my little one. Daddy will be home soon.”

The scene shifted to the lab again. Dad was explaining something to Jay. He had a tube in his hands. “This device is very dangerous. It erases all the memories of a person. It should only be used for the security of this place. To maintain secrecy. I will be gone soon. Back to my family. When you are big enough, it is your responsibility to see to it that it is not misused.” The boy nodded earnestly.

The next scene was crystal clear. As if the same room suddenly got illuminated with bright lights. Dad was standing behind the desk, bent over a microscope. Little Jay stood up from behind him, with big innocent eyes, looking scared and apologetic at the same time, and gently lifted his hands. The tube was in his hand. A small blue light shone on the tube. He placed it gently on the back of Dad’s bent head. Dad started once, clutched his head, before crumbling to the ground. The boy went into shock, his face turned pale. Throwing the device on the ground as if it had stung him, he bent over, tried to shake Dad into consciousness and ran out of the room.

A few scenes breezed by, of Dad walking in a trance, a blank look on his face, another one in which he ruffled Jay’s hair, saying ‘Now why can’t I remember that?’ The next scene was of Jay showing my photo to him. Alia, Jay said, his big eyes full of hope. Dad glanced at it and said ‘Who is Alia?’ ‘Your daughter’ said Jay. ‘I have no family,’ replied Dad.

After that came a scene where Jay, a teenager now, was looking around in wonder. The neighborhood was mine. He was looking through my window, into my home as we went about laying the table. Then he watched me from behind a tree, as I went around collecting cans from the neighborhood with my friend for a cleanliness drive.

I was propped up in bed, reading, while Jay, now a young man, watched me from outside my balcony. Then he was in my room, watching me sleep, a sad look on his face. Next, he was dressed as Santa Claus handing out gifts to a few kids who were lined up in front of him. I was standing in a corner chewing gum, playing on my phone while Don stood in the queue. Jay kept glancing at me, all the time I was there.

A much older Jay working in the lab with Dad, playing with lights, observing them, taking down notes. A few scenes where he lay alone in the cave, deep in thought. Next, he was typing something on an old PC. It looked like one of those internet cafes near my place. The message read-

**From: anonymousxyz@gmail.com**

**To: lexisam@hotmail.com**

**WHERE did your dad disappear to? River's End College of Sciences is the clue.**

He clicked on send.

He was climbing up the ivy. He jumped in through my window and stood in my room at the hostel, head cocked to one side watching me sleep. I curled up like I am cold. He turned around to go, hesitated, then pulled up the covers as carefully as possible so as not to wake me. And left the way he had come.

He was in my room again. This time he sat down, placed a halo like thing loosely around my head. He held so for a moment and let go when I moved my head. He waited until I was still again, then placed a metallic curvy device on my forehead for about five seconds, removed everything and left through the window.

At the end, Jay's face zoomed in again. "Lexi," he said. He swallowed, frowned, swallowed again. "Everything has a dark side. Even the best of saints have done something that they are ashamed to admit. But then the dark part is what makes one a human. Or they wouldn't be here. They would be angels. I am not an angel, Lexi. Neither am I a saint. Please forgive me." His voice becomes a whisper. "Please." His face clears out, replaced by darkness.

I removed the cap. With the back of my hand, I wiped away the tears

that streamed relentlessly down my face.

Jay. It had been Jay all along. The one who was responsible for Dad never coming back. It had been him all along. And I thought him my guardian angel. Stupid, gullible me. I tasted salty water on my lips as the tears came down. Jay. I wouldn't have believed what I had just witnessed had I not seen it with my own eyes.

It had been an act, right from day one. Right from the moment I caught him watching me at the platform. A shiver ran the down the length of my whole body, thinking of him watching me all those years, unbeknownst to me. I could only blame my naivety, my poor people-judging abilities and my immaturity for falling for the snake in the grass. The whole college could see through him, they hated him, while I, the silliest girl in town went right ahead falling blindly in love. With the one who ruined my life. Sid had known, right from the beginning. He had warned me too. But then, I was busy being an idiot all the time.

On the plus side, at least keeping away from him would now be a piece of cake since the very heart that had sung lovey dovey sonnets for him, roiled with hatred. *I hate you, Jay. With all my heart.*

Numbness of mind was setting in. A sluggishness that was new to me. My knees felt weak. It was all I could do not to let them buckle in. All the sleep of the past two days seemed to be catching up on me because my feet felt wobbly, my eyes heavy. I slumped on the bed and sleep took over.

I woke up in pain on hard ground, in a closed room. *Not again.* I slumped back in despair. Don't give up, screamed my alter ego. I tried to get up, and looked around. Apart from a door the room was bare. There was a dim old fashioned yellow light bulb on the ceiling that flickered on and off. As I thumped on the wall near me, to see what it was made of, there was a light knock on the door, making me jump. Jay entered, his face darkened by the flickering light. Nevertheless, I was happy to see him and ran straight into his arms. Over his shoulder, I saw Ryan right behind him. I sprang back, suddenly scared, pulling a startled Jay with me. I did not like that I could hardly see his brown eyes, obscured by the shadows of his own hair. I tried to brush his hair away but he caught my hands mid way and held me to him. He turned around to face Ryan, the enemy, who had stepped in, closing the door

behind him.

Words started appearing above his head in the air. 'Leave her alone.'

I looked at Jay, confused. That was not a very villainous statement.

'No,' came Jay's reply over his head.

Ryan: Haven't you tortured her enough already? Let her go back now. Please.

Jay: She is mine. She will do as I say.

Ryan: But why? What is all this drama for?

I moved back in a daze, until I reached a point from where I could see the nonsensical dialogue without having to keep turning my face from Jay to Ryan and back to Jay. Somewhere in the back of my mind, something told me that my two companions were unaware that I had the information lens on.

Jay: I can't let her go now after all the trouble.

Ryan: That's not fair. You erased her Dad's memory once. At least now, let them be.

Jay: Who told you?

Jay's face had become contorted with anger, making him look scary.

Ryan: Your Mom.

Jay: Ah that's something that she would do.

Ryan nodded.

Ryan: Why her Jade? She's so innocent.

Jay: It's a long story. To cut it short, she had everything that I didn't. A doting Dad, a loving Mom, a sibling. Most importantly, a family that was together. I have hated her even before I saw her. Her dad used to tell me these stories of happiness. The more I heard, the more I hated her.

Jay's mouth stretched like he had tasted something bitter.

Ryan: She trusts you.

Jay: Because I made it that way.

Ryan: Leave her. She's a nice girl.

Jay: What's with you? Bugger off you...

Before Jay could complete, Ryan had aimed his light gun at Jay. Jay ducked, swirling swiftly and hurtling towards a stunned Ryan, in full speed. He head butted, crashing on Ryan's stomach, whooshing the living daylight out of him. Ryan staggered, whispering, "Lexi, I'll hold him off, you run."

Jay shouted, "No Lexi, don't listen to him. He's a traitor."

I just stood there, unable to move.

Jay was aiming the light gun at me. I looked at him dazedly, beyond care by now. He shone it on my head making me feel drowsy.

I woke up screaming. That was just a dream. My whole body felt feverish, my temple throbbed like it had been hit hard, my back ached. I didn't want to get up. I let myself fall asleep again. Much later, I opened my eyes to see Dad peering down at me. He had attached something cold on my head, a head band. I sprang up, but he subdued me. "Relax my child. This band will bring down your temperature." I lay back and let it be, too tired to resist.

"What happened?" he asked with a serious face.

I shook my head.

"Okay, better not talk now. Taking rest will get you well sooner."

I doubted anything was going to get me well. I felt sick. I spent the whole day in bed, flitting in and out of consciousness. Once when I opened my eyes, Jay's face hovered in front of me and I shut it again. The next day I felt better, physically at least. The emotional part was getting worse. When Sky came in to check on me, accompanied by Dad, I asked her about Sid, since I hadn't seen him for the last 2 days. She told me that he had been sent back, when Soul came to know about our plan. He was warned not to breathe a word about this place to anyone. At first he wouldn't go, Sky said, insisting to be with me. Finally, Dad had promised him personally that I would be sent back for sure as soon as possible. I was still here only because I was not fit

enough to travel through the worm hole apparently.

“And the passengers?” I asked. Dad’s face fell. “Condemned to stay here,” he said, bitterly, “until the new memory device has been tested. Who will allow that, Lexi? I told them to test on me, but they claim that the person should be young.”

One of the humanoids came asking for him. He shook his head. “Hopeless,” he muttered as he went out. I knew that it was not because Dad was young. It was because his memory had already been compromised.

I said to Sky, without looking at her, “You maybe way more advanced, the saviors of our Planet and all that. You may save our race, with your science and your pills and your serums. But you guys... It will be the end of humanity if you come into power.”

“No Lexi,” Sky replied, “Not with people like you around.” She gave my hand a squeeze before leaving the room.

I lay down for a long time, thinking. I got up and had a bath. By the time I finished I knew what I had to do, if not for others, at least to retain my own sanity.



## Chapter 31

(Present)

I realize now that this part of my memory must have been locked away by my mind on purpose. Because it is too painful, my mind refused to go there. Sitting on the same branch, facing the same person, had brought it in, powered perhaps by déjà vu.

I shake my head into focus. Jay is looking at me intensely. I give him one look and he knows. His face falls. “Lexi...”

“It was you... all along,” I say, my voice quiet.

Shaking his head fast, he says, “It is not like that. I wanted to explain it to you but by then, you had forgotten me. And everything else that happened. I was ...young. Stupid. Something came over me. Jealousy or....I...I don’t know what. Lexi, I didn’t have a proper family life at all. I envied yours...I ...I think. Your dad kept talking about going back, Lexi. I didn’t want to lose him. I don’t know. My only claim to some love. Stupidly, I must have done this to keep him back. It... it was not a planned thing at all or I wouldn’t have perhaps. That moment... I was in a daze. And then in the next instant I remember feeling so bad. It was terrible.”

He is talking rapidly but I don’t want to hear all that. *You ruined my life. Everything bad that has ever happened to me. You are responsible for it all.*

“That’s why I came to see you.” He is not done. “I felt so guilty, ruining your family. Till then you had been a fictional character for me. But then after I saw you in person, I couldn’t take it anymore. The enormity of what I had done. I...I tried my best to remind him of you. I brought you here, only so that you can see him again. To see if that would trigger his memory. But...”

It is coming out, as a boiling rage. I have to control it. Maybe I should let it out, or it would consume me. “You put up a grand show, didn’t you, Jay? Acting as if someone wants me down here, badly. As if something was

going around that you weren't aware of. As if all you wanted to do was protect me from my non-existent enemy. It was you all along. You wanted to destroy me," I finish, my voice high.

Jay shakes his head, desperately, "Lexi, I did put up an act... in the beginning... like someone else wanted you down here. I wasn't planning on telling you the entire truth. I just wanted you to see your dad and know that he lives. And to stop blaming him. I only wanted to see you happy. But... as I got closer to you, I couldn't keep the truth from you either."

He just wouldn't stop. I put up my hand. "What is the use?" I ignore the tears that are streaming down my cheeks. "Dad has forgotten me. My family. I just have to live with it. Now that I remember. I wish I hadn't tried to, Jay."

He closes his eyes in defeat. I leave him there, like that, and walk back feeling miserable.

As I walk I think of my last memory before waking up in the hospital near college.

(Flashback)

I was in Queen Soul's grand office, staring dazedly ahead while she regarded me with amusement.

"Your request is strange. Are you sure?"

I nodded. *I was not going to live with this. It was better if it was out of my system.*

"Memories are precious for a person," she drawled. *My words. No points for guessing how she overheard. The whole place was tapped.*

"It would be extremely kind of you," I say to her. "I want to be of help to my people." *Plus forget everything. Start over fresh.*

"Hmm." She seemed to be regarding this, a slight smile playing on her lips. She enjoyed playing with people's memories, weird as it may sound. For me, this was the only way to move on. To hang on to whatever was left of my sanity.

"It sure is sweet of you to let us test Ryan's tool on you." She motioned me to sit while she collected the equipment.

"Which part do you want to forget? I will be erasing only parts of your memory. Your hippocampus stores all the recent happenings."

"Everything," I said, still in a daze. "that's even remotely related to Neulan. Make me forget this dimension and that I ever saw Dad."

"That's all?" she pressed.

"And Jay."

Tut-tutting to herself, she pressed small square shaped chips in several places on my head with great care, much like a hairdresser.

"It may not be so accurate. You might forget certain people you might want to retain, not your close friends, but the less important people. Is that alright?"

I nodded. "Yes."

"Here goes then. You may experience some discomfort. Try not to

move.” She really talked like all she was doing was styling my hair. She brought the cylindrical gamma ray emitter close to my head. It was soundless making me wonder at first if it would even work. It all seemed like a big joke. Then I felt it. A clamminess inside my head. A tingling sensation that raised goosebumps all over my body. Thankfully, before things got worse, everything blacked out.

And I woke up in hospital, to find my friends peering down at me, my mind clear of all unpleasant stuff.

## Chapter 32

(Present)

We sit on the steps like a set of Zombies. It is a hot summer afternoon. Rhea wants a glass of juice from the canteen. Varun offers to get it for her. I observe my friends as they sit fanning themselves. Aisha and Sid have forgotten everything about Neulan. They are sweaty, and content. They only know what they need to. That they are students of RECS. That final year exams are coming and they need to prepare. That the IH330 has reappeared, having been hijacked for a year by a mysterious society on an unknown island.

It happened last week and is still all over the news. Amid speculations concerning its come-back, and controversies, and trolls and memes on social media, the general feeling is that of joy. Even the passengers themselves. All they want is to get on with their lives.

Rhea, who is sitting alone on the top most step catches my eye, and then averts it. I sometimes wonder about her. She seems to have forgotten too. Neulan and everything concerning her brother's secret that she is not part of. But I wonder. It's her eyes. They look sad. They droop. So unlike her vibrant pre-Neulan eyes. Did Ryan chicken out at the last moment, not wishing to hurt Rhea in anyway? Did his hands shake when it was his sister's turn?

I still remember how I had returned that day, the day I saw Jay for the last time, on the Dodo tree, the day I remembered it all, to find my friends sitting huddled together. Rhea was looking lost. Aisha and Sid had their hands around her. Rhea had just found out that Ryan was agent Carbon. She gave me an apologetic look for her behavior, for blaming me and all that.

I slumped on the ground near her, my hands around my knees. Aisha told me later that what Rhea felt terrible about was that even when he knew she was hurt he never said anything in defense, not even an apologetic smile was offered. He had just left, without so much as a word. Behind Soul. There were no explanations. So I wonder, when I see her sadness that she so tries to hide, if she really has forgotten or if she's just putting up an act.

As for me, I was released with my memory intact. It was *her* way of getting back at me. Soul's. Soul is pretty good at that sort of thing. I still remember the way she had told Ryan to 'let her be' when he was about to wipe my memory away too with his tiny, sophisticated device with all its accompanying clips. "She doesn't remember anything anyway," had been her reasoning, giving me a long sideways look. I knew then that she knew. That I do remember everything. That it has all come back now. Every unpleasant bit. Why were the passengers set free then? The risk that she took is so unlike her. That woman is a mystery.

Condemned to remember. That's my situation. Jay's deception. Dad's hopeless case. The only thing that has changed in my favour, the one silver lining on the cloud of my existence - I am no more the emotionless person I was before. I don't struggle to keep it in anymore. Doing that would have killed me for sure. Now, when it gets too much to bear, I go to my room, bolt the door, and let the tears flow.

END

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Email the author at [thazleena@hotmail.com](mailto:thazleena@hotmail.com) for updates on the next book in the series.

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Cheers!