Eyes wide open in shock. The jaw slightly hanging open and frozen in time. Skin pale and bloodless and clothes all covered in mud and dirt. It was strange how still it was compared to my pounding and heaving chest.

It was the first corpse I ever laid my eyes on. I couldn’t stop staring because I was so sure it would move again. I was used to seeing so much life in those eyes, it was hard to think otherwise.

‘Nandini.’

I looked up to see Akash standing on the opposite side of the corpse, panting just like me. He was studying my face just like I was studying the corpse. It was like he was waiting for me to breakdown and start crying or something. I didn’t know what I was supposed to cry about. It was a beautiful night actually – the sky was clear and the moon was full. The air was cold and brisk and I always loved the swirls of smoke that formed when we exhaled. It was one of the very rare things that I still enjoy.

Akash and I were standing in a deserted part of this forest near a wooden cabin. When I say near, I actually have no idea where exactly and neither does anyone else, because none of us have ever been to this part of the forest before. It was really dark here but my eyes had adjusted to it and I could make out Akash’s face from where I was standing.

He looked exhausted and alert at the same time. His eyes were almost as wide as the corpse’s and his hair was in an absolute mess, standing at weird angles on his head. His face was shining a little from the sweat I think and he was rubbing his pale palms together frantically.

‘Nandini!’ He said louder, ‘Are you sure about this?’

‘Yes,’ I told him. ‘Let’s do this.’

Of course I was sure about this. We just carried this huge corpse for so long to this spot along with two shovels. I’m not going anywhere without finishing what we came here for.

The forest was filled with similar looking really old trees. They were all tall and the whole forest looked like a dream during daytime. But right now, it looked as lively as the corpse between Akash and myself. Apart from the crunching of the dry leaves under our feet, the chirping crickets and the ruffling of our clothes, I could only hear my own heart. We had chosen a spot right beside a thicker bigger tree and put down the body and shovels to catch our breaths.

Akash probably thought I was having second thoughts and I was sure the same thing was going through his mind. But I wasn’t having second thoughts, I was thinking how the faint shadows of the tree-branches on the body made everything look so perfect. It seemed like the forest was inviting the dead too. Akash and I didn’t really seem to belong here. Our heavy breathing and flushed cheeks were disturbing the harmony of the night.

Akash was the first one to start digging and I started soon after him. The shovels were heavy and old on their own, no doubt about that. On top of that, the soil was all dry and stubborn because of the winter air. The first few digs was awkward and useless, but I soon picked up a rhythm like Akash. We barely said a word to each other, but I was constantly thinking what could be going through his mind. I looked at his furrowed brows, all focused on the digging, as if he couldn’t possibly be thinking of anything else. But I know how far it was from the truth.

He was thinking the same thing I was. He was thinking of all the ways he could’ve avoided this whole situation that we are in right now. He was thinking about how he never wanted any of this to happen, but he didn’t have anyone else to blame either. Neither did I. The digging was tiring us out so much more, now that we were slowly beginning to feel the weight of all the consequences.

I kept looking back at the corpse frequently, half hoping it would come back to life. Even though that would actually worsen the whole situation but that’s the only thing that came to my mind. After we were almost done digging a shallow grave-like hollow, Akash and I looked at each other. There were some voices nearby.

We didn’t need to say a word to each other to figure out what we should do. After quickly climbing out of the hollow, we both grabbed the corpse and pulled it to the hollow we made, until it fit inside. We kicked as much dirt and soil as we could on the corpse to somehow hide it as we could hear the voices getting closer. It seemed like there were a few men speaking softly to each other and they were now close enough for us to be able to see the light from their torches. They were directly coming towards us from behind the big tree.

We ran towards the opposite direction to hide behind some other tree. We both ended up choosing the same tree and stood beside each other, with our backs on the bark. We were both now breathing louder than before and I had to hold my hands over my mouth to muffle the sound to some extent. I saw Akash trying to turn back and see who are coming as the footsteps came closer.

I pulled him back as we heard a voice a lot closer than we expected it to – ‘Are you sure you saw them?’

It was deep baritone which sounded like the voice of an older man. A different and younger voice replied, ‘Yes, I did see them here!’

‘Sir, no one ever comes here. It is impossible for kids to come wandering in so deep…’ Another older voice tried to explain. This one clearly sounded disinterested in the whole endeavour and did not believe the younger man.

‘But I know what I saw! There was a girl and a boy and they were carrying something big…’

I looked at Akash and saw him staring back at me, mirroring the same fear in my heart. This was not supposed to happen. We had both made sure that no one saw us when we were coming here. We couldn’t even understand who this man is and how he saw us!

‘Hey,’ said the second older voice, ‘you didn’t say they were carrying something before! You just said they were walking around.’

‘No, no,’ the younger voice tried to explain, ‘they were carrying something large and heavy like a dead body or something-‘

‘Now listen here,’ interrupted the first older voice, ‘you might be in the mood for some rubbish mystery story, but we’re not. No one ever comes here and no one is here. We’re going to escort you back to the main road and go back to doing our real jobs. Let’s go.’

‘You should consider yourself very lucky if we don’t smell alcohol in your breath,’ said the second voice as we could hear them start to walk away.

‘What? I’m not drunk! I am telling you the truth! Those two murdered someone and they were carrying the dead body into the woods to hide it!’

‘Did you see them murder anyone? Do you know them?’

‘No, but-‘

‘Then we’ll read the rest of your story in your novel. Let’s go!’

‘Lord knows what kind of stuff kids are into these days…’

‘You don’t understand, I’m telling you the truth!’

‘Ya, of course you are! Keep walking!’

The voices slowly faded away along with the sound of the footsteps. But we stayed frozen in anxiety, with our backs glued to the tree. After a considerable amount of time passed and the voices were far away, I turned around. I saw that no one was around and tip toed back to the tree beside which we had left the corpse. I could feel Akash close behind me. It was unbelievable how close we came to getting caught.

We both stood on either side and looked down in more shock than we had just recovered from. The shallow grave that we had dug was hollow. The corpse was gone.

We stared back at each other, unable to make sense of what exactly happened and what we should do about it now. I was almost about to devise a plan to escape, when Akash suddenly broke the silence.

‘We have to go back to the cabin.’

‘Don’t be ridiculous.’ I cannot believe that he came up with that!

‘What’s your plan then?’

‘We search for it!’ I couldn’t think of anything else.

‘Oh ya? Where do you wanna start? There are no signs of the body being dragged or being moved in any way! Even our shovels are still here! How are you possibly going to look for it?’

My eyes scanned the darkness around us in vain. I could realise that he was right and we literally had no idea how the corpse got out its own grave and disappeared. This is going to cost us really bad.

‘Nandini,’ Akash tried to convince me, clearly getting impatient. ‘We are not responsible for this. Let’s keep it that way and go back to the cabin before someone else sees us!’

I quickly changed my mind and agreed, ‘You’re right.’

We both grabbed our shovels and started jogging back towards the cabin. A sudden loud ringing startled us both. We looked at each other realising that it’s not coming from either of our phones, they were both on vibrate. Then Akash took out a different phone from inside his jacket – the dead man’s phone was ringing.

Akash was about to throw it away, but I quickly grabbed it and answered it. He furiously mouthed at me, ‘What the hell-‘

‘Is it done?’ It was a calm and serious voice on the other end of the call. The caller-ID was blocked which is why he had no idea who it is.

I kept holding the phone tightly to my ear but I didn’t say a word. Akash was looking at me with a big question mark on his face.

‘C’mon, do you have both their bodies?’ the voice was getting more eager, but clearly did not suspect that someone else had answered the call. I was waiting for this speaker to give up some more information before he realised he isn’t talking to the person whom he think he is.

‘Are Akash and Nandini dead or not?!’ The voice got louder and after a short pause he ran out of patience. ‘Fine, you stay where you are, I’m coming!’

The call ended.

I looked up at Akash and told him what I understood from this short phone call – ‘We are the ones with the target on our back, not him.’

‘We have to get out of here,’ Akash concluded after a while.

He took the phone from my hand and smashed it on the ground and broke it. I watched all the tiny broken pieces, thinking about how our lives had become so volatile and how we have to leave behind everything we had earned.

‘It’s time to start running again, isn’t it?’ I asked Akash, but I already knew the answer.

In reply he just took my hand and we started running towards the main road, never looking back.