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# 11 HOURS

A Romantic Thriller

**DANIEL PAUL SINGH**



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*A. Das*

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**Daniel Paul Singh**

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For my mom, dad and wife

## **Part 1**

### **The Couple**

Chapter 1 **Diana**

**Date:** Oct 20, 2016

**Time:** 10.00 PM

I barely had 11 days to plan a surprise for Diana, for our second

anniversary, which fell on the 1<sup>st</sup> of November. I couldn't believe that it had been two years since I first held her hands in mine. Time indeed flies. Wish the earth revolved a little slower around the sun.

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Marriages are made in heaven and mine was fixed with an angel, Diana. I am Robin, 28 year old, Tamil, the boy next door of medium build, who hated his glasses, wore lenses, was careless and at times absolutely hopeless! Nonetheless, I aspired to be a famous writer someday and doubtlessly believed in everything that my wife said. She was my encyclopedia romantica.

Diana was not my better half, but the best half. She was everything a guy could ever wish for: short, cute, an amazing smile and big expressive eyes that spoke a thousand stories with every second.

“You know why short girls are cute? Because it's easy for men to kiss our forehead” she said once.

“Nah, it's easy for us to give a knuckle punch if you keep talking like this.”

I pretended to give a knuckle punch, she pinched me and ran away.

She was my stress buster, entertainer and a perfect partner in crime. Life after marriage was a roller coaster ride, with two years feeling like two minutes and every minute with her feeling like an eternity.

Diana's parents called her Dorcas.

“Dorcas? It rhymes with dark ass!” I uttered when I heard it for the first time. She raised her right eyebrow, which was a subtle indication of her mood – a fake anger which would soon erupt into a fist fight.

So quickly I followed that up with “But you do have an amazing ass.”

She chuckled with embarrassment. But it was true; she had the best derriere in town.

Diana was working with Galarena India, which was in Ascendas on OMR, a notorious road famous for IT companies, late night rides, couples in love, call girls and rapists alike. Her office was about 15 minutes away from Thoraipakkam, where we stayed.

She worked in the late afternoon shift from 2 PM to 10 PM. She would start from her office at 10.30 PM in her office cab and would reach home at 10.45 PM sharp, daily. Every day she would give me a call before she boarded the cab and then would keep on texting me till she arrived home. I insisted that she do that. It was hard to trust anyone including our own shadows, especially after the Swati murder case.

The clock in my room showed 10.00 PM. I had 45 more minutes to plan for the anniversary gift. Right next to the clock was a framed photo which read “Best Husband Award”, something that Diana had presented to me on my 27<sup>th</sup> birthday (the first one I celebrated with her). That birthday, I had left for office early and around 11 AM, I was summoned to the cafeteria by Prabhu, where I found my wife waiting for me with a cake and that gift. I was genuinely surprised.

It was only later that I came to know that she had contacted Prabhu, got all necessary permissions and took tumultuous efforts to reach my office to gift me that award in front of all my team mates. I was on cloud nine - a day I could never forget in my life.

Ever since our wedding, birthdays and anniversaries had an all new, different meaning to both of us. What mattered during these special occasions was how the two of us could outdo each other in coming up with our insanely unique and innovative gifts. We would spend months on deciding the gifts, and make sure that each of us had the most memorable celebration, by the sheer amount of surprises we planned for the other. It all started when I gave her 24 gifts for her 24<sup>th</sup> birthday – which saw her reactions change from surprise, wonder, excitement, joy, love and eventually tears.

“Of all the gifts I gave you, which one did you like the most?” I asked.

“You” she replied instantly.

Since that birthday, Diana had turned into a gifting monster herself and started to anoint me with innumerable gifts for every possible occasion. She even gifted me last year on “International Men’s Day” and as I was happily opening my gift she uttered, “Do you know? Today is also World Toilet Day!” I paused for a moment, looked at her as she laughed uncontrollably but then I continued to open the gift like nothing happened. *Men are the real victims*. She once presented 30 gifts to my best friend Prabhu on his 30<sup>th</sup> birthday and from then on, he also joined our ‘gang of gifting goondas’. I couldn’t help but smile thinking of all of this as I further scanned my

laptop for ideas, while in parallel keeping a tab on the Brazzers site. One of the ideas suggested was for a photo collage. It was nothing new, but the other ideas I had were very few, so I decided to give that a view. I opened up the folders in my laptop and browsed through all the photos we had taken over the last two years, in ascending order.

Photos had their own unique way of bringing back sweet memories, add to it that Diana's were poetry on canvas. It started with the bouquet I had gifted her during our first date. Then there were the photos of our first memorable dinner, the first saree I had gifted her, our engagement pictures, and there were also the honeymoon photos which were way too personal to describe.

Diana had long silky hair, like those shampoo models, in all those photos. Once we returned from our honeymoon, I took her to Green Trends for her first haircut. After the usual enquiries, she was taken in by a stylist and came back after 40 minutes in a completely new avatar. I was stunned to see her fresh, stylish look and stood frozen with my mouth agape. She snapped her fingers in front of my face and brought me back to reality. I couldn't stop myself from admiring her, even the staff working there kept praising her new look. She looked stunningly beautiful in her shortened, fluffy, free-flowing hair. I wanted to kiss her right then, but just held her hand tight and took her home with the adrenaline rush still intact. Should I even tell what we did when we reached home?

A week post the hair cut, her mom came to our house and was shocked to see her daughter in that stylish hair style (was she jealous? I would never know). We then had a huge argument with her mom, who wasn't merciful on me for westernizing her daughter and cursed that I would go to hell, along with Diana. Little did she know, I'd love each and every minute of hell as well, if Diana was around.

'Love you' was the word that we exchanged the most on any given day, only next to 'Bubbly'. Well, that was how she addressed me! I liked the way it sounded when she uttered it. To rhyme with her, I called her 'Gubbly' and we became the "Bubbly-Gubbly" couple. Could we be any cheesier?

Every night before we slept, I had to give her a good night kiss and tell her how much I loved her. Even after two years of marriage she wouldn't sleep without clutching the tip of my T shirt. It was a practice that became a habit and eventually turned out to be the way of life for us.

“What would you have done if you had gotten a hubby who was strict like your parents?” I asked her one day.

“What makes you think you are any different?” she shot back.

“Duh... Come on baby. Be serious.” I knew she was pulling my leg.

“Do you really want to know?” She asked.

“Yes, tell me.” I insisted.

“I don’t know Bubbly. Maybe, I would have lived an unfulfilled life but nevertheless he would have got the best wife in the world.” she quipped with pride and I agreed without a second thought.

“But I am lucky that God gave me you and you gave me the freedom I had always longed for.” she added.

“Who am I to give you, your freedom? It’s your life, you have to live it the way you want, Gubbly.” I said with a smile. She hugged me. See, we could be cheesier.

Though I was liberal in many ways, both our parents were orthodox and strict, and it was difficult for Diana to listen to all their advice patiently. She had let go of her comfort zone, her home, the place where she had lived all her life and had become a part of another household of someone she barely knew of - different culture, cooking styles, clothing, washing, snoring and what not, but she still managed to get accustomed to it all and lead a happy life.

Despite fitting into the nitty-gritty demands of my house, she kept her identity intact all along. She never compromised her ambitions and relentlessly focused on pursuing her goals - that of becoming a successful graphic designer. She was a rare combination of a child, a mentor and a consoler, and seamlessly transitioned between these roles as the situation demanded. I loved every version of hers dearly, while the child remained close to my heart.

I always kept pulling her leg saying, “You know Gubbly, I think I did not pray well and that is why God gave me a kid like you as my wife. Maybe, you prayed so well that he gave you such an understanding husband like me.”

“I think I didn’t pray well enough Bubbly; else, I would have got a good mother-in-law as well!” she said and pretended to be dejected. I gave her a playful rap on her head.

A couple of weeks ago I had met with a minor accident while returning home from office. A speeding vehicle had hit my bike from behind as I was

trying to take a turn towards my street. The driver didn't stop, but looked at me and sped away like a coward. Thankfully I was driving pretty slowly and the impact of the fall was minimal. I was able to get up on my feet and go to a nearby hospital, all by myself. Diana was worried on hearing the news and rushed to the hospital immediately from her office.

The doctors told that I had suffered a concussion and that it warranted a minor operation in the back of my head. I was hospitalized for four days and Diana was by my side taking care of me every single minute. She kept praying fervently, kneeling on the hospital floor for long hours. Whenever I woke up in the middle of the night, I could find her praying by my bedside, pleading to the Lord for my speedy recovery. I did recover fast and she believed it was because of her prayers. I never doubted it.

Not everyone can make you smile as soon as their name flashes in your mind except your loved ones. I smiled again like a lunatic, thinking of Diana and looking at the honey moon pictures with her long hair and then looking at her first picture after haircut.

Hoping to resume the task at hand, I looked at the clock. It showed 10.35 PM. Diana hadn't called me yet, where was she?

In a way, it was good. Else, she would be pestering me with a myriad of questions to know what I was doing at that exact moment. I sighed and turned towards the monitor. There was a pop up message from a horny girl who was staying in the next street, calling me for sex – stupid Brazzers! I wondered how a computer server located somewhere in the US knew about who was horny in the street next to me. Sometimes I feel machine learning has reached its apotheosis only when it comes to matters of sexual nature. I laughed it off.

I closed the pop up window and started to focus on the photos. As a few unworried seconds passed by, a baffling discomfort overwhelmed me. I felt a sudden surge of pain at the back of my head where I had been operated. I tried to concentrate, but couldn't. To divert my thoughts I took my phone to look at the WhatsApp messages. There were quite a lot of unread messages but none of it was from Diana. She hadn't called, nor had she texted. Her WhatsApp last seen status glared at me from the screen 'last seen at 8 PM'. There are times when you have a hunch that something is wrong with your loved ones. They could be miles apart, but deep down in your heart you would know that they aren't alright. I felt so at that moment. Perturbed by an inexplicable uneasiness along with a rein of doubt, I dialed her number.



It took two seconds for the automated voice to reply that her number was switched off. *She would never turn off her phone*; I knew that for sure. I looked at the clock, it was 10.38 PM. A wave of anxiety engulfed me. I tried hard to keep all the negative thoughts away but they rapidly swirled in my mind. I became restless. A deluge of uncertainty embraced me as I dialed her number once again, in panic.

***RRR***

## Chapter 2 **The First Meet**

10.38 PM:

A deluge of uncertainty engulfed me as I dialed her number once again, in panic. The number was still switched off. I had a bad feeling about it.

I wasn't sure if I should be alarmed or wait for a few more minutes for her to arrive, but my heart was pounding hard already. The clock was ticking. I couldn't browse any further and kept trying her number again and again. Her mobile remained switched off. For a minute I just wanted to throw the phone and break it, but thinking of the salary I was receiving, decided against it.

I closed the laptop and pulled my phone off the charger. I was moving around aimlessly in my room. My parents had gone to our hometown and I was home alone. After a few minutes of desperation, I decided to go downstairs and wait for her at the gate of our apartment. I was in my cargo shorts. Deciding against changing my clothes, I locked the door and went down stairs. I took my mobile as well. I desperately hoped my gut feeling would be wrong. I prayed that nothing should have happened to Diana and it should be a one off case where her mobile ran out of charge.

“Why didn't she charge her phone?” I was frustrated. “My mobile battery never dies down the entire day.” she had once told me when we were having a casual discussion on how long our mobile batteries last. Hers outdid mine hands down.

“May be you should use your phone for that, browse something, or at least look at it once in a while.” I said. Diana never used her phone while at office. If I called her, she would never pick my call and even if she picked, she would talk in whispers and even if she talked it would be ‘I am busy

now, talk to you later'. At times the automated voice conversed more than her.

"Using my phone at office is neither necessary nor needed. Moreover, I can't use my mobile at office hours, it's against our policy." she had replied casually.

"Baby, am I not more important than your policy?" I asked, putting up a baby face.

"Not when I am inside Galarena." she said without any remorse.

"Savage! You know, I bet you will use it one day so much that your battery will die and that very day you will get lost somewhere." I almost cursed her.

"Even if I get lost, it's you who has to come and rescue me." she teasingly hit me with her purse.

I fervently prayed that nothing like that should have happened to her. She must have overused her phone owing to the free Wi-Fi at her office and must have forgotten to charge it. A million harrowing thoughts fired my mind and I relentlessly kept negating them. There was no stopping my anxious mind from listing out the daunting conclusions at times of uncertainty.

'10.40 Pm'

My mobile display screen flashed the time disconcertingly as the minutes ticked by. My heartbeat increased profusely. The watchman of our apartment gazed at my anxious face and came to have an unsolicited conversation.

"Enna thambi, wife ah? {What brother, your wife?}." He asked with a stupid smile. He was dressed in his usual navy blue uniform.

"Aama na! [Yes brother]" I sighed visibly disturbed.

"She will come this late ah?" he probed further.

"Yes na... she has a cab... it will drop her in five minutes."

"Oh Okay... those days no, we never let our women stay out after 6 Pm... times have changed, wonder what gains you have!" his words of wisdom were totally uncalled for.

I glared at him thoroughly exasperated. I did not want to explain to him about the house rent I was paying and the exorbitant school fees I will have to pay in a few years. I just turned a cold shoulder and simply fixed my eyes on the road. The vast road was nearly empty with just one or two vehicles moving in their own sluggish pace. There was an emptiness surrounding me, I could hear my own heartbeat. I let out a sigh.

10:43 PM:

Just two more minutes were left of the usual time for her cab to arrive. I looked at my phone – no notifications. I regretted neither taking down her cab driver’s number, nor storing any contacts of her cab mates.

I had once asked her for the contact number of Ankurita, her cab mate. “That girl is still single. She is lean, very fair and just the type you would like. But, don’t even think of getting her number from me.” Diana had warned.

“I just want to note it down to contact her in case of any emergency baby.” I had replied calmly.

“In case of any emergency, dial 100!” Diana had fumed.

“Come on, darling!”

“Here then! Take this number.” she had continued reluctantly, “This guy comes in my cab too!”

“A guy’s number, duh!” I didn’t bother to take his number after that kind of a conversation.

Honestly, I wasn’t particularly a flirt (ok, I am), but she was definitely possessive.

I haven’t seen wives who are that possessive. She wouldn’t even allow me to sit next to a girl in a share auto and would give a cold stare, warning me by waving her forefinger up and down. I am not sure whether she would have been this possessive had ours been a love marriage. Yes, ours was an arranged marriage.

India is one of those unique countries where marriages were arranged based on the parents’ choice. I was no exception. Ever since my childhood, I was totally a momma’s boy and had vowed that I would marry only the girl chosen by my mom. I somehow never believed in the concept of love (and that’s a famous saying of all the ‘single’ and ‘friend zoned’ men). In fact, ‘love’ was a banned term at home. Don’t even ask about sex.

When I reached puberty, and my testosterone started pumping iron, it dawned on me that love wasn’t that bad after all and that feeling incremented exponentially every time I saw a gorgeous girl on the road, school or even on TV. I developed a huge crush on Catherine Zeta Jones and vowed to find her and marry her when I grew up. But thanks to the initial ‘ingrained inhibitions’, I was a complete dampener when it came to

talking to girls. I would always screw up and end up as the guy who wouldn't look at girls in their eyes. No, I wouldn't look at their breasts either, but gaze aimlessly at the ground.

Until 15 years of age, I didn't know how to talk to my female counterparts. It took me a few more years to realize that they were just fellow human beings and there was no need to be scared of them. Talk to them like you would talk to another fellow human, with confidence, conviction and honesty, and they would love you. Within two years, I was a completely changed man, I had more lady friends than guy friends. I guess I went so overboard that a few of my buddies 'stamped' me a flirt!

Although my mindset changed in a lot of aspects over the years, I still did not change my decision over marriage. Falling in love was still a strict "NO". Neither did any girl propose to me nor did I have the guts to express my feelings to those crushes I had. I stuck to the principle of marrying only the girl my parents chose for me. In retrospection, I don't remember my parents discussing this with me or taking any such promise from me. Time rolled by, and I relocated to Chennai for work from my hometown, Trichy. Five years into my professional life, my parents asked me if they could look for an alliance, and I gave an immediate nod (How long should I wait for this question?). My dad was quite excited and happy. Among all those children who fell in love and married 'against' their parents' wishes, there I was, agreeing to his deeds, willing to marry the girl of his choice, an ideal son. *He would never know that falling in love is never in our hands.* My marriage with Diana happened in a jiffy. It has the potential to be on the run for bagging the record as the 'Fastest Indian Arranged Marriage'. I remember all the incidents vividly.

I met her on the 8<sup>th</sup> of August, 2014 at her home for the first time. From the very moment I entered her house, I was a complete chatterbox. I was very well-known for impressing the mothers of my lady friends during school and college days. I used the same tricks on Diana's mom as well, and not surprisingly, it worked wonders.

I closed my mouth only when she asked my monthly salary. I was uncomfortable and was in a spot of bother. Even my parents have never asked me this so far! I saw my mom silently gazing at Diana's mom. Without anyone to save my ass any further, I mumbled out my salary. Diana was still waiting inside one of the rooms. Their hall was quite spacious and neat. I talked to her mom for about twenty minutes, when my

mom asked her parents if we could meet Diana.

Diana came out after a few minutes. She was wearing a white and pink churidhar, had long well-oiled, well combed hair, wore a pleasing smile, and took careful steps as she sat in the chair opposite to me. I instantly noticed her protruding small belly. She didn't wear any makeup. I was pleasantly surprised to see such a simple 'city-bred' girl. "Praise the Lord." she politely greeted and we gradually started to interact.

"Hey hi Diana. How are you?" I started.

"I am fine Robin and you?" I noticed that she called me by name.

"Good! Err... So, what interests you?" it sounded silly, but I had to be 'artificially formal' as our parents were still seated beside us and listening to EVERY WORD we spoke!

"Nothing in particular" came a bland reply.

"Alright. Do you drive?" I started asking a few important questions.

"No."

"Not even a two-wheeler?" I was bemused.

"Not even a bicycle." she replied.

"She can drive if the road is empty or if someone can hold the bike and run behind her." her dad intervened. My parents laughed hysterically.

"But, in Chennai, it's good to learn to drive, right? Especially, if you have to commute to work every day..."

"My company provides cab facility." She responded as if she owned a helicopter.

"Diana, you are staying in Padi now and working here in Ambattur. After marriage, you will move to Thiruvanmayur. I heard your RBS office has a branch at Guindy. Will you be able to manage a transfer to Guindy? Else, I am afraid it will be quite difficult for you to travel all the way daily without your own vehicle." I said.

She quietly nodded, unconvincingly.

"Do you cook?" I continued my one-sided interview.

"No" she said.

"Do you even know to boil water?" I asked sarcastically.

"No. I have never entered the kitchen." She retorted and gave a warning glare.

I got the message and stopped questioning further on that topic. I didn't know how to continue the conversation any further. I wasn't being stereotypical, but I knew for sure that after marriage we would have to eat

and the cooking process should involve either her or me. I wasn't a bad cook, but I was lazy and it would never work if I have to cook in the early hours before heading to work. I was still fine with her not knowing to cook though, but not knowing to drive was definitely a disappointment.

There was an awkward silence for a few seconds. There were no questions from the other side, as well.

"What other things do you like?" I persisted.

"I am well-versed with Photoshop." she said.

"Aah... Okay!" For some inexplicable reason, I didn't like her voice at all. Her tone sounded manly and was interspersed with few ghastly grunts. Another minus, I thought with disappointment. I wasn't expecting a Lata Mangeshkar, but definitely not a female Amitabh Bachchan.

"Do you draw?" I asked as she was interested in Photoshop.

"Yes, I am interested in sketching. Last page scribblings during boring lectures kindled that interest in me"

"Great. Writing stories in exam papers, kindled the author in me. I write stories, you can draw for them. You know, I also play the keyboard. I have composed a few songs for my office events." I told proudly.

"Oh! Do you play the keyboard in the church?" her dad interrupted.

"No uncle. I haven't so far. I am just an amateur. I don't know to play it that well." I said with a sheepish smile.

"Other than drawing, what do you do?" I redirected my attention back to her.

"I like pets, dolls, flowers and small beautiful gardens" I observed that she was a woman of few words, and that to me, sounded like an oxymoron! Before I could ask permission to talk to her in private, my parents cut me midway and told that we would take leave, go home, discuss amongst ourselves, and then inform Diana's parents of our final decision. I was disappointed. I was in the middle of a conversation, and they ended it so abruptly and would make a decision now?!

Her parents called for an auto to drop us to the bus stop. On the way back, I was agitated and started to question as to why we had to leave that way. My parents asked me to keep my mouth shut as the auto driver could be a known friend of their family. I obediently obliged.

We got down at the bus stop, and I looked at my mom and dad.

"What do you want now?" My mom asked me in her usual authoritative tone.

“I feel we shouldn’t have left in haste. I wanted to talk to her alone. There are a few... actually, a lot of things that I wanted to discuss and know about her. I had just started and you stopped it too soon”

“Whatever you discussed was enough” she almost ordered.

“Mom! How could you?”

“What do you want to know?” she stared at me.

“What are we going to tell them after going home?”

“We will decide that later. Do you like that girl, Rob?” my mom asked me.

“Come on! She doesn’t know to cook. She can’t drive. How can a city-bred girl be so naive? To add to this, she has an awful voice too!” I lamented and added “But yeah, I like her.” and bit my tongue.

“She must know cooking? You are looking for a life partner or a servant? So, should we tell ‘NO’?”

“Not like that mom. I guess I must meet her in person and talk one more time before we take any decision, mom.” I was very particular about it.

“We will go home first.” my dad intervened.

I was still quite puzzled about why we left Diana’s house hurriedly and why my parents insisted on replying to them when I was so indecisive. I knew that I would never get a convincing answer. But, I knew one thing for sure: Diana’s mom was quite impressed with the way I talked. I had sold myself well. I wasn’t sure if Diana had liked me though as all I managed to do during our short conversation was to pull her legs.

My mom turned to me and said, “You know what, when I got married, I did not know cooking. But, I learned it as the days went by. That is something people can learn, no big deal. I would advise you not to reject her for that.”

I was even more confused and bewildered. *Does that mean it is a ‘YES’ from my parents?* Besides, Diana not knowing to cook was the least of my worries. I was more worried about choosing my life partner within 10 minutes of meeting her. I wasn’t getting a clear picture from my parents.

They were confusing me.

I decided to talk to Diana secretly without the knowledge of our parents and then make a decision. That would make sense and that felt right. What I least expected anyway was that our first ever conversation would end in such a disaster. I was frustrated and disappointed to such an extent that I never wanted a girl like her ever in my life!

**RNR**

## Chapter 3 **The First Date**

Oct 20<sup>th</sup> 2016

I was anxious and wanted to talk to Diana. My 27<sup>th</sup> ring to her mobile yielded no result. It was still switched off. The watchman was observing me from a distance. The look I gave him earlier was enough to make him know his place and occupy only that. I thought hard to remember her cab driver's number in vain. Her cab mate's number was never registered in my memory. I cursed myself.

'10.47 Pm'

It was two minutes past her usual cab timing, I couldn't wait any further. I called 'Just Dial' and enquired for Galarena's contact number. I received it in an SMS and immediately made a call to it. After a few rings a sweet voice of a lady answered at the other end,

"Hi this is Suji from Galarena India, how may I help you?"

"Hey, hi, this is Robin. My wife works for your company, I am trying to reach her, but unable to. Could you please connect me to her?" I asked as my mind was wavering with random unwanted thoughts.

"Sir, this is the reception. I will not be able to connect to individual employees." she responded.

"At least ask her to come to your desk, or inform her manager or inform someone there to... don't you get it? I am unable to reach her. Its 10.47 now. She usually comes home by this time and I am worried." I raised my voice.

"I understand sir, but I wouldn't be able to." she continued.

"Oh cut the crap. What can you do?" I was furious.

"What's her name sir?" she still politely enquired.

"Diana. Official name is Diana Israel. Please ask her to contact me immediately, if she is still in office" I said as I wiped the sweat from my forehead.

"I will drop her an email now and ask her to contact you sir. Would you need any further assistance?"

"No thanks." I said bluntly.

"Have a nice evening sir and hope everything is alright." she said as she cut the call at her end.

I wished to have a nice day too. I hoped against hope as I looked at my mobile again for any news from Diana. She was still not reachable.



Aug 10<sup>th</sup> 2014

I somehow wanted to reach Diana without the knowledge of my parents. I desperately hoped to contact her. Even if we were not to be married, we could still remain friends, I thought. She was working with RBS in its Ambattur branch which was quite far from Thiruvananthapuram, where I stayed. I was thinking of ways to talk to her when I was reminded of my friend Kalpana, who also worked at RBS, but in its Guindy branch. Kalpana was my trek-mate. We had gone for a couple of Nagalapuram treks together. She was cool, curly haired, of my age and had a knack for sarcasm. I decided to check with her and dialled her number.

“Kalpana I need a small help from you.” I started.

“Hey Robin, yes, tell me.” she replied with a heavy dose of enthusiasm.

“I just met this girl as an alliance and she is working in RBS, her name is Diana. She works in the Ambattur branch. I want you to get her email address or mobile number or anything that you could, please.” I uttered in one single breath.

“Oh congratulations!! But wait, should I help you or help her by asking her to run away from you?” she started teasing me.

“I will tell that to your boyfriend first.”

“Which one of my boyfriends are you going to talk to?” I could hear her giggle. I had to laugh along, else she wouldn't get me Diana's details.

“Ha ha... Jokes apart, when can I get it?”

“It's not that easy, my boy! It will take some time. Besides, right now, I am on a tea break. I will have to go to the loo, and then come back, and if my mood permits, will search for your darling's details.”

“Huh... Kalps, please, ASAP” I pleaded.

“Just don't talk like my bloody boss.” she abruptly hung up.

I waited patiently with bated breath for the next half an hour after which I got a Whatsapp message from Kalpana:

“[diana.is@rbs.com](mailto:diana.is@rbs.com) is her mail ID. Unable to get her mobile number.”

I called her back immediately.

“Hey Kalps, did you also inquire about the girl? How is she? Her character? Silent? Calm? Arrogant? What about her attitude? Will she suit me?” I shot all my questions.

“One question at a time, boss! One at a time.”

“Did you inquire?” I paused and then asked.

“Yes, I did.”

“And what did they say? Is she an apt match for me?”

“Well... None of my friends know her.” She told in a confused tone.

“Oh, shit!”

“Don’t shit. Actually, it’s a good news. If none of them know her, it probably means she is a quiet girl, which is good for you.” She gave me a comforting news.

“What a theory! And what kind of friends do you have?”

“My friends are people like you. But wait... Will a silent, goody girl suit you, Mr. Playboy, the Chatterbox?” she started pulling my leg.

“Opposites attract, Miss!”

“I am so tempted to drop her a mail about you detailing all your girlfriends.” She teased again.

“I don’t have a girlfriend!” I said in a dead serious tone. “Yeah, that’s what I said, you don’t have one, but many girlfriends!” she said and laughed like it was the best joke in the world.

“Send it across. Bye for now baby... thanks!” saying I cut the call.

*Silent girl! Will she suit me? Do opposites ‘actually’ attract?* I had my doubts.

Ignoring my thoughts, I started to draft a mail for her. The first things that we do for our loved ones always remain special. The first message, first date, first kiss, first movie... they all remain special for every human being. I wanted my first mail to her to be a memorable one. I had never thought that hard even while writing my appraisal document.

I thought through a lot, and decided to keep my first mail simple and straightforward:

*Hi,*

*This is Robin. Hope you remember me. Is this your mail id?”*

*Regards*

*Rob.*

9\*\*\*\*\*

I had included my mobile number in my signature deliberately. I mailed her before I left for lunch break, hoping to find her reply once I was back. It felt like one long lunch break as I tried to hide my excitement and behaved normally with my lunch gang.

I returned as soon as I could and checked my mailbox anxiously for her mail. It wasn’t there. I double checked if I sent to the right email ID, indeed

I had. The wait became longer; the day became longer, but there was no response from her. I was quite upset. She was making her intentions clear. I didn't know how to react. I didn't tell anyone at office. I wanted to keep it all a secret until things moved to the next level. I left office around 8 PM, thoroughly disappointed.

That night, I had to travel to Trichy for the settlement of an ancestral property. I boarded the bus at around 10 PM and occupied a corner seat. Some random movie was being played in the bus. I was in no mood to watch it, neither was the view outside exciting. I chatted with a few friends on Whatsapp to kill time.

At 12.07 AM, I got a message from an unknown number.

"Hi, this is Diana, please do not send e-mails to my official ID."

I jumped with joy. In fact, I wanted to jump out of the window and shout. I was thrilled and it showed in the texts I sent her.

"Hey, sure! I wouldn't send hereafter. But wait... How did you find my number?"

"You first tell me how you found my e-mail id." She shot back.

"I have 'reliable' sources all around the globe. They can't be revealed." I sent an eye winking smiley.

"So do I. I would also not tell you how I found your number." she sent an 'I don't care' smiley.

"Come on! Please tell me." I pretended to plead.

I knew that she picked my number from my signature. But, women like it when men act dumb.

"You first tell me how you found my email Id." She was insistent.

"That was your e-mail id anyway, right? Then, don't worry about how I found it." I said.

"Then, don't ask me how I found your mobile number." It looked like she was in a serious mood.

"Alright... Alright... Why are you still awake? Not getting sleep?" I continued the conversation.

"Was thinking of you all day and not getting any sleep." she added a sarcastic smiley.

"Lucky me! What did you think of me?" I decided not to take anything that she said at face value.

"Duh... I work in shifts. My work got over at 10.30 PM. I came home late. We completed our family prayer a while ago, and I am lying in bed. So,

thought of replying to you.”

“Nice to know that I am the person you think of before going to bed.” I flirted.

“I am used to watching horror movies before I sleep” she replied.

“And these days, are you content with seeing yourself in the mirror, before you sleep?” I shot back.

“You know what? I shouldn’t have messaged you. Good night!”

Clearly, she was upset.

“I am sorry. That was crass. Really sorry... Please talk to me for some time.”

“Why talk to you and about what?”

“Anything under the sun!”

“Where are you now?”

“I am on my way to my hometown.”

“Oh! But, why on a Tuesday night?” she inquired.

“I have to sign in some document for selling our ancestral property.”

“Alright. Can I ask you something? If you don’t mind...”

“You don’t have to be this formal with me, Diana.”

“Will try. Don’t you have any work at your office? You are always online in Whatsapp. Who were you chatting with all day?” She dropped the bomb!

“Were you stalking me all day?” I sent an eye-winking smiley.

“Answer my question. Who were you talking to all day?”

“Not with anyone in particular. I would just be online and talk to anyone I ping or who pings me.” I sent the smiley that shows all the teeth.

“Then, there are a few things that I must change post my marriage.”

“Marriage!??” I sent a ‘shock’ smiley.

“I said MY marriage... and that need not necessarily be with you.”

“Err... What!??”

“Go. Sleep now.”

“Why are you being so mean to me?” I was slightly upset.

“I don’t want to talk to you before anything is finalized.”

“Are you angry with me?”

“No. Why will I ever be mad at you?” She sent a heart smiley along with it. Heart smiley!

I was flying above the clouds - a heart smiley from my ‘probable’ fiancée.

“Oh my God! You just sent me a heart smiley?”

“I know what I sent.”

“Thank you!” I sent back a ‘heart in the eyes’ smiley.

“Okay, good night. Travel safe. Now, don’t text me. Don’t message me until I do.”

“Done Deal!”

“Flirt” read her last message. That was uncalled for and I felt uneasy. Calling me that for the second time made me uncomfortable and thinking about it made me angry.

Though I enjoyed our first chat conversation, it wasn’t something I could cherish. Diana sounded harsh, strict and arrogant at times, so unlike the ‘silent girl’ image she had at office and home. I wasn’t sure if she would suit my easy-going, fun loving nature and it evoked further doubts as to whether the two of us would be compatible with each other at all!

I read the conversations all over again. Frankly, I didn’t like it. If she were trying to be sarcastic, she had definitely gone overboard and so had I. Our first conversation needn’t have gone that way. It could have been a lot more warm and polite, I felt. I was all the more confused if she was the girl for me. I decided to delete the conversation and also her from my life. I deleted the conversation first.

Two weeks went without a word with her.

Our next conversation happened when her parents came to visit our house. It was the 22<sup>nd</sup> of August 2014. The elders talked about the prospect of marriage, as I sat down casually, listening to every praise they poured on me, addressing me as a good, obedient, caring boy. I was flying. I came back to my senses when they started discussing the marriage date. Wait, what? Marriage? Not so soon, not with her!

I wasn’t sure how my parents were already convinced. I was even more doubtful how her parents were in agreement as well! I felt spineless, in fact, boneless too, when our parents decided to get us married within two months. I hadn’t even registered her face well so far! Two months? I wouldn’t even get to know her favorite soap nor soup by then.

I fervently opposed such a swift marriage. I wanted to postpone it by at least six months so that I could spend enough time with Diana and understand her. Our parents’ didn’t heed to my demands. Moreover, her parents were even more particular to conduct the marriage within the next few available dates. I called her and explained the situation, but there wasn’t much that she could do either. Our engagement and marriage dates got fixed right then. My fate was sealed.

Her parents left after an hour, and I turned to my mom.

“Mom! Please don’t do this. I haven’t even talked to her properly as yet. I need to spend more time with her. Don’t decide anything in a hurry before that. I am not sure if both of us would be compatible with each other. She might not be my type”

“What type? Robin all that will be taken care of.” my mom assured me, and true to her words, informed my concerns to her parents too. Thus, the date for our ‘official first date’ was decided and we agreed to meet on August 29<sup>th</sup> at KFC, Anna Nagar for lunch.

August 29<sup>th</sup> 2014:

She was late for our date, and I hated the wait. As she got down from the auto, I went near the door of KFC and opened it for her [inspired from various ‘first impression’ lessons I had learnt]. I asked her to place the order (ladies’ first) and then we took our food to the first floor. We took a corner seat and started to chat as we ate.

She was being a silent listener. She didn’t talk except for a few nods, bites and ‘hmmms’. She gave an impression that the chicken in front of her was the most important thing in the world at that moment. Anything that I said, fell on deaf ears. As she continued to give her meal that undivided attention, I decided to surprise her by gifting a key chain. She took it so casually as if it was the bill that had just arrived, glanced at it, kept it aside and continued to eat.

Without showing my disappointment, I gifted another small memorabilia, after ten minutes. She smiled and finally took her concentration off the chicken. The smile was momentary, but the hogging continued. I should have known better, I thought. Then, I gave her a big bar of “Cadbury Dairy Milk Silk”, and her expression totally changed.

“You should have given me this first.” she said and began to open it hurriedly to eat. I anxiously gazed at her lest she was going to lick it the way they show it in the ad.

I gave her three more small gifts that I had bought to woo her, one by one every ten minutes. Gradually, to my relief, she began to enjoy the gifts more than the food, and more than... you guessed it, ME!

Once we finished our meal, I asked her to go and wash her hands as I prepared to present my final gift for the day.

I looked around and saw a few couples busily attacking their plates. I slowly took the rose bouquet from my bag. I thought for a moment whether I should propose like a hero by going down on my knee, but then, I

dismissed that thought immediately. I felt KFC was inappropriate for such a brave act and decided to place the bouquet on her seat.

She came back nonchalantly after a minute and was about to take her place when she saw the bouquet. She was bemused. Her eyes glistened with joy and out came a drop of tear! Her happiness was visible in every inch of her body, but she tried her best to conceal it. There was a slight shiver in her move, she was getting emotional. I wanted to hug her; I know she wanted it as well. Then I looked at her and our eyes hugged each other. It was divine. After several calls from her mother, she reluctantly decided to go home carrying back the memories of her chicken, the bouquet and her man. In her eyes, I saw the woman who would be mine forever very soon!

That night, we chatted the longest. It felt like a never-ending night. She opened up to me about her dreams, her desires, her fears and her apprehensions. I could sense that she entrusted herself completely to me. I genuinely started to feel that she was the one for me, *my lady*.

“I am extremely happy. So are my parents! My mom told my dad, ‘We are married for so many years. Have you got me a single gift till now? Look at him. Even during their first meeting, he has gifted her so many things’.” she texted me gleefully.

“Ha ha ha... Thanks, baby! This is just the beginning. You wait and watch! There are much more such surprises ahead in store for you.”

“Eeee... I am waiting! I agreed to marry you within ten minutes of seeing you, I thought it will take a life time to love you, but guess I am already falling for you” she texted.

“That’s nice to know. By the way, I wanted to ask you something. Do you wear modern clothes at all, like jean and stuff? ” I questioned.

“Of course, why are you asking?”

“Coming from an orthodox family, I was wondering whether you had such modern traits. Even today you wore a chudidhar to KFC”

“What makes you think ‘modernity’ lies in the clothes one wears?” She was agitated.

I didn’t know what to reply. I had wanted my wife to be modern while having her roots firm in our traditions. Somewhere in my mind, ‘modernity’ was strongly associated with one’s attire, and that reply of hers was a slap on that thought.

I wanted to change the topic immediately.

“You look splendid in your Whatsapp DP, with you sitting on that wall and

sipping your coffee and your hair tied in an improper bun. I especially like that bun. It's really cute."

"That's a nice way to change the topic. Anyways, thanks. Mom clicked it, and that's my favourite mug. Wait, did I read it right, did you like the bun or the bum?"

"B U N... bun" I said, not realizing that her bum is what I would fall in love with, forever.

"So, how do you want me to call you?" She continued.

"Anything you wish."

"Would monkey be fine?"

"If the donkey is okay, the monkey has no problem."

"Duh... You told you are a writer, right?"

"Yes... and you are an artist! I think we will make a perfect combo. You can write paintings for me and I can draw poems for you"

"Ha ha ha, yes we will. But before that, there is something you have to do for me after our marriage, and you will have to do it every night." she sent a text with an eye-winking smiley.

With quite a few kinky thoughts in my mind, I excitedly asked, "Ahem... Like what baby?"

Her response took me by surprise, and I wasn't really sure if I could do what she asked - EVERY single night, for the rest of our lives.

***RRR***

## Chapter 4 **The Surprise**

Oct 20<sup>th</sup> 2016

11 PM

The night was still young and fresh. It still had a long way to go to

see the light of day. Galarena's receptionist didn't call me back, neither did Diana nor any of her managers. I kept glancing at the empty road and my mobile every few seconds. I became more and more troubled as several unsettling thoughts started playing in 'repeat mode' in my mind. I was unable to keep calm any longer. The watchman saw me and inferred that something had gone terribly wrong. I started walking impatiently like a cub; anxious, jittery and quite disturbed by then.



I knew in my mind that I had crossed the threshold limit for waiting for her and realized I shouldn't be wasting any minute further.

I rushed back home, changed clothes, took my bike key, purse and mobile, locked the door and came down to the parking area. My Hero Honda shine was waiting for me. I kick started the bike and drove straight into the incessant stretch of OMR road, never realizing that it was going to be one long forgettable, endless, sleepless night.

.August 29<sup>th</sup> 2014:

It was late into the night, but I was still texting Diana - our first chat which lasted that long.

I was all ears to hear what she wanted me to do to her every single night.

“You claim to be a writer, don't you?” she texted me.

“I do. Yes, and I actually do write, you know!” I replied back.

“Then, you have to tell me a story every single night, right before we sleep, all our life. That's what I want you to do”

“A story? Is that all? This is what you want me to do every night?” I was disappointed.

“Why, what did you imagine?”

“I imagined a hell lot of things, forget it”

“What did you imagine, tell me!”

“Nothing leave it”

“No, tell me now”

“Come on, it's nothing!”

“If you don't tell me, I won't text you”

“Girls, I tell u! Well, I thought you would want me to do something kinky or have sex with you in a different position every day or something like that” I texted.

“Jeez. How grosss!”

“Gross??”

“I mean, sex every single night? Is that even possible?”

“I watch porn every single night and I, ahem, so yeah must be possible”

“Jesus Christ!! Every day!!! You watch porn EVERYDAY?? Dude, seriously, don't do it. It's a sin!!”

“So according to you sex is sacred and porn is sin?”

“Sex with your partner is fine, not porn”

“I am watching people having sex with their own partners”

“How do you know they are partners?” she asked.

“How do you know they are not?” I shot back.

“You are sick” she was pissed off.

“You told modernity is not in the attire”

“And according to you, modernity is in not wearing an attire and fucking another guy?”

I was taken aback by her usage of the F word.

“You used the F word”

“I use it if I am angry”

“Don’t use it anymore. I don’t want my kids’ mum to be using such words in front of them”

“Already talking about kids?”

“You are my wife already” I sent a heart smiley.

“Dear hubby, alright, I won’t use the F word going forward. But promise me that you will tell a story every night”

“Just the story again?” I was disappointed, again.

“You are crazy, well... listen, then along with the story every night, I want you to kiss me good night and say that you love me, every single night” she sent it with a smiley.

Men make many promises on the spur of the moment, sometimes not knowing whether they could keep them up, and at times knowing very well, they can’t. This was one such promise, understandably, of the latter possibility.

“Of course darling, sure would do. I would just not say love you, but would also make love to you.” I sent a heart smiley along with the reply.

“I love you so much, dear!” she messaged back. That was the first time she had told “I love you” to me. I reciprocated. She then replied with a ‘Brinjal’ smiley. I was wondering and asked her what it was.

“Keep thinking and when you find it, well, never mind” she responded.

And then it dawned on me.

“And Rob, don’t watch too much of porn and don’t give too much work to my little man even before marriage, wait for me”

“Sure darling and he is not a little man” I texted back.

After that, our Whatsapp chats continued every other night. We came to know a lot about each other through our daily conversations. She liked fantasy – mermaids, fairies and Tinker Bell, whereas I heard about Tinker

Bell for the first time. I loved cricket, football, yoga and writing, while she had no clue about Michael Bevan, my favourite cricketer. We were completely polar opposites by taste.

“Tell me a story now and put me to sleep.” she texted me one random night. I wasn’t prepared, nevertheless, decided to narrate a story on the go.

“Let me tell you a story based on reality. Okay?” I started

“Alright.”

“So, there was this guy called Robin, who was to be engaged to a beautiful angel named Diana. They met and instantly took a liking to each other.”

“Hmm... Instantly? No, it took some time for me, to be honest” she texted back.

“Do not interrupt my flow. So, Robin decided to surprise Diana and went to her office one day. He went to her bay and carried her from her desk in his arms, like the baby she is for him. As all her coworkers kept looking in awe, he kissed her and announced to all of them that he loved her madly and is going to marry her.”

“That is the dumbest story ever written baby” she immediately responded with an eye-winking smiley.

“What in the world! Why? Isn’t it romantic?” I was frustrated.

“A little romance is there, but no logic at all. Just for your information, there is no way you could come to my office. Forget about entering my bay; you can’t even enter our reception area! ha!”

“Really? Like Seriously?” I was honestly surprised.

“It’s a bank, Rob. Outsiders are not allowed. Uhh, mom is coming to my room; I will talk to you tomorrow. Good night, sweet dreams, love you.” she texted me and dozed off.

The sense of satisfaction one attains in accomplishing things, which people claim as impossible, is immensely gratifying. Love definitely gives us the necessary push as I decided to do the impossible.

A few Days Later: Diana texted me that she was feeling bored at the office. I had completed my tasks for the day as well. The thought of visiting her office suddenly flashed in my mind. I yielded to my temptation.

My office was in Thoraipakkam, and hers at Ambattur. I bought a doll for her and sped my bike towards her office. It was a one and a half hour drive. I reached India Land Tech Park and parked my bike. I looked at the

towering buildings. There were two phases - Phase A and Phase B. I remembered having seen the buildings in a few Tamil movies.

I was asked to get an entry pass by the security. I obliged and started to fill in the form he handed over to me. I entered my purpose of visit as “Client Engagement”, and the person whom I had come to meet as “Lavanya”, the manager of Diana. I wanted to safeguard Diana from trouble if at all anything ensued later due to my visit.

I reached the main entrance of Tower A, where RBS was functioning and proudly displayed my entry pass to the security. I expected the guards to salute and let me in. But, they looked at me suspiciously as though I had come to loot the place and stopped me.

*“ Aap andar nahi jaa saktey saab!”*

“What? I don’t understand Hindi. Can you talk in English or Tamil?” I replied though I perfectly understood what he was conveying.

“You no go in.” the guard said in his broken English.

“I have the entry pass.”

“With that, you only go reception ground floor”, he showed me a waiting area. I wasn’t sure in which floor Diana was, and I hadn’t driven so far to meet her in the reception area after all and I wanted to do to her what I did in the story that I narrated to her!

“I am a vendor, you see. I have a meeting with a manager. Err... Lavanya. I need to go in for a discussion.” I told him.

“Then, ask manager come here, give guarantee signature, and she take you in.” he said in his blatant stony voice without having an iota of courtesy or mercy on me.

“Guarantee? What do you mean? Can I talk to your supervisor?” “What?”

“Supervisor... Your supervisor. Can I talk to him?” I insisted. “Wait. He come half hour.” he said and continued his work.

“Damn.” I looked at my watch. It was 5.15 PM. I didn’t know anyone else in that block and definitely couldn’t call anyone for help. I sat in the reception area convincing myself that there should be some way to enter in. I played the waiting game. Everyone who crossed me gave me a strange look (or so it felt) being the sole occupant of that large white sofa.

I suddenly got reminded of Kalpana and called her.

“Dude, where are you? In the office?” I asked her.

“In Bangkok, with my boyfriend. Anything urgent?” she replied.

“Not now, Kalps. Not now. Listen, I need an immediate help.”

“You want her mobile number?”

“Damn! I got her number long back, and I am already at her office. Now, I need to enter her bay for which I need someone to provide a guarantee signature for me here. Do you know anyone in Ambattur office?”

“Shit! What have you done now that warrants a guarantee?”

“Nothing, stupid! I just came to surprise her!”

“And ended up being taken by surprise, what a shock, I must say! Let me check with a few friends and call you back.” she said and cut my call hurriedly.

Meanwhile, the security guard supervisor had arrived, and thankfully, he knew English well.

I went straight up to him.

“Sir, I need a favour. This is crucial. I have a meeting...”

“If so, then ask that person to come down and take you up.” he said without even looking at me.

“Hmm... Err... Actually... Let me tell you the truth. I came here to meet my fiancée. I want to give her a surprise. I drove through half the city and came down here. I really want to meet her in her bay. I definitely got to do this.

Could you please let me in? Please!”

He looked at me like I stole his clothes.

“I definitely can’t.” he said sternly.

“Bro, please understand. Please let me in.”

“I understand, but if you go in, I will be chucked out. Understood? They will send me home. Everything is being recorded in that camera.” he showed the CCTV camera in one corner.

I nodded in understanding, when I got that call from Kalpana.

“Kalps, who is here, ask that person to come to the ground floor near the reception and sign for me... Really soon, please!”

“Wait, wait... Rob! I have only one friend there, and he is on leave today. My bay mate knows another colleague, but he is in a call till 7 and can’t come down before that.”

“Bloody rascals!”

“Did you wake up in front of the mirror today?” she pulled my leg.

“No, it was your DP that I saw first thing in the morning.”

“Liar! So, why don’t you ask her to come down and put the sign for you?”  
“It’s a surprise for her, dumbass! I want to stand behind her desk in her bay all of a sudden and give her a shock. That’s the whole point.”

“Oh, interesting!! But sorry da. I won’t be able to help you any further on this.” She said and disconnected the call.

My last ray of hope vanished into thin air. I was clueless about my next move. I had gotten this far on my mission and returning without meeting her would be a disaster. I wouldn’t have an interesting story to tell my grandchildren later in life! I went and settled back in the reception sofa to rack my brain for some better idea.

I thought of all the possible options and finally decided to make a call to Diana herself. She picked my call immediately.

“Hey, Diana! How are you?”

“Hey, Rob! Am good. Nothing has changed in the last two hours. Why?”

“Just like that. How’s work? Where are you? Is your manager around?”

“She is in a meeting. No work for me, and it’s really boring. I told you already!”

That’s why I have come all the way to meet you darling, I thought.

“How about your best friend, Kavitha?”

“She is in the Guindy office today.”

I cursed my luck and continued to talk.

“Which floor are you on?”

“I am on the 9<sup>th</sup> floor. Why are you asking all this?”

“Just like that. Well, how good a worker are you? I want to know how you behave in office. You know, there is a flurry of complaints I have against you. So, give the phone to your friend next to you.” I blurted out spontaneously.

“If you have any complaints against me, tell me directly. If you want to know how I work, ask me. Not some other random idiot!” she said in an agitated tone.

“No! No complaints. Just wanted to talk to any of your colleagues. Can you hand over the phone to someone near you? Anyone! ” I chuckled.

“No. Tell me directly. Anything you want to say. Just tell me, will you?” she insisted.

How can I?! And ruin the perfect surprise that I am waiting at your office’s ground floor and trying to come to the 9<sup>th</sup> floor? Why don’t you just hand over the phone to the person next to you? AARRRHH...!!! Women and

their gazillion questions. I sighed.

“That, I can’t. Just hand it over to someone else, please.”

“I won’t.” she cut the call abruptly.

I was so infuriated that someone could be so mean. But, having no other choice, I dialled her again.

“Hello! What do you want now?” she fumed.

“Give the bloody phone to anyone near you.”

“I already told you, I won’t!”

“Don’t you trust me?”

“I do. But, what has trust got to do with this?”

“Trust me. Just trust me for once without asking me questions, Diana! Don’t make me lose my cool. I don’t want to lose my cool. I have already endured many a misfortune today. Just listen to me and hand over the damn phone to someone next to you, NOW!”

“I WON’T.” she screamed and cut the call again. I was on the verge of breaking down and also turning into Hulk at the same time.

I controlled my anger, drank some water to calm myself down and went to the restroom nearby. By then, it was 6.30 PM. I decided to call her one last time. If she handed over the phone to any of her colleagues, then we would meet. If she didn’t, I wasn’t sure what decision I would take next.

Just as I was about to call her, I got a call from Prabhu. Wondering whether there could be anything important, I attended.

“Rob, where are you?”

“At RBS, Prabhu, what’s up?”

“Oh, have you met Diana?”

“I would, in a while. Tell me, anything important?”

“Yes. I am going to join a CEH course. Would you like to join me? We should do something to move up in our career man!”

“What the hell is CEH?” I was frustrated.

“Certified Ethical Hacker! It’s a highly recommended course for ethical hackers.” he said enthusiastically.

“Prabhu, I am not in the right mood to discuss this right now, and even if I am, I wouldn’t be joining the course. Thanks!”

“Any problem with Diana?”

“No, nothing like that.”

“The course costs just 1.5 lakhs, and it is a special offer. So, thought of informing you.”

“So kind of you, but no thanks.” I cut his call and decided to call Diana again.

She picked.

“What do you want?” she had mellowed down by then.

“Hand over the phone to someone next to you.” I said the same words again in a measured assertive tone.

“Here you go.” she gave the phone to her friend. I was more than relieved.

“Hey, hi... What’s your name?” I asked her.

“This is Priyanka.”

“Alright, listen. I am on the ground floor and I need someone to come here and put a guarantee sign for me. Could you please just come down and do that? I hope you know that I am Diana’s fiancé.”

“I know. Wait! Let me come down. How do I identify you?”

“I will be the only guy sitting on the large white sofa in the reception area with a disgruntled expression” I replied.

Exactly ten minutes later, a young, lean naïve girl of 5’6” came down along with a fair girl of medium build, who had large eyes and thick brows. They came closer with a thoughtful look, and one of them gazed at me questioningly. “Are you...”

“Priyanka? “ I finished before she could.

“Yes. Where should I sign?”

“Come here. Sign in this ledger, right here, Thanks!” I guided her.

She signed and looked at me anxiously.

“There is a problem. I am new here; joined just four weeks ago and I heard that outsiders can’t be taken inside. So, if I take you there, I will be terminated.” Priyanka, the lean girl, the dropped the bomb.

“Wait... What? Then, why did you sign there for me?”

“Because you asked me to!” That was the dumbest possible answer she could’ve given me.

“Is there no way I can come to your floor?” Never did I realise that it would be such a difficult task.

“No. But, you can wait in Tower B, and I will ask her to come there. That’s where we have the canteen.”

Do I look like I came all the way and waited all the while to eat in your canteen? I am hungry, yes... but no, not to that Tower!

“Tower B? I would have done that an hour ago. I have waited for almost an hour here to meet her at her place and surprise her.” my disappointment was



evident when Bishaka, the other girl with thick eyebrows, interrupted.

“I have a plan. You come to the 8<sup>th</sup> floor where we have our office cafeteria and wait there. I will bring Diana. That should be feasible.”

“That sounds like a plan, and would be awesome.” I said, and we three took the lift to the 8<sup>th</sup> floor. They took me to the cafeteria, and I waited excitedly to catch the first glimpse of Diana when she would walk in to find me there. Bishaka left to bring Diana while Priyanka sat next to me worrying whether she would still have her job intact after I left.

After five minutes, Diana came to the cafeteria hopping around like a deer. She simply froze looking at me. Her face instantly brightened, her reactions subdued, and her cheeks instantly turned deep pink in excitement as she gave a teary happy smile. A smile is the best makeup a girl could ever wear. Diana evidently couldn't conceal her happiness. She couldn't look me in the eye.

“Did you expect me?”

“I didn't.” she hushed as she couldn't talk. Had I quizzed her further, she would have surely broken down crying. She was quite emotional.

“You didn't have any doubt whatsoever? I asked you to hand over the phone to your friend. I asked which floor you are on. You couldn't guess anything still?”

“I couldn't, really! I was just thinking why you were behaving like the lunatic that you are. I never figured you would come here all the way. That too to my office, that too, to the 8<sup>th</sup> floor! It's like a dream!”

I wanted to hug her, but restrained myself as we were in her office premises and gave her the doll I had bought for her. She held it like a prized possession.

“I want to meet your manager; I have entered telling that I have an appointment with her.”

“I said she is in a meeting now, didn't I? You can't meet her.”

“Alright. Shall we go out for dinner? Inform her that you are leaving for the day and come. We will go out.” I told her.

“Okay. Give me ten minutes. I will shut down my system and be back.” she left.

She returned in fifteen minutes. She had washed her face, and it shone as bright as the morning sun.

I kept admiring her all the while as we ate our meal and she kept blushing. At around 8 PM, she took leave to catch her cab back home. I kept looking

at her as she walked towards the exit. I really wanted to hug her. I called out her name and went near her when she turned to me. “I want to give you something.” I said.

“What?” she smiled and looked at me.

I came close to her, smiled and stretched out my right hand.

“Bye.” I warmly shook the tip of her right hand.

She reciprocated with a lifeless handshake and left hurriedly. Just what I expected of her anyway!

I kept staring at nothingness.

**RRR**

Chapter 5

### **The Third Date**

Oct 29<sup>th</sup> 2016:

Nothingness engulfed me. I felt empty driving through OMR towards her office. Ascendas was about fifteen minutes' away from home on a normal day and OMR was quite busy even at that odd hour, thanks to it being the abode of numerous corporate giants. I crossed Perungudi, Kandanchavadi, SRP tools and finally reached Ascendas in just ten minutes.

I parked my bike right under the 'No Parking' signage outside the building, rushed towards the entry pass section, and asked for a cafeteria pass. The security guard looked at me, then looked at the clock on the wall, then again looked at me with disapproval all over his face.

“Cafeteria passes are not provided after 10 PM sir” He shook his head as he said and kept staring at me.

I gazed at the clock and it showed 11.13 PM. “Damn!”

“Is there any way I could get in? My wife is missing; she usually comes home by 10.45 PM. I don't have contact numbers of any of her colleagues, nor her company board line, nor her cab driver, nor her team mates. I need to go in and check. Please let me in” I pleaded teary eyed.

“Relax, Sir! Which company is she working for?” he asked me.

“Galarena, Phase 3. I have been there once on her birthday. I know where it is.”

“Okay sir, wait a minute. I will check what could be done” he said and dialed one of his superior. They conversed in Oriya, I didn't understand a word. There was a mirror in one corner where I saw my reflection. I was

jaded, clad in a white shirt, immersed in sweat, had uncombed hair and was visibly worried.

“Okay. Yeah Okay” the security said and turned towards me.

“Sir, I can’t give you a pass. However, I can let you in. Give me any of your ID card and your mobile number” he said with a smile.

I searched my purse and was quite relieved to find my PAN card. I handed it over to him. I wrote my mobile number in the ledger and rushed towards Phase 3, towards Galarena.

“Galarena”

Diana had quit her job at RBS and joined Galarena a year ago, for two reasons: It was closer to home (After our wedding we moved from Thiruvananthapuram to Thoraipakkam), and she loved the job of a graphic designer. She had always been someone who pursued her passion and was never bogged down by what others said. She charted her career on her terms.

“Bubbly... I want to start a design page in FB and start making wedding invites, personalized gifts, anniversary gifts and the like. Do help me create it and promote it” she ordered me one day and I had to oblige to those beautiful eyes. The page was a huge hit and design offers started pouring in almost instantly. Someone once said, ‘Have a hobby that pays you’, and she took it quite literally.

Diana was a determined, no nonsense person, who truly followed her heart (even if it meant-others getting disappointed), and never let others dictate terms to her, which I came to know clearly during our third date.

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Oct 10<sup>th</sup> 2014:

Diana’s parents did not believe in the idea of women going out with men, even if they were married, forget being engaged. I was obviously oblivious to that fact. I called her up one fine day after our engagement and told her that I wanted to meet her.

“Alright. We will meet up.” Came her disinterested reply.

“Do inform your parents and then come.” I told her.

“Listen. Only one of these two can happen. Either I come without

informing them, or I inform them and stay at home.” She was quite bland.  
“Come again? What?” I did not get what she meant.

“If you want to meet me, I will have to lie to my parents and then come. But, if you want me to inform them and come, I can’t meet you ultimately because I won’t be allowed to.” She explained patiently.

“Diana, you weren’t engaged to me back then. Now you are! Tell them that I want to go out with you. They will allow you. Don’t lie to them. Just tell them the truth. It is better to tell the truth and die than to lie and live a regretful life.”

“I am fed up with your philosophies! I will do as you say though, but I am sure us meeting-will never happen.” she meant what she said and kept down the phone exasperated.

After an hour, I received a message from her.

“My dad did not allow. We can’t meet.”

I was infuriated. All I wanted was to meet my fiancée on a Sunday evening. I felt like my fundamental rights were being denied! I immediately called her dad. He picked up immediately.

“Hi Uncle!”

“Yes, Son.” He told in his soft voice.

“Umm... Uncle, hope Diana told you. I want to meet her this Sunday. Don’t worry! I will take care of her. I will make sure she is safe. Trust me. Please allow her to come and meet me for an hour or so at Skywalk mall.”

“Fine, Rob! I don’t have a problem. She will come.” he replied in a calm tone.

I was sweetly surprised. *Didn’t she ask him properly or did he trust me blindly?* The respect I had for my father-in-law increased multifold. I thanked him and informed her.

It was our third date. We decided to meet around 5 PM at Sky walk. I requested her to be on time and reiterated it several times. I started from home almost an hour earlier, got a small gift as usual and began my ride. It was one long, tiresome bike ride for me. I somehow found my way through all the complicated one-ways, over-bridges, traffic signals and reached Sky walk at 5.10 PM. I parked my bike, got the parking ticket, and called her.

“I reached. Where are you baby?”

“I am just starting from home. Wait. I will reach in ten minutes.” She replied without remorse.

“What the hell? I told you to start early, didn’t I? I asked you to be on time.

Why are you late? I insisted several times, right?” I lost my cool.

“What is the point of waiting for you all alone? I decided to start just after you reach.” She said coolly.

“Diana, I hate it when people come late.” I was gnashing my teeth.

“Then, you should have come early, by five itself” she wasn’t taking my anger seriously.

“You know what? I will kill you when you arrive. Start now. I said NOW, and don’t make wait any further!” I ordered her.

I started to have my mood swings. I wasn’t someone who would ever go on time for a meeting, but I hated it when people made me wait, probably that was the reason why I always went late.

After five minutes, I got a call from her. I didn’t pick it. She called again. I ignored. She called for the third time, and after much deliberation, I attended and screamed.

“Whaaaaaat!”

“Where are you?” her voice sounded like she didn’t care how I behaved.

“About to leave. You?”

“Okay, bye! I came here to shop in Skywalk with my boyfriend” she said casually.

“Enjoy shopping then! You know what? I drove for almost two hours and I am left stranded here all alone! Just because of you.” I sulked.

“Where are you now?” she asked.

I was on the third floor and I saw her with a big shopping bag, hopping around on the ground floor.

“I see you, come to the third floor.” I cut the call, thoroughly infuriated. She got onto the escalator and reached the third floor.

“Excuse me.” she called out.

I didn’t look at her but said,

“If this were some other place, and if you were someone else, I would have surely slapped you.”

“You can still slap me. Here, my mom gave some sweets for you” she offered the bag and showed her left cheek for me to slap.

“You should eat it and add some more fat to your body. Come with me now.” I walked briskly ahead of her towards the parking lot. She followed me without uttering a word.

“Do you know the way to the beach from here?” I asked as I kickstarted the bike.

“I do.”

“Then guide me.” I said, and we headed towards the beach.

We reached the Marina beach in 15 minutes. She knew the directions very well and claimed it was because of her spending most of the weekend afternoons during her PG days at the beach.

As we walked on the sandy beach towards the shore, I wanted to hold her hand, in spite of my anger.

“Can I hold your hand?” I turned towards her and asked.

“Yes, if you can ask that with a smile.” came the reply.

“I can’t. I have a toothache” saying I held her hand lightly. It felt very soft. Diana blushed as we walked. I felt awkward and withdrew my hand. We then sat on the beach among many such hundred couples.

We ate two plates of bhajji. I was then deeply lost in the magnanimity of the vast sea, in its eternal breeze and the everlasting waves. Sea and stars are indeed great healers. They continue to inspire millions of poets and billions of writers around the globe.

I suddenly felt something twirling and irking my waist. Fearing it to be a crab, I shook off my body and looked around. Diana was smiling at me holding a hand full of sand. She had just thrust in two handfuls on my waist!

“What the hell?” I glared and began to throw sand at her who was giggling like a 5 year old.

She retaliated equally and we continued this until I mellowed down and my anger vanished. I then composed myself and spoke to her.

“I am telling this to you again, and I would say this only once. Remember it for life, Diana!”

“Tell me, I am all ears.”

“Never, ever, never ever make me wait. Got it? Even if I make you wait, never ever make me wait.” I warned her.

She nodded.

“Good.” I said without realizing that after marriage, the time I was going to spend the most was waiting for her to dress up. Men are such fools!

“And the same applies to you as well” she countered.

“I will try” I said, knowing I can never do that.

“Why were looking at the sea and not me?”

“The sea, the night sky and the stars always fascinate me. I love this vast expansion of uninhabited space. Our world is so big” I said.

“Not for me, I hold the world in my hand” she smiled and held my hand.  
“That’s sweet. You talk like you are a poet and I talk like I am an idiot.” I uttered and she laughed.

I then presented her the gift I had bought for her. She took it with a toothy Garfield grin.

I then continued, “Diana, I want to ask two things to you, may I? Be frank with your responses”

“Why so serious? Ask” she responded.

“First, tell me this. Everyone says you are a silent, calm girl, but every time I converse with you, I have never found you so.”

“I am indeed an introvert; I don’t open up unless I like a person. There are a handful of people with whom I talk like this” she revealed her secrets.

“And you added me to the list”

“Yeah, that is my fate. Didn’t have a choice” she gave a dejected look. I gave her a gentle knuckle punch on her head.

“And the second thing. The day I met you at your home for the first time, your voice was bland, man-like and unbearable. How is that your voice has become sweet and child-like since then?” I wanted to clear that doubt as well.

“My voice was manly? I thought it was always sweet”

“It is sweet now, agreed, but that day I didn’t like it. You know I didn’t like your voice, the fact that you didn’t know cooking, driving, didn’t like our first conversation and above and beyond all that, I have agreed to marry you” I said looking at her eyes.

She was startled and didn’t react for a few minutes and then spoke.

“Frankly, more than me, my mom liked you and only because of that, this has all gone to the next level. And I didn’t do anything with my voice, it has always been the same. Not sure what you heard the other day” she said in a low voice.

I wondered how her voice became sweet and child-like from what I had heard earlier. I would never know. She would never say. It was all magical. She was a bit disappointed though, on hearing what I told. I wanted to change her mood and make her smile.

“And tell me this as well”

“A third question?” she asked in a lifeless tone.

“Yes, tell me. Have you watched porn?” I winked.

“Do you even realize what you are asking a girl?” her expression was of

utter shock.

“Very much yes. Tell me. Have you or have you not”

“I haven’t”

“Don’t lie”

“I am not lying!”

“I know about girls, tell me. How many movies have you watched?”

“Movies? Oh, my god. I just watched one small clip, detested it and never watched it again. I swear!”

“Holy mother of Christ, you cheat. Your parents believe that you don’t even watch TV and here you are sitting and watching porn loops”

“As if your parents know that you are watching porn every night”

“Not a good come back darling. So, what did you watch?” I enquired.

“I wouldn’t tell, but it was so horrible that I didn’t want to watch any further”

“What could be so horrible in that? Tell me, tell me. I have watched the worst. Tell me, else my head will burst”

“I won’t. Keep guessing”

I continued to plead her, but she didn’t budge. She was adamant on not sharing with me what she watched. I couldn’t probe her any further. We spoke for some more time casually when she turned around to see a woman selling shells.

“Rob, could you please get me some of those shells?” she asked enthusiastically.

“Definitely! Do you like them?”

“I love them!” her face glittered in the moonlight.

I bought her all the shells she wanted and she was jumping around in joy like her life-long dream had been accomplished. I took one of the shells in my hand, went down on one knee in front of her, gave the shell to her and said,

“Diana, I want you to be my better half”

“You are already my best half” she blushed and got the shell from me.

I hugged her and gave a gentle kiss on her forehead. She kept looking at me. We then decided to part after a time well spent. Her dad had called five times by then. He even offered to come and pick her at Skywalk mall.

However, I wanted to be the ‘responsible’ man and drop her home.

She navigated the way back home. After about half an hour of travel, we realized that we had been going in a completely unknown direction. We



laughed our hearts out and then took a U-turn towards her house.

I dropped her and said bye even though my heart fervently wanted to be by her side, hug her, kiss her and hold her hands all night. I reached my room nearly an hour later when I got a message from her.

“Rob, can I tell you something?”

“Go ahead.” I responded as I settled on the bed.

“I used to have a dream, a repetitive dream.”

“What dream?”

“That I am on the beach with someone, admiring the stars, speaking everything that comes to my mind, shedding all inhibitions, losing myself in the moment, and then this person buys me shells. I have had this dream for a long time, several times.”

“Oh!”

“I always thought that the person was my caretaker, Esther. But, after what happened today, I realized that it has been you all the while.”

“Don’t tell me! Are you trying to say that I am the man of your dreams?”

“You definitely weren’t when I first met you, but guess what, you might just be that guy!” she sent an eye winking smiley.

Signs from God, they really were, or so we thought, rather wanted them to be. Diana was in fact the first alliance I met and we clicked. My maternal aunt claimed during our engagement that, when she prayed, the name Diana got stuck in her mind and she couldn’t think beyond that.

Maybe, God had been sending the right signals to many of us all along.

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There was still no signal in her mobile. I dialed her phone for the 69<sup>th</sup> time as I leaped up the stairs of Phase 3 to reach the 3<sup>rd</sup> floor of Galarena in Ascendas. I was sweating profusely as my legs wobbled over those steep steps.

Just as I finished two flights of stairs I saw two wings – A and B ahead of me. At the A wing, there was a large green name plate that read, “Galarena, India”. I rushed towards the glass door, on which it was written, “Tailgating is prohibited”. I tried to push open the door, it didn’t budge.

Dejected, I looked at the Security guard standing nearby and pointed him to open the door. He asked me to display my Galarena ID card and kept looking at my neck and worried face. He didn’t look like someone who would comply with my request. *I was never going to have my way with*

*these guards.*

“I have lost my ID. I have to go in. Can you please help?” I said in an authoritative tone.

“Trespassing is not allowed sir” he insisted.

I looked around and found the emergency exit option right next to the glass door.

“Break in case of emergency” was written in red bold letters on the box.

The security guard was asking me to get some approvals to enter into the work area. My mind was not listening to him. Thinking of all possibilities, without having any other choice, I decided to break open the door and rushed towards the emergency exit button.

***RRR***

Chapter 6

**The Long Drive**

September 19<sup>th</sup>, 2014:

“What is the emergency now? Why should I come over to your place immediately?” I questioned Diana over phone.

“There is no one at home” came her instant reply.

“Oooooohhh!” I said playfully.

“Don’t let the horses of your imagination run wild dear boy. I want to go to my friend Darshini’s house now and invite her for our wedding. She stays in Mathur. Come soon. My parents might come home anytime in the evening” she urged me.

I was at Thiruvannamiyur at my bachelor pad then. It was 1 PM in the afternoon and the sun was making its presence felt in the best way possible.

“To a friend’s place? Err... It will be too hot outside now.” I told her. “It might be really difficult for me to drive. Moreover, I don’t want to get tanned before our wedding. If we are to spend the time at your home, then I could give it a try”

“You dirty pervert. And can you even tan anymore? Duh!! Fine, you stay there. I will go by myself” saying, she cut the call ruthlessly.

Women have their own way of bending their men to their will. I got ready and left my room within 10 minutes flat! I called and informed her that I would reach her place within half an hour. She responded as if she expected my call and asked me to come at the earliest.

I couldn't believe my eyes. Diana was standing right in front of me in her bikini. The door behind us was locked. Phew! The things that girls do when parents aren't around.

She came close to me to hug me. I could smell her sweet fragrance. It was jasmine, I liked it. I was nervous and excited at the same time. My hands trembled. I couldn't take my eyes off her perfectly shaped body. She brought her lips towards mine, and just as I was about to taste them, I heard a horn blare in my right ear. That's when I came back to my senses and looked around.

I was still at the Tidal Park signal and it had turned green. The vehicle behind me kept on honking incessantly. I started my bike and rode it as fast as I could, hoping my day dream to turn into reality.

I reached her bus stop in about half an hour and dialed her number. She guided me to her house, and as I rode following her directions, I saw her on the way walking towards me. I pressed the brake disappointed.

“Why did you start walking already? I would have come and picked you at your door steps.”

“That's fine! Someone might see you coming in and I don't want them to imagine things, especially when my parents aren't around. Start the bike.” she ordered.

I pouted in disappointment.

“Why, what did you expect? To be in my bed?” she smirked.

“No, no! All that is only after our marriage.” I lied and started my bike as she sat in the pillion.

She was my Google map again, as we drove from Padi to Mathur. It was one of the best roads I had driven on. It was long, straight, serene and traffic-free. She sat behind me leaving a considerable distance between us.

“Why don't you come closer and hug me?” I questioned her.

“Only after our marriage.” She insisted.

“Hardly 40 days left for that baby!”

“Doesn't matter.” she said and kept her handbag between us. *Damn.*

We reached Darshini's house in about 20 minutes. Darshini was her classmate in college and her best buddy. She was married and lived with her mom and husband.

"Vanga Vanga! [Welcome! Welcome]" her mom smiled and lead us in. We chatted for some time. Darshini was upset that Diana didn't come for her wedding. I then had to convince her and made her to agree for coming to ours. As always I talked non-stop and Darshini's mom was impressed. She said that I complimented Diana, who was the silent and calm type, perfectly. Opposites attract indeed.

We then conversed for some more time after which we decided to take leave. The climate suddenly changed like the mood swings of a toddler and it started to drizzle.

"We need to reach home soon. I can't get back home all wet. I will be caught red-handed as my parents still believe I am at home" Diana urged me to drive faster.

I was in no mood to listen to her. It was the perfect setting. A soothing climate, long drive, light drizzles, my favorite girl on the bike, nothing could get better than that. I began to drive slowly deliberately.

"Drive fast!"

"Can't hear you, baby! Come closer to me." I said.

I could slowly feel her hand hugging my waist and holding it tightly. Her body embraced my back as she came closer.

"Take me home soon." she whispered into my ear.

"I will take you to my room in Thiruvannamipur, if you put it like that." I said as I smiled.

I drove the bike at a snail's pace as her hold tightened around me further. The gap between us became non-existent. I could hear her heartbeat and feel her breath. Her thighs were close to my legs and were wet. She didn't complain, I never would.

It was one of the most memorable rides of my life. On the way, she showed me the marriage hall where our reception was to take place. None of that chatter fell into my ears anyway. My sole focus was on her hug and her proximity to me. I wanted to stop the bike and kiss her in the rain. The best way to overcome temptation is by yielding to it.

I stopped in the middle of the bridge which we were crossing at that moment.

“Why are you stopping?”

“It’s raining too heavily! I am not able to drive.” I lied.

She should have guessed it.

“Get down for a minute please” I requested her.

“Should we get a cab?” she asked, very well knowing it wouldn’t be needed.

“Wait. Get down. I will remove my coolers, and then we can drive.” I told.

She got down. The bridge was empty, the road, as long as I could see, had no one on it, the drizzle was picking up. I put the side stand on my bike and turned towards her.

“You want me to help wi...”

Before she could finish her sentence our lips locked. They fit in each other in the best possible way as if they were made for each other. She didn’t resist. I didn’t force. She cried. I smiled.

I gave her a passionate hug and looked right into her eyes. The first liplock couldn’t have been more dramatic or romantic than that.

We resumed our journey again. The rain stopped after a few minutes. We decided to eat in a nearby restaurant and spent an hour there. Then, I headed towards her home when she placed her hand on my shoulder.

“Where are you headed?” she asked softly.

“To your home of course.”

“Oh! I thought we are going to Thiruvannamiyur.”

“Oh my! You really want me to?”

“Nah... I was kidding. Drop me home” she smiled.

I dropped her home in 15 minutes and drove towards my room, soaking up in her memory and replaying that beautiful kiss the whole way back.

“That was wonderful. Never expected that and it felt magical” I texted her when I reached home.

“I wanted to say the same. It was pure bliss” she replied back.

“I have seen such stuff only in movies. How did it feel?” I continued the conversation.

“Doesn’t really matter Rob” she sent an eye winking smiley.

“I get it. Okay, tell me something. That day you told me you watched porn, right. What did you watch exactly? Why did you detest it so much?”

“Why asking now?” she retorted

“Thought I might get a response now as you are in the right mood”

“Okay! Good assumption. But no, I am not going to tell you”

“Come on Diana!”

“I can’t come. Maybe you can watch porn and cum”

“Sick joke” I responded.

“Imagine how sick it would be with you practicing it regularly”

“Can we talk something else other than porn?”

“Did I start it Rob?”

“Okay, my mistake. What’s the plan for tomorrow?”

“Shopping. Our wedding shopping! Have you forgotten? At T Nagar. Be on time. Don’t get delayed and make that puppy face at me.”

“Being on time and me? We are just the polar opposite’s baby” I replied back.

“And you will lose your mind if someone else comes late, right? But you will always come late... fine Rob”

“You haven’t forgotten what happened in Skywalk, have you. Wait, I always thought girls liked guys who come late” I sent a devilish smiley.

“Sick joke!”

“Tit for tat” I replied.

“Tit, huh?”

“Enough!”

“Alright Rob, tell me, what is that one thing in life, that you want to achieve”

“Me? Like one great ambition in life? Well, I want to become a successful writer. A famous writer. Best-selling Indian author. Someday, someday I hope I can and I will”

“That’s nice to hear. Can you send me your stories? I will read them and see if you have got it in you to become the man you want to be. I hope they are all not similar to the one you recited a few days ago. If in case they are, then sorry mate, you don’t stand a chance”

“Come on Diana. Reciting is totally different from writing. What’s your gmail ID? I will email one story now. Read it and let me know how it is. What genre do you like?”

“Anything other than imaginary romance please. What genre do you write?”

“I write all genres, tell me your favorite”

“I like Fantasy. If you have one on it, send it to me now”

I agreed to her request and immediately sent her my fantasy novella “Kila the Warrior”. I was quite curious to hear her opinion. She read it within a

few hours and then texted me as,  
“Check your mail box”

I anticipated a full-page review and opened my inbox with excitement, when I found a cover design for the novella. It was designed in the most elegant way possible. It had a girl holding a sword, clad in a Viking style attire, wearing a crown of roses and being ready for war. There were two swords placed on either side of her with roses filling in the rest of the available space. It was perfect for the fantasy comedy I had written. The girl looked exactly like I had imagined my heroine to be.

I called Diana immediately.

“This is so good. It’s hard to believe you designed it so soon. Did you like the story?”

“I loved the story Rob, and the cover design is my way of giving feedback for the story”

“I am elated with the design. Some day when I publish this novella, this will be my cover page.”

“Sure darling. I hope that someday comes very soon. Have you posted it somewhere?”

“Yes, I have posted it in my internal blog, in our company, Diana”

“Oh internal blog!?” she enquired.

“Yes, there are host of other stories that I have posted there, around 200 of them”

“Oh my God. So, how do I access them? Mailing 200 stories isn’t a good idea, I suppose”

“You can’t access it, it’s our internal portal.”

“Then you better start an external blog and post it all there”

“Oh, like really?”

“Yes. haven’t you thought about it so far? Come on it’s the basic thing for an author”

“No, never, not until now. I had never felt the need to start one”

“Then do it today, right now. Go ahead. Take your laptop, create a blog page and start posting your stories. And once you create it, let me know. Will change the look and feel of it”

“You sure?”

“Do it now. You have an hour’s time. Do it and then call me” she insisted and cut the call.

I had never been this encouraged to take up my writing seriously. I wrote

for fun and wrote only on internal company blogs, but Diana changed it all and that very day, I created my first blog and uploaded, Kila the Warrior, her favorite story in it as the first entry. I then called her and informed, she got the log in credentials from me and updated the cover page, the way she wanted it to look and asked me to promote the stories in Facebook as well. I agreed to everything she said.

“Thanks a lot baby. This is like, you know, a major step in doing what I am passionate about” I texted her.

“And didn’t do it all these days and needed me to guide you. Rob, listen, I will be with you in this. Always. We will publish your books together and I will design the cover pages. You will become a successful writer one day, Rob. I wish so and I pray so” she assured.

“Love you sweet heart. You inspire me. I am lucky to have you”

“Yes, indeed lucky to have a free designer too :P” she replied back.

“Ha ha ha. My gubbly you are. Fine then, we will meet tomorrow for shopping as planned. Kisses and hugs”

“Kisses and hugs bubbly. Do come on time” she insisted again.

We both complimented each other well and I loved it.

The next day, we were supposed to go shopping for our wedding dresses. I was all prepared and headed to T Nagar, where I was welcomed by Diana’s parents and Diana who had already reached. I was late as usual. We started our purchase at Kumaran Silks. Every time I saw Diana I felt her lips were inviting me to taste them. I resisted temptation, but I knew I couldn’t do that for long. I kept admiring her reflection in one of the mirrors as she was trying out a saree, when I heard her dad talking over phone.

“Yes, Angel! Where are you? We are at Kumaran Silks. Please come soon.”

He then turned towards his wife and said, “Angel is on the way, will be here in a few minutes.”

“Uncle, we will go to some other shop” I told him shaking my head in disappointment as I wasn’t convinced with the saree varieties.

“Wait, Son! We will go after Angel comes.” He said.

Angel... The name brought about livid and vivid thoughts in my mind. I tried to hide my excitement and put up a straight face.

“Fine, Uncle. We will just wait.” I pretended to skim through a few sarees on display.

After a few minutes, I heard my father-in-law saying, “Angel is here”.

I immediately turned towards the entrance of the shop and saw a good



looking, wheat-complexioned lady in a saree walking towards us. My heartbeat increased gradually. MILFs had their unique way of teasing young boys. They needn't do anything, them just being themselves was enough. I felt butterflies twitching in my belly as she approached us.

While I was admiring her, I was interrupted by a voice, "Son, this is Angel."

To my horror, my father-in-law introduced a stout, bald man in his mid-30s to me.

"Wait! Is this Angel?"

"Yes! His name is Angel... Angel Sam. Didn't Diana tell you about him?"

"*Why didn't you tell it's a 'him' in the first place?*" I wanted to ask.

"Diana... Well... she might have forgotten, Uncle! Hi bro!" I gave a customary handshake to him as he smiled at me and accompanied us for the rest of the shopping.

My day dreams were shattered, one more time in a span of two days.

Not being satisfied with suits or party wear designs in five more shops, I finally chose my Wedding attire at Raymonds. We didn't have time to shop for Diana that day. We decided to come again to T. Nagar the following week.

The following week, Diana was accompanied by her mom and aunt and the four of us took the pain of visiting and checking every shop in T. Nagar for Diana's Wedding Saree. Choosing the wedding saree was one of the most cumbersome tasks I had to endure as part of the wedding process. There was no single instance where all four of us liked one particular saree. I cursed the Almighty for creating so many different people with so many different tastes as I grew more and more impatient.

We visited several shops and had seen almost all the sarees in them and had brought their whole warehouse down too! However, Diana was still not convinced with any of the designs. And when rarely she was convinced, I wasn't, and when I was convinced, their entire family wasn't.

Her aunt gave up and left midway, and then, it was just the three of us who continued shopping. We got tired and decided to have lunch at Balaji Bhavan in Pondy Bazar. I ordered full meals, while Diana ordered Chapathi.

"Chapatis for lunch?" I pulled her leg.

"I like it." she replied in her usual soft voice.

"Don't tell me you are dieting." I said rhetorically.

“I am not, and I wouldn’t do that for you, ever... and even if I do, that would be for the wedding photographer.” she said subtly which only I could hear. I giggled and her mom immediately asked what transpired between us. I had to convince her that nothing funny happened, but just that I got reminded of an old irrelevant joke. She didn’t believe and looked at her daughter. Moms and daughters have their own code language and talked through their eyes. Since I couldn’t understand an iota of it, I continued with my lunch. We had a sumptuous meal. Her mom paid the bill refusing my offer to pay for it. As we came down confused whether to continue our pursuit or to retire for the day, I got a call from my mom who was in Trichy.

“Where are you?” she asked perturbed.

“Shopping at T. Nagar, Mom. Why?”

“Stop everything at once and rush back home immediately.” she urged and her voice sounded quite alarmed.

***RRR***

## Chapter 7 **Gone Girl**

I knew the alarm would go off if I broke the emergency exit box, but I had no other choice. I went close to it and was about to hit it open with my bare hands, when I heard a beep sound. I stopped abruptly and looked at the glass door ahead. It opened and a tall, rugged man, wearing shorts, with uncombed hair and large thick glasses came out. I thought of trespassing, but decided against it. The security guard came running from his desk to catch hold of me, as the man who came out of the door glared at me.

“Listen Mr., whoever you are... Do you know a particular Diana working here?” I almost threatened the guy who came out.

“Diana? I am not so sure. I am new here. What’s with her now?” he asked bewildered.

“Dude... I am her husband. She works in the 2 to 10 shift in this very office, in this very cubicle. It is 11.30 PM now, and she has still not reached home. Her mobile is not reachable. It is, in fact, switched off. She was last seen on Whatsapp at 8 PM tonight. Could you just check if she is in?” I ranted continuously.

“I don’t even know who she...”

I grabbed him by his collar before he could finish and then let go of him.

“If not you, someone else might surely be knowing her whereabouts. Just go in and check, now!” I almost ordered him. He was visibly shaken and took some time to compose himself and adjusted his collar. He agreed to go in and check and I went along with him.

The security guard now understood the gravity of the situation and didn't prevent me from entering through the door. I looked back at him and thanked him with a nod.

The rugged guy ran straight to his TL and asked him if he knew Diana.

“Diana? Small? Short hair? Fair?” replied the TL who was a tall stout man wearing a headband.

“Yes! Do you know her?” he continued.

“I do.” replied the TL.

“Do you know where she sits?” I intervened.

He gave me an unconvincing look that meant, “Who the hell are you” and replied saying,

“She usually sits there” pointing to a seat three rows away in that large cubicle and continued “May I know who you are”. I didn't respond to him and ran towards her desk, but to my disappointment, found a guy sitting and working there.

“Diana? Does she sit here? Who are you?” I gasped.

“She usually leaves before I come. We both share this system and I didn't see her today” he replied not knowing why I sounded so desperate. I was losing it completely. I wondered how she could have magically disappeared without a trace. I couldn't take it anymore.

“Have any of you fucking seen her today?” I screamed at the top of my voice.

There was dead silence. Everyone in the office stopped working for a second and looked at me, stunned. I was furious like a crouching tiger with an itch. The TL came towards me and spoke in a soft tone. Everyone's eyes were on the two of us. He tried to console me.

I explained my situation to him. He immediately dialed to Shiva, the coach who worked in the 2 PM to 10 PM shift. Shiva picked the call after four rings. The TL put the phone on speaker.

“Hello, tell me Thomas.” Shiva said from the other end.

“Shiva! What time did Diana leave office today?” Thomas enquired.

“I am not sure of the exact time, but she left early, I am sure of that.” Came the reply.

“Early as in? What time?” Thomas continued.

“Early as in, err... after dinner, I think. She left for dinner and that was the last I saw her for the day.” Shiva dropped the bomb.

“What time?” I pitched in and reiterated the question, as every word of his sent shivers down my spine.

“It should be around 8 PM. Why, any problem? And who is this, by the way?” he enquired on hearing my voice.

“Nothing, Shiva. No one. You get back to sleep.” Thomas said and cut the call.

I felt like the spinning world suddenly came to a screeching halt under my feet. I couldn't stand properly. I was weak in my knees, lost my balance, slipped and fell down. A few people ran towards me, sprinkled water on my face, gave me some water to drink and sat around me. I was shivering and was on the verge of crying. I felt a surge of pain at the back of my head, where I was operated for concussion.

“Any one of you know what could have happened to her?” I asked the people surrounding me in a pleading tone. Unfortunately, everyone shook their head. The TL called a few of Diana's colleagues and checked with them. They all gave the same unanimous answer that she had left at 8 PM. Where did she go?

“Thomas, can you check with folks she had dinner with? She usually has it with a girl called” I tried hard to remember and then got her name “Harsha, yes. Harsha.”

Thomas didn't have Harsha's number. Luckily, one of the other colleagues had and Thomas dialed her number. To add to my frustration, Harsha didn't pick the call. We kept on calling until she picked up.

Finally, we heard her, “Hello, Harsha here”

“Harsha, Thomas here. Sorry for disturbing, but did you have dinner with Diana today?” he was straight to the point.

“No, Thomas! She went with some other friend...But why are you asking at the middle of the night? It's almost 12 now” she had her own concerns.

“Some other friend? Do you know who that is?”

“No I don't know him. I have never seen him before.” Harsha gave me the second shocker. Diana had left office at 8 PM and she had supposedly had dinner with a stranger. I hoped against hope that everything should be alright with Diana.

“Ok, fine.” Thomas replied to her.

“Any problem, Thomas?” Harsha was worried.

“Well, yes. She is missing since 8 PM” Thomas finished.

“Whaaaat? Oh, shit!” I could hear her scream. It clearly showed that her sleep vanished with a poof!

I stood up and looked all around. Thomas and the guy in shorts helped me up and supported me to walk. I looked at Diana’s place again. Her red bag was still placed there. I was even more doubtful then and pleaded everyone around.

“Her bag is still here. She wouldn’t have left without her bag. Can someone please check if she is around? Maybe, in the rest room, or canteen, or somewhere? Could any of you girls please check if anyone has fainted in the WC?”

A few girls immediately rushed to check in the rest room. I felt guilty to trouble them during their office hours. But, I felt that work could wait as it was a life or death situation for me. I waited desperately for them to return with a good news. Meanwhile, a few others ran to the canteen downstairs to check.

For once, I wished Diana had fainted. For once, I wished she had broken her leg and was admitted in the company’s nursing room. For once, I wished it all to be one huge prank of hers. For once I wished it was some insanely unique anniversary surprise planned by her. For once I wished that the friend of hers with whom she had dinner was someone that could be trusted. I simply wished that she was just around.

After ten minutes, they all returned disappointed and concerned. I didn’t know what to respond to them, but thanked them for the help, anyways. I took her bag and walked towards the entrance thoroughly dejected.

“Do you want any help, Sir?” Thomas asked me as he came to open the door for me.

“No, I’m fine Thomas. Thank you.” I replied slowly. *After all, what else could he do?*

“If you feel it is appropriate, we can register a police complaint. She has been missing for 4 hours now.” someone from the crowd said.

It was definitely a valid suggestion. So much could happen in four hours. I gazed at the person who suggested this.

“Do you know anyone in the police department?”

“Yeah, but it is not possible right now. We will have to wait and lodge an FIR in morning.” he continued.

I wasn't sure if I could wait that long. I was worried about what could happen to her by then. I wasn't even sure if she had had her dinner. She could never endure hunger. Just then, Harsha's words rung in my ears again, "She went with some other friend!" Who was this some other friend, why didn't she inform me of that. There were so many thoughts running in my mind. I trusted Diana with all my heart. Diana eloping with someone would not happen even in the wildest of my dreams. If she had not willingly gone with him, she should have been definitely forced to go along with him. What could have forced her? I thought hard, but couldn't get a clear picture in my mind.

A picture, a recording, CCTV recording! It struck me suddenly. I whizzed around with a new sense of hope and asked Thomas excitedly, "Can I get the CCTV recording of the people leaving or entering your cafeteria?"

"Yes, but that's with the security team. Tanvir, please take him there."

Thomas ordered the rugged guy in shorts. We both headed to the Security Surveillance Room in the second floor.

The security in there was half asleep. As we entered the room, he suddenly woke up and sat upright, shocked as though someone poured hot water on his face.

"Prohibited area, Sir! Get out!" he ordered. I was in no mood to talk to him. Tanvir explained my situation to him. The security guard then agreed and kept insisting on Tanvir dropping a mail later as protocol. Tanvir nodded in agreement.

We started to check all the recordings of the cafeteria since 7.45 PM. We played it first in fast forward mode, then slow motion, but nowhere could we find Diana or her stranger friend.

"Why is this so? Where could they be?" I questioned Tanvir.

He replied with an expression of 'How would I know'. I turned towards the security guard.

"This is just the recording of Galarena's pantry area." he said.

"I asked for the Ascendas cafeteria's recording." I insisted thoroughly annoyed. "That's what Harsha said right?" I asked Tanveer. He nodded in agreement.

"We don't have it, Sir." he shook his head.

"But, why?"

"That is a public area. It belongs to Ascendas management. We don't have any control over that. I work for Galarena" he explained it all.

“Is there a camera over there? In the cafeteria?” I was pissed off.

“Yes, there is. But we don’t have access to it. Only the building admin has.”

“Who the heck is that? Call him.” I ordered impatiently.

Tanvir was constantly looking at his watch, and so not to trouble him further, I asked him to leave. The security dialed up the building admin and put the phone on speaker. I explained my need to him but he started talking rules much to my frustration.

“Sir, this is not a public property. I can’t show these videos to random individuals. If you want to view it, get me a written permission from my manager, or get an approval mail from him. By the way, do you work in Ascendas?”

He was asking way too many questions at such a crucial time. Without much choice, I looked at the security guard and sighed. He gave me his system and I wrote a mail to the building admin’s boss.

I wasn’t sure if his boss would even check the mail, but waited for his reply with bated breath, as the system showed him to be online. People at times tend to forget that the processes exist to help people. I lost my patience after few minutes and rushed towards the building admin’s room, guided by the security.

I reached and knocked on his door. He opened after a few seconds. I barged in and explained my situation to him without allowing him to talk much. He was again talking rules, and then, I waved a 500 rupees note on his face.

*Wherever rules talked, money talked better.*

Within seconds I got access to all videos. The security guard asked me to swear on my long dead grandma, that I would never ever tell about this incident to anyone, anywhere, anytime. I obliged. I started viewing all the videos, one by one, and in one particular video, I saw her. It was indeed Diana, in the same churidar she wore that day and there was an unknown guy beside her.

I asked the admin to zoom in on him. He was dark, had a short hair, and wore specs. It was a familiar face. I had seen him somewhere before, but couldn’t remember where. I took a snap of him in my mobile. They both maintained a considerable distance, and Diana’s face was pale. She definitely wasn’t comfortable with him. *Was she kidnapped? If yes, then what for, and why?* The thought of her missing was hard enough to accept, she being kidnapped was nearly improbable to digest. Who was that guy so familiar, yet so unfamiliar. I had several doubts in my mind.

I thanked the admin and came out. I stood in the middle of the cafeteria not knowing what to do next, and what fate had in store for me. I wanted to call and inform my parents, but decided against it as it was late into the night. Prabhu would be awake by then, but I was skeptical if I could call him not knowing what I am up to. I wanted to drink some water and went near the water filter, when I heard a beep sound from my mobile. I looked at it. It was a message from an unknown number.

“Find Brindha.” were the only words that text read. “Crap”, I uttered and continued drinking water. As I took in a few gulps of water, I looked at the message again.

I would have ignored it as a random wrong number on any other night, but that night, it was different. It was a day of disappointments and surprises. I couldn't dismiss my thoughts to know who it was. I finished the last sip of water and decided to make a call. I dialed that number.

“Naan raja, Naan raja, eppodhum naan raja (I am king, I am king, I will always be king) I heard the ring tone of this Tamil song as someone picked up the phone.

“Hello.” I uttered and waited in anticipation.



## Chapter 8

### **Every Family Has a Fight**

September 27, 2014

“Hello, mom! Wait. Don't panic! Just tell me what happened. I am not in Trichy, alright? I am in Chennai and am shopping. I told you in the morning, didn't I?”

I couldn't understand the reason behind my mom's anxiety and continued talking to her in a composed manner trying to console her.

“I know all that. Just catch the next available auto or cab, get back home and make yourself safe. There is a riot breaking out in Chennai.”

“Why?”

“Because the Chief Minister has been arrested and is in Bengaluru jail now. I told you not to go for shopping today, didn't I?” My mom was breathless as she bombarded me with all the news.

I stood near the bus stop shocked. The happy shopping had turned into a 'survival for life' experience within a few minutes. At a far distance, I could



see shops being closed. Hooligans pelted stones and started attacking a few stores that were still open.

Diana got a call from her dad asking all of us to leave immediately. A bus near their area in Ambattur had been burnt. Chaos presumed. Busy roads and buses were being abandoned, as people began to rush home for safety. There was a sense of urgency and panic in everyone's face. I had to react instantly to escape from the impending danger. I booked a cab for Diana and her mom, and one brave driver accepted the request.

Diana's mom insisted that I accompany them to her place as it was close by and I hadn't got a cab yet. But I declined as I was skeptical of staying at their home before marriage. Finally, they left hesitantly as they were unable to convince me as much as they tried.

Meanwhile, I kept getting zillion Whatsapp messages and calls detailing the atrocities happening around the city and urging me to return home safely. Finally, I caught an auto that was heading towards Thiruvannamiyur.

"How much, Anna?" I asked him.

"Four hundred." he demanded. I was ready to pay even 4000 for this thrilling ride!

I got in without a question. As we were en route to my place, I started talking to him to understand the riot situation unfolding in the state.

"They broke the glasses of several autos, stoned several shops and forced them to shut down. The city will be in a mess today and tomorrow. Be safe, young man! Don't roam around carelessly." he insisted. The young man in me wanted to be rebellious and wander around all evening.

When I reached Thiruvannamiyur RTO, there wasn't even a single tea shop open. I did not have any food stocked at home either. Diana insisted that I buy dinner before I reached home as all shops were expected to be closed that evening. Clueless about how I would manage dinner, I reluctantly reached my room convinced that I had no choice, but fast for the night. The dreary seemed to drag along at snail's pace. I wondered why time behaved in a relative manner. Whenever I wanted it to go slow, it went at a rapid pace, and when I wanted it to rush through and bring me the next day, it refused to budge an inch and kept enjoying my trauma. It was well past my dinner time and my stomach growled with hunger. It looked as if my small intestine would gobble up my large intestine if I did not cater to it soon.

With hunger displaying its supremacy so imminently, I decided to seek

refuge in social media to see if I could figure some way out.

“I haven’t had anything for dinner. Too hungry! God, help me please!” I posted on Facebook.

Within minutes, I got a response with the address of an All-Night Hotel which was catering to helpless victims like me that evening. I put Diana’s anxiety to rest when I informed her that my dinner was taken care of.

Only after I had dinner that night could Diana finally get some sleep. That’s when I realized I had found a girl, who was as caring and loving as my mom. Not just my wedding, but even my wedding shopping in itself, had ended up being a story worth narrating to my grandchildren!

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Time flew in a jiffy. Diana and I were married on the 1<sup>st</sup> of November in our hometown. Our marriage happened in the same hall where my parents’ wedding had taken place several years ago. Prabhu was my best man and stood beside me through the entire proceedings. Diana and I had to stand and pose for all those photos wearing that fake smile throughout. The never-ending crowd made it impossible for me to satiate my hunger. The dining hall seemed very inviting as the appetizing aroma of delicious food spread to the main hall. I longingly looked at the delicious food on display when my office gang came on to the stage.

“The wife on one side and the keep on the other, enjoy Robin.” one of them pulled my leg.

“Oh, come on! Not now.” I signaled them to keep quiet.

“You know, Prabhu was quite upset all along the journey, like he has lost the love of his life.” they continued.

“It is because he wouldn’t have my company for weekend movies anymore.” I argued.

“Come on now, seriously, aren’t you both a gay couple?” one of them giggled and Diana immediately gave me a warning glare. I shook my head desperately.

“That’s enough, your photo is done, just get down from the stage, NOW!” I said with a serious face.

“Just kidding, Rob! Diana, these two are best friends who always roam together, gossip together and will do anything for each other. Rob is indeed lucky to have a friend like Prabhu. I am sure that you will get jealous of

their friendship.” one of them said as they left the stage.

“Friends... Never mind...” I gave a sheepish smile as I looked at Diana helplessly. She nodded and sighed, but shot a deadly glare at Prabhu.

After all the proceedings of the wedding, we returned to our home in Trichy. Despite being tired and worn out, I was still excited about the approaching night. Our relatives accompanied us to our home uninvited, and by the time everyone left, it was 9.30 PM.

Unlike what they show in the movies, Diana retired for the day and went into our room early. I was talking to my mom in the kitchen. She gave me two glasses of milk and asked me to take it in. I never expected this role reversal. I was nervous as I entered our room and bolted the door. Diana was equally anxious and was waiting for me.

I placed the milk glasses on the table and sat next to her on the bed.

Surprisingly, she was quite comfortable.

“It was a long day...” I started.

“I know.” she nodded.

“You know, I had been imagining this night for, Darn!”

As I spoke, I got a call on my mobile.

“Who the hell is calling at this odd hour!?” I muttered as I went to check my mobile that was on the table. It was Prabhu who was calling. “Why him? Why now!” I thought, but ignored the call and returned to the bed, to Diana.

“I had been waiting for this night, Darn...” the phone rang again. It was Prabhu again.

“What now!” I thought and picked the call. I put him on the speaker.

“Is everything alright, Prabhu? You got your train back to Chennai? Any issues with the hotel?” I asked a flurry of questions nervously. I heard many giggles at the other end. I realized that it was a prank call from my office gang.

“I will never forgive you guys for this!”

“Hey Robin! It was Prabhu who gave us the phone and wanted us to call.”

“Prabhu, mark my words! I will barge into your room on your first night.”

“That you can do, but what are you doing now, Rob? Everything alright? Any doubts?” I couldn’t recognize the voice.

“I have done a Ph. D. on this already through video-based learning. Now cut the call right now!” I said grinding my teeth.

“Oooohhhh!” they screamed.

“That’s enough.” I said and was about to cut the call.  
“All the best” they all screamed from the other end.  
I gave a sigh of relief and went back to the bed.  
“Friends...” I gave the dumbest smile.  
“I heard” Diana responded bluntly.  
“Where were we?”  
“You had been waiting for this night for long.” she reminded.  
“Yes, I had been...” I continued when she interrupted.  
“Rob, I have my periods. We won’t be able to do anything today. I am so sorry.” she said.  
“What in the world? Really? Shit man! Why didn’t you tell me before?”  
“I should have, I am sorry.”  
“So, we can’t do anything now?”  
“Nope, I am sorry.”  
“Will it be over before we go for our honeymoon?” I was worried.  
“Yes, honey!”  
“And for today?”  
“Tell me a story.” Diana said as she lied down on the bed.  
“Story?! Well, there was a lucky guy called Robin, and he... well, he... He never thought that he will have this kind of a first night...” Needless to say, I was heartbroken.

After our honeymoon, we shifted to a 1-BHK apartment in Thoraipakkam. As Diana was not comfortable with cooking, I started making sandwiches. They turned out to be really good. She got addicted to them. I cooked breakfast; she cooked dinner. We had lunch at office. Things went quite smooth.

One fine evening, Diana held her stomach and sat in a corner. “What happened, baby?” I asked.

“The usual... Can you please get me a sanitary napkin?” She asked me in a pleading tone.

I would have got the world for her to relieve her pain. This was nothing, or so I thought. I went to the medical shop nearby. I wasn’t sure which brand I

should get and was looking all around when the shopkeeper asked what I wanted.

“That.” I said, pointing my finger and feeling embarrassed to name it.

“Which one of those?” he chuckled.

“Anything that lasts long.” I said. A lady standing next to me giggled. I ignored her, thoroughly feeling uneasy by now.

“Stayfree all night, then!” he said and took one from the shelf, rolled it in a newspaper, put it in a black carry bag and handed it to me. I was amused at the amount of packing that was done to ‘hide’ it. Possibly, most people would by now know what is inside if they see a ‘black carry bag’ with a little package!

Anyways, I felt relieved. I didn’t feel that uncomfortable even while buying a condom!

But I couldn’t forget that sarcastic giggle of that lady. Being a guy, I was embarrassed to ask openly to another guy, how hard it should be for the women to buy sanitary napkins from men in shops. From that day, I vowed to buy the napkins all by myself.

Time flew in a jiffy. My dad retired and my parents came to Chennai to live with us. We moved to a 3-BHK apartment. Before we realized, 7 months had passed since we got married.

One day, my mom called me for a serious conversation.

“Yes, Mom!” I said.

“We should go to the doctor for a check-up for you and her. It has been seven months since your marriage, and there is no sign of her getting pregnant yet.”

“Mom, we haven’t done anything significant yet.” I bit my tongue just realizing what I had uttered.

“Haven’t done anything? What do you mean? What were you doing all these days?” My mom was genuinely worried.

“Mooooommmmm! Come on.” I gave a reaction which meant, ‘Please don’t ask such personal questions. It is embarrassing.’

“Are you happy with her?”

“Of course, why?” I was startled by her question.

“I hope you guess the meaning of ‘happy’ here.”

“Oh, that happy. I do, I do.” I wanted to vanish at the snap of a finger, given a choice.

Nothing could get more awkward than discussing your bedroom stories with your parents! Of course, I was not going to tell her that I had several packets of condoms hidden away in my shelf.

“I wonder what you both were doing all these days then.” my mom contemplated further, much to my annoyance. I didn’t encourage any further conversation and left the place.

Undoubtedly, Indian parents are typically orthodox. They would neither allow us even to watch a smooch scene on TV, nor are we allowed to read or discuss sex. Needless to say, porn movies are banned. But the minute you are married, you are suddenly expected to become a sex expert and father a kid within ten months of wedlock. My parents were no exception.

Diana and I had discussed before our wedding that we needed to spend some time with each other to understand ourselves better, know our preferences and embrace our differences before we stepped into parenthood. Since both of us were of the same opinion, it helped us to bond better.

I was returning from office one day when I got a frantic call from Diana.

“Where are you?” she questioned.

I had just parked my bike then.

“I am on the way, Gubbly. Why? What do you want?”

“Come home, soon! I can’t stay anymore in your house. Find me a hostel immediately. I will live there alone.” she started to weep bitterly.

No matter how much effort men put in, they can never comprehend how and why women react to particular situations in a certain way. I was facing one such moment. I had no clue why Diana was crying bitterly, and why she sounded so desperate. With several thoughts racing in my mind, I rang the door bell. I saw a gallery of slippers lined up outside and sensed that we had guests.

As I entered, I found Diana’s parents sitting in the hall. I welcomed them, excused myself and went into our room, really confused and anxious. Diana had locked herself in the bathroom. I closed the bedroom door and called her out. I was surprised to see her wet cheeks and swollen eyes. I guessed that she should have cried for quite a long time to be in that state of agony. Before she could say anything, I hugged her to comfort her.

“Find me a hostel. I can’t stay here anymore. Definitely not with your mom!”

“Wait, Diana. Relax! Don’t cry and don’t talk like this. Tell me what happened.” I hugged her even more tightly.

“Do you know what your mom told me? Do you know what she said to my parents?” she wept bitterly.

It was hard to console her as she sobbed incessantly. I knew I couldn't get to know anything from her at that stage. I asked her to rest and walked out to the hall where the family had gathered. I pulled a chair and sat amidst our parents. To my surprise and relief, they were talking casually. I felt as if a war zone had suddenly transformed into a tranquil garden after I had entered home. It would have been difficult for anyone to believe that something had gone wrong a few minutes before.

Seeing me confused, Diana's dad began to brief what had happened.

“Nothing much to worry, Rob! We were just discussing about you guys, and Diana got upset, that's all.”

I was shocked. Diana was crying her heart out in the room, and here, they were all being so cool about it! I was desperate to know what exactly happened.

“Your mom was telling how Diana was wearing tight jeans to the office during night shifts, and how that is quite risky these days. Then, Diana's mom was saying how you had made her cut her hair.” he sighed disappointedly.

I looked at my mom. My mom was in no mood to even look at me. She stared at the wall and was clearly disinterested in any further conversation. My dad interrupted.

“Misunderstandings do happen. It just happened unintentionally. Let us all forget it.”

Diana's mom spoke her share now, “You were the one who made her cut her hair. Is that how a married woman behaves? Wearing such tight pants and cutting hair like sluts?” Her blatant questions shook me.

“It was not just *my decision*. It was *our* decision. I gave her the freedom that she lacked in your house.” I tried explaining to Diana's mom when her dad came to my rescue.

“Don't talk about it, Jesse. Even in college, she wanted to have short hair, and she used to wear jeans. But, I too feel it is not right to do all this after marriage.”

‘Modernity is not in the attire,’ Diana's words kept lingering in my mind.

Then, Diana's dad spoke to my mom, “Just today, I came to know that even you are against her wearing modern clothes. I thought you did not mind that at all.”

My mom didn't reply. I didn't know what to do. I was caught in a complex web, an entangled web, so fragile that I could neither escape from it, nor break it open. I kept silent as I felt that was the best thing to do when in doubt.

"Instill some wisdom in your daughter's mind." my mom told her dad. He nodded grimly, and they decided to leave. We all stood up for prayer and called out to Diana. Diana's dad dutifully advised his daughter to behave as my mom pleased. Just then, my mom retorted, "Ask her to apologize to me."

"Why?" I questioned.

"She screamed at me and asked me to leave the home." my mom fumed. That was when I started realizing the gravity of the situation. I sank down on the sofa. It was all too much on my face in one go. I couldn't think clearly, so I chose not to react either. Never even in my dreams did it occur to me that Diana, of all people, would be so disrespectful to elders. From what I had known of her so far, she was the softest and the most obedient girl I had ever come across. Diana's dad insisted that she apologize to my mom, but she kept refusing vehemently. Finally, she ran into the bedroom once again in tears and slammed the door.

Without much choice, Diana's parents departed solemnly. I still didn't have the strength to move from the sofa.

"Did she really tell you that, Mom?" I asked genuinely hoping to hear a 'NO'.

"You heard me well. That little wimp told me exactly what I said. How old is she? To disrespect me like that and having the audacity to ask me to go away from MY own home! Who the hell does she think she is?"

I tried to calm her down in vain.

My mom then narrated what had transpired between all of them while I was not there.

My mom was complaining to Diana's mom about her dressing for late night shifts when Diana suddenly lost her temper and wanted to leave our house. My mom had authoritatively asked her to go in, and she had retorted this way in the spur of the moment.

I didn't know how to react. I looked at my mom. She was quite shaken by the time she finished explaining everything to me. She could not take a word from Diana or anyone anymore. I hugged her.

I tapped our bedroom door, and Diana slowly opened it. She was still



crying. So, I did not want to shout at her.

“Whatever could have happened, you still shouldn’t have spoken this way to my mom. There should be no compromise in respecting elders. Don’t you think it is inappropriate to talk the way you did? I want you to apologize. How would you feel had I said the same to your parents in your house? Will that be fair?”

“Rob, there is only so much I can take in. Not anymore. Now, listen to me. You decide whether you want your parents or me. If you want to choose your parents over me, then find me a hostel. I cannot live in hell for the rest of my life.”

“What the heck? What did they even do to you to take such a strong step? Do you want me to shout to bring some sense to you? My mom doesn’t want you to get into trouble. You are returning late from office, you never know what will happen. Why are you behaving this way?” I wasn’t sure what I was talking, but I had to.

“I have to be presentable at my workplace, Rob. What is wrong in it? What’s wrong in wearing a jean?”

“Nothing wrong in it, but modernity is not in the attire, remember?”

“Come on!”

“Diana, you know what my mom told when you cut your hair. She said it suits you very well and makes you look good. More than me, she admired your new look. I am pretty sure if she is saying something like this, there should be some reason behind it. Could be that the list of serial killings and rapes happening in the city is troubling her. Why don’t you think in that angle?”

“Nobody is going to rape me in my office!”

“Most of the rape victims are attacked by people whom they know well, like cab drivers and stuff. Take the case of Nirbhaya.”

“That’s the problem with the society, Rob! The problem is with your eyes, not in the dress I wear! Even in the case of Nirbhaya, it is the rapist’s cheap attitude that cost her life. Not her attire. Everyone victimizes the woman and asks her to hide behind doors rather than hang the convict to death immediately! When will we start addressing the criminals directly rather than make women a victim for someone else’s crime?”

“I am not asking you to not wear modern clothes. Wear it, flaunt your body, but remember, there is no replacement for elegance. From what my mom told, it was clear that she is genuinely worried about the timing in which

you are wearing the costume, not the costume in itself. Be a roman when you are in Rome. Above all, I will get you good salwars and tops. You will look classy in that.”

“I am still not convinced why I should change.”

“Well, then sit down and think calmly. I hope you have something called as brain. Think what I will do if someone kidnaps you or rapes you someday!”

“Rob, what are you even talking?”

“You first apologize to my mom.”

“That I can’t.” Diana was adamant.

I did not know what to say. My mom had been the most important person all my life. Like any other son, I loved her the most and respected her the most. When someone talked to my mom that way, I would lose my cool and would beat the pulp out of that person. But that day, it was different. I couldn’t even bring myself to scold Diana. I couldn’t even bring myself to slap her. I was trying to talk sense into her. I was growing up. In a fight between mother-in-law and daughter-in-law, the best thing a son could do is to not take sides and not get involved.

“Diana, listen to me... Do this for me, just this once at least. Apologize to her immediately. She is an elder, and we are a family, remember? These things sometimes happen, unintentionally. I am asking you to apologize for behaving badly to an elder, which was definitely not the right thing to do and you know it!”

“I won’t!” Diana screamed at the top of her voice.

I didn’t know what to do. I knew for sure that what Diana did was wrong. No matter what, she shouldn’t have disrespected my mom. I felt dejected and was quite tired by now. I just sank down on the bed.

After a few minutes, a hand fell on my chest, and Diana turned me towards her side and kissed me. “Okay, I will apologize, and that will be just for you. But when I am back, I will find myself a hostel and vacate this house.” she got up from the bed, unlocked the door and went straight to the kitchen. She apologized to my mom, and then to my dad too, and again rushed back to our room and fell on the bed, crying.

I went to my mom who was still in the kitchen and said, “Mom, Diana has apologized. Shall we forget this whole incident and make peace with each other?”

“I am in no mood to forgive anyone.”

“Mom, come on now!”

“It was not a heartfelt apology, Rob! You know it. You both will never understand that all that I do and ask is for your good!”

“I know, Mom! I don’t know why she behaved that way. I am sorry.”

“Had I talked this way to my mother-in-law, your dad would have beaten the pulp out of me.”

“Mom, I do not believe that hitting a woman is the sign of being a ‘Man’, and you taught me that, by the way. I am just following your teachings.”

“I know, but the Bible also says, ‘Spare the rod and spoil the child!’”

“She isn’t a child.”

“But you treat her like one, Rob. If not for you, I would have shifted back to Trichy the moment she asked me to leave. Why should I sit here and listen to all this at my age when you are not even defending me in front of her?”

“I did defend you, Mom! I promise on her behalf that she wouldn’t wear such clothes late in the night. And I apologize again on her behalf.” I huffed.

“I can never forget this Rob, remember that.” my mom said and continued to cook. I felt bad for her. I couldn’t find a genuine reason for that weird behavior of Diana. I sat at the dining table. My dad was already seated there, having his dinner.

“Sit down and eat. You must be hungry.” my dad spoke calmly to me.

“Dad, I don’t know...”

“You don’t have to say anything. Every family has its fights, and it is not new to anyone that the mom-in-law and daughter-in-law fight top them all. Just keep silent. All will be well soon.”

“I am not sure what to say. When will mom become normal?”

“That may take few days. Maybe, we both should take a break and go to Trichy and let you guys live alone for some time in peace, and more importantly, in privacy.”

“Nothing like that, Dad! I need all of you. I am dependent on all of you. Just don’t talk about leaving us now.”

“Let’s see.” he said blankly ignoring my pleading eyes.

“You should have been here and listened to how Diana screamed. The entire block would have heard that. How true is the saying that the softest ones make the loudest noise! Even I was baffled, Rob.”

“I am sorry, Dad. I will ensure that does not repeat ever again.” I begged.

“Make sure your mom doesn’t go through this again.” he told me firmly.

I was pretty sure that it was going to take quite some time and a lot of effort

from my side to pacify my mom.

Diana and my mom's relation got strained since that incident. They almost stopped talking to each other. The house was a mess for nearly a week after this. Diana was still adamant about finding a hostel nearby. But, I took a firm stand on that issue and never obliged to her plea of living alone. Diana slowly accepted the truth in what my mom had said.

In accordance with Murphy's Law, bad times don't come alone. When one thing goes wrong, the rest of your world crumbles down along with it too! My life was no different to this theory.

Two weeks later, Diana was visibly upset and was longing to talk to me when I returned home. I saw her sullen face and hoped with all my heart that there was no more disagreement in the house again while I was away.

"Any problem with anyone?" that was the first thing I asked. "No."

There was no emotion left in her face.

"Then, why do you look so dull and disturbed?" I was worried. "I am not sure how to say it."

"Just say it." I insisted impatiently.

"Rob, I am afraid I am suffering from cancer." she uttered in an

emotionless tone with a dreaded concern buried within. *RRR*

## Part 2

# The Crush

### Chapter 9 Deal for Diana

I was concerned with the message to 'Find Brindha' from the unknown number and dialed to it, hoping to find a lead to save Diana.

"Hello" I uttered and waited in patience.

"Hello" a male voice said from the other end in an enthused tone.

"Who... Who are you?" I trembled.

"Relax, Mr. Robin!" he talked as he if he knew me well.

"How do you know my name?" I wasn't comfortable with the call.

"Huh... I know everything about you." He boasted.

Silence. An uncomfortable pause ensued as I waited anxiously for the stranger to continue.

"I know that you went out from your office this evening to the Kolkata chat shop nearby, and had a *pani poori* and a *pav bhaji*. I know that you returned home at 8.30 PM. I know that you were planning for an anniversary gift for your wife. I also know about the girl in the next street inviting you for sex. I know that you waited for your wife with bated breath near your apartment gate by 10.45 PM, and I am aware that right now you are standing at her office." he finished.

I was stunned. Even the slightest thought of someone watching me all through the evening sent shivers down my spine. I wondered how he knew everything about me. He should have sent someone to follow me all along. I also guessed he might have tapped into my browser. I knew it could be done, but was shocked to know that I was subjected to it. *Oh and my browser history, Heck!* I stood frozen and speechless while he continued.

"Are you still on the call Robin?" he asked in a chilling tone.

I was thinking hard on who it could be and what gain he could have in tracking me. I gathered some courage and spoke.

"Who are you? What do you want?"

"You want all the answers so quickly, don't you? Have some patience." He said in his measured tone.

"Bloody tell me who you are now!" I lost my cool.

“Do you think it’s so easy? I have waited for this day for the past six months. Six months, Mr. Robin! That’s a long time, right? I would naturally expect you to wait for some time.”

The stranger was taking it too far.

“Why are you doing this to me?” I implored.

“Because I need my reward” I could hear a faint smile at the other end.

I wasn’t sure who he was and why he had been waiting for this day for six months. Even though at the back of my mind I guessed that he should have kidnapped my wife, I couldn’t bring myself to ask him about it on his face. I wasn’t someone who would cross path with anyone at any point of time. I had not even got myself into a fist fight. With that being the case, I couldn’t think of any incident that would warrant my wife to be kidnapped.

“What reward? How much ransom do you want?” I asked.

“How much can you give?” he shot back.

“Everything I have is for my wife. Take everything, leave her.” I pleaded.

“I never said your wife is with me, did I?”

“Just stop this word play now, will you?”

“The game has not even started, Mr. Robin!”

“For heaven’s sake, tell me what you want! Take everything I have. Just don’t harm my wife.”

“Not a good bargain, Mr. Robin. Not at all! Money is not what interests me.” he paused.

“What is it that you want then?” I was getting more and more irritated.

“I need something else.”

“Tell me already.”

“So, do you agree to my deal?”

“I do. Whatever it is, tell me straight. Don’t beat around the bush.” I had a strong instinct that he had kidnapped Diana and was using her as bait. I wasn’t sure what ransom he would ask. *Whatever be it, I will give it away to save her.*

“Do you realize that I have already messaged you what I want?” he asked.

“Find Brindha?” I questioned.

“Exactly.” he replied.

“But, who the fuck is Brindha? I have absolutely no clue who she is, and you are asking me to find her. Have you gone crazy?”

“You don’t remember Brindha? Your best friend and your supposed crush?” he asked sarcastically.

“The one who worked at Bangalore VCS?” The word ‘crush’ helped me to identify her.

“Aahaa... Now we are talking.” He said in a serious tone.

“But, where is she?”

“How would I know? You have to find her for me.”

“Who are you? Her lover? Or brother? Or husband?”

“What if I am her father?” he said and paused.

I didn’t reply.

“Listen, Robin. My identity has to be the least of your worry now. Buckle up and find Brindha. How you would do that is your problem. I don’t know where, but I sure know by when.”

“By when?” I asked him.

“How long do you know her?”

I thought hard. *How long did I know her?* I knew her from my 12<sup>th</sup> standard days. That should be around,

“Maybe, 11 years?” I gave my response to him.

“That’s quite a long time. I don’t have that much time with me, but I can give you 11 hours. 1 hour for each year you know her. Beg, borrow, steal - do anything you want, to find her before 11 AM tomorrow, and your wife will come back to you safely.”

I looked at my watch, it was sharp 12 midnight.

“Where should I come after I find Brindha?”

“I am not dumb to tell you that, now. But, be sure that I will be monitoring everything you do. So, don’t try to act over smart. Find her and I will contact you”

“Alright, I will locate her through my contacts and let you know where she is “

“Locate Brindha virtually and I will give you back an augmented reality version of your wife”

“What do you mean?” I was confused.

“I want you to find Brindha in her physical form. Meet her in person, greet her and then reach me, no ‘locating’ business. No cheating business. How you find her is up to you.” he responded coldly.

“Fine. I need to have a word with my wife to be sure that she is safe and that you indeed have abducted her”

“Trust me Robin. She is fine and yes, I have kidnapped her. She was crying all evening calling out to you and has just slept, exhausted. I wouldn’t harm

her. You are my TARGET!” He finally agreed that he had kidnapped her. In some corner of my heart, I was happy that Diana was alive.

“At least send me her photo.” I demanded.

“With her clothes on or without?” he giggled.

“If you so much as touch her hair!” I screamed in an agitated tone.

“What will you do, my boy? Whaaaat!” he shouted back threateningly.

“Listen, Mr. Whoever you are... Remember this. I will go to any extent to save my wife, and if I know that you have harmed her even in the slightest possible way, I will give it back to you tenfold.”

“You are forgetting that you are talking to your wife’s captor. I give the orders here. Not you!”

I took a deep breath and composed myself.

“I have no contact with Brindha. The last I know of her; she was in Australia. How could I meet her in person within 11 hours? Why am I the target for all this?” I rattled all my questions.

“Do you love your wife, Mr. Robin?”

“I wouldn’t be running like a headless chicken and talking to an unknown stranger at the middle of the night about finding a girl who I have lost touch with, if I didn’t love my wife!”

“Then, stop asking questions and go find Brindha.” He gave his final order.

“How can I?” I had my genuine doubt.

“Why should I bother? And by the way, what’s the date and time now?”

“12.01, Oct 20.” I was getting frustrated.

“20th was yesterday, Mr. Robin. Today is the 21st. Do you know what’s special about today?”

I was totally blank and couldn’t think of anything. Even our anniversary was 11 days ahead.

“I have no clue.” I replied.

“It is Brindha’s birthday, and your 11 hours to ‘Find Brindha’ mission has already started ticking.”

“What in the world is happening to me!” I uttered aloud, thinking I was talking to myself.

“And don’t be so foolish to go to the cops. I hope you wouldn’t when your wife’s life is in danger.” saying, the stranger cut the call.

My whole world turned upside down. Diana had been kidnapped by some unknown loafer who claimed the reason for the abduction was me. There were too many knots to undo, and I felt they were quite complicated and



incomprehensible. Who was that caller? Why should he kidnap my wife? What did she do? How did Brindhya come into the picture? Why did all this happen today? My mind whirled in confusion, and I was unable to draw any conclusion.

I looked at my phone. It had 83% battery strength. I wasn't sure if it could withstand for the next 11 hours. It was going to be one long sleepless night. Even though he warned me not to contact the cops, I felt I had to inform them of this. I didn't know anyone in the police department nor did I have friends whose fathers were cops. Without having any other option, I searched for the contact number of the local police station on the mobile internet and noted it. I dialed the number anxiously and waited for someone to pick, but there was no response. I then dialed again, and it got connected to the local police station.

"Hello, Sir! My name is Robin. Someone has kidnapped my wife. Please help. Please do help!" I pleaded breathlessly.

"Calm down, please. Don't panic. Please give me more details." an officer answered from the other end in a subdued tone.

"She is 25, short, wore a black full sleeve dress today. She is fair, has short hair and doesn't wear any jewels. She works for Galarena and has been missing since 8 PM last evening, Sir."

"Missing since 8 PM? Why are you complaining so late then?" he doubted.

"Just now, I got a call from someone stating that they have kidnapped my wife." I said breathlessly.

"What is the number from which you got the call?" he enquired.

"Wait, Sir!" I checked my call log and gave the number to the cop.

"Fine. Let me trace the number and get back to you. Give me your contact number."

I told my number, and the officer cut the call.

I felt slightly relieved. My throat was parched by now. I wanted to drink water again and took the glass from the water filter.

I was waiting for the cop to call me back. I wasn't sure where the nearest police station was. I wasn't sure if the officer took a FIR complaint. I prayed to the Almighty to help trace the kidnapper as soon as possible.

After a few seconds, my mobile buzzed. I picked up instantly. "Hello Sir, were you able to identify the caller?" I asked anxiously.

"And I thought you would be a gentleman agreeing to the deal, Mr. Robin. What did I tell you?"

It was the kidnapper and he knew that I had breached the contract and had called to the cops.

“Shit!” I said under my breath.

“You are making me angry, and I am losing all the hope I have for you.” He said in a disappointed tone.

“I am so sorry. It was a mistake” I uttered as I felt the jitters in my body.

“I called to say that your number is in my control now. I was the one who answered the last call. Every call you make from your mobile will reach me. To reiterate it again Robin, you are being monitored and followed. Mr. Robin, if you still don’t believe how serious I am, should I send you, your wife’s little finger for proof?” he was dead serious.

“No! Noo. Please don’t do anything to her. I am sorry.” I panicked.

“Haven’t you watched any kidnapping movies before? Don’t behave like a nut case anymore.” he said furiously.

“What do you want me to do? Who are you? What is your name?”

“I already told you what I want you to do. Remember, every single call of yours is being traced. Don’t even think of reaching the cops again. All your calls go through me. As for my name, call me LOSER” saying, he cut the call.

I broke down helplessly. I sat on the platform nearby not knowing where to start and what to do. Coming to terms with the recent happenings was hard. I wished it was all just a bad dream. I pinched myself. It really hurt. It wasn’t a dream.

I called my best friend Prabhu, but the call went to the LOSER by default.

“Listen loser. I will find Brindha for you, but just don’t do this to every call of mine. I need to contact my friend Prabhu. He is not a cop, for God’s sake. He is someone who is just going to help me.” I was exasperated.

“Tell the number. I will connect.” he said.

I wondered how the LOSER could control all the digital devices that I was using. I desperately wished that I could throw away all my electronic goods. I would then become non-traceable. The Loser connected the call to Prabhu. Prabhu was my ‘4 AM friend’ and the go to person for me, every time I was in trouble. He answered sleepily.

“Prabhu, I am in a big soup, and I need your help” I spoke like a possessed man.

“What happened, Rob?” he sounded alarmed as soon as he heard my tense voice.

“Diana has gone missing since 8 PM today. I just got a call that she has been... she has been...” I couldn’t bring myself to finish the words. The LOSER was still listening to my conversation. I continued hoping that Prabhu would somehow understand my situation. “Listen, I need your help. We need to find another girl. We need to find Brindha.” I told Prabhu “Have you lost your mind?” Prabhu replied irritated and confused. “Prabhu, trust me on this. Please try to understand. My phone calls are being traced. There is only so much I could tell you. Just help me find this girl, Brindha before 11 AM tomorrow. Only then will I get Diana back, please understand.”

“Okay, where are you? Where should I come?” Prabhu was always ready to help.

“Wait. I will come to your house now. Tie your dog. Keep the gates open. I will be there.” I said and pressed the ‘end call’ button.

I then called the LOSER and asked if I could go to Prabhu’s house.

“Remember, I follow every move of yours. I don’t care whom you go to as long as they aren’t the cops.” he replied warningly.

I opened the photo gallery on my phone and looked at the picture of the man who was accompanying Diana at the cafeteria. His face looked like that of a loser. I took Diana’s bag, got my Pan card back from the security guard and started my bike to reach Prabhu’s place in Madipakkam within 20 minutes. The gate was open, and the dog was tied.

I entered in a hurry. Prabhu offered me water and then we both went to his study room where he had his computer.

“Calm down, Man. Why are you in such a hurry? Tell me what happened.” He tried to comfort me.

“I already told you, Prabhu. Diana has been kidnapped. To add to the misery, all my electronic goods are bugged, from my phone to my computer. The kidnapper knows everything I am doing online and is tracing me. Wonder if he knows what I speak as well. But, I can assure you that this kidnapper knows every move of mine! We have to be really careful with our plan of action”

“That we will be, yes, but tell me who you want to find now? Why some random Brindha, and not your wife, Diana?”

“He threatened me with so much conviction, Prabhu. He definitely has Diana in his custody. I know for sure that he is no regular guy. He has planned it all for six months, and I have no clue why. We aren’t dealing

with ‘just’ another guy. Even the call I made you, he was listening. I tried to call the cops, the call went to him. He has bugged my cellphone. He knows what I browsed in my system. He has been watching me all evening and claims he has followed me for almost six months. He has planned it all meticulously through the days. He definitely isn’t some random usual kidnapper. There is a bigger, greater motive behind this. And this guy wanted me to find Brindha, if I have to get back my wife in one piece. He has given me 11 hours to accomplish the task, the clock has started ticking already, Prabhu.” I sputtered.

“And who the hell is this Brindha?” Prabhu was visibly furious by then.

“Prabhu, this is definitely not the right time for flashbacks.” I silenced him.

**RRR**

Chapter 10

### **Brindha– A Flashback**

*Dear Readers of this blog, I am happy to present you with a story that is up close and personal - an autobiographical account of incidents that happened in my life. Please do read and provide your candid feedback, as always – Robin.*

I wasn’t sure if it was winter or autumn then, but a fresh breeze of spring engulfed me, when I saw her sitting along with her gang of friends in the row ahead of us. She was of a medium build, clad in an orange salwar, had long hair, thick eyebrows, sharp nose and attractive lips with a measured smile. We were in that large auditorium attending an interschool talent competition at St. Joseph’s School in Trichy. I was seated along with my school friends waiting for a dance event, to be followed by the overall winners’ announcement.

When my school dance team came up and performed on stage, we all screamed and shouted till our vocal chords cracked, all through the performance, a few in the audience even danced. I saw her closing her ears, unable to bear the noise. I smiled and screamed and whistled even louder. The dance lasted for ten minutes and it got the loudest of applause.

After our team left the stage, we reminisced on how well they had performed. We were being quite vocal as we discussed and were giving hi-

for each other, when that girl turned around and spoke to me in her sweet voice.

“Excuse me.” she said.

“Yes?” I looked at her questioningly.

“You are being loved.” she said without any reaction in her face. “Come again?” I told her. She repeated the same words. “You are being loved.” she stressed on the last word. I lost myself

for a few seconds feeling flattered. I was in seventh heaven. A girl loved me so soon, and said so in front of everyone? What did I do to impress her? Had she fallen for a simple whistle?

‘I don’t love you. I will love only the girl of my mom’s choice,’ I

wanted to say, but no word came out of my mouth. I couldn’t take my eyes off her either. She looked puzzled and turned away. I wanted to boast to the guy sitting next to me that I had won a girl’s heart within just a few seconds and that too without doing anything. I kept gazing at her. But, she had decided not to turn back again.

I sat back and was planning on how to inform this to mom, how to get married and where to go for honeymoon. I was divided between Switzerland and Los Angeles, when I heard a loud cry from the audience for another set of dancers from some other school. ‘Why are they being so loud’ I thought as it struck to me that ‘loud’ and ‘loved’ sounded the same if not pronounced correctly! *Crap.*

My palpitations stopped, my nerves cooled down, and I smiled like a lunatic. I shook my head and kept giggling the whole day, whenever I remembered that silly incident. Our school won the overall championship there and I won second prize for the GK quiz competition, but nothing sank in my mind. I was still yet to come to terms with what I had imagined. Long after the teachers congratulated us and my fellow students lost their voices post celebration cries, I looked in the front row to find her missing. She was gone. I didn’t know which school she belonged to as she had not come in any uniform. I wondered what event allowed her to come in an orange churidhar, should have been some dance performance that I had missed.

I looked around for girls in orange churidhar, but couldn't find any, the rest of them were in uniforms. I felt so bad for not initiating a conversation with her. I could have at least asked her school's name or where she stayed. I felt like a loser. I didn't do anything further to find her whereabouts in the following days, but I could never forget her.

Six Months Later:

It was my first day in 'ASPIRE' tuition center. We were the last

batch in Tamil Nadu to have entrance exams post 12<sup>th</sup> board exams, which would determine our scores, colleges, and thereby our jobs, wives and lives. 'ASPIRE' was a famous institute in Trichy, which prepared us for those dreaded entrance exams. I joined the coaching center along with five of my school friends. Our classes were conducted in K. A. P. Venkataraman School in Thillai Nagar.

On the very first day, I was taken aback to see that same girl again, wearing the same orange salwar. "Does she not have any other outfit?" was the first thing that came to my mind, followed by some inexplicable happiness and a sense of satisfaction of having found her, finally. I believed that destiny and *karma* had a role to play in us meeting again. Life was giving me a second chance. I wanted to go talk to her, but couldn't bring myself to. She left the class as soon as the lectures were over.

I tried to get her attention on the second day, but failed miserably. Unsurprisingly, she didn't seem to remember me and also kept to herself without taking much notice of anyone for that matter. She was clearly studious and focused solely on the purpose of enrolling in the coaching Centre, which was 'to study and score well' in the entrance exams.

I always thought to myself that the person I marry should be a 'perfect' combination of beauty and brains. Needless to say, she seemed to 'perfectly' fit the bill. She was the first and the only girl who made me believe in 'love at first sight', rather, 'second sight' in our case. I was ready to forgo my principle of 'marrying only the girl of my mom's choice' after seeing her, yes, you read it right, even after seeing her. *That's what our movies teach us, don't they?*

The classes continued every weekend and I made sure, I took that seat in the class from where I could monitor every move of hers. It was January 2005 and FB wasn't quite famous, so that was how we men used to stalk women. Through a few friends I came to know that her name was Brindha and that she was studying in the very same school where we had our classes. She stayed somewhere nearby as she used to come to the classes by walk. Unfortunately, we didn't have any common friends and I still hadn't gotten an opportunity to talk to her. One day I managed to stealthily follow her to her house in Thillai Nagar. I maintained a considerable distance as I traced behind her when she was about to get into a large house, which was painted in Orange, in the 3<sup>rd</sup> street of 5<sup>th</sup> cross. I wondered if Orange was their family color. An old man came near the gate to take her in, should have been her grandpa. She jumped up and plucked a neem leaf that was hanging above her head, as she walked in. Strangely the tree was protruding through their compound wall. I turned around and ran away as quickly as I could before she could notice me.

K. A. P. School, where we had our classes, did not have a proper restroom. There were several days where we had to control the urge to pee in order to avoid getting into the nasty smelling, awfully maintained toilets. However, on certain days, we couldn't escape and had to yield to nature's pressing call. One such day, when I was returning from this painstaking 'bio' break, I saw Brindha along with her friend Madhu walking in front of me.

I felt it to be the best opportunity to initiate a conversation with her and spoke to her casually.

“Excuse me, Brindha. How do you guys even study in this school? The restrooms are a mess; they stink so much, there is no water. This is very bad”

To my surprise, Brindha's face expression changed to that of an enthusiastic child as she turned around to respond. I thought she was restrained, but when she started talking, she just rattled non-stop!

“That's the specialty of our school, you know. Forget about boys' restroom, the girls' restroom is even worse! It's out in the open. Imagine!”

“I don’t want to imagine. And there are no fans in the classrooms as well. It is hectic with summer approaching.” I continued my list of woes.

“See, even if there are any fans, they wouldn’t function. They are just showpieces. Only one fan works, and that is placed in the principle room.” she couldn’t have certified her school better.

“Ha ha ha... I never knew you talk so much. I thought you were a quiet girl.”

“Ask about my school, I can give you lectures.” she said and left along with her friend, who stood silent for most of the conversation.

I was surprised with myself to be able to talk so easily with my ‘crush’. [I considered her as ‘crush’ by then, was too timid to think of ‘love’]. It was fun; it was different, it was what I had been longing for a while. I felt that I was enjoying my ‘boyhood’ to the best only then!

After that, I made use of every opportunity I got, to talk to her, admire her and dream of our conversations. We had a very small classroom, and the girls and boys occupied adjacent rows. After every class test, we had to exchange our answer sheets with the folks in the next row to get it corrected. I made sure that Brindha’s answer sheets always came to me. All the boys in my class knew by then that I had ‘special feelings’ for her. They addressed her as ‘my girl’. In fact, everyone knew that I had a crush on her, except her.

Brindha Krishnan... She always wrote her name as ‘Brindha K’ in her answer sheet. Lost in her thought, I even wrote my name as Robin K once, instead of A. I realized what I had done only after I got back my answer sheet post correction. My friends picked up every chance to pull my legs that day leaving me embarrassed.

On April 1<sup>st</sup>2005, I decided to propose to her. I had made all plans to secure myself from the pain of being rejected. I had convinced myself saying if she were to accept, all would go well, but if she rejected, I could just say “Happy April Fool’s day” and run away.

I had bought a red rose and a greeting card and was waiting for her to come out after the class. She came along with her friend Madhu (as always). I approached her nervously. I guess she should have seen me sweating profusely with a visibly trembling hand. I had the rose and the card in my



bag. I stopped her for a minute and pulled out the card and the rose and gave it to her.

She folded her hands and looked at me, expecting me to say something.

“Would you accept this?” I asked her.

“What is this?” she questioned.

“I think... I think... Brindha, I never believed in love at first sight, that’s why I fell for you when I saw you the second time. I haven’t seen a girl more beautiful than you. You have the brains to go with your beauty, and all my life, I had waited to find a girl like you, and I want to spend the rest of my life with you by my side. I want to live my life for you” I rattled.

Her face turned pale. I thought that she was about to scream at me and slap.

Then, she thought for a moment and took the rose and the card from me.

“Thank you.” she said.

“Is that all? Is that a yes?” I asked her.

“Yes, it is!” She replied.

I didn’t know how to react. I wanted to run naked around the ground.

“Like, Really?”

“Yes, Sir! And... Happy April Fool’s day” She said and bit her lower lip giving me a look of sarcasm.

I had to react immediately to change the situation in my favor. I acted like I was disappointed that she found out the prank. “Aaaaah! Smart girl... and I thought I could fool you. Better luck next year maybe.” I gave a sheepish smile and wanted to run away.

“Keep trying.” she said and returned the greeting card and rose to me.

I felt I was rescued from the guillotine at the very last minute, just before it could cut my neck. I let out a sigh of relief and rushed to my friends, who were eagerly waiting to hear the ‘proposal story’ and its outcome. I narrated as to how thoughtfully I fooled her. *The silly things we do when we are kids!*

I dared not to talk to her for a while and kept avoiding any eye contact with her. She seemed to have taken the incident lightly and didn’t change her attitude towards me. The next time I brought myself to talk to her was on the last day of our coaching. All of us were ready with our ‘autograph booklet’ to pass it on to our friends and bid farewell.

“Write something.” I handed over my booklet to Brindha.

“Should I write, ‘Happy April Fool’s day’?” She smiled.

“As you wish.” I smiled uncomfortably.

“Keep smiling as always, and make your dreams come true.” she wrote.

“Leave your number as well.” I said shyly.

“I have written my landline number.” she said and handed over the booklet back to me. That was a decent farewell after all.

Since it was her landline, I never thought of giving her a call. Also, every time I thought of her, the April Fool’s Day incident came to forefront and I decided against contacting her. Three months later, I got my results, and I secured considerably good marks to get a merit seat in one of the reputed colleges in Trichy. Life changed after college, new people came into life, new friends, new relations, new problems, but still Brindha occupied that corner of my heart somewhere. It was a special place reserved for her.

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Time flew by, and I was in my third year in college and had considerably moved away from constant thoughts of Brindha.

One fine evening, I was browsing through my old diaries and autograph booklets, when I happened to find the note from her. As I reminisced the fond memories of her, I felt a gush of hope springing from within. The note had her landline number that she had written three years ago.

I had no idea if she was still living in the same residence. In all probabilities, they could have vacated the house. Brindha could be studying now in some other city or staying in a hostel. Even if her contact number had not changed, there was no guarantee that she would remember me. Maybe, I could narrate the April Fool’s incident again. With such uncertain train of thoughts, I dialled her number and waited with bated breath for someone to answer. A young lady answered the phone, and I nervously asked for Brindha. Then, I heard the familiar voice I was waiting for, “Hello!”

“Hey Brindha, this is Rob. Robin from ASPIRE coaching center. Do you remember?”

“Of course! I do, Robin. How are you? What a pleasant surprise! How did you get my number? Is today April Fool’s Day?” she responded with her usual enthusiasm.

“You gave your number to me Brindha, remember? I just can’t believe I am talking to you after so long. I doubted whether your number would have changed by now. And let’s not talk about THAT day.”

“It’s indeed so nice to speak to you after so many years, Rob. I am so thrilled that you remember me. And I won’t talk about it” she was indeed

thrilled as much as I was.

*'How can I forget you, my crush?' I thought to myself.*

"Do you have a mobile? What is your number?" I asked.

"Tell me yours. I will message you." she said.

I didn't have a mobile then. I was using my dad's phone for texting. I gave his number, and after a brief conversation, ended my call. Within minutes, I received a message from her mobile number on my dad's mobile.

"That was too fast. Thanks for trusting me and giving me your number." I texted.

"How could I not trust you, buddy?" she replied.

Dad had not put any message booster pack then. Every message cost me a rupee. I still went ahead and texted her all evening. The next day, I recharged his phone and added a message booster pack. From then on, there was no looking back. We started exchanging messages often.

In few days, Diwali festival came, and I so badly wanted to wish her. I texted her several times, but there was no reply. She did not answer my calls either. I missed her so much. I felt bad that I couldn't wish her on the first special occasion that occurred after we started chatting. I was upset the whole day and didn't talk to anyone properly.

The next day, Brindha messaged me.

"Did you mess me yesterday?"

I looked at the message for a few minutes confused. Then, I laughed when I recognized the typo. "I didn't mess you. I missed you yesterday. Belated Diwali wishes to you!"

"Oh, ok. Thanks." she replied and followed it with another message, "I too missed you"!

I was jumping around in my room. I felt like she had accepted my proposal, and I started to announce to everyone in my college that I was seeing this girl and was committed to her. Whenever my classmates tried to tease me with another girl, I would dismiss that thought and say that Brindha was waiting for me.

It was later when a friend told me that 'mess' was the short form of 'message'! *Well, now I felt like a stupid.*

Christmas was around the corner, and I was out shopping with a few of my classmates. We finished shopping and were heading for lunch, when one of

my friend's friend joined us casually. We all got introduced to this new entrant named, Ramya. She told us that she studied in PARCET, the same college as that of Brindha.

“Wait. PARCET? Do you know Brindha? She studies there.

Brindha Krishnan... medium-built, my height, fair?”

“Brindha Krishnan... I mean... Are you referring to Brindha Ramesh?”

“No. Brindha Krishnan.” I corrected her.

“I don't know her full name, but they all call her Brindha Ramesh. Ramesh is her boyfriend's name.” Ramya gave me the shock of my life.

“What?” My castle came down tumbling.

**RRR**

Chapter 11

### **The Scheme of Things**

Prabhu looked down at me with contempt when I said I needed to find Brindha. He couldn't comprehend why I was talking about some other woman when I was supposed to be searching my wife.

“What do we do now, Prabhu?” I asked him.

“Well, you have to tell me. Who is that girl?”

“Brindha is my friend from Trichy. The last I know of her; she

was in Australia. I have lost contact with her. I have no clue where she is now, how I am going to find her, and more importantly, why I have to find her.” I retorted in a single breath.

“Do you have any of her numbers which she had shared with you in the past? Can't you think of any way to contact her now?” he asked. “I do. I have about three different contact numbers of hers, one Australian and two Indian, but I am pretty sure she isn't using any of them. Someone else is using her India number which I came to know from its WhatsApp DP and the Australia number took me to an automated voice the last time I called. Her other India number is deactivated. She has also deactivated her

Facebook account. To add to the misery, I have missed her landline number as well. I don't even remember the name of anyone from her family, other than her dad. She hasn't replied to any of my emails for the past seven months. Come on, Prabhu! Didn't you read my blog about her?"

"No, I didn't read your blog. But, why did you mail her for seven months when she did not reply?"

"Just to know if she was doing fine, that's all. It shouldn't be a concern now. Let us think of how we can find her."

Prabhu was lost in his thoughts for some time. I gazed at him. He was lean, 6'4 and fair. He had recently suffered a stroke and had drastically lost weight. He still wore his old clothes that didn't fit him, and it made him look much older than his age. Prabhu was a genius, to say the least. I could always bank on him in times of trouble. He was an excellent problem solver. I trusted him to come up with some plan or the other which would help us to move forward in this puzzle. Prabhu let out a determined sigh, and I knew he was ready for the adventure.

"Well Rob, you told that Brindha is not on Facebook, right? Are you sure that she has deactivated her account, or is she just in hiding mode?" he asked me.

"How in the world would I know? And what is the difference between the two?"

"Never mind... Give me all the numbers of hers that you have and her mail ID."

"Official mail ID or personal?"

"Do you know her official mail ID as well?"

"Of course, I do. She worked for VCS and went to Australia for an onsite assignment. What time will it be in Australia now?"

"Early morning, why?"

"I have a few friends in Australia. Maybe, I could get their help. They could tell me which area the number belongs to, and may be, go check on her."

"Didn't you just say that the number took you to an automated voice?"

Prabhu questioned.

"I did, yes, but what's wrong in trying?"

"Alright then, give me all her numbers which you have, all her mail IDs, and call all your friends who you think could help." Prabhu told me.

I gave him all the details and made a WhatsApp call to my friend in

Australia, Jithesh.

“How are you, Rob? Long time!” Jithesh was excited when he answered.

“I am doing fine, Jith. How are you?” I made the customary enquiries.

“All going well. Tell me, sir! How are things, how is life, how is your wife?”

“Yeah, all are fine, Jith. Can you do me a favor? I will give you an Australian number. Would it be possible for you to find out who used it? It’s a bit urgent.”

“What! How urgent?” he questioned.

“I don’t have the time to explain now, really. I need it immediately. Can you please help me?”

“Okay, if you say so, let me do it. When do you need the details?”

“Maybe, in the next fifteen minutes?”

“Shit! Are you crazy, Rob? Anyways, send me the number. I will try.”

Jithesh was a software engineer who had settled down in Australia after his marriage. As I waited for his response eagerly, Prabhu tapped me on my shoulder and said, “Check this out, Rob!”

“What is this?” I asked.

We were looking at an Australian telephone exchange website. I wondered how he accessed that.

Prabhu wasn’t a hacker; I knew that for sure.

“How did you access it?” I asked bewildered.

“Remember that CEH class I asked you to join? Well, I am a Certified Ethical Hacker now! I learned this from there.” Prabhu replied.

“Thank goodness you attended it. You are great Prabhu” I praised him.

“You know, I have even hacked the websites of our local cab services, just for fun. At times, I manage to get free services from them using my skills.” Prabhu said proudly.

“Duh, Prabhu! And that by no means is ethical hacking bro. So, what have we got now?” I asked.

“I know all that crap. Listen, the number is defunct for 6 months. No one is using it now.” he continued.

“Won’t they give it to someone else?” I pondered.

“They would, but am not sure why it is still defunct. No use in tracing it, forget it. What next? You want to trace the India number”

“No use, someone else is using that number. Is there a way we could hack her Facebook account and find any details? Anything about her friends or

relatives? If we can get their numbers, they should know her whereabouts. The last I knew, she had a boyfriend. His name is... Well, it starts with G... some Ganpath. See if you can find him. Ganpath is from Hyderabad, working in Bangalore VCS. Then... I remember she has a cousin. She is very close to her. I forgot her name, though... Maybe, I will remember if I can browse through her friend's list. Other than these people, we don't have any other common friends at all."

"How did you become friends then, you and her, Rob?"

"This is not the time to narrate the story, Prabhu. Just search on Facebook if you can find Ganpath or hack her account."

"There could be hundreds of Ganpaths, any second names?"

"No, I don't know. I hadn't had the need to know. Strangely, I don't even remember Brindha's sister's name now!"

"Her Australia number is defunct. Either she has changed her number, or she may have even returned to India." Prabhu concluded. That seemed quite logical.

"Yes, that is another possibility. We can't overlook that." I said. I stood up and started pacing around the room restlessly.

"Do you know any HR in VCS, Rob?"

"I know a few, but it is almost 1 AM now. No one would be awake. Besides, what will I tell them? How will they have access to any system at this odd hour?"

"Check with them, preferably only your trusted friends. Check if they know this girl, or any of her teammates, or boss, or anyone in her close circle. See if you could find her."

All these suggestions weren't making any sense to me. I called up one of my HR friends, who was shit drunk. I knew I couldn't get any sensible information from him and cut the call. I then decided to send a mail to Brindha's official mail ID and to my horror, the mail bounced back stating that the email ID was no longer valid.

"Damn, Prabhu, she isn't with VCS as well. She should be with some other company now. My guess is she should be back to Bengaluru now, what do you think?"

"I think your brain is functioning well, Rob" he uttered and looked at me.

"But there is still a possibility where she could be working at Australia in some other company" I let out a dry smile.

I couldn't trust the loser and be content with locating Brindha and hope that

he would let go off my wife. I was looking for a plan where I should find Brindha, locate her in person and then be able to come back to Chennai to my wife within the stipulated 11 hours. I had a gut feel that Diana was still somewhere around in Chennai as there was only a four hours' gap between the kidnapping and the loser's call. As much as I was trying to locate Brindha, I had to locate the Loser and thereby Diana as well.

It was 1 am by then, I still had 10 hours in my hand to find Brindha. I discussed with Prabhu on all possibilities ahead of us.

“If she is in Australia, and if I have to travel there, my wife would be dead by the time I board the next available flight! If Brindha is in Bangalore, going there by car would easily take 4 hours. If she is in Trichy, a swift drive would take us there in 3 hours. I am not sure if we would find her in any of these places though. Even if we did, I am not sure if we could return on time as that is the priority for me. We never know what the Loser would and could do.”

“Makes sense, Rob” he said.

“Contacts, Prabhu. I need contacts of those who could help me in locating her swiftly.” I said as my mind whirled with innumerable conflicting thoughts on what should be the next step for searching Brindha when I got a message from the LOSER,

“Brindha is not in Australia. And you won't be able to locate me”

I jumped from my chair. “Prabhu, see this message. It looks like the LOSER knows where she is. He says Brindha is not in Australia, but how does he know she is not there?”

“Hmm... Good question. Didn't you tell that your cell phone was bugged? You just called some friend in Australia, didn't you?”

“But, that's a WhatsApp call!”

“A call is a call.” Prabhu replied as he tried to hack the Facebook account of Brindha.

*Brindha Krishnan. Brindha K, I dreamily remembered those exam sheets that came for correction during my ASPIRE coaching days!*

As I switched back to reality within seconds, I couldn't still come to terms with the web of misfortunes that I was caught in. I couldn't talk to anyone without being traced.

Prabhu banged on the desk in frustration. “Unable to crack the password, Rob! It is quite difficult. I neither have the mindset, nor do we have much time to spend on this right now!”



“Prabhu, please don’t give up. You are my only hope.” I begged.

“Rob, please understand. Looks like she has created her FB account using some other mail ID. I will have to crack both the username and password. It would take more than an hour. We don’t have that much time to spend on this. Think of some other idea.” Prabhu insisted.

I remained silent. I couldn’t think of any other way to pursue this search.

“How long do you know her?” Prabhu questioned.

“11 years.”

“How long have you been her Facebook friend?”

“Ever since I joined Facebook; ever since I was into social networking. In fact, I was her friend right from the days of Orkut.”

“Orkut! Damn man! Why didn’t you tell this before?” Prabhu said excitedly.

“You asked only now. Why? What are you going to do with an Orkut account? Isn’t it outdated?”

“Did you know we could download our personal details from Orkut? You told she had deactivated Facebook, but she couldn’t have deactivated Orkut. Google deactivated Orkut on September 30, 2014. With whatever you say, this girl should have been inactive in FB only for the past 7 months. Let us try and see if we can download the details from her Orkut account. I am not sure if we can download her friends list, but we can definitely download her testimonials and check if any of her family or close friends or even her boyfriend had given any testimonial and then search them back again in FB to contact them and in turn her.”

Prabhu’s plan gave us a new ray of hope. Incidentally, Brindha had used her old mail ID for her Orkut account. Within few minutes, he hacked into Brindha’s Orkut account and started downloading her testimonials.

“How long do you think it would take for the download to complete?” I asked him.

“Maybe, 10 to 15 minutes.” He uttered without looking at me.

“I want all the names, Prabhu. Don’t miss any of them. I hope that we will be able to trace her close friends, relatives and family members from these testimonials.”

“Aren’t you her close friend?” he asked teasingly.

“Believe me, Prabhu. I am not anymore. Now, don’t ask so many questions. Just show me the testimonials. And are you sure we would not be able to download her friends list? That would make my job easier. I could get a

phone number from that.”

“We wouldn’t be able to download those, Rob” Prabhu let out a breath of disappointment.

Just then, I got a call in WhatsApp. It was Jithesh.

“Rob!” he screamed from the other end.

“I know, Jith.” I uttered.

“What do you know?” he screamed again.

“The number has been deactivated long back.” I said in a dead tone.

“If you already know, then why did you ask me to check?”

“I came to know just now. Thank you very much for your help. Will catch up later.” saying, I hurriedly cut the call.

Then, I spoke to Prabhu. “Get me a Nokia 1100 phone without mobile internet. I need to change my phone. I can’t have these always smart devices and be traced by the loser. Do you have a backup SIM?”

“I have a phone, but not sure if it has any charge, or if there is a SIM. Don’t you have a dual SIM?”

“I do, but I am not sure which number he is tracing. Anyways, get a phone without internet first.” I said.

“Do you really think internet connection is needed to trace your phone?”

Prabhu asked quizzically.

“You are the boss, you know best. But just get me a damn no-net phone with a new SIM” I almost ordered him.

Prabhu searched in his wardrobe for the old phone. It had no charge. To my relief, he soon found the charger too, and he brought the phone back to life. He also managed to find an alternate SIM and inserted it into the phone. I felt good about it, when I heard a beep sound on my phone.

“Do not change your phone or SIM.” the LOSER had sent a message.

My happiness vanished instantly. My heart sunk in disappointment. How in the world did he know what I was talking? If he knew it all, why was he broadcasting it? What was his point?

I looked at Prabhu doubtfully.

“What happened, Rob?” Prabhu asked me reading my expression.

I showed him the message, and he too looked flabbergasted.

“How did he find out what we were talking?” he quizzed startled.

“How would I know? Maybe, you would?” I looked at him with piercing eyes.

“Don’t you trust me, Rob? Are you crazy?” Prabhu was visibly disgusted at

that thought.

“I can’t trust even my own shadow now, Prabhu!”

“I understand, but believe me. I don’t work for him.” Prabhu assured.

“Not sure if I can trust anyone now, Prabhu. But if I have to go by what you say, I think he is not tracing just my calls. He is somehow tracking my conversations as well. For all you know, he may be even hearing this very sentence of mine!”

I signaled to him for a paper and pen. We decided to have all further conversations over pen and paper. I had seen this type of tracking in a recent popular Tamil movie where the hero will be bugged and his every move will be tracked by the villain.

Meanwhile, as the Nokia phone was getting charged, the download of testimonials was complete. I didn’t know most of the people who had written the testimonials. As I skimmed through the names one last time, I came across a familiar name, Girija Desigan.

“Prabhu, I know Girija. She is Brindha’s cousin. Brindha was quite close to her.” I said.

“Alright then, we shall find her on Facebook.” Prabhu said and searched her name on FB. A few moments later, he sighed in disappointment, “Bad news Rob, I am unable to find her.”

“Search everywhere, just not in FB. Try Google. Search for Girija D, Giri Desi, Girija Desi, or any other combination, Prabhu.” I insisted.

“I did. I looked at all the options and possible combinations. But none of the results matched what we are looking for” Prabhu sighed.

“Damn! Why should online searching be so tough? How am I going to... Wait, Prabhu, I just remember, Brindha had sent me Girija’s resume long back. I guess her details will be there in the resume.”

“And you tell me this so soon”

“Rob. Brindha is a thing of the past. I vaguely remember anything about her. Expecting me to remember about other people in her life is too much, to say the least.” I said. Prabhu warned me and asked me to use the paper and pen.

“And you are asked to find this girl!” he wrote.

“That’s the silliest thing of all. The LOSER, he should be from one of those asylums” I wrote in the paper and sent him. We both laughed.

I logged into my Gmail account and searched for emails from Brindha and found Girija’s resume. There was a phone number and mail ID in it.

“That’s her number and I will call her.” I wrote.

“Are you crazy? It is 1.00 AM now! Just mail her.” Prabhu responded.

“Are you even aware of what you are talking, Prabhu?” I shouted. He then kept his silence and reminded me to use the paper. It was tough to get used to writing in a paper instead of talking. I wondered how the ensuing 10 odd hours were going to be. *Damn, you loser.*

I cursed him in my mind and looked at the mobile number of Girija. She was my last hope. I knew it was well into the night, I knew it was unethical, but I didn’t have a choice. I dialed her number. The phone rang perennially, but there was no response. I was disappointed when the call was not picked. Not losing hope, I dialed again. No response! I looked at Prabhu for comfort.

“Give a try again” he said with his eyes.

I dialed her again for one last time, and after several rings, someone picked the call at the other end.

**RRR**

## Chapter 12 **Wibru**

Last Week in the Blog:

“I don’t know her full name, but they all call her Brindha Ramesh. Ramesh is her boy friend’s name.” Ramya gave me the shock of my life.

“Whaatt?” My castle came down tumbling.

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Brindha had a boyfriend at PARCET? I wasn’t convinced at all about what Ramya was telling me.

“Ramya, this just can’t be true. I think it should be some other Brindha, not Brindha Krishnan.”

“There is only one Brindha studying in the third year of my college. She is committed to Ramesh, and I see them together daily in the cafeteria. In fact, the whole college knows it.” She responded like someone from the CBI department.

I did not know how to react. I was shocked, confused and disappointed. My friends, who were with me then, knew about my crush on Brindha. They started making fun of me. I could not believe that my love story, which had started on an April Fool’s day, finally ended up making me a real fool!

I wasn’t really sure if I should ask Brindha about her boyfriend, or confess

my feelings for her. I had never explicitly expressed them to her till then. Or maybe, it was a better idea just to stop texting her forever.

After a lot of thought, I texted her that morning, “Hi Bru, what doing?”

Bru was Brindha’s nickname.

“Drinking Coffee. My mornings always start with a coffee.” she texted.

“My mornings always start with your text” I wanted to reply, but couldn’t bring myself to do it and sent some stupid response. The conversation continued with irrelevant messages for a while until I made up my mind to ask her what was exactly happening in her life.

“Okay, listen. I need to ask you something. Not sure how you would take it, but I will break my head if I don’t ask. May I?”

“Yeah, sure! Go ahead.”

“Who is Ramesh?” There was no reply from her for some time. I felt uncomfortable and immediately sent a follow-up text. “If you are not comfortable, you needn’t tell me.”

“Nothing like that. I will tell you.” she responded.

Then, she started to text me her love story on how he proposed, how they always hung out together, and how his parents considered her as their own daughter et al.

“Your parents know about him?” I asked.

“No, they don’t. They will kill me if they come to know that I am in love.”

“Why? Is caste a problem?”

“Very much. Not so much a problem on his side, but it is a big issue in my family. I haven’t talked to my parents yet.”

“Oh! So, when are you guys planning to get married?”

“I have not completed my story, wait” she continued.

“Tell me.” I so badly wanted to hear from her that they broke up. *At times, cupid plays tricks as per our deepest desires. At least, I believed so then!*

“We broke up.” she sent.

“Oh, no!” I put a fake sad smiley. But, I was all smiling on the inside. If only our mobile phones sent our live reactions through a live capture, many of us wouldn’t be alive to tell our stories to the world. Many would agree that the mute button has saved the job of almost every employee in the IT industry.

“It’s been a while though. I have moved on.” she texted.

“But, everyone is still talking about you. They say that you were a pair like no other.”

“Yes, we were. He was too possessive, and at times, behaved weirdly. I couldn’t tolerate that anymore!”

“Okay.”

“Anyways, I have moved on.”

Every message of hers after that was shouting out loud that she was ready for a new relationship, and that, I could possibly make my move. I resisted the imminent temptation. Nothing brings people closer than adversity, loss or a breakup.

From then on, we started to text each other more regularly and became closer than ever.

I got placed in KTS during my final year while she was preparing for her interviews. I helped Brindha with her preparations. I got a new phone for getting placed on-campus and the first thing I did was to put a message booster card, which allowed sending 22,500 texts per month! That was about 750 messages every day. I made sure that 700 of those were sent to her.

Our conversations started with a ‘Good morning’ message every day and lasted till late night. It became a habit that her ‘Good morning’ message was the first thing I saw, rather wanted to see, after waking up. I considered her my lucky charm.

Brindha finally got placed in Wipro. She boasted that going forward, Wipro would become Wi’bru’. I liked the wordplay.

Things had changed quite drastically between us as days moved on. From strangers, we became best of friends. From ‘buddy’, I became ‘darling’ for her. From my ‘crush’, she became more than a friend for me (*yes, only that*). I made sure that I was the first one to wish her on all special occasions. The feeling was mutual. She kept awake till 12 in the night to wish me on my birthday and every other special occasion for a Christian. My parents were strictly against love marriages and even if by a change of heart they agreed, it wouldn’t be for a girl from some other religion. The same was the case at her place. We both weren’t people who would do anything against our parent’s wishes. That was one major reason why I didn’t want to take the relationship to the next level.

Brindha’s dad was working at Bangalore, while she was living with her mom, sister and grandparents at Trichy. She was more close to her grandpa and took his company wherever she went. By looks, she resembled her mom a lot, almost a color photocopy, but claimed she resembled Anushka

Shetty, while I found her to resemble actress Kiran Rathod (in her lean version) more, though I never dared to say her that. Her Orkut profile was full of photos of Anushka from the movie Arundhathi. She almost worshipped her and was obsessed by her looks and the movie. Arundhathi movie's Tamil dubbed version was just released and was running successfully in theatres in Trichy that time.

"Have you watched the movie?" I asked her after she changed her Orkut profile picture to that of Anushka's photo.

"I watched it in Telugu once at a friend's place, but so badly want to watch it in Tamil in theatre. This movie is a visual grandeur and Anushka is fantastic." she kept on heaping praise on the movie and the cast.

"She is indeed" I agreed.

"Have you seen it?"

"No, I don't watch movies you see" I said.

"Oh, I forgot, thought I will ask you to take me for the movie. Never mind" Coming from an orthodox family, I had never been to theatre to watch movies. It was banned at home and I had never had the inclination to do so as well, but *when it's your crush asking, you don't deny.*

"No no, I can make an exception, for you" I said.

"Really? You are fine with it?"

"Of course, anything for you. Tell me the date and time"

"We will go even this Saturday, book in Sona theatre. Book two tickets, one for me"

"And one for me, I know" I responded.

"No, one for my grandpa. Two from my side. So, in total book three tickets" she texted.

"Wait a minute, your grand pa will also be coming? Will he be fine with you watching a movie with me?"

"Correction, I am watching a movie with my grand pa, you are accompanying us" she sent a smiley along with the text.

I wasn't sure how to react, but I knew for sure that it was going to be awkward. I didn't know her grand pa. It was my first movie in theatre with my crush and I was to have an old man for company. I still decided to give it a try.

Online booking was not available for that single screen theatre and I had to book tickets in person right before the show. I went well ahead of time for the 4.30 Pm show and got three tickets, and waited for those two people.

They arrived sharp on the clock and we took our seats. Crushing my expectations, her grandpa sat between the two of us. I longingly looked at Brindha who was already engrossed in the happenings on screen. I tried to get her attention, but in vain. I couldn't bring myself to watch the movie. I wanted to hold her hand, if possible sneak a kiss, but her grand pa had other ideas. He even let out a fart in between, I was sure. It was the most painstakingly gruesome one hour, I had spent sitting at the same place without doing anything. She was so close, yet so far.

During the interval of the movie, her grandpa didn't seem to leave for a loo break, and she decided to give him company, so I had to go buy them popcorn, coke and puffs. I came back, offered it all to them and sat dejected in my seat. The second half of the movie was even more thrilling, had quite a few moments of scare. Brindha was genuinely frightened and every time she was afraid, she caught hold of her grand pa's shirt tightly and buried her face in his chest. *If only he hadn't been there, it would have been my lucky day.* I kept looking at her when her grandpa turned towards me and offered the popcorn. I denied it. He then offered the coke. I denied it too. *He then offered me his seat, oh no he didn't, no he didn't!* I gave a sheepish smile and looked at the screen. *I wanted to beat the pulp out of him.*

The movie got over and we took leave off each other. As I reached home, I texted her,

"That was my first movie in theater and I loved it, thanks to you" I said with a heart full of contempt.

"You are welcome, and you must thank Anushka for that" she texted back. *Well, you are my Anushka,* I wanted to respond.

"Your grandpa liked the movie? He was fine with me accompanying you?"

"Yeah, he is fine with all that, he is chilled out" she responded. *Why wouldn't he be? Just see what I do when you bring him next time around (no I didn't say this, instead blurted out some politically correct message.)*

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Within few months, we completed college and got ready to join our respective IT companies. Her joining date was a few months after mine. I joined in KTS and moved to Chennai and settled there.

Wipro had asked Brindha to join in January 2010. She was all excited as her placement was in Bangalore, where her dad also worked.



She called me a week before her joining date. “I can hardly wait now to get started!”

“Awesome, dear. Happy for you! Who is accompanying you? Mom or dad?”

“My dad is already in Bangalore, you forgot?” she reminded me.

“Oh yeah, I forgot. So, who is going to escort you then? Would you want me to come?” I asked

“Can you?” she said.

“I wish, but I won’t be able to. Few last-minute work commitments this weekend. I am sorry, dear.”

“Go die. I know I can’t trust you. That’s why I have asked my other boyfriend to accompany me.”

“Other boyfriend? Great! My best wishes. Safe journey.”

I was confused with what she was saying. If she were playing a prank, I wasn’t going to fall prey.

“So, you won’t ask who it is?”

“If he were your new boyfriend, you would have told yourself, Bru.”

“Okay, don’t get jealous. My grandpa is coming with me.” She laughed as if it was the best joke. I gave a sigh of relief and pretended to laugh along with her. *Her grandpa again.*

“So be it movie or new job, it’s always grandpa for company, right?”

“Yes, he is the sweetest boyfriend I could ever have” she responded with pride.

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Her day of journey to Bangalore arrived. She got ready, packed all things, boarded her train and texted me throughout her journey. We then decided to sleep around 1 AM as she had to wake up early in the morning. I wished her luck for her new job, new role, and hoped she had a satisfying start in the IT world. We slept off with a lot of dreams thinking of the exciting life ahead.

It was around 6 AM when I heard the phone ringing. I was too sleepy to pick the call. I had asked Brindha to text me when she reached Bangalore. I wondered why she was calling.

I ignored the ring and continued sleeping.

The phone rang for the second time. I wanted to scream at her and picked the phone, but was startled to hear Brindha crying at the other end.

“Bru, calm down first. What happened, tell me?”

What she told took me by shock. I wouldn't want such a thing to happen even for my enemy.

“My grandpa has passed away” Brindha mumbled amidst her sobbing.

“What?” It took a while for me to get a grasp of things. I felt deeply depressed. It was her first job, she was all happy in getting ready to join the company but even before she could step into it, she was facing such a turmoil; at times reality is more cruel than fiction. It needn't have happened then; it needn't have been her grandfather.

“How? When?” I asked.

“I don't know. I tried to wake him up in the morning and he didn't move. He has died in his sleep. I don't know how; I am not sure. I don't know what I am going to do” she burst out crying.

I didn't have words to console her. Indeed, it was a great loss. Her grandpa was her world. She used to tell me that her grandpa accompanied her wherever she went, be it the temple, or a weekend getaway or even a walk in the park. I felt sorry for her. He shouldn't have left her at that point of time. He was a nice man after all. I was equally dejected.

“Do you have anyone there? Should I come?” I asked her.

“We will be taking him to our relatives' house here. You needn't come. We will cremate him in the evening here at Bangalore. We won't be able to take him back to Trichy. We won't be able to take him to Trichy!” she stressed on it and cried again.

“I know it's difficult dear. Take care, I am there. I am not there physically with you right now. I so badly wish I was, but I am there for any emotional support. You can fall back on me” I tried my best to console her, but I knew it wasn't enough.

I so badly wanted to be by her side, to give her my shoulders. It was a long day for me. I was dejected. Her whimpers and her thoughts kept filling my mind. Her grandpa was taken to her aunt's house. Her dad arrived and took care of her. They had the cremation at around 4 pm. We didn't text much that night. I couldn't sleep, neither could she, both for very different reasons.

Brindha had postponed her joining by two weeks and joined the company by February. She slowly started to move on and enjoy her new-found

freedom, freedom from parents' constant monitoring, freedom from neighborhood aunt's watchful eyes, freedom from societal stereotypes. It was largely visible in the way she was making new friends and her subsequent texts. She managed to get quite a few testimonials in Orkut from her new friends and every single one of it increased my jealous quotient tremendously. However, I liked the new, changed, matured version of hers, ever more than her naïve earlier self.

Our texting reached its pinnacle. From early in the morning to late in the night it was a flurry of texts, when we couldn't text, we took the help of office e-mails. I don't remember working much during that period, but was pretty sure that I kept sending umpteen mails to her every minute and she would reply to each and every one of it within seconds, so much so that, I even once asked.

"Don't you have any work?"

"How about you then?" came the instant reply.

"I am new to the team, just getting KT and yes, not much work"

"Same case sir."

Even in long distance relationships, it was necessary for people to meet each other once in a while. On a weekend in the August of 2010, she had decided to visit Trichy. Incidentally, I was also in Trichy that weekend and we decided to meet up over a cup of coffee and to do some shopping. The time was fixed as 7 pm.

I was there in Hotel Raghunath near the Rock Fort Temple on time and was waiting for her. She arrived after ten minutes, clad in a white shirt and grey formal pants. I found it difficult to keep my eyes on hers as a couple of minions in her shirt were making their voluptuous presence felt. Just as I was trying hard to adjust my vision and firm it up on her temple, one of my lens came off.

It fell down and before it could hit the ground, I got hold of it and was looking for ways to place it back, when I saw her running frantically around, calling people to help, to get some water, to give me some air, a mirror or anything I would have asked for. Never before have I seen a woman showing so much care for me, other than my mom. Her worry was pretty evident, her concern was eminent, her eyes were full of care and her actions reflected her genuine affection and all this for my lens coming off. She then helped in placing it again in my cornea. She didn't hesitate to touch my face and eyes and place them back in position with so many

people watching us, even though I suggested to do it myself, she insisted on doing it. After all the drama, she asked if I was alright. I nodded.

We had a coffee and then stepped out to commence our shopping, rather her shopping. I was just giving her company. She bought a few household items [*I thought she might also buy some jockey products, but she disappointed*] and after half an hour started to leave for home. As we were walking towards the bus stop, we had to cross a busy road. I crossed the road in five long strides and turned around to see her still standing at the other end. I looked at her eyes.

“Why didn’t you wait for me? Why didn’t you hold my hand and help me cross? Why did you just leave me here? Don’t you have basic courtesy? Don’t you care about me?” so many questions in that one look of hers. I didn’t have answers for any of them, other than a feel of guilt. She crossed after the traffic had reduced and came to my end. She didn’t talk about it and I didn’t ask what was in her mind. We didn’t converse until we reached the bus stop, we just knew.

As she was about to get into the bus, I couldn’t resist but give a gentle tap on her shoulders, thanking her for her help and asking her to go home safe and drop me a message on reaching. She nodded, and asked me to follow suit. I departed then, I knew that her care filled eyes would occupy my memory for a long time.



### Chapter 13 **Rob Thoughts**

After a long time and many rings to Girija’s mobile, the call was finally answered. My heart skipped a beat as I heard the sleepy voice of a lady at the other end.

“Hello.” she uttered.

“Hello Girija, this is Rob. You might not know me, but I...” “Do you have any sense? Who are you by the way? Why are you

calling at this odd hour? There is no Girija here. Wrong number!” An angry voice spat venom along with a few expletives at the other end. Prabhu looked at me and let out a gentle chuckle despite the trauma that we were going through. I couldn’t enjoy it though.

“What is there to laugh? You should be in my position now to realize why it is not so funny!” I told him wryly.

“I am not mean Rob, but couldn’t help. Is there someone else we could reach out to or search for?”

“Brindha knew Ganpath since the last few years, but I am not sure if they were Orkut friends. There is no testimonial from any Ganpath either. Girija is my best bet. I think I should drop an email to her.”

I dropped a note to Girija’s mail ID, which was mentioned in her resume, asking her whether she knew the whereabouts of Brindha. I also requested her to inform ‘Bru’ to contact me immediately.

“How long will it take for the Nokia phone to charge?” I wrote my question on a paper and showed it to Prabhu. We then continued to converse over pen and paper.

“About half an hour and the charge will stay intact for a day.” he wrote and showed his reply to me.

As I was thinking about my next move, I got a WhatsApp message from the LOSER.

“I told you not to ask for a phone.”

I felt frustrated and helpless about being continuously monitored. I wanted to get rid of that first. I asked Prabhu in writing, “Know of any friends, who have an electronics lab, or any doctors? I need this bug to be removed from my phone. And by the looks of it with him knowing everything we speak, I doubt if... doubt if, I am also bugged”

Prabhu gave a sharp look of astonishment and continued.

“I know of someone, but not sure whether he could help now.” Prabhu wrote.

“Call that person and ask for help. I have to find my wife and Brindha and I can’t do it with every move of mine being monitored.” I wrote in detail.

Prabhu took his phone and went to the next room. After a few minutes, he signaled me to get ready. I took Diana’s bag with me as we both rushed to his car parking area. I got into the car as he followed me but he stopped, went back again to his room and returned after a few minutes. I could see a bulge in his right pocket then, I didn’t bother to ask him what it was though. He started his car and in a few moments, we zoomed and vanished into the darkness.

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Prabhu stopped the car in front of an old house in Adyar. He knocked the door softly. A grumpy, elderly man with white beard, uncombed hair, confused looks and pretty lost face, opened the door. I wondered how he managed to hear that faint knock of Prabhu. He wore spectacles that didn't fit him and by looks, was the last person on earth I would have reached out for help.

“Hope no one saw you.” he whispered to Prabhu.

“No, Professor. No one saw us.” Prabhu assured.

“Rob, this is Prof. Vimal Kumar. He was my physics lecturer

during my UG days.” Prabhu introduced him to me.

“And Professor, this is Rob, my friend. I was asking your help for his sake.”

We exchanged handshakes. It was a warm, strong hold for his age.

Prabhu began to brief the professor about my situation. “He is in big trouble, Sir. Someone has kidnapped his wife, and he needs to find her before daybreak.”

“Oh, my bad. That's sad! How can I help this lad?” the professor asked concerned.

“His phone is bugged sir. His online presence is being monitored. We also fear that there is a bug in him as well. We need to remove it all, because every time he talks, his kidnapper knows his next move. We have to do something about it”.

“His wife is kidnapped and his every move is being monitored? That's some worry. I feel very sorry.” He uttered.

I wondered why he was talking with a particular rhyme in everything he said. I didn't know how to react and felt stranded. The professor then asked us to follow him through a small door, which led to a large sophisticated laboratory. I was surprised on how such a small house could host such a huge space for a lab.

“This is built underground, so that it's never found” the professor told me as if he read my mind. It had all the equipment, much more than what I had seen in my Physics lab in college. I could hardly identify any of them though. It felt like I was walking through a science exhibition at school, guided by the professor and Prabhu.

In one corner, I saw a coffin and was shocked to find it there. I wondered

what significance it could play in a science lab!

“That one you find there, is the regeneration chamber.” the professor said pointing at the coffin.

“What is that?” I asked.

“Star fish, which is technically not a fish and is called a sea star, regenerates its parts when it’s wounded or cut. We humans could never do that yet. However, this chamber aims to help one with that” he said.

“Do you mean to say that if you cut a human being into pieces and then throw him into this chamber, he can grow back inside this chamber into a full human again?” I would have almost fainted.

“Not yet. We have not reached that stage yet. We have just started on an experiment where we are figuring out if we cut a finger small, whether it will grow back again tall.” the professor showed me his left hand where his little finger was missing indicating that he hadn’t succeeded yet. I had my heart in my mouth wondering where I had landed. I didn’t want to be in a situation where I escaped from the frying pan and settled comfortably on the burning fire.

“You do all these experiments on yourself?” I asked him.

“It’s on me most of the times, but at times a few of my students too, though I know it’s a crime” he replied.

“And they volunteer?” I asked shocked.

“There is no significant achievement in science without a little sacrifice, that all of us endure, from humans to mice” he told. I looked at Prabhu and he nodded indicating that he was also one of the volunteers.

“Remember, I had a stroke six months ago?” Prabhu asked me.

“Don’t tell me it is because of this regeneration experiment!” I shouted.

“No, not because of this, but in another experiment, where we tried to...” before Prabhu could finish his sentence, the professor signaled to him to keep quiet. That was my first closest encounter to real-life science experiments. I had always thought that they only happened in fantasy stories and movies.

The professor now brought a small device and scanned all over me. I felt like going through a ‘security clearance’. When he took the device near my pocket where I had my phone, we heard a beep sound. I handed over the phone to the professor. “Aaah the beep tone, there is something in your phone.” he told me.

*‘Tell me something that I didn’t know’* I thought to myself and looked at

Prabhu questioningly. *“Is he the right guy? Does he even know what he is doing? Why are we here in the first place?”* I so badly wanted to ask Prabhu why the professor talked in rhymes. It was irritating every time he took some time to utter his sentences so that they rhyme, even though he knew pretty well that I was in a dire situation and running against time. And to add to it, the rhyming wasn't perfect either. I was annoyed.

Prabhu gave a reassuring look and signaled me to trust him and the professor. I had lost trust on everyone by then. The professor had dismantled my phone and was still researching on it as my thoughts wandered hopelessly with a myriad of doubts. He then kept the phone aside and again scanned my entire body with the device. We didn't seemingly hear any beep sound.

After thinking for a few minutes, he ran the device near the back of my head, and we started to hear faint beep sounds. All of us were confused. The professor asked me to put the SIM card back into my phone. I followed his orders. The moment I switched on the phone, I saw a lot of WhatsApp messages from the LOSER.

“Where are you now?”

“What's with regeneration?”

“Do not remove the bug.”

“I hate the rhyming sentences” I couldn't help but chuckle reading it. Me and the Loser had at least something in common.

I showed all the messages to Prabhu and the professor.

The professor then asked me to lie down on a table and pressed a button. The table lifted itself up and my head was sent through a device. It looked like a CRT scanning machine. The professor observed the readings of the scan in his system and I was trying to remain calm. Prabhu was standing next to the professor noting down his observations. The professor first looked astonished, and then, his expression changed into a shock. I didn't know why he looked terrified. He then took Prabhu to another room. I was still lying down on the table and waiting for them like a lost kitten.

After 10 minutes, Prabhu came out with a look of disbelief. He shook his head in distrust and asked me to get up from the table. I got up swiftly and tried to look at the monitor that had given them the shock. It was all waves and lines which I couldn't comprehend.

“Is it something serious Prabhu? Am I suffering from brain tumor?” I asked him.



“Chuck it Rob. What did you tell, was her native?”

“Chennai.” I responded.

“But, you told she is from Trichy, sometime back?”

“Who are you talking about... Brindha or Diana?”

“Brindha, I asked about Brindha.”

“Oh her, well her native is Trichy. Yes, why asking now?”

“I think we should go there. How long is it from here?”

“Takes about 3 hours by car, I guess. We discussed this already, don’t you remember?”

“Alright. We have to go there.” Prabhu said in a hurried tone.

“But, why?”

“Because I have a strong instinct that we will find some clue there.” He guessed. I could decipher from his worried face that we were upto something much viler than what we had imagined.

“We can’t risk six hours based on your gut feeling. It’s already 2.10 AM now. We hardly have 9 hours to find Brindha. I hope you are not kidding me!” I was thoroughly exasperated and tired.

“Rob, Brindha is not in Australia. Even the LOSER has told you that. So, she could either be in Bangalore or Trichy. You don’t know anyone who could help you in Bangalore. You practically can’t contact the HR or her office at this odd hour and even the ones you contacted didn’t respond properly. Since Trichy is her native, we can at least seek the help of her parents. We will definitely get a lead. Do you remember where she stays?” Prabhu was trying hard to convince me and it made some sense.

“The last I remember; in Trichy she was staying at Thillai Nagar.”

“You know her house?”

“I faintly remember, but for all you know, her residence could have changed now.”

“Faint remembrance is better than no idea, alright? We need to go to Trichy to get a lead.”

“What if she is in Chennai?” I asked.

“We can be back by 8 AM, and you will have 3 hours then to find her. Let us now head to Trichy.”

“What about Diana then? Where is the time to find her?”

“We will find Diana, Rob, trust me. We will definitely find her” Prabhu promised.

He then asked me to follow him to the car. The professor was still looking

anxiously at me, and I had no idea why. I was at least getting away from his rhyming torture for some time.

It was 2.15 AM. The earliest we could reach Trichy was by 5.15 AM. *Will I remember her house? Will her parents still be staying in the same place? Will they remember me? Will it be still painted Orange?* A million thoughts ran through my mind. I looked at my mobile, and there was no further message or call from the LOSER.

We would have driven for an hour and reached Chengalpattu when Prabhu gave a sigh of relief and relaxed. I was still wondering how I was going to identify her house when he interrupted my thoughts with his heavy gasp.

“Why this sudden respite?” I asked him.

“Answer me. Who is more important? Brindha or Diana?” he asked.

“Is that even a question? Of course, it is Diana.” I replied.

He looked at my phone and continued in a calm tone.

“What will you do if you find the guy who kidnapped your wife?”

“I will kill him!” I replied with vengeance written all over my face.

“Check your phone now and see if you have got any message from the LOSER.”

I checked. There was none. Prabhu then insisted that I send the LOSER a Whatsapp message saying that we were heading to Trichy to find Brindha. I did so.

“I know, all the best.” came the reply from him.

“Good. We are now in the safe zone.” he sighed relieved.

“I am sorry? Care to explain? What zone? How?” I asked bewildered.

“Rob, did I tell you how I got a stroke? We were trying an experiment, a scientific breakthrough, which involved transmitting commands through brain pulses.”

“Errr... What?”

“It’s an electromagnetic wave pulse being generated from brain impulse that would transfer the wave of thoughts into a predictable graph, helping in realizing what thought has transpired in one’s mind” he said in a single breath.

I didn’t understand a word of what he said.

“Can we talk English?”

“Listen Rob, its simple. We want to see if we could make electronic devices work just with our brain pulse. Like, you enter a room, you think that the light should be switched on, and it does. You look back at the door, you

want it to be closed and it does. Getting it?”

“Is that even humanly possible? This mind control thing?”

“It is not mind control. It’s just thought pulses. It’s a signal, an electromagnetic wave, an impulse, that’s all. You control your electronic devices with your thoughts, as simple as that. You could close your house door sitting at your office, switch off your gas cylinder from a faraway shop. You could do anything like that if this system is successfully implemented. A lot of experiment is happening in this field currently”

“Though it sounds interesting, it scares the shit out of me. It seems like a scene from a Sci-Fi movie! What if someone sits in some corner and thinks I should die and my watch obeys his impulse and strangles my hand and kills me”

“You and your imaginations, Rob! Listen, what you see as Sci-Fi fantasy today could be our future for all you know. Our professor wanted to take this idea to the next level. He wanted to see if human thoughts could be interpreted.”

“Like dream interpretation?”

“No. Like, think of your wife, how much you love her, what all you would do to get her back, to what extent will you go to save her and whatever you think will be recorded as impulses, which would then be used to decode your thoughts and draw a graph of your mind in a system. Similar to an EEG graph...And at the end we will know what exactly you are thinking.”

“Is that even possible?”

“We were giving it a try, I volunteered for the experiment, and it went wrong. I suffered a stroke and was admitted to the hospital for 90 days. The professor decided to stop the trial forever after that.” Prabhu said.

“Holy shit! You never told me this. Have you recovered fully? Didn’t you file a case against the professor?”

“I volunteered for it, Rob. Come on!”

“Experimenting on humans is banned, Prabhu. How could you even volunteer for this?” I was furious.

“Rob, I am aware of all that. Besides, we don’t explicitly publish any of these findings. We only discuss them in secret conferences. I told you now because you are my brother and I trust you. Not even my dad knows this.” He looked straight into my eyes as he said, hoping I will keep it as a secret all my life.

“Damn, Man. So, why are we even discussing this now? What is the whole

point? Why are you telling all this to me now?” I was confused.

“Because you have one such thought detector placed near your brain now. The kidnapper of your wife knows everything you think. Knows every next move of yours, knows what you are exactly up to, and there is a live impulse feed happening from your brain to his system.” he finished and waited for me to react.

It struck me the hard way that I was facing someone more conniving and dangerous than I could have ever imagined, and worst of all, I didn't have the freedom even to THINK!

**RNR**

Chapter 14

### **The Secret Crush**

The thought of Brindha filled my mind as she took leave of me. Her care filled eyes promised life eternal. If only she had been a Christian or I had been a Hindu. Brindha left for Bangalore that night and I left for Chennai and as always we texted throughout our journey. I wasn't particularly sure when I dozed off.

The next day as I reached Chennai, I texted her and got ready to go to office. However, I didn't get a text from her. She hadn't messaged on reaching Bangalore nor had she sent a 'Good Morning' text. I called her, she didn't pick. I was worried at first and with every passing moment an inexplicable discomfort engulfed me. *Is she alright? Did the bus take her there safely?* My mind was asking several unpleasant questions. I even tuned into the TV to see if there were any accidents in the Trichy – Bangalore Highway.

I couldn't have my breakfast properly - the pongal I was having, found its way with much difficulty into my belly. I prayed that nothing wrong should have happened to her. As I chewed the last bolus, I got a text from her.

“Hey sorry da, Chumms, that's why! I reached Bangalore safely and dozed off immediately. All well, just woke up. Good morning dear.”

I was relieved. I cursed my mind for always thinking the adverse. *But wait what did she have?*

“What, what is that?”

“Whats what?”

“I mean. Whats Chumms?” I doubted.

“You don’t know? Seriously?”

“No, why? Hearing it for the first time. Whats that?”

I was a single male child. Sex was a taboo at home. I had no clue about the technical terms that the female world used. It was my first encounter with the term.

“Okay, leave it. I am going to get ready now”

“No tell me bru. I want to know”

“Oh come on. How in the world could I tell you? I can’t and I won’t” came her furious reply.

“You just said you have chumms. Is it like mumps? Is it contagious, are you alright?” I did say that.

“Grrrr. God! Save me from him. Dude, Leave it. Don’t talk about it. Bye” she wanted to run away.

“Come on Bru, tell me.”

“If you want to know go ask your mom” she said and put an angry smiley. I didn’t understand why she was distressed and wondered what made her behave that way. I got really pissed off when she told me to ask my mom.

“Why should I check with my mom? Do you think only you know this term and that I don’t have other friends? I will ask my other lady friends” I texted back.

“For duck’s sake, don’t do it, wait, I will call you. I need to pee urgently. Will go to the loo, come back and then call you.” she texted.

But before she could call, out of curiosity, I texted and asked a couple of my lady friends for its meaning. One ignored my text and the other called up immediately to know why I had asked it. I gave her the context and then she laughed off and explained that it’s the colloquial term for menstrual period.

“Oh, periods!!” I felt stupid.

“Yes dumbo” she said.

“Thank you soooo much” I said and cut the call. Meanwhile there were 3 missed calls already from Brindha. I called her back immediately.

“I told you not to check with anyone” was the first thing she said.

*Jesus Christ!! how did she find? Was she having a spy around? “I wasn’t checking with anyone, I got a call. It was my mom dear”*

I lied blatantly.

“Oh really? You asked this to your mom?”

“No, I didn’t ask anything. Why would I? I was talking to her

casually”

“Don’t lie. I know that your mom calls you only at night. So, did that girlfriend of yours tell you?” she fumed.

“She didn’t, she refused to”

“So, she is your girlfriend?” she cornered me with her question. “Yikes. She is a friend who is female. This English is a dangerously funny language.” I tried to squeak out a laugh.

“Did she tell you or not?” she was focused.

“She didn’t.” I continued with my lies.

“So you asked her its meaning, in spite of me telling you not to?”

I was bowled again. The kind of questions she asked, I wished she was in the CBI department.

“Ahem... I ... I ... not intentionally”

“This looks 200 % intentional. Listen Rob, any more when you have such doubts ask only me and not to anyone else, okay? Got it? Clear? Just me!! “

“Okay madam. So what is it?” I asked.

“I won’t tell you” she retorted.

“Come on!”

“Okay, don’t plead ... its menstrual cycle... “

“That’s all is it? You were creating a ruckus for this? Duh. It’s a common thing right, why so much fuss about it. You could have told me straight”

“Hmmm. I could have. But I didn’t want to. So, you started to office?” she said teasingly.

“Yes, on the way. We will catch up over mail”, saying I pressed

“End” button in my phone. I came to know of two things: the colloquial name of periods and that she was too possessive on me, which was the most important thing. I felt good about it. It felt different and I wanted to express it to her, but not through the usual text messages. I decided to do something unique and different. I reached my office and sat down to write a poem for her, my first poem. I was no poet, nor a writer back then, but I guess its love that

brings out the poet in most of us. I scribbled some random verse ending with rhyming words and called it a poem. I don't exactly remember what I wrote (*even if remember, I wouldn't share it in this blog, as*

*I am pretty sure you all will laugh at it*). It took me around 4 hours to write that 8-verse poem and I mailed it to her after I was satisfied (*okay, I wasn't, but my brain froze and I couldn't think any further*) with it. I had praised her and expressed (*in words that I normally don't use and had to look up in thesaurus*) on how much she meant to me and how sorry I felt for my earlier behavior.

Exactly after six minutes, I received a mail in my inbox. "Rob, that's a sweet poem, did you write it? And for me?" read her mail.

"Really? You liked it? Yes, of course, I wrote it just for you" "I like your intent. And I love the poem, it rhymes good. From when did sir become a poet?" she mailed.

*Right after seeing you*, I wanted to reply, but said.

"Nothing so, just felt like expressing myself, differently." "I don't like poems Rob" she sent a follow up mail.

"Oh my, I didn't know that, sorry." I was disappointed with that mail.

"But I liked yours" she sent that in the second mail.

"Why did you give me that heart attack with the first mail? You should have said both in the same mail" I responded.

"Why should I? And I think you did well for a first attempt. May be some day you might become a great poet"

"LOL. Nice joke" I replied and kept laughing about it. As much as I wrote my first poem for Brindha, I wrote my first story as well for her, on her request (*or was it a demand*). It was a ghost story, ironically *Or was it symbolic?*

Brindha preferred to read stories as against poems and from then on I started to scribble something at will every day and claimed it as a story and forced her at gun point to read it. She obliged (*had to*). She became my only reader, critique and fan. I was however too shy to share it with anyone else, including my parents.

"You know, the best love story is yet to be written" she said one day.

“Yes, and it will be ours” I wanted to reply, but instead sent a smiley.

As I was embarking on my newly acquired hobby, she seemed to have amassed a new concern of her own - weight gain.

She constantly kept pestering me on suggesting ways to reduce weight - from diets to exercise to hanging upside down, she was ready to try it all. After consulting friends, trying exercise, jogging early mornings, she finally decided to try her hands at Yoga. Within a couple of days, she had joined a yoga center near her hostel and excitedly texted me the details of her new journey.

“Joined Yoga dear. I am so happy”

“But why Bru?” I replied.

“What why? I am looking like a bloated balloon. I need to reduce weight” she replied.

“You are lean” I said.

“I am fat. Rob”

“You are just chubby and fluffy and cute. You don’t have to do all that”

“I want to be Anushka, not a Kiran Rathod” she replied. “But you already are Kira” I deleted the content and replaced it with. “Following your role model Anushka?”

“Very much yes. Why don’t you also join the yoga classes? “If only there is a teacher like Anushka!!” I sent a sad smiley. “Rob. Yoga is good for health. It helps one control both mind and body. I think you definitely need it to control your wavering dirty mind.”

“I am happy with whatever mind I have now. You became a yoga ambassador already!” I responded.

However, after twenty minutes of texting, she convinced me to join a yoga class near my place. *Women!!*

I never took the yoga classes seriously. Even though I liked yoga, I hated the fact that I had to get up early in the morning for it, *EARLY MORNING!!* I learnt a few basics and began to practice and self-teach myself at home. I forced myself to endure it as she was constantly asking me to provide updates on my daily progress as she was providing her weight loss updates. I started imagining that ‘her’



losing weight would be good for me during the 'woman on top' position.

.

A few Weeks Later:

Brindha texted me frantically as she was returning from office. "You know what that rascal Divakar did today?"

"Divakar who? What did he do?" I asked in a rhyming tone. "That senior guy, friend of my brother who also works here. That

rascal told he had a dream about me and talked all bullshit" "Like what?" "Like in his dream, I was lying down it seems and he had poured

honey all over me and he started to lick, starting from my legs and then slowly went all the way up to my thighs and then he sensuously" "Yuck, Enough. Stop it already! Were you intently listening to this so-called dream of his?"

"No no, I didn't. How could I? And how dare he dream about me that way and tell that in person to me?" she fumed,

"Was it really a dream or are these his deepest desires?"

"Seriously! How would I know? I have decided to stop talking with him hereafter, no more dream talks. Have blocked his number already"

"Yeah, just don't talk to him, ever. How dare he talk to you that way, sick" I was agitated. I would have opened his skull with my bare hands if he were in front of me then. How dare he have such dreams of her. Not even once have I had a dream of even kissing her. And how dare he discuss it with her. *Sigh!* I couldn't keep my thoughts away from it, neither could I stop putting myself in that dream of his, in his position. The honey was sweet though.

.

A few days later, she called me up and said in a dry tone. "I am very upset today" and started to sob.

"What happened dear?"

"I was travelling in a bus today. A guy was sitting next to me and

he... he"

"It's okay, tell me"

“He touched my”

“Your, what? Hip?”

“No, my... he bumped IT with his elbow”

“Your breast?”

“Yes and that scoundrel!”

“Did you just leave him like that? Didn’t you beat the shit out of

him?”

“How do you think I could do that. Slap him in front of everyone?”

“He touched you, right? You have every right to hit him” “I couldn’t. I immediately moved away and sat at a distance” “It’s because of people like you that such men are taking advantage”

“It’s easy to talk Rob, but you need to be a girl to understand all that. I couldn’t and I wouldn’t hit him. I am like that, but I gave him a stare he would never forget. That was enough, he didn’t disturb me further”

“Are you alright Bru?”

“Yes da. I cried a bit. I kept wondering why the woman of this country should endure all this”

“I know, apologies on behalf of all men”

“Why should you apologize?”

“I don’t know. Maybe you would feel better”

“I wonder what’s just there in these breasts. Why do men keep ogling at it and want to fondle and feel it?”

I didn’t know what to reply to her.

“Why silent, what are you thinking?”

“About your boobs” I wanted to say, but considering the gravity of the situation, I withheld my silence.

“You there?”

“Yes, am sorry, was thinking about the bad state of Indian women”

“What could we do?”

“I know!” I said, both of us weren’t in our usual self. There was one guy dreaming about her and there was one guy taking advantage of her and all I could do was sit 300 Km away and listen to her

sobbing. I so badly wanted to be by her side. I so badly wanted to take care of her, protect her, love her, be for her. I so badly wanted to tell her that I had a crush on her and that I loved her. “So tell me. Who was your first crush?” she asked me out of the blue.

“Wait, What?” I came back to reality with a jerk.

“I just need a change of mind. So, a change of topic, tell me about your crush. I am sure you would have one.”

*I wondered how she knew what was exactly running in my mind then.*

“What silly question! I don’t have any crush” I blurted. “Come on, don’t lie. It’s just me, tell me – just between you and me. I will keep it a secret. Pinky promise” she almost cornered me. *How would one react when his crush is asking about herself.*

“Hmmm Okay. Well then there are two crushes I have had” “Two crushes? Wow interesting, tell me, tell me” she was all enthusiastic. I wanted to say it was her, but my ego and fear of losing her friendship didn’t allow me to talk about it and I said. “One is Catherine Zeta jones. Oh, man, what a beauty, flawless, perfect shape, one goddess face and shapely boo”

“Boo? What? Boobs?”

“Boody, body “I managed.

“Who is the other?”

“The other is my maths teacher from 12<sup>th</sup>. Oh man, I lost marks in my twelfth because I was admiring her all through the class. She has a son who is of my age, but then who cares, she is an ethnic beauty”

“Lol. I didn’t know you were an ‘aunty’ hero”

“Every single boy would have had a crush on one of his teachers. Its nature’s law, can’t help it”

“I have never been attracted to any of my male professors or teachers”

“Unlucky you”

“Ha ha ha “She giggled.

“What’s that sound in the back ground. I hear another girl talking” I asked her.

“You know I have a stupid room-mate. She always keeps talking to her boyfriend. She is just crossing limits and what will I do? I don’t

have a choice but talk to you”

It didn't sink in properly or I chose to ignore it. *If her room-mate was talking to her boyfriend, why should she feel like calling me?* My stupid brain

didn't ask me that question.

“I feel a little light after talking to you Rob. So, what next?” “You forgot what happened in the morning?” I asked. “I can't, but I have stopped feeling bad about it”

“Hmmm. Alright, so tell me, who is your crush”

“What?” she asked.

“I know you would have had a crush too, tell me about him” “Ahem. My crush... You really want to know?”

“Yes. I must. Tell me”

“Like really?”

“Yes, just tell me” I pestered her.

“Okay. I am saying only to you. Just between you and me” she took a vocal promise.

“Yes, I am all ears”. I said hoping to hear her tell that it was me. “Just tell that it's me, tell it's me” I was hoping hopelessly, when she responded.

“Even you know him well”

I was pretty sure that I was the only person she knew from my college. It was cute the way girls played around in telling such information to men.

“I kind of guess whom you are going to say”

“Oh cool Rob. It's none other than Vinoth from EEE department”

“Vinoth who the duck?” I had made it a point not to use expletives to her and so had she.

“Vinoth, tall, lean, has glistening eyes and long well-oiled hair. You should have seen him”

“I don't know; besides I see only girls in my college, that too a selected few, not all” I was trying hard to hide the disappointment. First it was Ramesh, then Vinoth, I wondered how many others were in store.

“So you have met him, gone out with him?”

“No da. He is just a FB crush. I like him, his photos, am a big fan

of his, but he puts scene at times and sir won't talk, simply shows off!"

I was relieved a little bit, but not completely. *It is difficult to know that you are not the crush of your crush. At least my case was better, I had my crush as my best friend. But we humans never would be content with what we have, we always want more.*

"Hey Rob, wait a minute, mom is calling" she said and cut the call abruptly.

I kept looking at my phone and felt empty. As I decided to dismiss all thoughts, she called again and almost screamed.

"Rob! Looks like mom has found a guy for me named Rakesh. She has just mailed me his photo and he looks super handsome." I stood frozen as she continued to praise him at the other end.

**RRR**

Chapter 15

### **The Search Begins**

My thoughts froze as I listened to what Prabhu said. I tried to compose myself, but couldn't.

"What the fuck do you mean?" I uttered, still shocked.

He continued.

"It is a break-through in science Rob. The professor was perplexed to find this chip in you and so was I, we never thought this was possible"

"Is it like that "Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy" movie, where they will land on a planet in which a hand from beneath the ground will punch people every time they try to think? I had always laughed at it while also marveling at the thought process of the author. To think that someone has managed do it, God! Prabhu, I am really worried now. I don't even know what all I have thought about him in the last few hours. Damn, he shouldn't harm Diana. He knows every word I speak and think of speaking. Oh God" I was shit scared.

"No, he wouldn't know what you are thinking now, Rob. The device has only a range of 50 KMs. We are 50 Kms away from Chennai now and he can't hear you. I even tested it by making you think of your priorities

between Diana and Brindha and how you would react on seeing him, he wasn't able to receive the signals.”

“But he knows I am out of range, right?”

“Yes, but we have convinced him that going to Trichy was the only way to find her, so that should seal the deal”

“And how did you know that this works only for 50 Km. You say you see it for the first time?”

“We didn't know, but this is i4-263 IC chip. The processor usually has a small range. 50 KMs was just a guess and it turned out to be right.”

“Are you sure this is the range, what if he knows even now. What if he, what if I think of something wrong. What if Diana is harmed.”

“Rob, relax. Trust me on this. We are definitely in the safe zone”

“I am not sure Prabhu, I feel dizzy”

“Rob, be strong. There is nothing to worry now. “

I was in no mood to be consoled.

“The professor, wait Prabhu, I am confused. What next? Can he infuse data into my brain and make me do as he wishes?”

“That he can't! It's just a transmitter. There is no inception involved. Rob, stay calm. Keep thinking that you are in the safe zone. You can think whatever you want now and I already proved you that there is no harm.”

“What if you are wrong and the transmitter still works and the Loser is just playing along”

“From what we have seen of the Loser, I don't think he is someone who manipulates things. He would have definitely buzzed you the moment you told you will kill him” Prabhu tried to comfort me with his logic and continued.

“The professor has promised to track your signals to where it leads, to locate the identity of the kidnapper.”

“Will the LOSER still be tracking me?”

“Yes of course Rob. He is tracking your mobile, right? We were unable to remove that bug. You forgot or what? And we can't be discussing this by being static here for a long time, we need to move soon” saying Prabhu began to drive the car and added.

“And that's why I wanted you to think about going to Trichy and not about removing the bug while you were still in his range, in the professor's house”

“How the heck did he place it there? In my brain!!”

“Near your brain” He corrected and continued “No idea. Maybe you should have been admitted in a hospital recently, were you? Wait. That accident.”

“Yes, two weeks ago, that accident and I got admitted and yes I was having some pain in the back of my head too. They told it was a normal concussion and that it needs to be operated. Diana used to pray every single night for my speedy recovery, man. It’s all a long laid out plan, Prabhu. How could the hospital guys do this? I will sue them for sure.” I was furious.

“We will do that after we save Diana” Prabhu assured.

“Prabhu, I am pretty sure that I would have thought of killing him, the moment I find Diana, even when I was in his range. Shit, he knows Prabhu. He knows. Will he kill Diana?” I kept pestering him.

“Highly unlikely. If he had wanted, he would have killed Diana already, but guess he needs you to find Brindha”.

“Prabhu, don’t even talk like that man. It hurts, it really hurts” I shook my head praying nothing should have happened to Diana. She was just a child.

“It hurts me as well Rob, Diana is my sister and I will find that kidnapper and will reprimand him, give him more than what he deserves”

I looked at him. I couldn’t have asked for a better friend than him in my life. But there was still a doubt in a corner of my mind on how he knew everything about the kidnapper and his subsequent moves. Was it plain guessing or was he a partner all along?

“So what next?” I asked him.

“You know Brindha’s house, right? That will be the next stop. He will be tracking your mobile still. We need to keep moving and reach Trichy asap.” He said and pressed the accelerator.

.

The car was speeding at 120 KMPH, I was looking outside through the window, aimlessly when I was disturbed by a WhatsApp message.

“You will have company, as long as you are there in Trichy”. It was the LOSER.

I wondered how he had access to everything and every place, but then that’s what happens with six months of meticulous planning. I wondered what all he had intended to do. If he had a ‘Thought Detector’ and fixed that chip in my brain, he could have gone to any extent. He should have a huge amount of money at his disposal. What a name to call himself, LOSER: ironic.

I looked at his Whatsapp profile pic, there wasn't any. He didn't have any status as well. Should have been a number he had got for this very purpose. I wasn't sure if I should laugh or cry. All this for Brindha. Bru that was the name in which I had saved all the 3 numbers of hers, but none of that was working. Her last Whatsapp status was some love failure quote. She of all people posting such a quote, but wait, what if it were actually a love failure? What if the LOSER was Ganpath...

LOSER, Ganpath.

I was reminded of the video where Diana was accompanied by a short haired man as she was leaving from Ascendas. I frantically looked at the photo I had taken of him in my phone in that security room... it resembled Ganpath. It was so similar to him. Ganpath was the LOSER.

My mind was working at a breakneck pace. Ganpath was in love with Brindha, maybe they broke up and that's why he wanted his revenge. Maybe Brindha became inactive in Social media because she wanted to avoid him. She wanted to let go off all contacts with Ganpath, so vanished from Social media. Ganpath knew that I was close to her. He might have guessed that I was still in touch with her and that I was the only way to reach Brindha. Incidentally, Ganpath was also from a rich family. But would he go to this extent to find Brindha? Was he that obsessed with her. I would never know. I felt that things fell in place.

"Prabhu, I have found him. I have just found who LOSER is" "Who?" he asked without taking his concentration off the road. "It's Ganpath"

"Ganpath who?"

"Ganpath is the lover of Brindha or may be could be the ex-love now"

"The guy whose second name you didn't know? Her lover is doing all this?" he doubted.

"Not sure if he is the lover now as well. Could be ex. should be ex" I was coming to my logical conclusions.

"If so, then why should you be involved? Whats the logic?" Prabhu questioned.

"Maybe he thinks I know the whereabouts of Brindha. Maybe he wants me to reach Brindha for him, talk on his behalf or worst case, I could have been the reason for their break up?"

"What? What the heck did you do?"

"I don't know. I didn't do anything. I haven't even talked to her after we broke up"



“You guys broke up?”

“Yeah?”

“You told you were just friends all the while. You never told me you were in a relationship with her”

“Rob, she was my first and only crush. The crush turned into friendship and friendship turned into” I paused as Prabhu looked at me with a look of contempt on his face...

“Love, lust and sex?” he finished.

“No. it turned into thick friendship”

“What the hell is thick friendship? And what has that got to do with this guy chasing your ass?”

“I could have been one reason for them breaking up.”

“You slept with her?”

“No ... no Rob. I would never dare to, you know me; I am a momma’s boy. I wouldn’t do that. I had always wanted to marry...”

“Marry the girl of your mom’s choice!! I know that shit” he finished before I could.

“So why do you think you could be a reason for the breakup”

“I could be. I could be not. It could be his perspective. But as far as I know, I maintained a safe distance from her after we broke up. I was in fact happy for her new relationship. This is all news to me. I think we will find the answer only when we find the Loser” I said.

Prabhu gave a sigh and continued to drive. He looked tired. The road was long, dark and scarcely populated. Diana would have enjoyed such a long drive.

“Do you want me to drive?” I asked Prabhu.

“You do that while we return back” he responded without looking at me.

“Why should we return back?” I asked.

“Don’t you want to save your wife?” asking he raised his eyebrows and pierced me with his looks.

“I mean, when will be returning back?” I wondered why I asked the first question.

“Depends on how quickly you can find your so-called crush turned friend turned thick friend turned ex. So how were you friend zoned?”

“Let’s just not talk about it now. Once we return you can read my blog where I would have detailed it all “

“Come on tell me. It’s a long drive, there is nothing much we could do now.

I am trying hard to keep myself awake.”

“If I tell that story now, you may doze off permanently.” I said and he laughed.

“It just happens Prabhu. You would never know; you will be best of friends and you would want to take the relation to the next level and then one day you will end up just as a friend and the girl will not have any other ‘so and so’ feelings for you. She will share everything with you, except her life. But one major reason why I didn’t want to take the relationship to the next level is our religion”

“Religion! I know, right. So, have you had sex with her?”

“Prabhu, come on. I already told you, NO. I haven’t. Why are you always asking that?”

“Cos’ that’s the driving factor for us humans. Tell me the truth, Rob”

“Had I made love with her, I would have made posters and stuck it all around Trichy or Bangalore or even Chennai. She wasn’t someone you would want to bed, she is someone you would want to spend your life with, as your spouse.”

“Oh, the homely type. Btw. does Diana know this?”

“She does. I told her after our marriage”

“I believe you told her after your honeymoon, else you wouldn’t have had one” he giggled. I smiled.

I wondered how he could talk or even think like that, when my wife’s life was in danger but then realized that he was trying to ease the situation. We had only a slim chance of succeeding in our mission against such a sophisticated and well thought out plan by Ganpath.

“Enough Mr. Prabhu. I believe in being truthful to my wife”

“And she told what, on hearing it”

“Diana is very understanding. All she said was, I don’t care about your past, I want to be your future and a memorable *present*”

“How POETIC!” he stressed and simultaneously screamed when the lorry behind us came dangerously close to us and almost hit us.

We moved to the left corner of the road giving the lorry enough space to overtake us on the right. But the lorry was keen on following us behind rather than moving aside. I was reminded of the message from the LOSER “*You will have company till Trichy* “. I didn’t expect the pursuing to happen in THAT way. They could have trailed us from a distance.

“They are the LOSER’s men. They have been sent by him to watch over us”

I told Prabhu.

“Why are they stalking us?”

“Don’t ask such silly questions Prabhu, just drive” I urged him.

“I don’t think they are here to track us. It looks more like they have come to finish us”.

“What do you mean?” I turned back to see the lorry hitting the trunk of our car.

“Fasten your seat belts, my boy” Prabhu said and pressed the accelerator hard.

The car’s speed increased from 120 to 160. We drove off as quickly as we could, losing the vision of the lorry behind us in that dark road. However, within five minutes, we saw the lorry picking pace and catching up close behind us.

“Oh shit! Man!! He has planned to kill us in these roads to make it look like an accident” I shouted.

“Do something Rob, text the Loser or call him and ask him to stop them” I called the LOSER Ganpath and he picked immediately. He should have decided to keep awake all night.

“What Rob?” he was in a hurry

“You told we are only being followed, why are you trying to kill us?”

“Why would I do that? I don’t want you dead. Death is not suffering, living and seeing all your loved ones die is suffering. I want you to suffer, not die”

“Then why are they eager to run their lorry over us?”

“Hey Ram! I have no clue, let me check.” he put me on hold and came back in line after a minute.

“Bad luck, Mr. Rob. They aren’t picking my call. I think they got my order wrong. I just told to watch over you guys and they are planning to send you over and above. Shit, those dumb a-hole minions. And that’s why I operate alone. Damn Rob. But wait, I am sure you will find a way out to survive, I know you will and I want you to” saying he cut the call.

“What did he say?” Prabhu asked me.

“He has washed his hands off. He also mentioned ‘Hey Ram’ all the more probable for him to be Ganpath as against a Gordon. We are on our own, he can’t help, do something Prabhu...”

“What can I do man?”

“Anything Prabhu, look out the toll booth is approaching. We will be finished if we reach there. We will have to do something before that” I

could see death in front of me.

“We can’t do anything now. If we hit them or they hit us, we will be the ones who will be dead.”

“Prabhu, check if they are slowing down. Damn, I don’t think they are, they are speeding up. We don’t have a choice, but to keep moving” I said frantically

“If you don’t know a way out, at least stop scaring the shit out of me” saying Prabhu steered his way towards the toll plaza.

The toll plaza was just a few meters away. The lorry behind us, didn’t slow down. Prabhu reduced the speed of our car and drove it dangerously close to the median towards our right. Our right rear view mirror was thrashed in the median lane. The toll plaza was scarcely populated with just a few lorries and buses making their moves on either side. I didn’t know what plans Prabhu had in mind.

I fastened my seat belt. Prabhu was focused and nervous at the same time. I wasn’t sure if he had a plan, I wasn’t sure if we could get away, even if he had one. The lorry hit our car. Prabhu took his legs off the accelerator. Our car was moving with the inertia of the force generated by the speeding lorry behind us. It didn’t seem to stop and its driver was in no mood to press the brakes. There was a sense of alarm in the toll booth with two speeding vehicles approaching to hit them straight.

A few barricades were tactfully placed and left only a minimal space for one vehicle to go into the toll booth at a time and in a considerably slow pace. With the speed at which we were drifting I was sure we would hit the barricades or worse, even the toll booth. I closed my eyes and hoped the air bags in his car worked fine. The impact could be within a minute... Our vehicles were dead locked. I prayed to the Lord to forgive all my sins and to somehow find a way to save and protect my wife. I looked at Prabhu for one last time.

Just seconds before we could hit on the barricade, Prabhu steered the car’s wheel at its fullest to the right and our car took a sharp right turn, milliseconds before impact. The force of the turn was uncontrollable and our car was heading straight towards the other end of the road, spinning, as Prabhu was trying hard to bring it to a halt, when a bus from the other side of the road hit us, the impulse of which pushed us to the median again, resulting in a glass shattering impact. It all went blank.



## Chapter 16 **Bangalore Date**

My mind was blank. Brindha continued to praise her prospective partner Rakesh, at the other end. Every single word she spoke fell on deaf ears. How could she keep on talking about someone just by looking at his photo.

“Are you even listening?” she interrupted.

“Yeah, yes. I am. But what’s the hurry now for marriage? You are just 23”

“My mom is already looking at me as an old aunt” she replied.

“You are an old aunt, yes, but you are still 23”.

“Just because I can’t slap you over call, doesn’t mean you can talk anything you want.”

“The truth indeed hurts”

“Duh. But, I am very happy you know. Rakesh works at Infosys and resides in Bangalore. He is a manager there and earns about a lakh per month.

Brindha Rakesh also sounds good, right?”

*Somehow Brindha Robin sounded better for me.*

“Yeah, it does. Advance wishes. Hope everything goes well and you tie the knot soon”

I wasn’t sure if her enthusiasm was real. If it were I didn’t want to be a bottleneck in her marriage. I was disappointed, yes. I was heartbroken, yes. But there wasn’t much I could do about it, with my own cowardice of not being able to bring myself up to talk to my mom. I didn’t have any other choice. The night went with me being lost in thoughts. I couldn’t sleep well and it reflected glaringly next day at office.

My project mate saw my troubled face and asked me the reason for it. I told him the entire story listening to which he gave a different interpretation.

“Maybe she wants you to propose her”

“What?”

“Yes man, reverse psychology. She wants you to feel jealous. Try proposing her” he said casually.

“But she is going to be married”

“She has just received a photo. That’s one choice. If you propose her, she will then have two choices in front of her to choose from.”

“You mean, then she will choose me?”

“She will choose the one best suitable for her. Anyways, give it a try. Propose her”

I couldn't even think of doing something like that. I wasn't ready.

“I don't think I am ready at this stage of my career for marriage.” I told in a disappointed tone.

“Rob, if you are shit scared, nothing will happen, at least go on a date with her and try to understand what's in her mind. If she is really ready for marriage there is nothing you can do, but if she is ready to take the relationship with you to the next level, then it's worth the effort. Give it a shot” he encouraged me.

“Really?”

“Yes, where is she? In Bangalore, right? It's just six hours from here, go...”

It sounded like a good idea. I had gone out with her in Trichy, but the idea of travelling to Bangalore to meet her was exciting. I could make her feel special and if all the gods permitted, I might even propose her. I was thrilled. I informed Brindha that I would visit her at Bangalore on the following weekend. She was equally excited and booked a room in a nearby hotel for my stay over the weekend.

I departed from Chennai as planned.

Jan 8, 2011:

I had no clue about Bangalore and didn't know Kannada. I had never been there earlier and was travelling all alone, all the way for a girl, of whose feelings for me I had no clue about. It was strange. *The common things that we see in every other movie, seem extremely crazy in real life.*

It was very early in the morning when the bus I was travelling in reached Madiwala, where she stayed.

I got down, boarded an auto and reached the hotel she had booked for me. All my dreams of her waiting for me in the bus stop, giving me a welcome hug and taking me to the hotel still stayed intact in the castle I had built in stratosphere. The receptionist (*it was a guy, btw*) of the hotel (*it looked more like a lodge*) looked at me, up and down and asked, “Single?”

“Yes, but not sure if I will be the same when I return” I bit my tongue after saying it.

“What?”

“Nothing, single”

He noted my name and checked his ledger, it was already there. He then marked his entry and asked me to pay the advance. I so badly wanted to ask if Brindha hadn't paid already, but didn't. I paid the advance and went into that small room in the first floor, carrying my luggage. It looked like someone had made a room out of my house's kitchen area and left it for rent. I rested for some time, took a refreshing bath and then texted her, “I am ready, shall we go out?”

“I will be there in half an hour” she texted back.

The half an hour felt like an hour. I couldn't sit patiently. She called me on reaching. I expected her to come up to my room, but she decided to stay at the reception area and was waiting.

“So what's the plan for today?” I asked her.

“There is a mall close by, Forum Mall, shall we go there?”

“I am the guest, you are the host, please lead the way” I said. She took me to breakfast at a local eatery. I had to stand and eat. She claimed with pride that, that was where she would have her breakfast every day. We then got a bus and headed towards Forum Mall.

We did some random window shopping at Big bazaar. I wasn't interested in buying anything. I wanted to spend some time with her, alone, but didn't get a chance. She was quite occupied in checking out all the items in the shop that she had no intention to buy.

The day was spent purposelessly. We decided to have our dinner in the mall and decided to return back to her place at around ten pm.

“How about we take an auto” I asked her.

“How about we walk and reach faster?” she replied back.

“Is it safe? It's almost ten”

“It is safe. And I would love to walk” she said and we walked with a considerable distance between us. It was a full moon night. We walked along the foot path. Her face glistened amidst the moonlight and the yellow street lights. She was reminiscing about a lot of things throughout our walk. It felt like we were transported to a separate planet. I couldn't hear the traffic noise, but only her voice. I couldn't see the road ahead, but only her face. I was nodding silently to everything she said, as much as I wanted to bite her lips. I wanted to hold her hand, but resisted the urge. After 40 minutes of a memorable walk we reached her hostel.

She was narrating some funny story about her room-mate while I was lost

in her eyes. I so badly wanted to kiss her and hug her.

“So what next?” she asked me.

“I want to kiss on your forehead” I wanted to say.

She brought her head close to me as if she heard my mind.

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We made wild passionate love. She was on top of me in that bed, her yoga classes had indeed worked. Her long dark hair was blocking the view of her breasts, I gently moved it aside to take a good look at her womanhood. I caressed her face, she bit my finger. It hurt. She moaned. It was a pleasure. She had the perfect physique. A deep burning fire within me was being satiated. I wondered what I had been missing all my life. My virginity was being ripped apart and I enjoyed every moment of it. Just as I was about to reach the pinnacle of pleasure, I heard the phone ringing with that familiar caller tune. *Oh shit, not her, not now!*

“Not her, not now” I wished.

I knew who it was with the peculiar ring tone I had assigned for her. I washed myself and came out of the bathroom finishing off my wild ecstasy self-help session and picked up Brindha’s call. It was quite a vivid imaginary love making session I had had with her.

“Hey, what’s up, slept?” she asked.

“No, was about to” I uttered disinterested.

“I am not getting sleep, was thinking of you”

“I was dreaming of us”

“Dreaming of us? Like what?”

“Like your senior dreamt of you” I wanted to say, but stopped and

said.

“I mean, thought of you. Just like that. I am here in Bangalore, I spent the entire day with you, obviously, I will be thinking of you” “You know, as you were about to leave from my hostel I thought you would kiss me. I thought you would hug me and kiss me on my forehead.” She said.

I wondered how she exactly had similar thoughts as mine. “That’s why you brought your head close to mine?”



“Then for what, for you to smell my hair spray?”

“It smelt like coconut oil. Did you apply hair spray?” “Your smelling senses are as good as that of a donkey’s” saying that, she laughed her heart out.

We talked for a long time that night. The next morning was different. The next day was different.

Jan 9, 2011:

We decided to go to Lalbagh Park on that Sunday. I didn’t know that it was the park dedicated solely for lovers. We bought the tickets and sat in the park benches and chatted all day. There was still a considerable distance that we had maintained between the two of us. I was so tempted by seeing all those couples locking their lips in every bench that adorned the park. Her lips were inviting too. “Hey bru, why don’t we get in that battery driven car and go around the park” I asked.

“No da, not interested. Besides it costs 100 per head, we will just walk”

“I am already feeling tired and its just 100 bucks, come on” “Noooo, let it go” she insisted and walked away.

I stood for some time and then followed her and asked, “But why? What’s in a ride?”

“When I reached Bangalore, you know what happened to my grandpa?”

“How can I forget it?”

“We took him from the train in a similar vehicle. It reminds me of that, that’s why I didn’t want to come”

“I am sorry dear. I didn’t know”

“That’s okay “she said and suddenly grabbed my right hand. I have seen several movies where the heroine touches the hero’s hand and he feels a sensational current shock passing through his hand. I had always laughed off on seeing such scenes. But the moment Brindha grasped my hand, I felt a tingling sensation in my body, I felt a wave of passion rushing through my veins, a few to the brain and a few in the opposite direction. It felt corny and heavenly at the same time.

“There is a monkey” she freaked out and hid behind me. I looked at the monkey, smiled and thanked him from the bottom of my heart. “So

what if it's a monkey. It's just a monkey”

“It's a monkey, shoo it away” she kept insisting, still holding my hand. The monkey ran away after sometime and she let go off her hold. I started to long for her touch. As we strode along through the park, a slope came along. I told that I wanted to go over the slope to the other end. She had a look at it and said.

“Alright, see, there are steps few feet ahead, we will take that” “Why don't we just climb over this slope? It will be fun” “I will fall” she told with a fake fear.

“You wouldn't. “I promised.

“Then you will have to hold my hand as we walk” she made an offer I would never refuse.

“Sure” I said and we walked hand in hand. I wanted to make sure that I had a firm hold on the slope, before I could balance her. Nothing could be more hilarious and belittling than falling in front of your crush while trying to save her. She held my hand a couple of more times, taking me hither and tither, buying coffee seeds, ayurvedic medicinal packets and the like. Lalbagh was to be etched in my memory for a long time thanks to those few touches of hers.

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My return bus to Chennai was at 10 pm. We had our dinner in a hotel near the bus stop. As we were eating, she gifted me a coffee mug.

“Whats this?”

“Just a small gift from me Rob”

“Is this even needed?” I gave a puzzled look.

“Just have it, as a memory” she insisted.

“I don't have anything to give you”

“You came here all the way for me, just for me, that is enough” I could only smile. We finished our dinner and came to the bus

stop. My bus arrived. I didn't want to leave her. I kept looking at her. Her eyes asked me to stay. I couldn't bring myself to tell good bye to her. The door of the bus opened and the conductor had blown the whistle, waiting for me to get in. The bus stop was crowded.

I wanted to hug her, I so badly wanted to hug her, but wasn't sure if it would be a non-lust, genuine, gentle hug. I resisted my temptation and got in the bus. She waved her hands. I waved back as her face was lost in the multitude of crowd.

I texted her as I sat in the bus.

“You know what, I have to say this”

“Yes. Is there a beautiful girl opposite to you?” she asked. “No and there isn't any girl either” I sent. “Besides, I don't find

anyone else more beautiful than you now” I thought.

“Tell me Rob”

“I love you” I sent and waited. Waited with bated breath. After a

few minutes came the reply.

“I love you too” I gave a deep sigh of relief and blushed, but added.

“Love more in the sense of care, not like the normal love or lust or anything, more like friends only, I will care for you and love you... that way”

“Oh, like that?” she replied.

“Yes, I love you” I said more confidently this time.

“Hmmm”

“What Hmmm?”

“Love you too” she said. I wasn't definitely going to propose to her over message. I had had several ideas of dream proposals. It was one memorable, worthy trip.

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In the following days, Brindha never talked to me about her new alliance. I guessed that the talks should have failed and she was happy about it. But within few days, she got another alliance and she went back to her old ways. I still hadn't proposed her officially and she knew that I would propose her anytime. With that being the case, her behavior irritated me. I couldn't take it further and was clearly pissed off. There was nothing worse than not fighting for what you want.

Aggravated by the increasing number of mails from her about her alliance, I told her plainly.

“Bru, listen! Emotionally, we are too dependent on each other these days. We can’t be without texting each other even for a minute, how do you think this could continue post your wedding? There has to be an end to it.”

“End, what end?” she asked.

“See, nothing can last forever. I am sure your hubby wouldn’t like me texting you this way”

“So?”

“So, let’s just try to reduce it”

“Reduce texting, like what?”

“Let’s not text or mail each other for the whole of tomorrow”

“What?” she was confused.

“Let’s not communicate with each other for one day and then see if we will be able to do it and then be without each other”

“Rob, I definitely can’t do that”

“If not now, then it will be really difficult for you after your wedding”

“I don’t care, but I can’t do it now. Let’s not do it, let’s just not do it”

“No bru, we have to, we have to try”

“I have given my stance, then your wish” she said.

“From tomorrow morning till night, no texts or mails” I sent her.

She was quite disturbed and disinterested to talk to me even that very night. I wasn’t sure how I was going to be without talking to her. We were virtually connected 24/7, but considering her marriage proposals and alliances, I didn’t have a choice. Either she should have taken the relationship with me to the next level or stop talking to me about other men in her life to provoke me or to make me feel jealous. I couldn’t take it any further.

The next day was the cruelest day in my life. I found it extremely difficult not to text her. I was sure, she should have suffered equally, if not more.

The day moved at a turtle’s pace. I couldn’t control any further.

It was around 8 pm when I messaged her while returning from office.

“Okay, I give up. I can’t be without messaging you, I can’t. I need you”

“Hmmm” came the reply. The reply that she usually sent when she was angry.

“What?”

“Nothing, you told not to text till tomorrow”

“Yes, I did. But I confess now that I can’t be without texting you, what now?”

“What do you want me to do? Text you now?”

I had to call her and explain my side of logic. It fell on deaf ears. She was in no mood to listen.

“Do you remember Ramesh?” she asked me.

“Your first love?”

“And why did we break up?”

“I don’t remember the reason exactly”

“Because, he behaved in the exact same way you behaved today, he avoided me”

“I wasn’t avoiding you dear”

“Just don’t call me dear...”

“Bru, I love you”

“Don’t say that!! Yes, I found it difficult not to text you. Yes, it was hard, but what you did to me today, reminded me of him. You are no different than him”

“Bru, come on. It was, it was a hasty stupid decision of mine”

“But it has made things clear for me, Rob”

“Won’t you say ‘love you’ once?”

“I think it’s better if we continue to be this way”

“I am sorry bru. Wait! What? Continue like what?” I asked without understanding what she meant.

“I think we should break up, this - whatever relationship of ours is.” She uttered in an emotionless tone.

***RNR***

## Chapter 17 **Hospital Diaries**

Diana uttered in an emotionless tone, “Rob, I am afraid I am suffering from cancer”

“What the heck are you even talking about? Come on Diana, be serious”

“Do you think I am kidding?”

“Tell me what happened” I made her sit up on the bed and listened to what she had to say.

“I see spotting when I take a leak, I see blood drops. Just not today, but for the past two/three days. I checked the reason for such symptoms over the

internet and it came out as a uterine cancer.”

“Why didn’t you tell me about the blood leak? Where did you check? Is there any pain in your lower abdomen?”

“There is no pain or may be I don’t feel it much, but I am scared. Will I die Rob?” she was genuinely upset.

“Come on darling, don’t even talk like that. Don’t worry. Wait, one of my friend is a doctor, let me check with her” saying I called my friend and explained her my wife’s situation. She listened to me carefully and asked me to take Diana to the nearest hospital and do a urine checkup.

I felt something had gone wrong and headed to Dr. Kamakshi hospital in Pallikarani. The doctor, who examined my wife, asked her to do a pregnancy test, a urine test, followed by an ultrasound scan of the vaginal tube. *Pregnancy test!?*

I was confused with what the doctor was saying, nevertheless we took all the tests and took it back to the doctor. The nurse in the waiting area told us that the pregnancy test was positive, but the fetus was in the fallopian tube. I couldn’t comprehend, but was happy that Diana was pregnant. The doctor called us in after a while and I went in with happiness written all over my face. The doctor though, was much upset and sad, which forced me to change my expression.

“Any problem doctor?” I asked in a low tone.

“Yes. This is a case of ectopic pregnancy. Her HCG count is also high. We need to act immediately”

“Wait, she is pregnant, right? What’s there to act?”

“Listen” she said and drew the female reproductive system on a paper and explained me. “This is the uterus, the baby has to be formed here, but in your wife’s case, its formed in the fallopian tubes, which is the tube connecting the uterus. This won’t be thick and is not expandable and if the baby is going to be there for a few more weeks, it will rupture, cause internal bleeding and even result in” she paused, looked at my wife and continued, “Death”.

My face turned pale. Diana wasn’t reacting much. I could understand the pain she was going through and wished I could take in her pain as well. I held her hand tight.

“Is there no way, we could pull the baby into the uterus?” I asked the doctor.

“It has never been successful”

I took a deep breath. I didn't want to look at Diana.

"What's the alternative?"

"We will give her a drug, 'Methotrexate' if her body reacts to it positively, the fetus will be destroyed and will mix with body wastes and will be disposed."

"How effective will it be?"

"Very effective, that's the one recommended as well"

"Can we go home, discuss and then tell you?"

"The HCG count is 5000, which means she is five weeks pregnant, I would strongly suggest you get her admitted right away"

"Now??? Just like that?" I turned towards Diana. There were no emotions left in her face.

"Yes" the doctor replied

"No doctor, just give us one more day. We will get admitted tomorrow" saying that I took Diana and left the room. We didn't talk to each other. She held my hand tight. The lift door opened in the fourth floor and we both got in. Just as the door was about to close, I saw a nurse running towards the lift. I kept the door open for her, she got in and then the lift started to go down.

I was staring aimlessly at the lift door with a million thoughts occupying my mind. *Is there a way we could get back this baby? Is there a way to move it uterus? What will happen to Diana? Will it be painful for her?* Diana disturbed my thought flow with a nudge on my shoulder and asked me to look at what the nurse was holding. I looked around to see the nurse. She was holding a small white package close to her chest. It felt like a package at first, but when I looked at it even more closer, I found a small face bound within the white towel. The baby had small tiny eyes and a tinier nose and mouth. The baby's face was pink and he was the most beautiful thing I had seen in all my life. He had bright button eyes and was looking at the nurse in the cutest way possible.

"Oh my God, is it, a new born?" I asked her.

"Yes. It's just been an hour. I am taking him to her mom" she replied.

I never knew new born babies were that beautiful. The nurse got down in second floor and the door closed behind her leaving me and Diana inside. I looked at Diana. She was still gazing at the place where the nurse was standing.

I went close to her and gave a gentle kiss on her forehead, she slid her head

on my shoulders. I uttered, "I will always be there for you." A small drop of tear from her eyes fell on my T shirt. She composed herself and looked up, I held her hand tight.

My parents were waiting for us and my mom asked what had happened as soon as I entered. I explained everything and told her that we were expected to get Diana admitted the following morning. There was an eerie silence. My mom went and talked to Diana and gave her strength. Women had their own way of bonding together after a fight. The whole family supported her. My dad came next to me and said, "Don't worry, it's said that the first one is always rotten. May be its all God's plans, everything happens for a reason. All will be well".

I went to my room, hugged Diana tight and slept through the night.

The next morning, she got ready, packed a few clothes, took some basic necessities and we went to the hospital and got her admitted. Her parents came to visit her. We all took turns to stay with her. She was advised to stay in hospital bed for 5 days and was kept under constant surveillance to check if her body was reacting positively to the drug. I brought her lunch and dinner from home. I had only one thing in mind. *She wasn't going to go through it all alone.*

I wanted to be with her in every small pain and suffering of hers. Losing a baby that has been just formed was no joke. Losing it for no known reason was cruel. Her face was enough to tell me what she was going through. I knew I couldn't bear her pain, I knew I wouldn't feel as guilty as her, I knew she needed me more than anything. I wanted to make sure that she had a will, a strong will and a belief that her husband would be beside her at times of adversity and sorrow; a hope that she could look up to and be happy for. As long as I was with her, I made it a point to joke around, make funny faces and tried to keep her smiling. If she looked too sick, I would take my phone and pretend to take a snap of hers, she being a photoholic, would end up with a smile. The doctors were monitoring her progress and were happy that she was reacting well to the drug.

Her parents stayed with her during the day and I stayed at night and whenever I could. When I was in her room, I made sure it was filled with laughter, so much that the nurse even warned me once to maintain silence. When her parents weren't around, we watched the History Channel's Houdini. She became a fan of the series and even watched the repeat telecasts. We also got our sneak peek kisses when the doctors weren't



around.

“That girl looks gorgeous in that pink evening gown” she exclaimed one night seeing someone in TV.

“It’s the costume, anyone will look good in that dress. But you look better even in this medical gown” I smiled. She reciprocated.

There is so much that life could teach you when you are in a hospital bed. I learnt that prawn was her favorite non-veg food, that she didn’t like milk that she loved to be pampered like a kid, that she loved me more than anything in the world and that I was her world.

“You know what?” she asked me.

“I know so many things, what exactly are you looking for baby?”

“I have never loved you so much, ever” she looked into my eyes and said.

“I have never loved you so much ever” I mimicked her statement by making faces and she hit me with her left hand.

Her HCG count came down by the 5<sup>th</sup> day around 5 PM and the doctors permitted her to be discharged. She was asked to rest for a month. She decided to take rest at her parent’s place and I didn’t object.

Also as an after effect of ectopic pregnancy, sex was prohibited for 4 months. The timing of this ban was so bad that porn sites were also banned by the Indian government at that time. I was totally a dejected man who had to live his life with the saved DVDs and porn loops.

Diana came home after twenty days and was a changed woman. She was more matured, blended well with my parents and I felt that she was no longer the child she used to be. She and my mom patched up after a few months and things returned to status quo at home. I was happy, the two most important women in my life finally started to get along well.

Time was indeed a healer. Ours became the happy family it used to be, until that fateful day, when she went missing. She had gone missing. She was kidnapped. Someone was using her as a bait to find Brindha. Diana was in trouble.

“Diana!!” I screamed at the top of my voice as I woke up. I was in a hospital bed, a syringe was inserted in my right hand and glucose was being supplied. I looked all around frantically when a nurse came running towards me. She asked me to remain calm and breathe easily. *Why am in a hospital bed? What the hell happened?*

“Calm down sir, relax. You are being treated” she told me.

“Treated for what? Where am I? Whats this hospital?”

“This is Saraswati Hospital in Perambalur. You had met with an accident a while ago and was brought here” she told me as she checked my pulse and noted down a few readings.

“Accident!” I slowly remembered the lorry chasing us closely and we escaping at the very last moment only to be hit by a bus. The last I remembered was our car hitting against the median. The bus was coming at a slow speed and hence the impact should have been minimal. We should have been safe. *We! It was we, I am here, where is Prabhu!!*

“Prabhu, where is my friend Prabhu? He was in the car” I panicked.

“I am really not sure. They brought only you here”

“No, my friend was the one who drove the car. Do you know who brought me here? Can I pull this glucose syringe? I have to go find him”

“No, wait. Don’t pull that syringe. Let me remove it, and take this tablet and then you can go find him” she said and removed the syringe from my body. I got up and was about to move when she interrupted.

“I heard that a couple of people died in that accident area earlier today morning. May be you might want to check the mortuary once as well.”

“What in the world? Oh no... It can’t be. It shouldn’t be... Prabhu! Oh my freaking God! Why don’t you have some mercy on me?” I couldn’t come to terms with what she said. “Where is the mortuary?” I screamed.

“Go straight and take the second left. You will find it. A ward boy will be there, ask him, he will show the bodies”

*Bodies!*

I rushed to the end of the room and took giant steps towards the mortuary. A teenager who was clothed in whites was standing in front of the door that read “Morgue”.

“I want to see the two bodies which came in earlier today.” I told him amidst my heavy breathing.

“Today we have had 5 bodies so far. Which one do you want to see? And how are you related?” he asked without an iota of concern.

“That accident case! It happened close by. I don’t know the place. Heard two people came here. One of them” I paused and continued” is my friend” I uttered hoping it shouldn’t be true.

“Oh, those two, the faces are not recognizable, anyways, follow me” he said and took me inside the room. It was freezing cold inside. He opened one drawer to show the first dead body, I could see only the face. It was mutilated, with glass pieces all over and dark red frozen blood smeared

completely. It was nauseating and horrifying at the same time. I couldn't exactly recognize him but was sure that it wasn't Prabhu.

"The other one?" I asked the ward boy.

He moved towards another drawer. I prayed and hoped that it would'nt be Prabhu. *It shouldn't be him.* It shouldn't be that of a tall, lean, fair, guy. He slowly opened the drawer and pulled out the dead body. I had my heart in my mouth. My heart beat stopped. It was Prabhu's. The face was not recognizable, it was full of frozen thick red blood, the skin was torn and the interiors were exposed, but the hair, the shape of the face, the skin color – it was all his. It was him. The world around me came to a standstill. My best friend had died.

I broke down and cried, the ward boy didn't even bother to console me. I stood near Prabhu's lifeless face for a few minutes not knowing what to do. I wasn't sure if I could touch his face. My dearest friend and brother was gone and I was the reason for it. I killed him. He had come all the way to Trichy just for me. He was the one who was guiding me, helped me in identifying the thought detector and finally saved my life by sacrificing his. He was my protector. I covered my face in my hands and sat on a nearby chair, dejected, not knowing the next course of action. I couldn't bring myself to call and inform Prabhu's dad, the guilt was killing me.

*He died for me, I should avenge his death. The Loser should answer for his loss in the most dreadful way possible.* I wanted to kill that Loser right there and tear open his guts with my bare hands. I got a new vigor, a new purpose and a new determination to take up the task at hand. I must first save Diana and then finish the life of that Loser - for Prabhu, for Diana. *I have to do it.* I looked at the ward boy and asked,

"What's the time now? How far is Trichy from here?"

"Its 5 am now. Trichy is about an hour's drive from here" he answered, wondering why I asked such a silly question.

I got up and walked out of the morgue, towards the exit door of the hospital. It was still dark outside, the sun was yet to make its visit to the earth. As I came out I saw several vehicles - cars and bikes, being parked in the parking lot. *Cars! What happened to Prabhu's car. What happened to it after the accident?* I looked around in the parking lot for a damaged red color i20 with a Chennai registration number. Under the dim lights, I couldn't find any such vehicle. There was no one around who could help, nor was there someone to whom I could enquire on how I was brought

there. There was no car, no more Prabhu, the only other way to reach Trichy was to get a cab or a bus.

The hospital was on the Chennai- Trichy highway. I stepped out of its gate, hoping to catch a bus or a cab and looked either ways to see in a distance, a red car. It was i20 and was parked near a street light a few meters away from the hospital. I could clearly see it being damaged. There was every chance for it to be Prabhu's car, *Who took it there? Were the Loser's men still around?*

I ran towards the car as fast as I could and as quick as my weak legs could take me. As I approached closer, I found it to be standing in front of a mechanic shop. *Why there?*

I came close to the car and was desperately looking for the mechanic when a hand touched me from behind. Taken aback, I turned around swiftly to punch the intruder and stopped half way, on seeing, Prabhu.

"Holy mother of Christ! Prabhu, you are still alive. Thank goodness. I thought you were dead. I saw your corpse, in the mortuary just a while ago. How did you get your life back? Thank God you are safe man. Oh my God" I was overjoyed.

"You saw me in the mortuary? Was it really me? Did you wear your lens properly Rob? Did you lose your vision after the accident? The doctor said there was no injury to the head and that you were safe, but didn't tell that you could hallucinate"

"Stop it, Prabhu, that body in mortuary was exactly like you, same hair, same skin color. I assumed it was you. Thank God. Wait, what are you doing here? Why did you leave me in hospital?"

"Rob, a while after the accident I woke up and saw that you had lost consciousness. The car had jammed against the median and needed a repair. The folks in lorry who followed us had hit against the toll booth and both had died on the spot. I got out of the car with some help from the locals. Someone then took you out. We got lift from another car, who towed my car and took us here. As you were sleeping and being treated, I thought I will repair this car so that it's ready to take us to Trichy. Is that enough?"

"Who cares for these explanations? I am just happy that you are alive. Trichy is close by from here Rob. We can reach in an hour. We need to start now."

"Not until this car gets repaired"

"Damn, man. You know, I am so thankful to the almighty that you are still

alive. Its like a miracle. *Ufff*. I wonder what that LOSER Ganpath is planning now. He already showed us a near death experience. I just can't picture anything in my mind right now“

“Don't picture anything Rob, relax”

“Wait, picture! I had Ganpath's picture in my phone. I had taken it at Ascendas. We could upload it in FB and check if any of my friends or your friends know his whereabouts”

“Why didn't you tell it all this while? Just take it out” he almost ordered me.

I touched my shirt pocket to take my phone, it wasn't there. There wasn't a feeling of it being in my pant pockets either. Prabhu dialled my mobile and heard a Switched off tone.

I panicked and ran back towards the hospital and checked everywhere, my phone wasn't there. The only contact I had with Loser and thereby with Diana, was lost.

“Shit crazy Lord!! Someone has flicked my phone!” I punched the street lamp hard and sat dejected.

***RNR***

## Chapter 18 **The Confession**

I wanted to punch Brindha on her perfect teeth, but since she was at the other end of the call, I had to listen to what(ever) she had to say.

“I think we should break up, this - whatever relationship of ours is.”

“Whats there to break up, as if we are in a relationship” I retorted.

“That's what I said, whatever that is there between us, let's end it here.

Right now, right away. I can't go through it all again from scratch. It doesn't mean that we should stop messaging - we definitely can. Message me whenever you want to, I will respond and I will also text you when I feel so, but I wouldn't be dependent on you like before” she said.

“Bru, give it sometime. Don't take any hasty decision”

“It took me 24 hours to take this decision, Rob. It's a well thought out one and I am clear about it. I know what I am doing. And thanks for everything” she said and ended the call.

Helplessness was what I felt first, which aggravated into anger and then ended up as hate. She had manipulated everything to show it was my fault,

completely ignoring the fact that I behaved so because she first started talking about her alliances, thereby rubbing me on the wrong side. She was equally responsible for everything that happened. I was upset. Though I knew that I wouldn't go into a state of depression, the break up was doing its part to dispirit me already. It all ended up as if it was my mistake. We officially broke up.

I didn't feel like calling her back. This was how it was supposed to end but I didn't expect it to happen so abruptly. I looked at my phone and skimmed through all her old messages. I controlled a split second anger to delete them all. I wanted to savor it. I felt heavy and sat down to write a poem, the best way I knew to heal my soul.

The next morning, I didn't get a good morning message from her. I felt empty, but out of habit sent her a 'good morning dear' and got a reply instantaneously as 'good morning'. As much as she missed the 'dear', I missed her dearly.

In the following days our conversations reduced significantly. She was replying to all the messages that I sent, but there was no life in it. The reply was done for the sake of replying. I lost interest in texting, mailing and even calling her. The feeling was mutual. *The end of any relation needs only one of them losing interest.* I couldn't continue with the namesake conversations any further and decided to put an end to it. I decided to confess to her.

One fine evening, as I was returning from office, I texted her,

"Bru, what are you doing?"

"Nothing much, you?" came the instant reply. She definitely wasn't avoiding me on the face.

"I have to tell you something, not sure how you would take it"

"Go ahead"

"The very first time I saw you, I fell for you. I am not sure if you remember, but it was an inter school event at St. Joseph's. You were clad in orange, you sat in front of me and you told me that I was being loud and I heard as I am being 'loved'. From that day, I was desperate to look for you everywhere, every day, but couldn't. And then I met you in aspire. Our very first talk about your school and the way you reacted is still etched in my memory"

"Okay"

"I could go on and on Bru. Honestly, you were the only girl on whom I have had a crush. You were my first and only crush"

“Oh?”

“I wasn’t sure how you will take if I say it all. I wanted to marry you. Not sure if I could find a girl like you ever in my life. I know we are from different religions, our parents will not be for it and all that, but against all odds, I wanted to hold your hand in mine”

“Rob, are you serious?”

“Bru, don’t react like you didn’t have a clue of what I am talking about. I know you know it all well”

“I don’t Rob”

“Don’t lie. I know that you know it all and I also know that, you know that, I know that you know.”

“Err What?”

“Never mind. Not every guy is lucky enough to get his crush as his best friend, I was!! I still am. But, I really couldn’t take it when you kept talking about all your new alliances. It hurt me a lot”

“Rob, what’s that gotta do with us?” she interrupted.

“That is everything Bru. You don’t know how hurt I was. One side it’s our families, one side I wasn’t settled in life, one side our religion and then there you were with your over enthusiastic alliance messages. In fact I came to Bangalore to visit you, because I couldn’t handle you talking so much about Rakesh.”

“And not for me? If this is what you felt, why didn’t you propose me?”

“I was afraid of losing you”

“How would I reject you, Rob?” she responded to my text..

I read what she sent twice. *She wouldn’t have rejected me. I should have known it all along.*

“I wasn’t sure. You meant a lot to me. I could never risk”

“You mean a lot to me as well, Rob”.

I called her immediately and she picked.

“Bru... I had wanted to propose to you in person, with a large bouquet, kneeling in front of you, with a marriage ring and all that, but looks like we will have to do that some other day. Doesn’t matters, let me say now. I love you Bru, not like a friend, not like in any other relationship. I love you with all my heart, you are the girl for me and I want to marry you. I want to make love to you and want you to be the mother of my children.” I said.

There was a pause at the other end.

“Bru? You there?”

“Yes Rob”

“I just proposed you”

“I heard”

“Why are you silent then?”

“I don’t think it will work out Rob”

“What? Moments ago you told me that you wouldn’t reject me”

“Yes, I would have definitely not rejected you, if only you had not acted weird, If only you had not asked me to stop messaging you for a day, if only you had not broken my heart that day, if only you had proposed earlier, if only.”

“What are you saying?”

“I am afraid now, Rob. I don’t think I can accept you now. I am not sure how you will behave after marriage. Honestly, I lost all feelings I had for you that day. You are just another passing cloud now. I wanted to know why you behaved that weird and now that I know of it, I am content. I am really sorry. But Rob, we can still be friends though”

“Friends! I could never see you as a friend Bru. It’s really difficult for me”

“Rob, I understand. But the choice is yours. Either we could be friends or you could lose me forever”

“Bru!!”

“Take your time, think well and respond.”

“Before you cut the call, I want to know one thing. Just one thing”

“Yes, tell me”

“Didn’t you have any such feelings for me? Didn’t you love me, didn’t you want to marry me?”

“I am not sure. I might have had. I might have not had. But it doesn’t matter now”

“No, it matters to me, tell me now”

“If you want me to be candid, well, it’s a no. I am sorry Rob”

Her last words turned my world upside down.

“You there Rob?”

“Yes. Thanks. Bye” I said and cut the call.

There was a flurry of messages from her, post the call asking for apology if she had hurt me. I was in no mood to respond. I disliked her and everything associated with her. I decided to stop practicing yoga. I decided to stop writing poems. I decided to stop texting her. It was all over.

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The next day in office I received a mail from her, containing the first poem I had written for her. I couldn't help but smile. She was trying her best to console me. There was one part of my heart that said I should accept the truth as it is and move on as she couldn't be responsible for my imaginations, while there was another part which infused hate for her as she willingly created scenarios that would fuel my imaginations.

I wasn't able to come to terms with the harsh reality of life and the after effects of a break up. I replied to her mail with a smile and she responded.

“Finally, you manage to smile”

“Give me some time Bru.”

“I understand. Take your time Rob and remember. I still need you

as my friend. All my life”

“Hmmm □“I replied.

Love, is the most harmful drug, it can make you forgive the

cruellest of crimes. That night I practiced yoga for one hour to relax my mind and muscles. Pranayama gave me the required serenity and calmness. I felt better and also light at heart. I got a new vigor to face the tumultuous life ahead and accept realities as they were. I was ready to be just another friend of Brindha and I expressed the same to her over message. She reciprocated happily.

Our conversations then dwindled down tremendously. We stopped with wishing each other on our birthdays and on special occasions. I moved on, she moved on, life moved on.

After a few months, I got a message from her stating that someone (*name not revealed owing to privacy issues*) had proposed her and that after contemplating for a few days, she had accepted.

“Great news, I'm very happy for you, all the best” I wished her with a fake smile.

“Thanks Rob. Even I didn't expect, it all happened too soon. It's like a dream”

It's said, two lovers could never be in love with each other after a break up.

If they do so, either they never really loved or they never really broke up. I wasn't really sure in which category we fell in, then realized that, we were not actually in love. I convinced myself to feel happy for her.

Against popular norm, Brindhya started to text me more ever since she fell in love with that new guy - detailing about her new found love, asking for help, falling back on me for her needs. Though I didn't enjoy it, I went along with the flow.

"He gave me an awesome surprise today. He came to my flat at 12 midnight. We cut cake, ate it, he applied it all over my face and I ran around. He gifted me a watch. It was so sweet of him. Wait let me send you the photos" she spoke breathlessly, when I called her to wish on her birthday.

"How are we as a pair?" she asked after sending the photo.

I didn't like him and that was the last pair on earth I would root for.

"You both are made for each other" I responded.

"I know, right. Yippee" she responded.

I could never understand women.

"I can never understand men" she texted me one day. "Why Bru, what happened?"

"I met with an accident yesterday" she texted back. I immediately called her. I still liked her and cared for her wellbeing.

"Nothing serious Rob, but I twisted my feet and have some scratches in my hand. I called him to help me. He came along with my roomie and they both took me to hospital and all that, he took care of me"

"Then?"

"Today I asked him to come home during lunch time, he came. I had some bandages in my hand and asked him to feed me, but he refused to"

"Why would he do that?"

"How would I know? Whats there in feeding me? He says that he will do all that after marriage. How insensible of him? I will never understand men at all"

I didn't know what to respond and I was equally surprised on the expectations women had for the simplest of things.

"What did you do then? How did you eat?"

"I struggled to eat and somehow finished it. I wonder why he dint bother

meeting such a small expectation from me”

“Some men are like that” I bit my tongue after saying that.

“Can you talk to him sometime tomorrow? Cos you know me better than anyone else. Can you tell him what all I expect, how to be with me, how to make me happy?”

“That wouldn’t be nice. It won’t be good if I do that” I resisted.

“Come on Rob, You were my best friend. It will be perfect only if you talk some sense to him”

I liked the way she stressed the word “WERE” – ‘Were my best friend’.

“Sure, I will try”.

She then gave me his FB ID, I had a look at his profile, but never gave him a friend request, saw a few photos of his and closed the window. I was never going to talk to him. He wouldn’t like it, if I advised him. The idea of intruding into Brindha’s love life sounded silly. It wouldn’t be nice - it would be awkward and uncalled for.

“You know what, Rob. Sometimes I miss you. How we used to chat non-stop for long hours. I miss those days. He never does that. He doesn’t understand what I want. I wish he was as understanding and caring as you”

“Bru. You shouldn’t be searching for me in him, you will never find me in him. He is your man, now. Accept him as he is. Don’t bring me into the picture”

“I know Rob, still. I do miss those days. Wish you had proposed on time. Hmmm. Btw, tomorrow we are heading to Trichy”

“We?”

“Yes, he is coming along with me. I thought I will introduce him to my parents”

“Great. All the best” I said.

Brindha had never invited me home. Even when I offered to visit her place, she vehemently refused and told me not to come. She was definitely taking the relationship to the next level with him.

“What did your parents say on hearing that he is coming along with you?”

“They didn’t take it in the right spirit and were upset, but then they will have to face him as their son in law, some day” saying she laughed. I laughed along wryly.

“So will you talk to him?”

“I will talk Bru. But I think, I shouldn’t come between you two. It will be

awful. I will see what I can do though”  
“Fine Rob, you know better” she said and cut the call.

Some people remain so close to us for so many years and then suddenly vanish into thin air. Brindha too went missing permanently from my life.

She left to Australia on an onsite assignment and texted a few times from there, but there was no communications thereafter. She didn't talk about her love life either. It took some three-four months for me to realize that she wasn't using that number nor was she active in any of the social media.

Somewhere between “You are my everything” and “I am my everything”, we all grow up. I tried reaching her in vain for the past few days without any lead. She vanished completely just like how she appeared from nowhere. I wasn't sure if I would ever meet her again in my life. Everything happens for a reason. Brindha's arrival and departure should also have a reason, which I am still searching for.

*I have tried to be as honest as possible about my past in this blog, as I trust all you readers. A few of you might like this blog, a few might find it boring, but I wanted to be truthful with myself and write everything as it happened. Before you could ask - yes, my wife was the first one to read this and she was totally cool with it (except for that imaginary love making sequence). Hope Brindha or any of her friends read this and contact me.*

*Until I meet you all in another blog, this is Robin signing off, love you all.*

***RRR***

## Part 3

### The Chase

#### Chapter 19 Trichy Trails

How could someone with a heart do that? How could someone flick a phone from an accident victim. I felt like I lost my right hand. My phone had quite a many contact numbers, almost 3000 of them. I didn't have a google cloud back up either. To add to the misery I didn't remember the LOSER's number. I wasn't sure how he would reach me or how I could contact him. I remembered only my wife's number whose phone was switched off and the only hope I had to communicate with her captor was gone. *God! What would happen to my wife? Will the LOSER think I am dead and kill her?*

I looked at Prabhu, who had followed me to the hospital, with utter disbelief.

He looked clueless too, when his phone rang. It was an unknown number. He picked.

"Hey Prabhu? Are you still alive? Good Lord. Where has that Rob run away?" said the voice of the LOSER.

I got the phone from him and answered.

"I am alive as well Ganpath"

"Who is Ganpath?" came the instant reply.

"I meant LOSER" I didn't want to give him any clue that I have traced his identity.

"What happened to your phone? Why did you switch it off" he asked.

"Someone stole it" I said.

"How? Why? It has my contact number, calls and messages" he was nervous.

"How would I know? The men you sent almost killed us. We met with an accident and just opened our eyes in the hospital and my phone is gone missing. How in the world am I supposed to know where it is?" that was the second time I raised my voice against him. Desperation drove me nuts.

"Look Mr. Rob, in this deal, I am the one who gives orders and gets to

shout not others” he reminded me again.

“Help me find my phone” I told him. Even though the loser could still contact me through Prabhu’s phone, he would want me to have my phone as it would be easy for him to trace me.

“It’s switched off, but yes, I could still track it. It’s about 2 km away from the place where I receive the signal of this call, where you guys are talking to me from. May be if you go there now, you could get it. It hasn’t moved an inch for a while.” He said.

“Really? Where exactly? Send the location over whatsapp to Prabhu” I told him and disconnected the call. The location came after 30 seconds.

“Rob, you need some rest. You look like a zombie with blood stains on your shirt and all those bandages on your head and hand. See your shirt is also torn. You better wait here, let me go get your phone for you” Prabhu said.

“You are hurt too Prabhu, what if the thief is strong and over powers you. It would make sense if both of us go together” saying I ran towards the destination. Half way down, I realized that running was a bad idea. I should have taken an auto. However, not knowing the whereabouts of who stole my mobile and what weapons he might have in store, going by foot seemed to be a better option. I didn’t want to warn him with an impending sound of an approaching vehicle. I thanked the LOSER for the first time for placing the bug in my phone.

We reached the location in about 15 minutes. Right in front of us was a dilapidated house, our supposed destination. I looked at Prabhu. He signaled on one of us attacking through the front door and the other attacking from the other back entrance, to surprise the thief. I decided to go through the front door and carefully chose my steps.

I brought my breath to a silent rhythm, made sure only I could hear it and took cat steps as I treaded towards the house. I heard minor movements within the house. House was the last thing I would call it, it was all but remains of an old bleak, broken piece of architecture. It didn’t have any doors or roof, but only corrugated bleak walls filled with algae and staunch smell of human excreta. I stepped inside the front door when I heard a ruffle. Someone was trying to do something in a room to my left. I rolled my wrists, readying to hit him on sight, and slowly barged in when my foot hit a rod on the floor. *Clink*, came the noise. I cursed myself for alerting the inmate of the house. I held my breath and waited in patience. There was silence. I could be attacked anytime and I had to make a move. Prabhu had

still not arrived, but I knew he would come in for rescue any moment, if anything went wrong.

I drew some courage and tried to peep into the room, to have a sneak peek of its occupant, through the corner of my eye. I couldn't see anyone. There was an eerie silence which caused further worry. I was pretty sure the inhabitant was hiding behind the walls, anticipating my entry, rearing to attack. I could be killed if he had a gun, or a knife or any other weapon. I wasn't armed.

It was still dark inside. I got accustomed to the darkness and when I felt comfortable to see in that dim light, I gently slipped into the room, when a piece of object drifted swiftly towards me. At the very last minute, I moved my head and escaped narrowly from the stone that was thrown at me. I looked at the direction from which it came. What I saw took me by surprise. There stood a little girl of around 12 years, who was ready to throw her next arsenal at me, but hesitated after seeing my state. She was scared and confused. I wondered what she was doing at that odd hour in that odd place.

"What are you even doing here, who are you?" I asked her.

"I live here. Who are you?" she said in a timid tone.

"I came looking for my phone. Do you live here alone?"

"No, I live with my father. He has gone out. He will be back soon." She was determined that I shouldn't take advantage of her being alone.

"Why did you attack me?"

"I thought it was one of my father's friends. He has lot of them, people who have given him money and people who want to get their hands on me and" she paused "eat me". She said wryly. I never expected to hear that from a little girl.

"Man...How old are you?" I asked her.

"I am a girl and I am 17" she replied, but looked not more than 12.

Malnutrition.

"Why are you here?" she asked again.

"To find my phone, I told you already"

"Is this the one? "Saying she showed me, my phone.

"Yes" I was relieved and got it from her.

"Dad gave it as a gift, he told he found it near the Toll booth today" there was a sense of guilt in her.

"I lost it there. There was a signal attached to it, so I was able to find it, thanks" I said. I didn't want to tell her that her dad had stolen it from me.

She aimed the stone right at me again. Fearing she would hit me, I bent down, only for the stone to hit Prabhu who had entered close in behind me. It hit him right in his forehead, though it was a small stone, it should have hurt.

“Ouch. You little wimp” he screamed.

“No no, don’t hurt him. He is with me” I stopped her.

“Oh Okay” she said as she dropped the second stone she was aiming at him.

“Prabhu, are you alright?”

“Except that I can see a few tweety birds around my head, I am perfectly alright” he said rubbing his forehead where the stone had hit.

I turned towards the girl and continued my questioning.

“You stay here, in this rotten place? You and your dad? Whats your name?”

I continued my questioning.

“We call this home. My dad calls me Yazhini” she said.

I looked around. It was quite unsafe a place for a girl of her age to be in.

“Your mom?” Prabhu asked.

“She hung herself, leaving behind her eyes for me” she said in a lifeless tone.

I was startled and looked at her.

“I was born blind” she said and stared at me.

“That’s sad. I am sorry, here, have this” saying I gave her two 500 rupees notes.

“No, my dad has asked me not to take money from anyone” she refused.

“Think of me like an elder brother, just take it” I insisted.

“That’s exactly what most of the men who come here say. I am fine with whatever my dad gives me” she continued.

I was astounded. I didn’t know what to reply. I looked at Prabhu. He gave his card to her and said.

“Thanks for the hit little one, in case you need any help, any day, give me a call”.

“I dont need your sympathy, but I will have this card.” She said and kept looking at us, sending the message that we were intruding her privacy. We decided to return back to the hospital and the mechanic shop.

“That’s one bold girl” Prabhu told as we returned. I couldn’t agree more.

I switched on my phone. It sprung to life within minutes, brightening up my mood. It felt like coming face to face with an old long lost brother. The home page screen read as 5.20 AM. It had a photo of me and Diana smiling



at the camera, as the display picture. My right thumb touched her smiling lips.

I had received a couple of messages from the LOSER asking if I were still alive and why I had switched off the phone. Airtel also said that there were a couple of missed calls from an unknown number. *Who would have wanted to call me at 5 AM in the morning?*

I dialled that number and on second thought, cut the call immediately and asked Prabhu to make a call to that number. Prabhu called and someone picked it immediately.

I got the phone from him and conversed.

“Hi, I had got a couple of missed calls from this number, may I know who this is?”

”I didn’t call to this number” said the other voice.

“No no. Not to this number, to my other number. That phone is switched off now, this is Robin” I said.

“Robin? Diana’s husband?” asked the voice from the other end.

“Yes, that’s me”

“Sir, this is Thomas from Galarena. We met earlier. Jesus! I found it so difficult to reach you. I didn’t have your number, Diana’s number is switched off. Then I thought if you had to come into my office, you should have left your phone number at the entry gate security and checked with him. Thank Jesus, you had”

“Thanks a lot for making so much effort, Thomas, please tell me. You have got any information about Diana?”

“Yes sir. I was coming out after shift today and felt like having a bread omelette, just as I was having it, the stall owner told me that Diana fainted near the shop yesterday evening and was taken in a car by a person accompanying her. He told me because, he had seen Diana coming with me to his stall usually and having bread omelette. He asked me if Diana was alright. I immediately wanted to inform this to you and was trying to reach you for the past half an hour”

“Oh my God. What car? Did he note the number of the car? Any one knows how he looked. Have they seen him earlier?” my hopes of getting close to Diana’s kidnapper looked promising.

“No, they had no idea about him. But an auto driver here has noted the car number. It is not everyday they get to see BMWs with fancy numbers and he has given me the car number. I will text you the same”

“Thank you so much Thomas. This is a great help, great great help. I am indebted to you for this”

“Sir, it’s my duty as her TL. I should have done much more than this. Hope you find her soon. Did you register a complaint with the police?”

“Not yet, will be doing it at dawn break” I said “And send the car number to this number you are talking to” I said and cut the call. There was a simmer of hope I could envision. A small speck of light amidst the world of darkness waved its tiny toes at me. Prabhu understood everything from what I spoke.

“Rob, as you know my dad is in vigilance. I will ask him to find out whose car that is. Also, send that Ganpath’s photo to me. I will post it in my FB wall, tag you and check if he is known to any of our friends or any other contacts. Send me” he said.

“I can’t transfer data to your phone, the LOSER is tracking everything. Is there a way I could transfer without him knowing?”

“Lets do it using bluetooth, don’t whatsapp me” he said. I had been so addicted to being online and the internet that, even the simplest of things of transferring stuff offline from one phone to another, didn’t strike me. I transferred the photo. Prabhu also got a message with the Registration number of the car and he sent it to his dad to find out to whom it belonged.

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We both walked back swiftly towards the mechanic shop. As we reached the hospital, from a distance we could see that the car was missing at the mechanic’s shop.

“Holy shit, Rob. Where did the car go?” Prabhu got tensed and started to run. I caught up behind him.

“He could have moved it inside the garage or parked it sideways” I tried to pacify him. The shutters of the garage were down and closed.

“Its not there and the shop is closed. That bloody robber” Prabhu was furious.

“Why did he close it?” I doubted.

“New i20. Owner isn’t around. Early morning. He should have taken it home. What a day! I lost my sleep, my car got hit, I was almost killed and now my car is stolen. Did he think we wouldn’t return? I will just call up

my dad and get this guy behind the bars. Note down his mobile number on that hoarding, Rob. Let me call my dad now. He has named this as “Raja Workshop” and all he does is stealing” Prabhu ranted non-stop as we looked aimlessly at the road ahead.

“He could have gone around Prabhu”

“He is not around, not in my car, Rob and not now.” Prabhu looked worried, when we heard that horn blare right behind us. It was Prabhu’s car with the mechanic in the driver’s seat. He put his head out through the window as he waved at us.

“Took a test drive saar, your car is perfect condition. Drive now. Raja make it perfect”

“Test drive? Was it even needed now man? I thought you stole it. I almost registered a complaint against you. Why did you close your shop for heavens’ sake?” Prabhu questioned.

“Steal ah? saar. Trichy people are not like that. What you think? No one to see my shop, so I closed. If you here na... I would have opened shop and gone. You no here, so I closed and went” the visibly upset mechanic responded. He couldn’t take the word ‘steal’ lightly.

“I am sorry, forgive me. Here have it.” Saying Prabhu handed him a 500 rupees note.

“Saar, you first customer today morning, give 300 change saar” he said.

“Keep the change” Prabhu said and smiled. The mechanic grinned ear to ear. “Thanks saar”

Prabhu got into the car and started it as I got in as well. It was 5.30 am by then. Trichy was an hour’s drive from there. Prabhu pressed the accelerator as fierce as he could and we reached Thillainagar 5<sup>th</sup> cross by 6.15 Am. It was a nostalgic moment for me, but I was in no mood to enjoy the warm memories the drive took me through. The streets and houses hadn’t changed, however I didn’t exactly remember where her house was or how it looked like. I knew one thing that it was in the 5<sup>th</sup> Cross and was painted in Orange.

We slowly drove through 5<sup>th</sup> cross and kept inquiring the bystanders on where Mr. Krishnan’s house was. No one knew. I didn’t even know how he looked like or his full name. As we came near the 3<sup>rd</sup> Street of 5<sup>th</sup> Cross, I had a strong gut feeling that her house was somewhere in that area. I remembered following her to her house, after one of the Aspire tuition classes. She knew I was behind her and didn’t mind me pursuing.

“Left or right” Prabhu asked.

“Left, I remember she walking through this”

“Oh, when?”

“Some 11 years ago. Look for a large Orange house” I said and we slowly drove our car in, through the street. I was observing each and every house. We went through the entire street and came to a dead end, but there was no Orange painted house.

“Are you sure it was painted orange? Not peach or pink or purple?” Prabhu questioned.

“Bright orange, like in an orange fruit. But that was 11 years ago. They might have changed it now”

“I know one thing for sure Rob. I am having a very bad day” Prabhu said in a dejected tone.

“I am pretty sure it’s in this street. I have been here, I know it for sure. I also faintly remember it to be one of those large houses”

“Every single house here is large, Rob”

“Cut the crap Prabhu, allow me to think.” I said and played back that incident in my mind. It was the same street, I had indeed visited this street, I remembered her granddad coming near the gate and opening it for her. It was the orange house, think, think. Wait – Yes, neem tree protruding from the compound wall.

“Prabhu, look for a compound wall where a tree is protruding through the compound wall”

“Are you sure?”

“Yes, I remember it well” I said enthusiastically.

We took a U-turn and swiftd through the street again and within minutes found a house whose compound wall was obruded by a tree.

“Prabhu, this is it”

“Is this orange? As far as I know it is elephant green”

“They might have changed the color. This is her house, Prabhu. That’s what my conscience is asking me to believe. Let’s go check with her parents” I said and got down.

It was 6.30 Am; Too early a time to wake up and disturb someone. I went inside the compound wall and pressed the calling bell. After a minute, a 60 year old man opened the door. He should have been taken aback by my appearance.

“Yes?” he asked.

“Mr. Krishnan?” I questioned.

“Krishnan?” he repeated.

“Yes, you are Krishnan, right? You work in Bangalore, have two daughters?” I was puzzled.

“I am Perumal.”

“Your brother, or son is named Krishnan?”

“No, no, I am. Errr. Wait, I get it. Krishnan is the previous owner of this house. We bought it from him. His family vacated this house six months ago. Who are you, his relative?” he said without removing his focus from the blood stains in my shirt.

**RRR**

## Chapter 20 **A Long Journey**

It took some time for me to heed and comprehend what I had just heard.

“His family vacated this house six months ago.” sounded like the last death bell.

“Why?” I almost cried.

“I have no clue. May be check with that neighbor there, they might know” he pointed to his right and kept his other hand near the door, readying to shut it close.

“But you bought this house from him, don’t you have his address?”

“I don’t”

“Can you check?”

“Can you leave? I have some work to do” he was ridiculously unapologetic.

“Hmmm. Alright. Sorry and thanks” I said and rushed towards the neighbor’s house he had pointed. The compound gate was locked. I shouted, but there was no response from the inside. I decided to breach into the house and jumped over the gate and rushed to their door. The calling bell was inviting and I pressed it as hard as I could. Four rings and I heard someone say “I am coming”, I waited.

After seconds an old fat lady in a sleepy state opened the door.

“Mr. Krishnan, they used to stay next doors, where are they?” I asked in a hurry.

“Who the hell are you?” she was shocked to see my pathetic state.

“Aunty. I am a friend of. I mean my father is a friend of Mr. Krishnan. I know that he was here. It’s an urgent matter, we need to meet him. I heard

that you would know where he is. Could you please help?"

"Are you alright? You want some water or something?" she was concerned looking at those bandages, Trichy people I say.

"I am perfectly fine, but do you know what happened to these folks? Mr. Krishnan and family? It's urgent. Where are they now?" I was restless. She looked at me with doubting eyes and asked.

"Whats your name?"

"Robin. Aunty, trust me. See here is my ID card. Can you please tell?" I asked. The questions the neighbors ask!!

"Well, they had some financial trouble and the girl of the house also ran away with some guy. So they sold this house and have moved to Srirangam"

"Ran away? Do you know with whom? When?"

"I don't know with whom, but that Kamala in the next street keeps saying that the girl ran away with a rich guy. For these generation people only money is important. Do you know Kamala? She herself is a jealous bitch, always backbiting."

I didn't want to know of any Kamala, only Brindha.

"Do you have their new address, please?" I insisted.

"I might have. Wait, let me go in and check. Do you want to come in?"

"No, I will wait here, thanks". I said and waited for her.

She came back after five minutes with an address note book and asked me to note it down. I texted the address in my mobile and saved it in drafts. She also gave me the mobile number of Mr. Krishnan.

"Thanks a lot aunty" I said and rushed back towards the gate and started to climb it.

"Wait wait, did you jump over that to come in, you scoundrel, you thief!" she started to scream.

I jumped over as quickly as I could and moved towards the car and signaled Prabhu to start it. He pressed the accelerator and we vanished from 3<sup>rd</sup> street of Thillai nagar. I hoped the lady would not contact the cops.

"Hi thief" Prabhu extended his left hand for a hand shake.

"Stop it stupid. Dial to this number. This is her dad's. He will know where she is" I showed him the number.

Prabhu called to the number immediately and heard a 'number does not exist' automated voice.

"Good news for you. The number doesn't exists." He said.

“Damn! May be he changed that too. How many obstacles should we be facing today? Alright, let’s go and check in person.” I told him and he drove towards Srirangam.

It was a 15 minutes drive. We entered into the main agraharam and with the help of a few locals there, it was easy to locate the address. It was a very small house with blue wooden door or was it plastic? Wondering, I tapped on it. An old man in his fifties opened the door.

“Mr. Krishnan?” I asked.

“Yes, and you?” he replied. I gave a sigh of relief and looked at him, my one final hope. He was lean, dark skinned, had less hair on his head and whatever was present had already turned white.

“I am a friend of Brindha. I have come to meet her.”

“There is no one by that name here”

“But you are Krishnan right, your daughter is Brindha. This is the address that they gave” I was puzzled.

“I don’t have a daughter by that name now. She is dead for me six months ago” he said and slammed the door.

“What? Uncle? Hello? Open the door” I kept banging on the door.

He opened the door after a few thumps and kept staring at me. Prabhu came to the rescue. He asked me to move aside and talked to Krishnan in whispers. Krishnan’s face reaction changed and then he looked at my state. I pleaded him with my eyes. He then let us in.

“Thanks uncle” Prabhu said.

“Want to have something?” he asked the two of us.

“No uncle. We are fine. Btw, I am her school friend” I started. I wasn’t sure if I could tell him the truth or lie to him. I looked at his frame again. I didn’t want to scare him with the truth and told a random lie that came into my mind to get her contacts.

“We are planning for a tenth year reunion of our school friends. We contacted everyone, except her. Can I get her contact number, please?”

He looked at my torn shirt with disdain.

“We met with an accident on the way. Hence the blood stain and this condition... Could you please give her number?”

He was fragile and had deep, sunken eyes that were on the verge of getting wet.

“I don’t have any number of hers”

“Sir, your daughter’s mobile number sir” I repeated.

“I don’t” he repeated looking endlessly at the wall above my head.

Prabhu held my hand before I could ask something.

“The last I know of her is that she is in Chennai, but no other contacts. It’s been six months. She has changed her number. I don’t have it. No one in my family has it. We don’t talk to her and she hasn’t taken the effort to contact us either. She is no more a part of this family”.

With the tone he said, I understood that he wasn’t lying. It was easy to guess. Brindha’s parents would have refused her wedding with Ganpath and they should have eloped, but I wasn’t sure why she settled in Chennai and not in Bangalore. Why should Ganpath kidnap Diana!

“Not even an address or any other number?” Prabhu questioned him.

“She eloped!! She ran away with him. We were not important for her, only him. Why should we have contacts with her or him? None of us have.” He finished. Her mom also came to the hall and stood in a corner trying to wipe the tears from her eyes. She looked exactly like Brindha or was it the other way around.

I shouldn’t have made them cry on an early morning but they looked like they were used to the routine for the past six months. I wondered why Brindha did such a thing. She had always valued her parents more than anything. Love was indeed blind, blind of emotions, blind of parents’ love for us, blind of every other priority on earth.

“Thank you sir and sorry for disturbing you” Prabhu said and urged me to get up and leave. Mr. Krishnan went in to his room without saying anything. I felt that there was no further use in staying there and started to leave when her mom came near and stopped us. She gave me a mobile number in haste and said.

“That’s her number. She had called me several times from that. I know it’s her. I haven’t picked or talked to her though. May be if you want, give it a try. And in case she picks, tell her I love... tell her... I mean, hope she is leading a happy life” she said and went in like nothing happened, closing the door behind.

I kept looking at the door. Brindha of all people shouldn’t have done such a thing. I dialed her number from Prabhu’s phone. Her phone was ringing and no one picked it. However, her number was working and I was happy for that. I had to get content with such small positives on an already fucked up day.

“Prabhu, should we trace this number?”



“I think yes, I will send this to my dad”

“Fine. Its 7 am now. Chennai is a 3 hour drive from here. If we start now, we will reach by 10. We will have an hour within which we could reach her and then take her to the LOSER. Hope the traffic isn’t bad today” I told him my plan.

“Sounds like a plan, Rob” saying he started the car and it soon broke wind in NH-45.

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Several thoughts ran in my mind. I wished the thought detector could record all of it and I could play back and watch it someday. On second thought, I was glad that it didn’t record any of it.

Prabhu’s mobile received a call. He picked it and put it on speaker. “Yes dad, tell me”

“Prabhu, the registration number belongs to some Darshan and

the address is given as Ashok Pillar. I will send you the address” saying he kept the phone.

Prabhu’s dad was always like that. He talked to-the-point and before we could react, he would cut the call. He told us what we wanted to know at that point of time.

“Who is this Darshan then?” Prabhu turned towards me and asked.

“Me and Darshan were school friends. We used to sleep in the same bed when we were young” I replied sarcastically.

“I didn’t know you were gay” he shot me an uncanny look.

“How the fuck in the world would I know who this Darshan is? Check his address and we will have to know why he kidnapped my wife.”

“Is Darshan the LOSER? Then where is Ganpath”

“Prabhu, I am more confused than you are. Please, enough of your questions”. I said, as we received the address of the LOSER in Prabhu’s phone.

Prabhu’s phone beeped again. This time it was a FB notification.

“Not another of those stupid candy crush requests” he said.

“What is it?” I asked him.

“Wait, someone has commented on my FB post.” He replied.

“What post?”

“Post with Ganpath’s photo, asking if anyone know him, duh”

“Oh ok. Let me check” I said and took his phone.

Anandhi, my wife’s friend who had worked with her in RBS, had left a comment in the post which read,

“This is Raj, he worked with me in RBS”.

*Ganpath is Raj?* Confused, I immediately pinged her over messenger.

“Is he still working there?”

“Who are you?” she replied.

“This is Robin- Rob, Diana’s husband, messaging from my friend Prabhu’s account. Trust me, it’s me. Now tell me, is Raj still working there? Is his full name Ganpath Raj?”

“Which Raj?”

“That Raj!! The guy whom you told you know. In that FB post.”

“No, he is not. He is currently working in some other company in Siruseri. Forgot the name of it though”

“What kind of guy is he - good, bad?”

“He is a good guy only bro, why are you asking?”

“How close were he and Diana?” I asked and waited in patience. The question should have upset Anandhi who was a good friend of my wife.

“What are you asking? “

“I am not doubting her. Oh come on, see, listen, just answer this. How good friends were they?”

“They were Hi - Bye friends. I haven’t seen Diana talking to him much, in fact he hasn’t interacted with any of us much.” She replied.

“And you haven’t answered this. Whats his full name? Ganpath Raj? Is he there on FB?” I asked her.

“Yes, he is in my friends’ list. I will ping his link wait”

After a few seconds she sent me the link.

Rajasekhar Thirumalsamy read his full name. It was the same guy. It was the same guy who had taken Diana out of Ascendas last night. I saw all his pictures. He hadn’t protected his profile. He was smiling in all of them. I wanted to make sure that he would never ever smile again. If he was the one who had kidnapped Diana, then where was Ganpath involved or was he not involved? Were Ganpath and Raj brothers as they more or less resembled each other? My brain threw up complicated web of questions for which I had no answers. For the time being, I decided to have Raj as the

kidnapper and not Ganpath, as Raj was a friend of Diana as well.

“Prabhu, this Raj is the guy. He is that bastard. We have to find him” I screamed.

“Wait, whom should we find? LOSER or Ganpath or Brindha or Raj”

“Bloody all of them, but Diana, more than any other idiot. For that, we need to find this Raj now” I was having a nervous breakdown.

“Isn't Ganpath the Loser? Calm down, calm down Rob. We will find him.

Now find how Ganpath and this Raj are related, search with their names in Google” he advised me.

I did as he said, but none of the results were matching.

“Check in friends list, common friends, mutual friends, something” he said.

I checked in Raj's profile. I had four mutual friends with him, including my wife and a few of her ex colleagues in RBS. There was no Ganpath in his friends' list.

“What next?” I asked him.

“Whats that Raj guy's email ID? Let's look into his mails and other online data.” Prabhu said, winking at me.

Prabhu had become an expert in hacking emails. I gave the long email ID of Rajasekhar Thirumalsamy to him. Prabhu stopped the car, asked me to drive and got in the other seat and started to do what he was best at.

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After one hour, we had crossed about 150 KMs and were speeding towards Chennai, when Prabhu interrupted me with his finding.

“Yes Prabhu” I said as I was focusing on the roads.

“This guy has ‘peppermintpriya\_92’ as his password, whatever that means!!” he laughed.

“Should have been his ex” I laughed along with him.

Prabhu logged into Raj's Gmail and was going through the mails.

“Don't read one by one, just search for Ganpath” I ordered.

“Okay officer” he mimicked me and searched for Ganpath, but couldn't find any.

“No match for Ganpath, any other names?”

“Try Brindha or may be even Darshan.”

He then searched for Darshan and saw one mail from LinkedIn.

“Looks like Darshan and Raj may be connected.” He said and opened the linkedIn page to see Darshan's profile. There was no photo in his profile

though.

“What does this guy do?”

“He is a diamond merchant. He has his own family business and he lives in Ashok Pillar”

“Could he be the LOSER?” I asked.

“How do I know? All we know is his car was used to kidnap Brindha. His car could be stolen, Raj could have used that car without his knowledge“

“Check for his mobile number or contact details or email ID, something... we need it”

“Yes” saying Prabhu searched for it, but couldn’t find any personal information. I was showing all my anger on the accelerator, when I received that call from the LOSER.

“What the heck are you doing now?” he screamed from the other end.

Shit! was he tracing Prabhu’s phone as well ? I felt like I was dead. But didn’t want to show it to him and uttered.

“We, we are returning to Chennai now. We met Brindha’s parents. She is in Chennai. We will find her before 11 am and hand her over to you. That’s all, that’s the plan” I said.

“I know what you have done and what you are trying to do, Mr. Rob. I told you, you have been bugged and are being watched.” He said angrily.

“No believe me, this is the truth. We are just trying to come to Chennai and will reach there soon and find Brindha. That’s the plan. That’s what you wanted, right?”

“You will never be able to find her”

“What? We have her number. Her dad gave. She didn’t pick though. We are tracing it and will find her in a short while.”

“Cut the crap, she is already dead” he said in a calm tone.

“Who? How?”

“Brindha, I killed her in my very own hands” he said and laughed hysterically.

***RRR***

Chapter 21

**A Broken Promise**

“Why did you do kill Brindha? Why did you? Why the fuck would you?” I hit the steering hard. I shouted, screamed, shrieked, cried.

Prabhu was shocked and couldn't move an inch.

"Why are you crying like a baby now?" the LOSER asked.

"I will find Brindha and you will let go off my wife that was the deal. I agreed for it - why did you break the deal"

"Why did you post that photo in FB? Are you trying to act smart?" he said. Prabhu got alerted. He realized that the LOSER had to be Raj.

"Raj, I am so sorry. I didn't mean to" I said.

"Call me LOSER" he corrected.

"What do you want now?"

"Where do you want me to bury your wife?" he asked in a sarcastic tone.

"Noooooooooooo. No! Don't touch her. Why would you? Please Raj, I beg you. I will do anything you ask for"

"I loved Brindha, but she didn't love me back. She kept comparing me with you. She told I wasn't good enough for her. She compared MEEE with a good for nothing you. I had to kill her." He told an eerily similar story I wasn't aware of.

"Then why did you kidnap my wife"

"Don't you have to know how it is to lose your loved one? And how it is to kill them by your own hands?"

"I will never kill her" I warned him.

"But I can kill her while you watch, come soon my boy. My systems say you would reach Chennai in two and half hours. Reach Tambaram and give me a call" he was unconvincingly arrogant and cut the call.

I cried. I wanted my wife to live. He could kill me but not her. "I don't want you to die. I want you to suffer. I want you to know how it feels if your loved one dies" I was reminded of his words. I couldn't concentrate on the road. Prabhu offered to drive and I took the other seat. Sleeplessness, weariness, pain, suffocation were burning me down. Prabhu found it hard to console me. He knew that things had gone beyond our control and that we had to find Raj somehow before we could reach Chennai.

After about half an hour, Prabhu got a call from Professor Vimal Kumar. He put the call on speaker.

"Hello sir, tell me" he started.

"Prabhu, I have managed to find the location to which, the signals from your friend's 'Thought Detector' are being sent without a glitch. Whoever had designed this has to be a genius bitch. He has used frequencies in pico-meter to send the signal relay and it was difficult for me to trace, hence the

delay. And I also slept for sometime as in my bed I lay”

“I think it’s the perfect time sir. Can you send me the co-ordinates of the location?”

“I have sent already. Check your phone when you are ready” saying he ended the call. Prabhu checked in his phone for the location and it pointed to a place near West Mambalam in Chennai.

“Rob, have a closer look at this place, where it leads”

“It shows that it’s near Public Health centre on Lake View road. Guess should be behind that building, somewhere.”

“It’s the building next to Sangeetha Fancy Store. I think I know it. It’s a warehouse, painted in khakhi. It stays completely irrelevant to the surroundings” he said.

“So, the kidnapper is located in this building?”

“That’s what the professor says”

“Can we trust him? He and his rhyming sentences!”

“He is obsessed with rhymes son, but a better scientist I know none” Prabhu said.

“Dude, stop the crap”

“Habitual impacts of listening to him” Prabhu giggled.

“Duh. So Ganpath is not the Loser, but Raj is and he has already killed Brindha. Should he be a serial killer kidnapping and killing women?”

“May be he loved Brindha, but she didn’t reciprocate and killed her, but why kidnap Diana?”

“Is he kidnapping happily married couples and killing off the wives? Could he be such an obsessive maniac with desire for blood of loving wives, because he didn’t get his loved one?”

“But Diana?”

“Diana was working with him. I have visited her office, he could have seen me. He could have seen that we are a happy couple. Wait, I remember it all now, this guy had once asked Diana if she would marry him, it had happened long before our wedding. Shit, he is that guy. Diana had politely rejected and remained friends with him. She told me about this. How could I forget? He has loved Brindha who chose someone else over him and has loved Diana, who also chose someone over him. I was the one involved with both the women and he is making me suffer for it. Damn. It all falls in place now Prabhu.” I told him my conclusions.

“He loved Brindha too? Is he also from Trichy?”

“Could be, or from Chennai for all reasons, and worked in VCS. Brindha could have been his ex. team mate or for that matter he could have known her through some other means, friends or friends of friends or family or something man.”

“Makes some sense. Is that guy your shadow? Closely following you and the women in your life?”

“How would I know, Prabhu? Listen, its 8.30 AM now. We have 2.5 hours in our hand. Two hours to Chennai - find him, finish him and save Diana. Right on the clock, right on the money” I said.

“If my guess is right, he might not wait for us. He might not wait until 11 am. We have to reach well ahead of that before he could do anything to Diana” He insisted.

“What? Why?”

“Because, we have pissed off him. He knows that we have found him. He knows that we are approaching. He will do anything now”

“But he told he will wait for my arrival and kill her only in my presence”

“What if I have already asked him to kill her?”

“Prabhu!” I screamed and choked him.

“Rob sorry, bad joke, bad timing. It’s a joke. Take your hands off me. I am driving, you will get us both killed” he shrieked.

“This is no joke. Tell me, are you involved in this. Tell me now Prabhu. Don’t play with me. What did I do to you for you to do this to me? How are you and Raj related? I should have known it with you knowing every move of that Raj”

“Rob, I am sorry. It was really a bad joke at a very bad time. I am sorry. I have zero involvement in this entire saga. I have no clue who that Raj is” He pleaded folding his hands.

“Hands on the steering” I said. I wasn’t sure if I could trust him. *Was it just a joke? Was he the one following me all the while? What gain would he have in killing my wife?*

“Rob, it was a gag. Okay. Stop imagining things and stop giving me that look. I thought my joke would ease the situation...I failed. I agree and apologize. Forgive me please. Now Listen. Listen carefully. The real reason why I said so was because the Loser was the one who asked you to find Brindha and then killed her before you could get close to her. He is now asking us to come to him in two hours, he could do anything to Diana.” Prabhu told in a serious tone.

“Prabhu, I will never forgive you if you are involved in this”

“Kill me if I am involved, okay? But trust me now. I didn’t realize what I was saying. And I am the only person who you can trust now” he insisted. I didn’t have a choice but to believe him. Also what he said made sense. The Loser was capable of it. He could very well kill Diana. We had to make it to his place as soon as possible. I just wished Prabhu didn’t have a hand in it. I wondered what state Diana was in. She should have cried all night. I wondered whether she would have had anything to eat, where she was, how she was treated by him.

“Who am I to you? Your wife, your love or your best friend?” she asked me once.

“A Kid. You will always be my kid first and then the rest of everything you said” I replied. She had always been a kid to me. All my life. I agreed to the LOSER’s deal hoping he wouldn’t harm my wife and that I could somehow save her. I didn’t want my eleven hour turmoil to end in vain. I had to definitely save her. She would have hoped all night that I would come and find her.

Nothing looked more important at that moment than to save my kid, not even Brindha’s death hurt me. I hoped Prabhu wasn’t involved. From the thought detector to Brindha, to trichy, to the accident, he was always by my side. The thought detector shouldn’t have been of much use to Loser, thanks to Prabhu. How much have I endured in a single night - my wife, my friend, my life. I wished it was only a joke from Prabhu. I wanted the Loser Raj to wait for my arrival and not do anything silly beforehand. I fervently wished he would not do anything stupid. It ached. I suffered. I was upset. The fatigue was too much and before I could realize, I had fainted.

A sprinkle of water sprayed on my face woke me up. I could see someone trying to talk to me.

“Don’t kill my wife. I will do anything for you. Please leave her” I pleaded.

“Rob, it’s me, wake up. It’s alright” said the familiar voice of Prabhu.

“Where are we? Where is the Loser? What happened to me? Have you handed me over to him?”

“Duh, Rob. We are on our way. Nothing happened to you. Here drink this” saying he gave me a bottle of coke and then gave some food to eat. I looked at him. My lens was on the verge of falling down and hardly managed to fit



in my eyes.

“You are worked up. You need some rest and energy” he said.

“We don’t have time Prabhu, just drive. We need to save her” I said...

“Just five minutes. Eat this and drink that, you will feel better and then we will go beat the pulp out of him.” He assured.

“Where are we?”

“We are near Changanpet now”

“Did you eat?”

“Yes”

“Whats the time now?”

“9 am. We have 2 hours left. We can go to the location of the LOSER within one hour and then you can do whatever you want” he said and smiled. I reciprocated. He continued.

“But there is a change in plan”

“What?” I looked at him confused. *Don’t beat me and leave me for dead Prabhu, not after all you had done for me, I prayed.*

“I am going to go to the place the professor had mentioned, all alone. I will find him, thrash him, save your wife and then you shall come”

“Have you gone mad? Why should you go for me? This is something that I should handle. Prabhu, come on” I was still not sure if I could trust him. I couldn’t risk Diana’s life on his words.

“Have YOU gone mad?” He was furious.

“No, not yet, but soon I may”

“There is a ‘Thought Detector’ placed in your head. Everything you think will be known to him. He will know that you are coming to kill him. He will know where you are, even before you could step on his street, he will have you killed and then kill your wife. Did we endure all of this for you guys to get killed? It won’t work. I will have to go, it has to be me. He would never expect me” he made sense.

“Prabhu, but it’s a risk. Do you really have to?” I intervened.

“Won’t you do it for me? Am I not your brother? Is she not my sister?” he asked, choking me with tears.

“Yes I would. Yes, Yes we are” I nodded.

He let loose of the grip and said “Then this is how it has to be”

I felt bad for doubting him a while ago. Friends like him were rare to find.

If there was one good thing that had happened to me in the last few hours, it was Prabhu. He was there through the thick of things and ensured I was

safely protected. I wouldn't have known about the Thought Detector or the details of the kidnapper, if not for him. He was indeed one true friend for life.

"Alright, how are you going to go?" I asked him.

"I have booked a cab already" it was always meticulous planning and execution with Prabhu. He did nothing on the go.

"Why? Take this car and then I will get a cab"

"Did you even look at your state? Shirt torn, blood stain, bandage, you look like a half zombie and you have already fainted once. Gain your senses and once I am done with it all there, I will inform you. Take the car and drive through. Is It clear? Don't contact anyone" he ordered me.

"Wait? What about the LOSER ? He is tracing my phone. He would know where I am with that"

"Do you think I wouldn't have thought of that ?" saying that he put his hand in his right pocket and took out the object that was bulging all the while, from it. It was the Nokia 1100 phone.

"You had put this in charge in your room and you went back to take this?"

"Yes boss. I knew that we would need it sometime. This is fully charged. You have this Nokia phone and I will take your smart phone. We both will be in touch throughout. The batteries won't dry out and..."

"And?"

"I will go till Tambaram and call the loser, while I will also make a call to this Nokia phone from my phone. I will put you both on speaker and you guys can talk. You ask him where you need to come exactly. Once he informs, I will throw your phone away and then I will go attack him, you get it?" Prabhu asked me.

"I get it, yes, Prabhu. I guess this will work. But wait, don't throw my phone away, it has almost 3000 contacts."

"Oh yeah. Then I will ask any of my friends from Tambaram to collect it on the way and have it with them and return it later, is that okay?"

"That's fine Prabhu. Trustable friends right?"

"Yes, Mr. Robin" he stressed it.

"Hope things go as planned" I wished.

"Your Jesus is there, he will protect us" he said.

"Hope your Krishna comes along" I said.

Who said people from different religions couldn't be the best of friends? We had our differences, a lot of it, but the understanding and the extent to

which we were ready to push ourselves to help each other was beyond measure. He was a non-blood brother for me.

We waited for Prabhu's cab to arrive. I had finished my breakfast. My watch showed 9.15 am. Prabhu's cab came and halted before us, he was about to get in, when I got a call on my mobile, which he was taking along with him. He stopped and fearing it could be the LOSER, he ran towards me and pushed the phone into my hands.

"Is it the LOSER?" I asked Prabhu.

"Not sure...Just talk" he murmured and handed the phone to me.

I had a look at the number and it wasn't the Loser's. Who could it be, wondering, I answered the call.

"Hello, who is this?" I asked in a casual tone.

"Hello, I am a friend of... Friend of..."

"Please tell me"

"I am a friend of your wife. I just wanted to know if she is alright"

"She... She is alright" I said and summoned Prabhu as I put the phone on speaker.

"Fine sir. If she is alright then fine. I was trying to reach her mobile, but it was switched off, then found your number in FB and thought of calling." he said.

He knew too much about me than he should know. A wave of doubt ran through my nerves.

"Her mobile is switched off, that's all..." I continued the conversation.

"Fine sir, thanks" he was about to cut the call.

"Hello, wait, wait. May I know who you are?" I had to ask.

"I told you, I am a friend of hers"

"Your name sir"

"My name is Raj" he uttered.

"Your full name please."

"Rajasekhar T" he said.

"T for?"

"Thirumalsamy. Why sir?"

"Where are you Raj?"

"In my room, but why are you asking?"

"Where is my wife?"

"Sir" he was getting nervous.

"Raj, I know its you. Where have you kidnapped and kept my wife" I

implored.

“Diana is Kidnapped?” he asked in an even more confused tone!!

The web was never ending.

“Didn’t you have dinner with her in the evening?”

“Yes I did. She then wanted to have Bread Omlette. I took her to the local road side shop, we had, she suddenly fainted. A BMW came nearby and offered to take her to the hospital... “

“I know all that... Weren’t you with them?”

“No !!”

“Are you sure?”

“100% sir”

“Why didn’t you then get along with her in the car? Don’t you have the basic courtesy to go along with your friend to check her well being? Would you just allow some unknown person to take your friend away?” I was upset.

“Someone else from the crowd came in and went along with her. I thought that was her team mate. So I didn’t bother to”

“How could you be so careless man!! Didn’t my wife trust you and come to eat out with you? Isn’t it your responsibility to be with her and take her back safe? As a friend and a man shouldn’t you have done it?” I didn’t know what else to scream at him.

“I am so sorry sir. I had been trying to reach her mobile to know her well being, but she was not reachable. Somehow managed to find your number from FB”

“Hmmm” I said.

“Sir. Please let me know if you find her”, saying that he hung up.

The Loser was not Raj as well. Who was he then? Darshan was the only one left and I had no clue why and how he was involved.

“Prabhu, I think its Darshan. We will have to go find him” I told him.

“No Rob, I think it is Raj” Prabhu said confidently.

***RRR***

Chapter 22

**A Friend in Need**

**Prabhu Narrates:**

Rob had just cut the call from Raj and looked at me. He said that it could

just be Darshan and not Raj. I was not going to buy the theory.

“Why do you say so Prabhu?” he questioned me.

“Rob, think of it. He talked to you for five minutes. He told he got your number from FB. If he had picked your number from there, he should have obviously looked at his photo that I had shared. His photo! He didn’t talk a word about it”

“Oh yeah, my God!! How did I miss it?”

“He is the Loser. May be he wants us to divert our focus to someone else, somewhere else and hence this call. You wouldn’t think of him as the culprit for some time now, but he is the guy. We have to go find him. Besides his motives are strong” I finished.

Robin looked at me in the usual way he does. I had always looked upon him as my very own younger brother. The admiration we had for each other was mutual. I felt guilty for the stupid joke I made about Diana. That was the last thing I would do on earth. Ever since I said that, Robin had a suspicious look on his face every time I came up with a theory. I definitely had to save Diana to prove my worth, for my friendship, to prove that it was after all a joke. *The words that we utter have us enslaved much more than our very own thoughts.*

“Makes sense Prabhu. What should we do now?” he asked me.

“I will head to Chennai now and I will ask my dad to trace this number from which you got the call, to know his exact location and his next probable move.” saying I got into the cab when Rob called out to me.

“What about the co-ordinates in West Mambalam?” he asked.

“What if it were just signals reaching there and Raj operating from somewhere else entirely? Like a remote location. You can’t do that with mobile signals”

“You sure? Because didn’t the Loser ask us to come find him?”

“It’s a trap. As Loser he is asking us to find him. As Raj he is clearing himself of the doubt list. Don’t fall for the trap” I tried to convince him.

“Do you think this will work?” he was still confused.

“Rob, I will go after him, find him and call you in one hour’s time. If he is not the Loser, I will still have one hour to reach West Mambalam Warehouse and find him. But I don’t think that would be necessary” I said.

“And Prabhu, give me that Nokia 1100” he said with a smile. I had put it back in my pocket inadvertently.

I smiled back, threw the Nokia phone towards him and got Robin’s phone.

The cab started to stretch its way towards Tambaram. I looked again at Raj's phone number. It was a CUG number. He should have got it in any of the OMR offices. I also faintly remembered about him working in some company at Siruseri. He should be staying in and around OMR. I called my dad immediately from my phone.

"Dad, I need you to trace a number" I told him when he picked.

"I have already done, the number is static and is located in Chennai Padi area, with no significant activity" he responded.

"I haven't even given you the number yet!" I was shocked.

"You already gave me one." saying he recited Brindha's number.

"No, not that number, this is a new number" saying I gave him Raj's number. "Dad, I will stay on call, this is urgent, find it immediately" I insisted.

"Alright, let me feed this number in the system and monitor its activity. The system is loading, the number is being traced and wait, looks like he is doing some kind of activity using his phone"

"Is he running away?" I got curious.

"No, he is trying to book a cab"

"Fantastic, feed it into my Cab monitor services page" "Where is it?" my dad asked.

"Its just there in my system dad, the file will be on the desktop, open it and input this number and it will let you know what he is trying to do"

"Give me a minute" saying he tried to trace the number's activity.

I had hacked the local cab websites just for fun a few months ago and never realized they were going to help me this way. I prayed that Raj shouldn't take some other mode of transport.

My prayers were answered when my dad responded.

"That number is trying to book a cab and actually waiting for the surge prices to come down. He is trying OLA." My dad said and laughed.

*His life was at risk and he was worried about the extra money.* I wondered what kind of character he was.

"Dad, thank you so much, just keep the app on, don't close it, I will access it from my phone and take it from here."

"You sure?"

"Yes dad" I said and cut the call.

He was trying to book in OLA, which helped me to locate his place. My Airtel 4G SIM was working fine even in that quirky travel and I was able to

access my project on cloud and monitored his cab bookings. I tried to block his booking a few times and increased the fares a couple of times to make sure that he waited till I arrived. His location showed as some place in Kotturpuram. I thanked him for not taking the local train to Park Station. *I am arriving, my boy.*

In parallel, I informed my friend Deepak to wait for me near Hindu Mission hospital to collect Robin's phone, once my call with the Loser was to be over. Deepak obliged.

Around 9.40 am, I reached Tambaram and called from Robin's phone to the LOSER. Robin was in speaker on the other line already.

"Where are you?" the LOSER asked.

"I am very much in Tambaram." Robin replied.

"It can't be. You just can't be here. Tell me the truth, where are you?"

"What is my phone signal saying? I am in Tambaram. Where should I come, tell me!" he insisted. I was being a silent listener.

"If you are going to lie to me, you will not see your wife alive"

"You told you will kill her in front of me?" he attacked the ego of the Loser. *Good ploy.*

"Yes, I will. Now that you are here, find me and come to my place. I am a man of my words and I will prove it. I am not going to tell you where I am. You have an hour to track down my place. I am waiting. Best of luck" he said and cut the call.

The LOSER's reluctance and suspense was genuine as he couldn't have got any thought feeds from Robin. The detector worked only within 50 Kms and if Robin had already been at Tambaram, the LOSER should have got his thought signals. Geniuses don't like to be outsmarted. He didn't talk about the thought detector either. He couldn't know that we have found out about it. Robin cut his call and then called me back again to my number.

"Yes Rob"

"Prabhu... where are you heading now?"

"I am heading to Kotturpuram"

"Why in the world?"

"That's where we have Raj"

"But the LOSER is in West Mambalam"

"What if the signals are manipulated?" I asked.

"What if the signals are real?" he shot back.

"No, but I just traced his location through OLA"

“What?”

“My dad checked in my system. Raj is trying to book a cab and planning to escape out of Chennai. If I go to West Mambalam, he will escape from Kotturpuram and go out of Chennai and we will be never able to lay our hands on him or find Diana” I said.

“Prabhu, but what if he is in West Mambalam?”

“Relax Rob, I have got him.”

“I am still not convinced Prabhu, I think I will head to West Mambalam” he was adamant.

“No Rob. Raj is the LOSER.”

“I can’t take the slightest of risks with my wife’s life in danger, I will head there”

”Dude, don’t drive me crazy! What do you want me to do? I could go to kotturpuram and still go to West Mambalam well ahead of time”

“No, we don’t have time. We just don’t have that much time in our hand. We have only an hour left. I have to go find him” Rob was desperate.

“What?” I didn’t get him.

“I will go to the location your professor sent” he told.

“Are you insane? I already told you. We talked about it. You have the bug in your head. He will know you are coming. Do you even know the meaning of surprise attack?”

“To hell with the bug. I will control my thoughts. Will keep thinking only about finding my wife and nothing else and I will reach his location before he could react.”

“You are insane. You sure you could do that?” I doubted.

“Dead sure. And don’t throw away my phone”

“My friend Deepak is coming to collect it, don’t worry. You can get it back from him later”

“Careful” he said and kept the phone. He should have started his ride from there. I wondered how he was going to control his mind and keep thinking only about saving his wife. The easiest way of thinking about something is to try and not think about it. *It’s famously said, the best way to make you think about elephants is ask you to not think about them.*

Deepak arrived on time and I handed him Rob’s phone. I then mapped Raj in Kotturpuram and asked my cab driver to head in that direction as fast as he could. He took the Pallavaram by-pass and reached OMR within 15 minutes. Meanwhile, Raj was trying to book OLA share, I allowed his



booking and gave my number as the contact number of the driver. My cab reached his place according to the map within 15 minutes.

10.00 Am, my watch showed. I wondered why the day was running at such a frenetic pace. The night seemed to have had more time in it.

I asked the driver to honk the horn. Raj was locking his door and came out with a heavy bag and got into the cab hurriedly. "CRN number is 0103" he told the driver when I got hold of him and began to strangle him. My cab driver was startled.

"Sir, what are you doing? What are you doing? Don't do all this" he shouted.

"End my ride now. I will pay you. I have something to settle with him." I said and threw Raj out of the car and took him inside the house. The evenings I spent in the gym came in handy. Though I had lost some weight after the stroke, my wrists were as strong as ever.

I got hold of him and locked the doors behind us. I took him by his collar and threw him on the TV, it broke. I then got hold of his hand and broke his elbow.

"Nooo, no. Wait!! Who are you? Why are you hitting me? It's paining. Don't, don't, why are you even doing this?" he screamed in pain.

"Tell me, tell me"

"Who are... aaah... are you Robin?"

"I am Robin's friend, smarty pants. Now tell me Loser, where is Diana?"

"I have no clue"

"I know you have some clue Mr.Loser and I have come here to decipher that." saying, I began to twist his right hand further. He was shivering in pain.

"I will tell, I will tell, I will tell everything" he came to the confession mode.

"Now that's like a good boy" I said and gave him space to relax and sit. He got up, sat on the floor and kept looking down at it. He couldn't bring himself to look at me in the eye.

"It all started when Muthuram contacted me"

"Muthu Ram, who is that?" I was bemused with the introduction of another new character. *How many of you are involved man, I said under my breath.*

"I don't know who he is, but he approached me. He asked me of this favor and told he will give me lot of money, a LOT of money"

"What favor?" I pierced him with my question.

“Two tasks. First one was to follow your friend Robin and hit his bike when he is returning from office. This happened some two weeks ago. I was instructed not to kill him, but to make sure that he sustained enough injury to visit a hospital. I did as was commanded. The second was what I did yesterday. I had to talk to Diana that evening, bring her out. Take her to that particular bread omelette shop and make her eat it, then put her in the car.”

“Are you really not the Loser? And you agreed to it all? MuthuRam is the Loser?” I wanted to thrash him on the floor.

“I am sorry. I am Loser. I needed money and had to do this to Diana, the girl who I once loved” he was still looking at the floor.

“Loser not like losing money - the LOSER, the mastermind behind this all. Are you not that guy?”

“No, that’s Muthuram”

“And didn’t you love Brindha as well?”

“Who is that, I have no clue of her?”

“Oh man! And you got alarmed when I shared your photo in my FB wall and asked for forgiveness”

He looked at me, meaning to ask, if I was Prabhu.

“Yes, I am Prabhu, now continue”

“Yes, first I panicked. I didn’t know what to do. I was confused between, if I have to reach Robin or you or MuthuRam.”

“And you decided to reach Robin”

“He seemed to be the easiest to talk to and I thought if I talked to him, he wouldn’t doubt me”

“You missed a beat there, a whole lot of it. Now tell me, where is this MuthuRam?” I confronted him.

“I have no clue. I haven’t interacted with him after yesterday night 9 Pm” there was a genuineness in his response.

“Do you have his number?” I was perplexed.

“Yes I do” saying he gave the number

“Let me trace his location, meanwhile, how much did he give you?”

“He gave me 1 Lakh”

That’s a very large amount. I wondered who we were being after, were they woman traffickers, body snatchers, professional kidnappers?

“That’s a large amount, Hmmm. Do one thing, show me the money.” I said.

He opened the bag he was carrying with him which was full of fresh money.

A bag full of 500 rupees notes.

“Voila! Now call to that MuthuRam. Tell him that one pack from this consists of duplicate notes and that you need an exchange”

“He wouldn’t listen to me sir, he would not”

“Him listening to you or your life? Which is more important to you?”

Raj immediately called to MuthuRam and insisted on receiving an exchange for one money bundle, right away. Muthuram was pissed off, the way I wanted him to be.

“Sir, I need it urgently sir. I am heading home and I need this money” Raj was arguing with Muthuram. MuthuRam finally agreed to give the money and asked him to come to his place near West Mambalam. It struck a bell for me. MuthuRam is the Loser and he was in West Mambalam. Robin’s logical guess was right.

We both then got into his bike and dashed our way to West Mambalam. MuthuRam’s house was not difficult to find. It was no warehouse though, but it was close to the Public Health Centre. May be Raj knew the place better than Google Maps. I hoped that Robin also arrived on time so that we both could come face to face with the Loser. I didn’t want to call him and disturb his thoughts though. *He shouldn’t think about the place. He should think only about his wife, else he will alert the Loser. I kept telling myself.* I had also sent the LOSER’s location to my dad and hoped him to send in some cops soon. We parked the bike near a tree in front of that double storied house. It was 10.45 Am. *15 more minutes were there.*

“Sir, he resides in first floor. I will have to go up all alone. If he sees you accompanying, then it will be trouble” Raj said.

“I am here for trouble.” I said and we both walked through the narrow stairs and reached the door of that house. I was about to meet and treat the kidnapper of my friend’s wife. I was going to reprimand the Loser. After a few knocks the door opened to reveal a middle aged, stout, mustached man, wearing a sweater. *Sweater in Chennai?*

He was startled to see me.

“MuthuRam” Raj uttered.

“Who is this with you Raj?” he turned towards Raj and questioned him. He noticed Raj bleeding and panicked and turned towards me. Before he could realize what hit him, I planted a blow on his nose. He fell down on the floor and lay unconscious.



## Chapter 23

### A Few More Minutes

#### **Prabhu's Narration Continues:**

It took two minutes for MuthuRam to regain his senses. When he opened his eyes, I was sitting on him and waiting to hear his story. I never expected the Loser to be a 40 year old man, wearing a sweater in Chennai-weather, but then from what I know of him, he should have had a half-baked brain.

Raj was in another corner, protecting his ass.

“Go ahead Mr.Loser. Tell me, where is Diana?”

“She is in the next building, to the back of this house” he said. I gave a sigh of relief.

“Whats there in that building and why did you kidnap her?” I sat hard on him.

“That's his lab. And I didn't... I didn't kidnap. It was him, my master, I just work for him”

“Who is he? Why should he abduct my friend's wife?” I posed the all-important question and waited. He looked at me and asked if I were not Robin. I nodded.

“We had to take her into custody because your friend is the ex of Brindha”

“I don't get the point. Is Ganpath your master?”

“No, it's Darshan Patel”

“Who the hell? How is he involved in this? What has he got to do with Brindha?”

“It's a long story!” he said. I looked at my watch. There were ten more minutes for 11 AM.

“Tell in five minutes.” I said.

“It started in 2001. My master is from Gujarat. His parents died in the Gujarat earth quake, if you remember that, he was all of 12 then; 12 and the sole owner of a large diamond jewelry business. He was quite troubled at his parents' loss. It took him several years to recover. In fact he is still recovering. But, when it came to business, he had his dad's acumen. He made all his moves and garnered fortunes just like him. He was brilliant and also had a liking for latest inventions in science and followed all the latest technological advances across the globe. He has a huge collection of such gadgets in his lab. He buys anything that he can lay his hands upon”

“Just cut the extra details and get to the point” I insisted losing my patience. “I am with this family ever since he was born. After his parents’ death, the task of taking care of him fell on me. I became his legal guardian. He was young and vulnerable, I was a grown up opportunist. I wanted to take advantage of the situation.”

“Now we are talking”

“I shouldn’t have even thought so, yes, but then think about it. I have a very large family... had too much to heed for. I was paid well, yes, but I wanted more. I wanted all of it. Who wouldn’t want, wont you?” he continued

“What did you do then?” I asked in a threatening tone.

“I wanted to kill him at first, but then there was a problem with the will. He would inherit the wealth only when he turns 18 and in case he dies before that, all this wealth would go to charity. It would be of no use to me. So I had to bring him up till he was 18, had to take complete care of him until then.”

“So you planned to kill him when he turned 18?”

“I tried, but I couldn’t bring myself to do it. I was emotionally attached to him. As much as the money was inviting, I couldn’t bring myself to kill the little man I brought up”

“Oh Okay, then?”

“But I needed the money badly. Without any other choice, I started to give him disillusionment drugs, resulting in him suffering from delusional disorder”

“Wait, whats that?”

“It’s a drug, like your cocaine, marijuana. I don’t remember the exact name of it though. It was called some crystal meth or something. The druggist said that it would make people forget themselves and go into a state of trance. They wouldn’t be in their senses nor in their physical state of mind. It sounded like the perfect ingredient for my plan. I decided to give it to Darshan every single day so that he ends up as a schizophrenia patient. Then being his legal guardian and considering his mental state, all wealth would come to me”

“You fickle scoundrel.” I wanted to spit on him. “Now where did Brindha come here?”

“Darshan was disillusioned and started to behave in an eccentric manner. His sexual urges increased multifold and were uncontrollable. Every time I gave him the drug he would have terrible mood swings and weird sexual

desires. He even once tried to rape me. Our family doctor said that it's a peculiar case and every time he is taking the drug, his deepest desires were being exposed and that it could be meted out only by fulfilling his sexual needs. I first took the help of some prostitutes, but he started to hurt them really bad, he was crossing limits. Then I had to employ a ploy of giving him a feeling of having an imaginary girl friend who would cater to his desires over call."

"Whose name was Brindha?"

"Yes, I made one of my daughters talk to him in the name of Brindha, every single day. He was getting addicted to both the drug as well Brindha"

"Your own daughter?"

"Yes sir. She was just talking to him over phone. You call it phone sex, right?"

"Your daughter deserved a better father than you" I said and asked him to continue.

"I know. But as days passed by, he was getting too addicted to talking to Brindha. In the mean-time, my daughter's wedding was fixed. I sensed that the conversations could no longer continue and had to be put to an end."

"You could have married her off to him, right? He would have definitely married her. Come on"

"We are his servants sir, how would he agree?"

"He is already drugged. Why would he care?"

"He would. I once brought my daughter in front of him and told that she is Brindha. He hit her with a glass bottle and banished us. He has his own image for Brindha in his mind and anybody who isn't matching it will be punished and chased out"

"Oh my God!"

"I had to put an end to it all and asked my daughter to avoid him as much as she could"

"Okay?"

"She started to avoid him, refused when he wanted to meet her in person. She stopped talking to him, stopped responding to his call and shunned him completely. Darshan had gone astray and couldn't come to terms with him losing a loved one for the second time in his life. I could see that he was losing his senses slowly and consuming the drug incessantly. There was hardly a time when he wasn't on it. He started to behave like a mad man and live in his own world, his own world of Brindha. My plan seemed to

work”

“I am not even able to digest this shit. So your fake Brindha pretended to break up with him and he wanted to avenge her ex boyfriend for that?”

“Yes sir“

“Then how did my friend and his wife come into the picture?”

“That’s because of this Raj. Raj had met Darshan in one of Darshan’s scientific seminars and they had exchanged numbers and became connected over some LinkIn or something. Darshan had a fake ID in FB, only very few knew it...”

“Okay?”

“He became Raj’s friend on one fine day”

“You are not just coming to the point. Why are you dragging around?”

“Well, Raj is your friend Robin’s wife’s FB friend. Looks like your friend is a writer and he had written about his first crush with some Brindha in his blog in a detailed manner and shared it on facebook. Robin’s wife had ‘liked’ the post, in turn Raj had liked it. May be your friend had it as a public profile and Darshan happened to read it all.”

“Whats the logic?”

”I have no clue. I had asked my daughter to break up with him and she gave some random reasons, like having an ex. and that Darshan is no match to his ex. and all that. May be after reading your friend’s story, Darshan thought that your friend, Rob is the reason for his break up. What did your friend write so in his blog?”

“I am really not sure what he wrote. What a freaking imagination!”

“Its imagination for us, but stark reality for him. He creates his own images, stories and worlds. Things happen there as per his wishes. He is the ruler and the subject and if he wants he would kill anyone in that world at will.”

“Holy shit!! That’s why he went ahead and killed Brindha and kidnapped Rob’s wife, is it?” I gave him a kick in his belly.

“He killed Brindha?” Muthuram was shocked. Raj was equally shocked and wanted to run away.

“Oh, you didn’t know. Yes the lunatic has killed Brindha and has promised to kill Diana as well. We need to stop him”

“Brindha is very much alive!! I don’t think he would kill Diana either sir. I brought him up, I know him. He is ruthless only when it comes to his business, otherwise he has a tender heart. He is such a nice person. My guilt has killed me slowly for so many days. Finally I got a chance to confess

now. My daughter is alive and well. May be he killed Brindha in his imagination. There is no mistake on his part. It was all mine. Don't tell your friend to harm him. If there is anything you want to do, just do it to me"

"What if he had found my friend Robin's ex. Brindha and killed her?"

"There is no way for that. He hasn't come out of his room for the last six months, ever since the break-up"

"He could have been in the room and asked someone else to do it"

"I am the only one he talks to. I execute his orders. He doesn't trusts anyone else"

"You execute ? Oh so, you were the one who sent those guys in a lorry to kill us on the way to Trichy?"

"I didn't ask them to kill you"

"Don't lie. I clearly remember the Loser saying "Hey Ram'. We thought he was calling a God, but looks like he has called to you"

"Okay, Yes, I will confess that too. Darshan's order was to follow you guys, but I asked them to finish you, just to be sure you don't come up with additional troubles. But looks like they failed, I am sorry, forgive me."

I kicked him again in his stomach.

"You should have thought of all this before you drugged your master. There is no use in confessing now. May be he didn't kill Brindha, but he has kidnapped Diana for sure"

"May be he kidnapped her, but he wouldn't kill Diana. I guarantee you that." MuthuRam said.

I got up as he was still lying down. We had been dealing all the while with a schizophrenia patient who had access to the latest technology and whose mind was not in his control. He could make any move at any point of time. I needed to act immediately. I turned around to ask Muthuram to take me to Darshan's room when that Oxygen cylinder hit my head. It hit me one more time. I didn't know who attacked me. I fell down on the floor. There was blood oozing from my head.

"Why did you get caught? Why did you? Are you all trying to spoil my plan? Do you know whats the wealth that's going to come to my possession? Darshan will be arrested for kidnapping, attempted murder and then imprisoned. I had planned it all well and used his BMW for the kidnapping. I have just informed the cops. The Police will arrive, catch hold of him and declare him insane. Right when everything was falling in place, who is this moron? Why did you bring him here? I trusted you Raj, but you



disappointed me” Muthuram was furious at Raj.

“I am sorry, I am sorry. I was attacked. He just brought me here by force, leave me, I will run away.” Raj pleaded.

“There can be no witnesses.” saying, he hit Raj with that red cylinder. He gave three more hits and I could hear the clear sound of his skull bone breaking open. Raj laid in a pool of blood. I couldn’t move. I could hear everything Muthuram was speaking but couldn’t move an inch. I looked at my watch. It was 5 minutes past 11.

The time was gone. I couldn’t reach Robin. I didn’t know what happened to Diana. What I could feel was that my end was nearing. I had to act immediately. If I didn’t make a move, I would be sent to the grave by Muthuram. I stopped moving and laid motionless. He kicked my head and dragged me along towards an internal door in the room. I remembered him saying that Diana was there at the other building, may be the door lead to it. As he was about to open the door, I pulled him down using the last resort of energy left in my hands. My head was spinning. There was a significant amount of blood loss. I used whatever reserve energy I had and punched Muthuram on his genitals. He screamed.

He turned around to kick me hard on my face and on my head, increasing the bleeding. I couldn’t see clearly. I held his leg in my hand and pushed him hard towards the wall. He was thrown face first at it. I twisted his knee and tried to break his leg. He kicked me hard and got up. He gave me repeated punches and kicked my face.

“Do not hit a man on his genitals, you eunuch” he admonished me as his kicks were resulting profuse leakage of blood from my nostrils and mouth. I held his feet, stopped his kicks, got hold of his shirt and stood up and hit him on his face and pushed him. He couldn’t withstand my push and fell back.

“You filthy old man, I thought I will forgive you. I thought you confessed. You liar. You will be doubly paid now”

“There is so much you could do for so much money and there is so minimal you could do without it” he gasped.

“There is so much I could do with this fist.” I said and punched him on his face. “You, are a bad guardian”. Before I could foresee his next move, I was already on the floor. He gave a double sweep kick to my feet and then repeatedly punched on my chest. He overpowered me. I felt ashamed to be beaten by an old man.

He took the cylinder in his hand and threw it flat on my face. I lost everything and closed my eyes. I wasn't dead though. I could still hear him. He uttered some cuss words directed at me, my mother and my sister and headed towards the door to open it.

*Diana will be there at the other end of the door. Open your eyes, save her,* someone was talking to my brain. I couldn't open my eyes. In a distance I heard someone opening a door.

***RNR***

## Chapter 24 **Save Diana**

### **Robin Narrates:**

I wasn't convinced with Prabhu's theory. Why would the Loser, having a BWM, try to book a cab in OLA? And how did Prabhu find his exact location.

"My dad checked in my system. Raj is trying to book a cab and planning to escape out of Chennai" Prabhu's words kept echoing in my mind.

Wait a minute. Prabhu's dad had been tracing all phone numbers and locating them, why did we not locate the Loser's number all the while. Had I done it earlier, I needn't have treaded on an 11 hour journey. I felt like a stupid. I had saved Prabhu's dad's number in my phone, but my phone was with Prabhu. *Damn.* I looked at the Nokia 1100 phone in my hand and searched its contacts list, hoping to find his number. I remembered Prabhu saving his dad's number as 'Fa', short form of father, in his phone. I hoped him to have saved it in a similar way in that Nokia phone as well.

Thankfully, he had. I dialled to his dad immediately.

"Uncle, Rob here. I need to find the location of a mobile number"

"Brindha's? Or Raj's? Or Prabhu's? Are you two in a phone number tracing spree today?" he said and laughed.

"No, uncle, this is a new number. Give this a try and let me know where it is" he said.

I gave him the Loser's number which I had memorized after losing my phone earlier in the day. Within 2 minutes he responded.

"The number is static and is located in"

"West Mambalam, near Public Health Care? A Warehouse?" I asked.

"Very much yes, how did you know? If you already know, why did you ask?"

“Just wanted a double confirmation uncle.” I said and cut the call.

The Loser was at West Mambalam. He could be Raj, he could still be Ganpath or even Darshan but he wasn't at Kotturpuram. I started Prabhu's car and speeded my way towards Chennai.

There was only one thing in my mind, save Diana. It had been a while since I practiced yoga, had left it ever since I broke up with Brindha, but I still remembered a few tricks that were taught to train my mind. I never thought it would come handy in helping me that day. I had to keep my thoughts under control. It sounded easy, but to have a focused mind, and not to think of anything else, especially under a crisis, needed a lot of practice, which I didn't have. I felt like a balloon, encompassing all my emotions within, a prickly wayward thought was enough to break it all and burst out the emotions. “Focus, save Diana, save Diana. Brindha is dead, just save Diana.” I kept telling myself, as the car speeded in the Tambaram highway towards West Mambalam.

The road was traffic free, I didn't mind any of the signals and was rushing towards my destination. “The cops will follow” *just don't think*. “What if LOSER” *just don't think*. “What if he knows what I “*Just don't think idiot*. I was dismissing all my thoughts and reached the destination in the coordinates that the professor had passed on, around 10.40 Am. *20 minutes before the deadline*. The warehouse looked upon me with disgust. With no smart phone to help me re-confirm the location, I banked on my gut instincts to move ahead.

It was a double storied building with the basement locked with a seal. There was a single door in the first floor - a steep stair case led to it, where I hoped to meet the LOSER. I took a deep breath and prayed well for a miracle to save my wife. “Save Diana”. I kept repeating it like a slogan. I was surprised to see no one guarding the door, but then got reminded of the LOSER saying that he preferred to work alone, lucky me, save Diana. I reached near the door stealthily and knocked it. No one opened. I waited and knocked again. There was silence. I decided to “Save Diana”.

“Splat” the door opened and revealed me its inmate. It was a stranger. I had never seen him in my life. He smiled like he was expecting me though. My eyes were searching for Diana. She wasn't there. I was desperate to find her and scanned the large room. The room for some reason reminded me of that of the professor's lab, but with much more complications. It was large, had more equipments and a weird man as its inmate.

“Looking for Diana? And do you like this lab” he asked in a sarcastic tone.  
“Oh Shit. Just Save Diana” I kept telling myself. I didn’t want him to know my next move.

“Who are you, Loser?”

“I am that I am. I am the Loser”

“Whats your name?”

“Doesn’t matter”

“Okay. I am here, that’s what matters now. Let go off my wife. I have found you before the time you gave me “I insisted as I looked around, Save Diana. “Did you know, I know your thoughts?” he gave a teasing look.

“I know” I was waiting for his move to counter attack. The best way not to think was just that. Not to think at all. “Save Diana”.

“Why aren’t you thinking anything now, other than ‘Save Diana’. You don’t want to know why I kidnapped your wife? What I am going to do to her”

“Save Diana” I bit my teeth.

“How do you think it will be, if this technology is implemented across the globe. I will know everything that everyone thinks” he laughed.

“Get to the point Loser. Where is my wife? Let her go. I have suffered enough”

“You haven’t even started. Do you know what suffering is? Do you know what a break up is? Do you know how it feels? Do you know how it is when someone you love with all your life just throws you away and chooses someone else over you. Do you know? Do you know how much I have suffered? I lost my parents when I was young. I don’t have anyone to show love on me and there was one girl, one last girl and you, you took her away from me.”

“I didn’t take anyone away from you. I haven’t interacted with Brindha for six months now”

“But you interacted with her for 10 years before that. I know your story. I know it all, she kept comparing me with you. I gave her everything she wanted, but she suddenly left me and the reason she quoted was you, bloody friggin you, am not a loser. I LOST her, but I taught her a lesson on what would happen if she forsook me. I killed her and it felt good. I will kill your wife now, in front of your eyes that should settle it all.” He said.

“You are talking too much mate” I uttered.

“Lets get into action then.” saying that he pressed a button and a door opened, revealing Diana behind a glass door, being tied to a coffin like lab

equipment, the same regeneration chamber, I saw in the professor's lab.  
*Was he going to cut her into pieces?*

"Don't kill her, take me, but just don't kill her" I pleaded.

"I won't cut her into pieces, don't worry. She is not my meal."

I looked at his computer screen. My thoughts were being live fed there and the signal wave was being transferred to texts, he was reading it.

"Who is this guy, what's his name, why is he doing this to me?" I kept wondering.

"I am surprised you didn't find my name. I thought you would have.

Anyways, I am Darshan- richer than you, smarter than you, classy than you and more deserving of Brindha than you"

"Brindha is married to some Ganpath, you have mistaken"

"Don't create new stories, writer. I have already read your blog and I know it all. You don't want to come between us, is it? How does it feel if I come between you and your wife"

"Darshan, you are crossing limits"

"I haven't even started yet. Do you know what happens when I press this green button? Your wife Diana dies and I press this red one, she is saved" he told and showed me a green and red button respectively as his hands wavered around the green one.

Diana was still unconscious.

"You know your wife was cribbing all day. She was chanting your name all evening until she lost her senses and fainted. Looks like, she loves you very much. Me and Brindha would have been a similar pair, if not better, but only if you hadn't played spoil sport."

"Darshan, I didn't do ANYTHING"

"Don't talk Rob. The girl I loved is after you, the girl you married loves you so much and all you think of is those Brazzers girls. How mean of you. I am so much better than you and still she left me. This world is no longer a place for good people" he screamed and was about to press the green button.

Without a second thought, I jumped on him instantly. I grabbed him by the collar and we both rolled over on the floor breaking down several tables along with a few bottles and instruments. I wanted to press the Red button and release Diana. He was no match for my physique. He had the brains, but lacked the brawn and was seemingly weak. For some weird reason I was reminded of the JOKER on looking at him.

He tried to bite my hand. I kicked him and pushed him around. I lifted him and threw him on a glass window near the door. I then thumped his face on the wall and thrashed it till he bled. I gave him a couple of blows and left him there and rushed towards the buttons. I pushed the red one in haste and waited with bated breath for the glass door and the coffin chamber to open. But to my horror, the machine got switched on and started to spin. I was shocked and turned towards to the Loser.

“Oops, looks like I lied. That red button starts the machine” he uttered as he threw himself on me and took me away from the buttons. I understood the Joker resemblance. Instincts.

“Shiiiiittt” I said and tried to press the green button, but he bit my hand again and threw his entire weight on my hands and took me away from the buttons. The rotating speed of the chamber started to increase. Darshan was in no mood to let go off me. With one swing using all my reserve energy, I pushed him away from my hands and pressed the green button using my left foot. The machine started to slow down and came to a halt. I got up and looked at Darshan.

“Before you beat and kill me, I forgot to say. That machine won’t kill her, but erase all memory of hers. Nothing like your loved one losing the complete memory of you, right? She wouldn’t remember you when she comes out of it and thanks to you for that” he laughed hysterically.

“Aarrggghh. I will kill you, you son of a bitch. What in the world did I do to you? What did my wife do to you? You will die in my hands. I will kill you. You will die, you little piece of shit” I screamed and kept hitting him. He was beaten to a pulp and lost his consciousness, when I heard a door open at a far end of the room.

I went swiftly towards the wall and hid behind the door, holding a conical flask in my hand. The door opened to reveal a middle aged man with a bleeding face who had blood stains on his hands. He had to be Darshan’s assistant. I hit him on his head with the flask as he entered in and threw few other bottles on him. The anger of my wife losing her memory, the agony of the entire day’s suffering, the trauma I was going through, all came out as hard line punches that landed on the face of the guy. I was done after ten minutes and looked at the two of them. They laid unconscious. The clock read 11.15 Am.

I looked into the other side of the door to find Prabhu lying in a pool of blood.

“Oh God, Prabhu” I rushed in and attended to him. He was slowly regaining his senses.

I then hurried towards the glass door and broke it open. Diana was still hinged to a couple of bolts in the ‘Memory Erasing’ chamber. I brought her down slowly. She was still unconscious. I hugged her and cried. I couldn’t realize what I had done to her. “She was calling your name all evening” the loser’s words kept reverberating. Knowingly or unknowingly I had erased her memory. I cried. I didn’t deserve that punishment. I wanted my wife as she was. I wanted Diana as the kid she was. I wanted my world back.

Prabhu’s dad had informed the cops and they arrived on time. I explained everything to them. Prabhu had regained his consciousness and helped me with the details I couldn’t fill in. Prabhu detailed on why Darshan behaved so and what had been done to him by MuthuRam. I suddenly got reminded that October 21<sup>st</sup> (the current date) was not Brindha’s birthday. It felt stupid. I felt bad for Darshan and wanted MuthuRam to be punished for his heinous acts. I could never forgive Raj, though. *Enemies can be forgiven, but not traitors.*

My wife and Prabhu were still in hospital. The doctors were attending to both of them. Diana hadn’t opened her eyes for a long time while Prabhu was recovering fast. I heard that Darshan had been admitted to a lunatic asylum, while MuthuRam and Raj had been put behind the bars. *Things that people do for money. To think of it that it was all a result of me writing a story about my ex, was silly, to say the least.* Prabhu’s friend Deepak returned back my phone that afternoon.

“What happened to Diana’s memory, doctor?” I asked the doctor attending her.

“There is a small lapse in memory, no major damage. I think she was in the machine that you mentioned for a less amount of time. When she regains her senses, she should be perfectly alright...” “When will she be awake?” I asked her.

“That, may take upto 24 hours”

“Fine doctor”

“But she is fine. All is well. Take my word for that.” She assured. “Thank you Doctor and Prabhu?”

“He is already fine. You can go and see him” she permitted.

I wanted to hug Prabhu, but decided against it after seeing him in that bed, with those large bandages.

“Thanks will be too small a word to say Prabhu”

“Then don’t say it” he gave me a slight punch with his left hand and smiled.

I sat next to him for some time when I heard a beep sound in my phone. I looked at it. It was a mail from Brindha.

It read, “Hey, Rob. Long time no see. I am fine da, perfectly fine. Happily married and settled with Ganpath. How are you and your wife? My cousin told me that you had sent her a mail. I didn’t check this mail ID for long, so couldn’t respond to you on time”

I called to her mobile immediately and she picked.

“Why didn’t you pick my call yesterday morning?” was the first thing I asked her.

“What call, when?”

“Morning, around 6.30, or 7?”

“Oh, was that you? I had put my mobile in silent and was sleeping. Didn’t know it was your number. When I woke up, found it to be an unknown number so didn’t call back. I have only this number of yours”

I gave a wry smile.

“Now on, even if its an unknown number, if you are getting more than one call, give a call back” I said.

“Fine. So hows life” she continued and we conversed for ten more minutes. It couldn’t have been better. Brindha was alive and happy somewhere and was sleeping through all the while.

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After 24 hours, the doctor called me up and I hurried in to her room.

“Mr. Robin, take good care of your wife. She has woken up.” She said.

“Sure doctor.” saying, I got up.

“Wait, listen to me fully. Whats the hurry? You must give her extra care now”

“Doctor?”

“She is in the family way. 3 months now.” the doctor said.

My happiness knew no bound. I rushed to Diana’s bed and hugged her. She screamed and asked who I was.

“I am your hubby.” I said, still wondering why she reacted that way.



“I am not married yet!” she said in a serious tone.

“But you are pregnant now!” I smiled.

“Did you rape me?” she asked in a shocked tone.

“Come on Diana. Don’t play, the doctor told that your memory is intact”

“No, I don’t remember you. Besides my husband wouldn’t call me as Diana”

I smiled.

“My sweet Gubbly...” I said and hugged her.

“My sweet Bubbly” she said as she kissed me.

It was one humdinger of 11 hours of my life. I would have never expected such an adventure in the wildest of my dreams. I had filed a case against the hospital who had instilled the chip near my brain. The thought detector was still intact in my head and I had volunteered myself for the professor’s experiments on it. Prabhu had recovered fully and was discharged from the hospital. I couldn’t thank him and his dad enough. My mom was totally pissed off with me as I didn’t inform her or my dad of any of the turmoil when it occurred. I had to pacify her with a hug, but she ignored me and hugged Diana. *Women!*

I still didn’t get the answer for what made Diana faint at the bread omlette shop and I didnt bother to ponder over it. I was glad that she was back. I got my kid back.

“Gubbly, I love you so much” I said hugging her.

“Love you too bubbly. I was scared and afraid through it all, but knew that you will come for me. Knew that you will protect me, knew that you will save me”

“Saved Diana” I winked.

She kissed me.

“Hey wait, I need to ask you something”

“Yes Rob”

I came close to her and asked in a serious tone, “What was that porn loop that you had watched?”

She came near my right ear, bit it and whispered “I forgot”

**The End**

**RRR**

Bonus Short Story

## **The Man Who Lost His Time**

### **June 6th, Friday:**

I looked at my watch, it was 10:22 PM. The train would leave at 10.30 Pm. I was still in the bus en route Tambaram. “I wouldn’t miss the train... I wouldn’t miss the train” I kept telling myself. The bus stopped in East Tambaram at 10.26 Pm. I got down as soon as I could and rushed towards the station.

Tambaram bus stop was buzzing in action even at that odd hour. Friday nights!!

I crossed the signal, narrowly escaping from being hit by a speeding bike, and ran towards Platform 8. I had two bags, one on either hand and ran as fast as I could, trying to stay ahead in the crowded pathway, when one of my bags smacked an unsuspecting man.

“Oops... sorry, sorry, please excuse me” I apologized and continued my sprint.

My watch showed 10.30 Pm. I looked at the platform at a distance in desperation. I could see the waiting train starting to move slowly. I took a few giant leaps to reach the base of the over-bridge. Just few more quick steps and I could catch it.

Praying to Bolt God, I hurdled my way up the stairs, having my eyes on the moving train when I bumped into that old lady.

“Aarrgh, I am so sorry ma” I turned and apologized to her and then turned back to continue my dash... when I found the train missing. I turned back to see the lady, she was missing too. Clueless and confused, I gasped for breath and ran down the stairs hastily towards platform 8.

THE TRAIN WAS GONE FOR REAL leaving no trace behind.

I stood there stranded in the middle of the platform, not knowing what happened. The train was there in front of me all the while.. I had my eyes set on it and when I bumped on that lady, the train was gone. How could such a large train vanish in a second?

Perplexed and puzzled, I reasoned hard hopelessly, when I heard that voice, “Katharagiya andavar ungalai ratchiparaga”... some biblical verse being recited from the local church nearby... which was usually broadcast every hour... Every one hour. Wait!

I looked at my watch, it showed 11 PM. I looked at the large clock in the

platform, it glared 11 pm.

I was baffled beyond despair and was on the verge of losing my sanity.

“Sir, whats the time?” I asked the guy who walked beside me.

He gave a mean look at me, then my watch, then the large clock and then at his watch and told, “11 Pm.”

“What the hell?” how could it.... how the hell in the world did I just lose 30 minutes at the blink of an eye.

### **June 9th, Monday:**

I was restless in front of the neurologist, Dr. Madhan, in Dr.Meenakshi hospital at Pallikaranai. He was young, had a thick moustache, wore a rimless spec and had a small scar near his left ear.

I couldn't take my eyes of the clock on his wall, as I kept looking at the watch in my hand, besides monitoring the alarm clock on his table. I wanted to be sure that all of them showed the same exact time.

“Relax Mr. Senthil... you don't have to panic” the doctor tried to pacify me.

“How could I not doctor? This is the third time it has happened in the last three days. I am losing half an hour every day.. half an hour...and I have no clue why its happening, how I am losing it... even the other doctor didn't have a clue and has sent me to you. Whats happening to me? Can this be cured? Will I be able to live a normal life? Should I consult some scientists? Has it happened to someone or anyone before?” I was anxious.

“Wait, wait... one by one... When all did you lose time in the last three days?” he questioned me.

“First, when I was about to catch a train, then when I was speeding to office to attend a meeting. Then while rushing home to watch a cricket match... and I have no clue how it happens... I would just blink my eye and uff 30 minutes will be gone... like a puff of dust... I don't get this doctor... I am losing my sanity... I haven't even told my parents yet. In fact I haven't told anyone yet... If I say, they will brand me a mad man. Please... Please doctor, help me come out of this” I pleaded him.

“Have you had any medical conditions of late...? Anything that affected your cranium?”

“I had a stroke two months ago and I was even operated in this very hospital. But I am completely cured now... Perfectly fine... I am keeping my bp under control, taking my stress pills on time. I am not stressing myself at all... Wait... I am stressing myself... Am I doctor? “I was behaving like a wild child.

“Calm down now Mr. Senthil, just don’t strain yourself. I think I know whats affecting you”

“How can I be calm Doctor, after this? Tell me, what has happened to me?”

I fumed.

### **June 21st Saturday:**

I woke up and looked all around my room and felt like being in the middle of a clock shop. I looked at my watch in my hand, it showed 3 Pm. I looked at all the five clocks on the wall, they all showed 3 pm.

I entered the bathroom to take a leak and kept an eye on the clock there....

It was 3.01 Pm. I washed my face and came out.

I dialed the pizza delivery guy and ordered a regular Chicken Margarita with double cheese. He promised to deliver it in Half an hour, I couldn’t help but chuckle. Half an hour.

It had been two weeks since the therapy and the tablets, I wasn’t losing time. I had a pack of ice tied to the wrist of my right hand to cool myself. I had to place it on my head every half an hour.. Half an hour again.

The pressure gauge in my left hand kept a constant watch on the BP level. I felt like a walking zombie. I didn’t go to my home town in those fourteen days. My room-mates started to gaze at me like I was a weird creature. I stood in front of the mirror and saw my reflection. A weird creature indeed. I took the stress pill the doctor had prescribed, then skimmed through the newspaper to find an ad for the movie, “Avengers part 13”. I was home bound for the last two weeks and was bored to death. Somewhere deep within, the desire to watch the movie overcame all the apprehensions I had about stepping out of my room.

### **June 9th, Monday:**

The doctor continued.

“All this is because of stress... The adrenalin rush... the rush of blood that goes to your head. You are not losing time Mr.Senthil, you are just creating that impression for yourself. You are over stressed” Dr. Madhan explained.

“You mean?”

“This whole losing time thing is a myth your mind is creating. No one can ever lose time. Think of this now, has it ever happened when you are with your friends? Has it ever happened when you are happy? No, right? The impression of you losing time happens only when you are alone and stressed. It’s a mirage, a bogus, a preconception, a lie that your mind wants you to believe, a shadow your stress is casting on you” The doctor made

sense. How could someone ever lose time? I should have been imagining it all the while.

“Are you... You mean... Should I consult a psychiatrist?” I asked putting up a sad face.

“No no... Absolutely not necessary. Take these stress pills, it will keep your blood pressure under check. Have these ice bags with you and place it on your head every half an hour. Do Yoga or meditation... hmmm even prayer will help... Basically, don't get stressed. You will be alright soon. Take your tablets on time” he comforted me.

I believed him. I would have believed him even if he had told that I didn't exist and was just an illusion.

### **June 21st Saturday:**

The drive in my Bajaj Crux through the vacant roads of OMR on that Saturday evening was pure bliss. I was heading to the Cosmopolis mall at Thoraipakkam. From Thiruvanmayur it was just a 15 minutes ride.

I started well ahead of time at 6.15 Pm for the 7 pm show. I was not ready to risk the first half an hour of the movie. No, not for Avengers.

I was riding only in the 40s as per the doctor's advice. I saw the signal changing red at the Kandanchavadi signal and slowed down my bike to park it behind a Volkswagen. 30 seconds wait.

The signal turned green, but the vehicle in front of me , didn't move. I honked my horn, but he wouldn't budge. I pressed my horn as hard as I could. There was no response from him. I started to lose my cool. I was too close to him and couldn't move my bike either side. I looked at my watch, it was 6.20 Pm. 40 more minutes for the movie.

I honked and honked and honked again... the car slowly moved... I lost my patience and yelled an expletive at him.

I then raced past the vehicles, crossed the toll gate and reached the mall. I parked my bike at the basement in a hurry and rushed towards the lift, which closed in slow motion just before I could barge in. I pressed the second lift's button as hard as I could and waited. However it was still moving up, with no intention to come down. I decided to take the escalator and ran towards it. I took giant steps in the escalator and reached the fourth floor in five minutes.

I searched for Screen 9, found it and showed my tickets to enter in. 6.30 it should be or at the max 7, I thought.

I was startled to see the movie having started already. Bemused, I looked at

my watch. The dial smiled back at me showing, 7.30 Pm.  
My God!! Have I just lost one hour?

**July 3rd, Thursday:**

I was lying in the hospital bed with the tubes protruding from my body being connected to several machines. My ECG was running normal. I still hadn't updated my family of the debacle. I checked my watch for the date, it was the 3rd of July, my mom's birthday.

I had always been the first one to wish her on all her birth days and nothing was going to change that. I wanted to wish her immediately. I asked the nurse who was standing nearby, for my phone and she obliged.

I called to my mom and wished her a prosperous year and a great time ahead. I couldn't speak properly to her and she constantly kept asking if I was alright, if anything was bothering me and if everything was fine.

How could I tell you mom?

How could I tell you that I am losing my life...? Losing my time, inch by inch, frame by frame, hour by hour.

I somehow convinced my mom that everything was fine and cut the call. I looked all around me and felt sick. I wanted to scream, I wanted to run away, I was normal human, I was no mad man.

I slowly got up from my bed and sat.

"Don't strain yourself... Just rest and relax" the nurse intervened.

"Rest, I will" I nodded.

I looked at the sole clock in the corner. It showed 11 am.

A sudden surge of thoughts occupied my mind. It all started with the train, from losing half an hour, I started losing one hour, missed deadlines, met with accidents, almost lost my job, lost sleep, lost peace of mind and lost myself. The doctors couldn't even comprehend my problem, there was no such case in history. I was a lost case for them, just being used for experimental purpose. How could they?

All of a sudden, it pained. It felt like a migraine attack. I couldn't bear it any longer. I held my head within my hand and shrieked. I screamed aloud like hell and let out all my frustration, all of it... for one last time... for one last time.

I closed my face with my hands and sat silently on the bed. I didn't want to look at the clock.

The nurse tried to console me.

I slowly removed my hand from the face and with a grip of fear saw the

clock. It was 11.05 Am. Just five minutes had passed on. Just five minutes. I couldn't believe my eyes. My happiness knew no bound. I hugged the nurse, then removed the tubes that were stuck to my body and jumped from the bed. The nurse tried to stop me in vain.

I ran happily, like a mad man towards the doctors' room. Dr. Madhan was busy in a call and didn't notice me. I stood outside excitedly for the call to be over. I had finally recovered, Relieved of all my stress. That one final let out of frustration helped.

I am no more the man who would lose his time. I thought, when I overheard the doctor's words.

"Yes chief... The experiment is a success... The time travel pills we gave as stress control pills are working perfectly fine for him... but he is able to only travel forward in time... we are still experimenting on.." The doctor continued to talk.

Shocked, surprised and engulfed in a reign of terror, I stood frozen, when I inadvertently looked at the daily calendar in the doctor's room, which read.

**July 4th, Friday.**

Realizing that I had just lost one day..... Or time travelled, in the words of the doctor.

***RRR***

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