

The (Im)Perfect Love Story

*When flaws become the reason
to fall in love*

Sophia J



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Prologue 1

Varun, leaning against the railing, was watching a couple....

He was spending time with his friends, at a local mall, and wondered, "They look so much in love.... Will I ever find someone like that"?

He was tall and good-looking, and had a line of girls crushing after him at college, but sensed none of them was the one he was looking for....

Prologue 2

Varsha was just entering the college, when she spotted him.... One leg on the concrete bench, visor dangling from his arm, laughing over something his friend had just said.... Clement.... "When will he even notice me"?, she sighed, inwardly. She was in her first year of graduation, and in love with someone who didn't even know she existed....

She watered the tiny pots on the balcony, with a small hand-held spray can, the type that mists the plant leaves. The spraying soothed her frayed nerves.... She definitely needed soothing, she thought.

Another pointless argument with Sandeep.... He was legally her husband, but she hated linking herself with him in any way.

"Where is my life headed?", thought Varsha.

Reality had crushed her dream of Clement.... Her beloved Clem.... but her heart wouldn't give up on him....

Chapter 1

The alarm went off. Varsha managed to snooze it, and got up.

Rubbing her eyes, she pulled herself out of bed, groping for her mobile. Six-thirty five a.m.... She could hear Sandeep snoring in the next room.

She stayed in her own room, and always had, during the five years she had been married.

Marriage, she laughed derisively....

Anyway, time to head to the kitchen, to start the day....

She set up the coffee maker, put it on automode, and headed to the bathroom for a shower.

After a few minutes, she was pouring herself a steaming cup of black coffee.... feeling it's aroma seep into her head. She liked it

black, with no milk and sugar. That really hit the spot, and woke you up, she thought.

The alarm went off. Varsha managed to snooze it, and fell back asleep.

When she finally awoke, it was almost a half hour later. "Oh God, late again for college", she sighed.

Rushing to the bathroom of her hostel room, she had a quick shower, and got ready, all in fifteen minutes. She stayed at a privately owned Women's Hostel.

Nothing fancy, just the fail-proof pair of blue jeans and a light pink top, hair brushed loose, with small silver dangles, in her ears. A dash of moisturizer, some compact powder to mattify the sheen, a thin smear of eyeliner and kohl, lining her eyes, and finished with a touch of lip gloss. Ready to face the day....

She was '**Varsha Deborah Francis**', doing her first year bachelors in Business Management.

Varsha woke Sandeep, by setting the coffee cup on the glass dining table with a thud. She wouldn't enter his room....

Then back to the kitchen, to make breakfast.... Eggs and toast for Sandeep.... Cornflakes in milk, with a dash of honey, for her.

After he left for office, she did some yoga to stretch herself out. That done, she put the kitchen in order, vacuumed the living room, and finally, sat down at her table, to write.... That's what she did, she wrote stories....

The rick broke down.... Varsha had to walk the last stretch to college.

As she entered the main gate, she could hear the first bell go off. Rushing towards the stairs, she put one foot on the bottom stair, to balance her bag, books and mobile. She wanted to put it on mute, as it was against rules for mobile rings to disturb classes in the academic blocks.

Looking up, she found herself being scrutinized by the most sensual pair of brown eyes she had ever seen on a man....

They were smiling at her, and sizing her up.

Observing slightly downward, she found they were complimented by a straight aristocratic nose and wide, curved lips. It was quite a feat walking up the stairs under that steady gaze. When she finally reached the first floor, she heard the second bell go off.

"Oh, crap", she thought. Explain her late entry to that old bull dog, the HR Professor, and hear his caustic response.

She turned to face the Greek God who had been staring her down....

She found him leaning against the banister, and saw that he had smooth, nut-brown skin, was clean shaven.... the chiselled face being topped with thick, black wavy hair. She also noted that he was tall and lanky.

How did a guy look this good, wearing faded blue jeans and a drab, olive green t-shirt, she wondered?

She was jerked out of her observations by a deep baritone asking her something. She realized he was, actually, talking to her.

"Late for class"?, he repeated.

She managed to nod, and smile a bit....

Her face was flushed, she could feel it. His unwavering gaze was making her blush and nervous, all at the same time.

She finally managed to walk towards her class, and though she wanted to, somehow resisted turning back.

"I've never seen such legs on a woman", thought Varun, as the vision in jeans and top, whom he had been admiring, passed from sight. "Of course, she's pretty too", he mused....

Realizing he didn't even know who she was, he walked across to the corner, where she had turned. She was entering Class 314, he noticed.

Those classes were for the first years, he reflected....

He was "**Varun Daniel Thomas**", doing his final year bachelors' degree in Business Studies.

After Sandeep left for work, Varsha usually wrote for an hour, or so. Right now, she was penning two stories, at the same time.... She had always loved writing, but the present work was a personal catharsis....

After writing for some time, she continued with her domestic responsibilities..... Cooking, cleaning, the works.... Sandeep would allow only a part-time maid, for mopping.

Varsha was staring out of the kitchen window.... She was thinking of another part of her life, when she was in college, doing her graduation. Friends, classes, canteen trips.... and Clement.

'Clement Bryan Sanderson'..... He was in his final year graduation, in Commerce.

He was so good looking, she remembered....

At first, she had only admired him from afar, but after they had been introduced, he was nice to her.... In fact, he had been more than nice, and that's where the problems started.

Clement was, at that time, dating someone else.... Cheryl Clifford, in her second year, while Varsha was in the first year.

She was **'Varsha Sophia Symonds'**.

Varun turned back from the corner, and bang.... There was his Professor coming.

"Morning, Sir", he wished him.

The Professor was no amateur. He had seen hundreds of guys this age. He assumed Varun was checking out some girl. He smiled, and wished him back.

"What are you doing outside, Varun"?, he chided. "Don't you know you have to be in the class before the second bell, or my entry, whichever is earlier"?

"Ah, yes sir", he replied. "Sorry about it".

He managed to enter the class ahead of the Professor, and winked at his close friend, Mahesh, as he settled down.

"You fucker, where were you"?, asked Mahesh.

"Long story, tell you later..... Prof caught me late, dude".

"Serves you right", replied his friend.

Break time found Varun describing his morning adventure to Mahesh....

"Oh, man, I haven't seen such legs on a girl", he sighed. He grabbed his mobile, and went to investigate the source of his excitement.

Mahesh caught up with him, "Where the fuck will you start searching"?

Varun replied, "I know the class, da. Room 314".

"Hey, that's my sis's class", informed Mahesh.

"Really? Call Haritha right now.... Ask her to meet us outside 314".

When Haritha came out, in response to her brother's call, she found Varun with him.

"Hi, long time", she greeted him.

"Hey, Haritha.... Do me a favour", he said, "I want to find a kid in your class".

"Kid"? she asked. "I mean a girl, da" he corrected her.

"Who"?.... "I don't know her name, man", he replied, looking around.

"Ya, all he knows is that she's got great legs", laughed Mahesh.

"Oh, oh.... Check out every girl's legs", teased Haritha.

"Hey, cut it out, both of you", he admonished. "I'm serious.... For God's sake, help me find her".

"So, how does she look"?, probed Haritha.

"Hmm.... Pretty", pat came the answer.

"Haa Can we do better than that.... As in, what was she wearing"?

"Like you noticed her clothes, you fucker", joked Mahesh.

"I did, damn you", grinned Varun. "Wait a moment, let me recollect.... Yep, blue three-fourth length jeans, some kind of strappy sandals, and a light pink top".

"Hey, that's Varsha, my bestie", exclaimed Haritha.

"Really? Now, that's what I call good luck", he laughed.

"You better confirm it", she suggested. "Look at the farthest end from the door, second row".

Varun did, and came back grinning, "Yep, it's her".

"So, what do you want me to do"?, she asked.

"Tell her that the guy she saw in the morning, on the stairs, would like to meet her. If she's ok with it.... Give me her number, and I'll call her after classes", he concluded.

"Ok, done", replied Haritha, going into her class.

When she related all this to Varsha, she was pleasantly surprised. "I never thought he would be your brother's friend", she said.

"Haritha, what kind of a guy is he? I mean, is it alright to give my number"?

"Oh, not to worry about that. I've known him for years.... He and my bro have been classmates since third grade. He's very nice, as guys go. Anyway, you can trust him".

"With his looks, he must be having lots of girlfriends", mused Varsha, out loud.

"Ya, ya.... He's got a long female fan following in college, but apparently, he's not interested. Mahi says he's not into casual dating".

"Ok, then, give him my number", she said.

"You better take down his number too, so you would know who's calling", replied Haritha.

Chapter 2

Varsha sighed, settling down on one of the dining table chairs....

Her back ached slightly, with the handling of the vacuum cleaner to mop and dust.

She grimaced, thinking of the argument she had had with Sandeep, when she suggested buying it.

He wanted her to mop and dust the traditional way. Like his mother, she thought sarcastically..... Even otherwise, he always compared her abilities to that of his mother, and found her wanting.

"Not that I care", she thought.

The maid did the daily wet mopping, but she behaved practically like a member of the Mafia.... which I suppose she is, sighed Varsha. Also, she worked by the clock. Not a minute less or

more. So, the vacuum cleaner had to be used, at least twice a week. Anyway, it was a wonder machine....

If she also had a dishwasher, she could probably dictate more terms, to the 'Mafia Maid'.

"Hmm, another argument is pending with Sandeep, regarding the dishwasher", she mused. She had to keep her points ready....

"Get battle-ready", she thought, laughing mirthlessly.

"How did I get myself into this situation"?, she asked herself, for the thousandth time.

"Because, you couldn't oppose mom and dad", said an inner voice.

"No", she corrected it, "because I lost my Clem"....

She wore a beautiful platinum and diamond band on her left ring finger.... In fact, it was the only piece of jewellery she possessed....

Her parents and in-laws had requested her, repeatedly, to remove it, but unusually, in this case, she had asserted herself.

The ring was put by Clement. She refused to part with it....

They had been spending time at a mall, when one of his school friends had run into them. While making the introductions, he had simply said, 'my fiance'.... She was surprised, and had asked him why. They had been dating for a month or so, but she was still surprised.

He had just smiled and replied, "coz, I'm going to marry you, babe"....

A couple of days later, he had put the ring on her, saying it was a commitment from him....

"When I'm not with you.... This ring will take my place", he had stated, kissing her hand.

Little did he know how prophetic his words were....

She had blushed.... becoming a little emotional over it.

"I don't think my parents will react favourably, Clem", she told him.

"Are you ok with marrying me, sweetheart"?, he asked.

"Of course", she replied.

"Then don't worry about anything else", he said. "If you don't want it, no force on Earth can take you away from me".

Little did he realize, that life was about to do just that....

Varsha found her eyes wet with tears.... as she came back to the present, hearing the doorbell ringing.

Anyway, she had managed to keep the ring on her finger, returning the gold band Sandeep had put on during the wedding. She refused to defile the wedding band....

The ring was the only physical thing she had from Clement.... A throwback to the time when she had really loved someone.

Varsha had just entered her hostel room, when her phone rang.

She had saved Varun's number, so seeing his name on the screen, she hesitatingly picked it up. Not that she didn't want to talk to him... she was just nervous, wondering what to say....

She was not used to talking to guys, and didn't have any smart answers ready.

Anyway, picking up the call, she said demurely, "Hi"

"Varsha"?, came a deep baritone, down the line.

"Ya", she replied.

"Hi, this is Varun", he introduced himself.

Silence followed.... She really didn't know what to say. "Huh, ya", she murmured.

"I would like to meet you. I understand you stay at a hostel close to college".

"That's right", she replied...

"So, will you come here, or".....?

"Yes, I'll be there..... maybe by six"?, he asked.

"Fine", she said.

"Ok, see you around at six. Bye". The connection clicked.

She had butterflies in her stomach.... What a voice, she thought. Even his voice is sexy, not enough he looks like a Greek God.

Varun had got the address of the hostel from Haritha....

Going in to shower and change.... He was a bit nervous too, but when he really wanted something, he went after it, and didn't have too many doubts on the way.

"So, what do I wear"?, she asked herself.

The eternal dilemma of every young woman going on a date, or meeting a guy for the first time, she thought.

"Jeans? Skirt? Salwar? What to wear"..... she racked her brains. Finally, she decided to stick to a jean and top.

"Safe bet", she mused. "He saw me in that the first time, and obviously liked what he saw"....

"That's why we're meeting at six, dumb", she told herself.

It was almost six.... "How did it go from five to six, so fast"?, she sighed.

She was still ironing out some creases, from her top.

"Quickly put it on.... then brush your hair..... Where are those little silver drops, for God's sake? Lipstick? No, lip-gloss, that's more subtle.... Dab on some moisturizer, a wee bit of foundation, and pat it all down with some loose powder".

"Do I look made-up?.... No, it's ok".

"Jesus.... I'm reduced to talking to myself", she thought, wryly. If this was the effect of a first date, would it get better or worse with time?

No time to muse on that, as her phone buzzed. It was Varun, five minutes past six.

"Hi.... I'm waiting opposite your hostel", he said, in the same deep and sexy voice. His voice.... She needed some getting used to it.

"Ya, Varun.... I'll be down in five minutes", she replied.

Last second.... Spray on a bit of perfume, brush your hair again.... and out of the room.

As she came out, she spotted him on the opposite side of the road, sitting on his bike.

"How does he manage to look this good every time"?, she thought, "or maybe I'm biased".

But she was not wholly biased.... Varun was very good looking. He had the looks most girls dreamt of, and saw described in romance fiction novels.... Tall, dark and handsome....

Blue jeans fitting snugly on his legs, a pale yellow T-shirt with the collar up, black wavy hair, slightly wet with hair gel.... Aviators folded into his shirt opening, a steel-strapped chronograph on his left wrist and a mobile in his right.

"He's busy on the phone", she observed.

She hesitatingly said, "Hi"....

He looked up, smiled warmly and replied, "Hi.... Sorry, I was just logging into my workplace software".

He worked part-time, after college, at a financial Broking and Consulting firm. It was a start-up, and picking up well. They were mainly involved in wealth creation and management for their clients.... by trading shares, among other financial tools, on the stock markets.

Today, he had taken a day off to meet Varsha. Even so, the software kept the trading on, so that clients wouldn't lose out on any market gains.

The way he was looking at her, made her blush.... getting more butterflies in her tummy....

"So"?, he was still smiling, with his eyes....

"Tell me".... she trailed off.

"Hungry"?, he asked, and she said, "Not really"....

"Shall we just take a walk, or find a place to chow"?, he asked.

"Sure, there's a Mac's on this road", she informed him.

"Ok, I'll just park my bike".

They had to cross the road to get to Mac's.... The traffic was heavy at that time. As they found a gap, sprinting across, he caught and held her right hand, in his left.... as though it was the most natural thing to do.

After crossing, she didn't know whether to pull her hand away, or just leave it in his, warmly enveloped. She looked up at him, smiling.... He took the dilemma out of her hands, literally and metaphorically.... by giving a squeeze and entwining his fingers through hers.

She felt a pang in the pit of her stomach.... knowing her face had flushed.

What she didn't know was that he was as much affected as her by the simple act of holding her hand....

"So soft", he thought, and as he tightened his grip, felt his groin tightening.

"God, what an effect she has on me", he sighed, inwardly.

They spent more than an hour at Mac's, getting to know each other slowly.... asking questions, getting answers.... both of them not remembering half of what they heard later on, as the sensation of fingers intertwining with each other was way more powerful than any verbal phrase.

Time flew as they spoke.... In no time, it was eight thirty on the diner's clock.

"Shall we make a move, Varun"?, she asked. "My hostel has a time limit of around nine in the evening. Auntie is pretty strict about it, give or take fifteen minutes".

"Sure, we'll leave", he smiled.

What he actually wanted to say was, "Why can't we just talk the night away"?.... Then thought, "That's what mobiles are for".

As they walked the too-short distance from Mac's to her hostel, he continued to hold her hand.

"Why can't we just walk or sit like this the whole night"?, she thought.

As they approached her hostel, he tightened his grip slightly, looking down at her. She smiled, or rather, blushed.

"Ok, so.... good night"?, she said....

"What else to do"?, he replied, asking, "Can I call you after a while"?

"Sure"....

"Ok then, I'll just go home and call you".

"Bye".... She reluctantly detwined her fingers from his, but he still held on....

Smiling through half-closed eyes, he gave her a slight wink, and squeezed her fingers, finally letting go.... She turned, almost ramming into the watchman.

"Sorry, uncle", she muttered, and dashed inside.

By the time she reached her second floor room, she was panting slightly.

Varun reached home, settled on his bike, and called her. They continued talking.... sensible, senseless things.... An hour passed like that.

Suddenly, his mother opened the door, and seeing him.... asked, "Dan, what is this? Why aren't you coming in? Who are you talking to"?

"Coming, ma", he replied.

To Varsha, he stated in a low voice, "I'll text you, sweetheart".

"Ok.... I understand", she said, her heart missing a beat, hearing the endearment.... He makes it all look and sound so natural, she mused.

The connection clicked.... She reluctantly got up to change into her nightwear, and lock the room door. She opened one window, to let in some fresh air, settling down to sleep.

As though she would get any sleep, she sighed.

Too many things to think about.... New plans, hopes, dreams.... Her eyes were almost closing, when her mobile gave the text notification.

It was a whatsapp text from him.... "Good night, babe".

She was thrilled, replying, "Good night, Varun".

She was tempted to use an endearment too, but hesitated at the last moment. "Whatever will he think of me? Too fast? No, better not yet"....

Varun didn't have any such hang-ups. He fired straight on. He didn't believe in casual dating or flirting, but when he fell.... he fell hard.

His last thought, as he drifted off to sleep that night, was, "When will I get to kiss her"?....

Varsha was also thinking something along those lines. "What would it feel like, to be in his arms"?.....

Chapter 3

V arsha continued to twirl the ring on her finger....

That unforgettable Thursday, she thought.

It was the Commerce Department farewell party, for the final years in college, a fairly grand affair. That would be followed, two days later, by the College farewell.... even grander.

Clement had asked her to wait with Halle and her friends. He had said he would come a little late.

He worked part-time, after college, in the evenings.... He said he had to go to his office.

By then, they had become quite close, though not officially dating.... but Cheryl, his regular date, had still not accepted the fact that he wanted out of the relationship, in spite of him having told her clearly. So, he wanted to make his choice public.... hoping, at least then she would get the point.

He came, as promised.... Walking over to where Varsha was seated with her friends.

Cheryl was also with her gang, just to their left, and staring at them with a piercing look. He purposefully spoke to one of Cheryl's friends, drawing the whole group's attention....

As it is, a lot of girls noticed him as he walked over.... He always drew admiration with his looks and confidence.

He greeted her friends.... Then, to Varsha's surprise, caught her right hand in his left.... simply walking out with her in tow.... He wouldn't let go of her hand till they exited the grounds, and college.

She had the feeling everyone was staring at them.... She kept her head slightly bowed....

Clement had made his intentions clear to everyone.... though he was mainly targeting Cheryl.

He might as well have announced it on the stage, she thought.

Later that evening, he took her out to dinner. She didn't know how to react....

Although he was as caring and thoughtful, she wasn't sure whether he was as much in love with her, as she was with him.... or whether he had walked out with her just to get rid of Cheryl.

"Oh, stop this negativity", she admonished herself, thinking, "Any other girl would be over the moon, to be with him.... Why am I still insecure"?

After dinner, he took her back to her hostel.... Stopping the bike at a small side road, to the right of her place, where there were no houses, just some empty land.

She stayed at a small and elegant apartment building that had been converted into a Ladies Hostel.

He was sitting on the bike, and she was standing next to him.... He was caressing her hand and fingers.

Sensing something was amiss, he asked, "What's the matter, sweetheart? From now, you're only mine.... I wanted to make it clear to everyone, especially Cheryl".

She questioned, "Are you sure about me, Clem? Is it just a reaction to Cheryl, or".... her voice trailed off.

"Of course I'm serious about you.... Why do you have so many doubts"?

"Because, I won't be able to take it, if I lose you", she said, her voice breaking.... eyes welling up.

"I really wish I'd met you earlier", he said.

"Earlier than what"?, she asked.

"Before I got involved with Cheryl", he admitted.... "But now, I've put that behind me.... making our relationship official".

For the life of her, she didn't know what happened in the next few moments....

Did she finally give into the longing for him?

Did he lose his control, which he usually didn't?

They were on a public road, although isolated....

The end result was that he pulled her into his arms, and started kissing her.... In that semi dark, cul-de-sac of a road.

It wasn't a brief kiss.... It was full on, his lips prising her mouth open, his tongue probing inside.... When he finally lifted his lips from hers, for a moment, he murmured, hoarsely, "Babe"..... and then, "I need you, sweetheart".... She also murmured, softly, "Clem, darling"....

The sound of a horn, blaring somewhere, jerked them out of their passionate embrace....

She was too embarrassed to look at him, and quickly saying, "Good night, Clem", ran back to her hostel.

She heard him call, "Varsha, wait", but she didn't stop, and didn't turn back.

"Whatever will he think of me"?, she wondered....

"What a kiss", said an inner voice.

Clement called a little later.... They spoke briefly....

She was so happy that night, but the next day, she again started having doubts... thinking, Excellency's it now. Cheryl won't give up, and Clem's job will suffer because of my involvement".

He called several times after that, though she didn't answer....

Finally, on the Friday of that week, he came to her hostel, and, had her called out. She didn't know who it was.... She came out in a casual top and slacks, her hair pulled up in a ponytail.

She was stunned to see Clement, waiting just inside the gate, looking as handsome as ever.... though he wasn't looking too pleased.

Their eyes met. She quickly looked away, so that he couldn't see them welling up....

He came up to her, asking, "Why are you doing this, Varsha"?

"It's not going to work out, Clem"..... she answered. He sensed the emotions behind her voice and eyes.

"Give me a chance, babe", he replied in a low, harsh voice, strained from keeping his frustration in check.

He added, "Just come out with me.... please. I haven't ever waited for anyone else like this".

Her eyes were darkening with emotions again, and he persisted, "Come on, babe.... Don't do this to me".

She was weakening, he sensed it....

"Ok.... I'll just change and come", she replied.

He thought she might go up to her room, and not come back.

But ten minutes later, she came down.... Dressed in another top and jeans, her hair brushed and clipped. She had also applied

some moisturizer, lined her eyes with kohl, and her lips with some lip balm....

She thought she looked worn out and tired....

He was thinking, "Jesus..... She looks so beautiful".

They went to a nearby diner, ordering some eats.

Clement caught her hand in his, stroking her fingers....

The fact that she didn't pull away seemed like a positive sign to him, and he asked, "What happened, sweetie? Why did you suddenly start avoiding me? What more should I do, to convince you of my intentions"?

She didn't answer, just tightened her fingers on his.

He reminded her, "We spoke about this. I told you, I need some time to sort it out with Cheryl. It's sorted now.... so, what's the problem"?

"But she's not going to leave you alone, Clem", she stated.

He loved the way she said 'Clem'.... It sounded so special, although almost everyone who was a little close called him the same.

"Sweetheart, please.... Trust me.... I'll handle her, if she makes any more trouble", he said.

He was looking at her, his deep brown eyes pleading for her understanding.

"Why can't we be together"?, he continued.

"Because, Cheryl and Lenny won't allow it. She will somehow get back in you life, and what then"?, she asked, "You'll go out with both of us, or dump me"?

She was purposefully being harsh....

"Better for him", she thought.... It was breaking her heart to say it, she just wanted to die then.

Unconsciously, her eyes mirrored her feelings.... He understood what she was trying to do.... Make things easier for him, or so she thought.

"Varsha, do you have any real feelings for me at all"?, he asked, in a firm voice.

She was taken aback, but managed to answer, "Too many.... You know how I feel.... That's the problem. If I lose you, I won't be able to take it".

He was genuinely touched by her answer, and the emotion in her eyes....

"You won't, darling", he replied, hoarsely.

His eyes softened, lingering on her.... She felt her face changing colours, hearing the endearment, and the way he was looking at her....

Eventually, he convinced her to give him a chance. She agreed, and they started meeting regularly.

Those were the most beautiful three months of her young life.

"Wasn't that a beautiful time"?, she thought, still twirling the platinum band.

Then she remembered how those three months ended....

Sweating and white to the face, she jumped up from the dining chair.

She made her way, a little unsteadily, to the kitchen sink, splashing cold water on her face, repeatedly. Even after all these years, thinking of that Saturday gave her a dizzy feeling.

"Clem, why did all that happen"?, she asked herself. "Why did you leave me, after all"?....

There were a hundred answers, and ultimately, none....

Looking in her bedroom mirror, she found her face wet with water, and, her own tears.

Chapter 4

Varun called up the next day, insisting they meet for lunch.

Varsha agreed, although she thought the relationship was progressing frighteningly fast. But the sound of his sexy voice, trying to convince her.... broke her already-weak resolve.

They had lunch at a small restaurant that served some really authentic Chinese food. That, however, was just a bonus....

What mattered was that they were together, behaving like any young couple.... on the verge of falling in love, yet not wholly sure of themselves.

Varun slowly elicited facts about her family. They lived in her hometown, and had reluctantly sent her here to study. She had never been away from them.

She stated that her dad was very strict, although her mother was understanding.... more of a friend. She had a younger sister,

studying in the ninth grade, the same age as Varun's sister, Sonia.

He also had a younger brother, Mark, studying in their college.... He was majoring in Math and Statistics.

"How does he look"?, she asked.

"Slightly shorter than me, although the same looks and build", he replied.

"So, two Greek Gods in one college", she teased.

He grinned, but was secretly flattered that she found him attractive. On his part.... He couldn't seem to keep his eyes or hands off her. Pity this was a diner, he thought.

They spent almost two hours there, only leaving when the Head waiter started staring uncomfortably at them.

Spending time with each other.... holding hands, gazing into each other's eyes, going on long bike rides.... It all continued into the weekend.

It was not what they did that mattered.... In all those time-tested ways of romancing, two hearts forged, or rather, started forging a bond that would hold them together, in the future, against all odds.

They spoke of a hundred things.... Discovered that their second names were Daniel and Deborah, respectively.... soon deciding that 'Dan' and 'Deb' were more intimate and romantic compared to Varun and Varsha.

They spent a couple of hours watching a movie neither of them remembered.... They shared their first kiss in the darkened movie hall.

It was all so new, for Varsha.... "My first kiss", she thought, dreamily.

For Varun, it was not his first..... but it was the first time he was so moved, physically and emotionally.

Physically, he felt everything a typical twenty three year old guy would feel on kissing the girl he had fallen for.

Emotionally, his feelings were a surprise.... He wanted to keep her in his arms forever, and not just sexually. That was a first, he thought wryly.

These protective feelings.... Wanting to make her happy, wanting to laugh with her, maybe even share some of his inner thoughts.....

Dude, you're falling in love, warned an inner voice.

Varsha was also feeling light-headed. She was physically stirred.... you couldn't help it, she reflected. He was just too good looking, plus charming, witty and intelligent.

But just like Varun, she too was touched emotionally. She just wanted to be with him..... know everything about him, wanted to make him happy....

Am I falling in love, she asked herself?

They finished the movie, and he dropped her back. As she was getting off the bike, he caught her hand, squeezing it. She smiled, blew him a kiss, slowly pulling her hand away.

As he watched her crossing the road, he wanted to stop her. He wanted to say something more.... wanted one more kiss, wanted to drown in her eyes, once more....

It all remained unsaid. As she went inside, waving to him.... He revved his bike, riding off in the opposite direction.

When he reached home, his mother asked, "Do you even live here anymore, Dan"?

His mom was the only one who called him Dan, and now, Varsha too.... or rather, Deb, he thought.

"Sorry, ma", he said, giving her a hug.

"Love you", he added, as he walked into his room.

"Ya, do all the nonsense, and balance it out with one, "Love you, ma", she replied.

"Mark, where does he go all the time"?, she questioned her younger son, who was watching the telly....

"Aw, must have gone to hang out with his gang.... or he's found himself a girlfriend", he assessed, rightly so.

"You both are the limits", she said.

"Ma, when do we do all this, if not now.... when we're sixty"?, asked Mark.

"Yep bro, you're absolutely right", added Varun, as he came into the living room, in an old t-shirt and shorts.

"Do you want any dinner"?, asked his mother. "We've all eaten. Your dad's pretty angry that you missed dinner time".

"He's jobless", stated Varun. "Give me something light"....

As she went into the kitchen to fix him something, he asked his brother, "Where's the magpie"?

Mark replied, "She talked so much, she got tired and went to sleep". They both laughed, referring to their younger sister.

"Dude, dad was pissed off with you today", informed Mark.

"When isn't he"?, replied Varun.

"So, where the fuck were you"?, probed his brother.

"Shh.... Mom's coming. Tell you later.... State secret, ok bro? Keep it to yourself".

"Naw, I'll fucking advertise it", joked back Mark.

"Fucker, shut up and watch TV", smiled Varun.

But behind all the banter, they were very close.... as brothers, and friends....

Chapter 5

It's been seven years, thought Varsha.

Sevhe would ever meet Clement again.

She didn't even know where he was, how he managed these intervening years, nothing....

The last she had seen of him was being hit by that punk, Lenny, who was Cheryl's brother.... In the semi-darkened basement of that hotel parking lot. They had gone for dinner that evening, and his bike was parked there.

He was bleeding, but still managed to yell, "Soph, get into the lift and push any floor button. Get outta here".

She was too shocked and terrified to move, but he continued to shout, "Babe, get out of here".

It finally galvanized her into action, doing as he asked. The next she knew.... She had got out on the fourth floor, and not knowing what to do next, was standing helplessly, in the corridor. That was when her mobile rang.... It was Clement. Thank God! she thought, answering quickly.

"Clem, what happened? Are you ok"?.... the words tumbled out of her.

"Soph, listen to me.... things have got out of hand. I hit that guy back. I think he's badly injured. I don't know what's going to happen.... Just get to your room.... I'll be in touch", he concluded.

"Will you get into trouble with the law"?, she asked.

"I might", he replied.

Clement knew the law would be there, any minute, and not just for assault.... Lenny had said he'd busted him, as he fell unconscious. He didn't tell Varsha that.

"Whatever happens.... Just remember that I love you more than anything else in this world", he said, in a slightly hoarse voice.

There was the sound of a police siren, and the call ended.

She held onto what he had said, in the following days and weeks.... but had no idea how long fate and time would actually hold them ransom to that declaration.

The fortnight following that evening had been a nightmare, she thought. So many stories, she wasn't sure which one to believe, which not to....

Cheryl had come to her hostel, shouting obscenities....

"You stupid bitch, the whole thing happened because of you. You couldn't keep your fucking hands off Clem, isn't it"?

Varsha flushed.... "You were the one who was irritating him. That's why he broke up with you. You couldn't accept the fact that he didn't want you anymore".

"Shut up", screeched Cheryl....

"Ok, leave it.... Could you please tell me what happened to him"?, she asked.

"He's been arrested for assaulting my brother. What else do you want to know, you slut"?, she screamed.

Varsha had had enough.... She ran back to her room, before anyone else heard them.

His close friends.... Deepak, George and Sandra, tried to help, by giving her whatever information they were able to get, although the result was chaotic.

Then, the ultimate happened.... The police contacted her father. They wanted to question her about Clement. Her dad blew his top, literally dragging her home from the hostel.

They didn't know Clement, or for that matter, Varsha. They just saw that her name was one of the most dialled numbers on his cellphone, and traced her home address.

They also questioned his brother, close friends and colleagues..whose ever numbers were dialled frequently on his

mobile. If it was a simple case of assault on Lenny, they wouldn't have gone to so much trouble..... but it went beyond that.

The police came to her home, and some other plain-clothes men too..... They informed her father they were from the Narcotics Bureau.

Clement was involved in drug trafficking, they claimed.

Her father slapped her after they left....

"Whom have you got involved with, Varsha"?, he shouted.

She had no reply.... She only knew that he was involved in some 'borderline illegal stuff'.... those were the words he had used, when she first voiced her suspicions.

They came again, especially the men in plain-clothes.... They asked her a lot of questions about Clement, but she really didn't have any answers.

"I don't know the details, sir", she confessed to the officers.

"He was working part-time for a logistics firm, and said he was aware of some illegal stuff.... He never told me anything beyond that".

They had been together only for three months.... He purposefully told her very few details of his work, probably anticipating some such scenario in the future.

When she tried to probe once, he had replied, "It's a dirty world out there, sweetheart..... You stay out of it. What you don't know,

they can't make you say". She didn't understand the true significance of that statement, then.... Now, she realized.

He didn't want her to know, so that they couldn't get anything from her....

He was not the type to talk a lot.... She had sensed that, even during the brief period they had been together. He had been a wonderful boyfriend and partner, though, she remembered.

The other thing she knew was that the whole thing was tied in with Cheryl's brother, Lenny.

"He wanted to get us out", she mused, but fate didn't give him a chance....

"I want to take you and leave this place, Soph", he used to say.

He called her Varsha initially, but after they had started going out, she had suggested he call her Soph.... short for Sophia, her second name. He liked it too... shorter, and more intimate.

His second name was Bryan.... but to her, he was always, just.... Clem.

Varsha's thoughts abruptly ended, hearing the doorbell ringing.

"Sandeep".... she thought, "What's in store today"?

She dreaded the arguments that were becoming a daily affair with him. There was no one, to even mediate....

His parents stayed on the ground floor, while they lived on the first. He had a brother, Santhosh, who lived on the second floor. His parents were weird, to put it mildly. One floor, for each son.

As he came in, she realized he was slightly drunk. That was a rarity, as he didn't usually drink during the week.

She was scared, but didn't reveal it. She simply gave him a steady look, asking, "Do you want dinner"?

He gave her a sardonic smile, replying, "Always so dutiful, isn't it Varsha? Don't you have any feelings, or you're just a robot"?

He continued taunting her, "It's always about doing your duties and retreating into your fantasy world, isn't it"?

"What else do you want me to do? My role is only cooking, cleaning and maintaining the house. I have put up with it, all these years, because I had no options.... but now, I have started to have them, and might change my mind".

"What's that supposed to mean"?, he asked.

"Just how it sounds", she replied. "We're both stuck in a forced marriage.... I'm at least being graceful about it".

"But I don't want it to be like that", he shouted back, then lowered his voice, realizing he might awaken his parents.

"Why can't we live a normal life"?, he questioned.

"Because, I don't feel how a wife should", she said, adding, "Remember, you also didn't want anything to do with me, for the

first two years, as you were involved with Renee. Now that you've broken up with her, I'm supposed to fall into your arms"?

"Suppose I had not been involved with Renee, and wanted a typical life with you, right from the start, what would you have done"?, he asked.... "Tell me, I really want to know".

"I wouldn't be alive to have this conversation", she snapped back.

"Oh, like that"?, he sneered.... "Ya ya, I forgot, you've always been in love with Clement. Still moaning over him"?

"Don't you dare talk about him", she raised her voice.

In a rare show of anger, she dumped the food she was assembling, storming into her room.... closing and locking it.

"Lock your room after you get in, sweetheart", she remembered Clem's words... though he had referred to her hostel room. He was scared that Cheryl would try and harm her.

Sandeep, sulking in the living room, wanted to taunt her more.... but then, thought better of it. He was a bit drunk, and if it escalated into a full-fledged fight, his parents would come to know of it.

He was frustrated, but it was his own fault. When he had married her, he didn't want anything to do with her, as he himself was involved with Renee.

Renee's parents had got her married elsewhere, but he didn't have the guts to oppose either her or his parents.

He had convinced Renee to continue their relationship.... Eventually, he had been hoping for a life with her, though he wasn't clear how he was going to go about it. But after two years of living a double life, she decided to break up with him, and make a life with her husband.

Sandeep was shattered, but had little choice. He had to accept Renee's decision, and get on with his life.

Varsha had confessed her love for Clement, in the initial days.... He was ok with it, at that time, but post his break up with Renee, he wanted a normal life.... though then, she wouldn't oblige. She was still waiting for that guy to rescue her, he reflected.

"Aw, whatever", he thought. He even considered divorce, but was worried how his parents would react. They were very conservative.

Meanwhile, Varsha once again cried herself to sleep. Her last thoughts, before sleep overtook her, were, "Why, Clem? Why did you leave me alone? Where are you"?

Chapter 6

Clement was just settling down, in his apartment living room.

It had been a long, hard day, he thought.

He was far away from Varsha.... settled now in a far-off Islamic Kingdom, on the personal staff of the Prince.... 'The Ruler', also known as 'The Governor', of that province of the Kingdom.

He was ostensibly in the Human Resources Department of the country's biggest Oil Company, although, his true designation was that of 'Trouble-shooter'.... It was a broad umbrella, under which various activities could be taken care of.

Given his record, he had just been grateful things had fallen into place.

Initially, he had been asked to work with the Company's Trouble-shooting Team.... They were essentially involved in espionage, both industrial and political, mainly linked to the Oil

Company.... which was the main source of economy for the country.

However, about a year after he joined, he ended up foiling an attempt on the Prince's life, as part of a terrorist operation.... Since then, His Majesty had him transferred to his Personal Surveillance Team. In fact, he headed it.

It was a small and tightly-operating unit, taking care of His Royal Highness's personal safety.

He had been here, for the past two and a half years....

Five years prior to that, he had served time, for his alleged involvement in drug trafficking.

He had not been totally innocent.... but had been framed for graver charges, by that punk, Lenny.... as a vengeance against him, for choosing Varsha over his sister.

Varsha.... or as he always remembered her, Soph....

"Where are you, sweetheart? Why did you go away? Why did you get married to someone else"?

He had learnt of her marriage, when his brother, Vincent, informed him. He had completed serving two years, then. Though he knew deep down that she must have been forced into it, it still hurt....

"You were only mine, Soph. How could you bring yourself to live with someone else"?, he asked himself, for the hundredth time.

Sighing, he lit a cigarette, and thought back to those days....

Clement was in his final year of graduation, in Commerce.... Cheryl, in the second year, and Varsha, in the first.

He remembered the first time he had seen her.... He was killing time with his friends.... a rarity for him, as he was usually busy with college stuff.

Also, he worked part-time at a logistics company that specialized in the movement of consumer goods and supplies.

It was a franchise, owned by a businessman, being managed by three of them. Harsha was the full-time guy, in charge of the office. He and Cherith worked part-time.... Cherith did mornings, while he did evenings. He worked from five to eleven p.m., and even longer, when required.

Joking with Deepak, one of his gang, he turned around.... to find himself the scrutiny of a pair of shy black eyes.... beautiful eyes, he thought.... with a hint of shyness; also a hint of mischief. It was lined with black eye liner or kajal, or whatever they call it, being complemented by a delicate face with high cheekbones.

Observing further, he found she had a petite, but nevertheless, shapely figure. She was wearing skin-fitting jeans and a top that outlined her curves. He also noticed that she had long and thick hair, left loose.

He gave her a half-smile.... She smiled back, shyly. As she was turning the corner with her friends, she looked back....

That look, and the girl, stayed on his mind the whole day.... and surprisingly, on and off, the whole week.

He kept reminding himself that he was dating Cheryl; though it wasn't anything serious, for whatever it was worth, she was his girlfriend. Anyway, she made sure everyone knew about it.... She was insecure. She didn't want any other girl getting close to him.

For Clement, she was not just his regular date.... She was a form of insurance, against some of the activities he was involved in.

Her brother was a drug addict, and also, a mid-level courier....

Some packages went through his office supplies. His boss knew about it, turning a blind eye, as he was being compensated well. Harsha and Cherith also knew, being involved to some degree.... actively or passively. All of them, including Clement, got their commissions.

Clement, however, was a little more involved. He knew the networks, through Cheryl's brother, Lenny and his friend, Darryl.

As Cheryl was romantically attached to him, Lenny kept him in the loop for couriers; also protected him from the law, due to his connections with the Informers network.

He was aware that he was playing with fire, but the commissions were good.... and for Clement, making money was a priority.

He had grown up in a middle class family, with very few luxuries.... early on, was determined to make enough, to help his mom, in her struggle to run their house, and also, have a better life for himself.

He knew the law regarding trafficking of drugs.... He was taking a calculated risk, he thought. He made sure he was involved only in small consignments, not the ones with commercial quantities that attracted more severe penalties, if ever caught.

Not that any penalty, in this line, was lenient....

But that was Clement's nature.... He was not afraid to take chances, and he took them.

Nobody in his circle knew about this part of his life, except his brother, Vincent, or Vinny.

Somebody close had to know, he reckoned, in case he ever got caught....

He was tall, dark and very good looking, although slightly rough to be considered classically handsome. There were lots of girls waiting for his attentions.... both in college, and outside.

But he was not really interested these days. He used to have fun dating, in the past years. Off late.... His job, the couriers and Cheryl had kind of dampened it.

The job and the couriers were his choice, he mused.... but Cheryl had been forced on him by Lenny.

He was reaching the end of his patience with her behaviour and attitude.

He was staring off into space, only jerking out of his reverie when his friends started ragging him.

"Day-dreaming, Clem"?, joked Deepak. "Oh, bull", he said, "I was just thinking of my office".

"Ya, ya, we know"..... laughed Deepak and George, his pals.

Deepak added, "but he still got enough time to check out that cute kid"....

"Who, what"?, George was all ears....

"Just now, da", explained Deepak, "A group of girls went by, and our man was checking out one of them.... not to miss the looks she was giving him".

"Cut the crap, guys", he said. But he couldn't stop thinking of her beautiful eyes and long hair....

The next week.... As the first class of the day was yet to start, he was talking to one of his classmates, Sandra. They went back a long way.... friends from school days. She was a no-nonsense girl, who was equally close to both the girls and guys. She was practically part of their gang.... Deepak, George, Akash and himself.

She was arranging some of her stuff.... He suddenly noticed that one of her term assignments were complete.

"Fuck, how did you finish it so fast"?, he asked.

She smiled conspiratorally..... "I got some help, but don't tell anyone".

"From whom"?, he questioned.

"There's this kid in the first year, my cousin Halle's bestie.... She volunteered to do it, when I was grumbling that I'm dying with so many to complete", finished Sandra.

"Really.... who's this kind-hearted soul"?, he enquired.

"Well, her name's Varsha Symonds".

"Varsha Symonds", he mused. "Nice name"....

"Hey, when do I get to meet her"?, he continued.

"Why do you want to meet her"?, she laughed.

"Thought I'll charm her into doing my assignments too", he joked back.

"You may not have to put a lot of effort for that", answered Sandra, "She's supposed to have a major crush on you.... Halle said so.... I believe she saw you at the 'Talents Day' fashion show, and since, fell flat".

Clement raised his eyebrows, giving her a skeptical smile. "A likely story", he said.

"Seriously da, the other day, we were at the canteen.... I mentioned your name, in some context, and you should have seen her reaction.... She blushed, just hearing your name".

"Poor thing.... leave her alone", he replied. "Anyways.... give me an intro, sometime".

"Why? Cheryl not good enough"?, she teased.

"Shut up, Sandy", he admonished.

"But you are getting a little tired of her, aren't you, Clem"?, she prodded.

"I don't know, da.... I don't even know what I'm doing with her, anymore", he sighed.

"So, get out of it", she suggested, "She's anyways no good".

"That's not so easy", he replied.

The same afternoon, he and Deepak had just finished lunch in the canteen, and were headed out for a smoke, when he heard someone calling his name. Looking around, he found Sandra waving and beckoning to him....

She was seated at one of the tables, with her cousin, Halle, and.... to his surprise.... the girl who had occupied his thoughts the past week.

He felt strangely happy.... then muttered to himself, "Get a fucking grip on yourself"....

Asking Deepak to wait, he went over to the table. Sandra gave him a wink, asking, "Hi, Clem.... What's up"?

He smiled slightly, including all of them in his gaze. "Tell me", he said.

"Aw, nothing much.... Just finished lunch. You know my cousin, Halle..... This is Varsha Symonds, her classmate".

He smiled at Halle, then, turned his attention to Varsha....

Giving her his most seductive smile, he introduced himself, "Hi.... Clement Sanderson".

She thought to herself, "You just lost it, girl.... for good. He's not just handsome, charming too.... and what a voice!".

Outwardly, she simply smiled, replying, in a low voice, "Hi, nice meeting you"..... She was surprised she found her voice at all.... Her throat was feeling that parched.

He was thinking, "Jesus.... She's lovely"....

His reveire was interrupted by someone screaming his name. Knowing only Cheryl could possibly screech like that, he turned around with a slightly irritated look on his face.

"I need to tell you something", she began...."Ya, coming", he replied.

Raising his eyebrows, and giving Sandra a know-all look.... He said, "Catch up sometime", to Halle and Varsha.... His eyes lingering just a little longer on Varsha, darkening with emotions, he himself wasn't sure of.... She saw the change in his eyes.... They were talking to her, without saying a word.... What she sensed, rather than heard, made her face flush.

The intense spark between them was not lost on Sandra or Halle..... neither on Cheryl.

"Who's the bitch"?, she asked nastily, to which, he snapped back, "Could you be a little more decent, when referring to someone you don't even know"?

"But you seemed to know her", she sneered, "and seemed to like what you saw".

"So"?, he asked, in a dangerously low voice, "I'm supposed to walk around with my eyes closed"?

"Ok, ok..... chuck it", she hurriedly replied, realizing that he was on the verge of losing his cool, and by experience, knew it could get ugly if he did lose it.

"My bro and Darryl want to meet you, today", she informed him.

"Ask them to come to my office, after eight", he stated.

He joined Deepak and started to walk off, when she asked, "Where are you off to"?

He didn't even bother to reply. It was Deepak who answered, "We're just going out, Cheryl.... catch up later".

Deepak sensed the repressed anger in Clement, and patting him on the back, said, "Snap out of it, man.... Don't lose your cool".

"Yep".... he muttered, breathing deeply, to bring his temper under control. He rarely lost it, but if he did.... all hell broke loose.

After Clement left, there was a slightly awkward silence at Sandra's table. To break it, she laughed.... asking Varsha what she thought of him.

Varsha flushed, her face turning a shade between red and pink..... "Ya, he's great", she managed to say.

"He thinks you're very pretty", replied Sandra, "He's not the kind to complement everyone".

Halle laughed, "Match-making, sis"?.... to which, Sandra replied, "Aw, I wouldn't mind, Halle.... I think they'd make a great pair, and he'll be relieved of that stupid Cheryl".

"But she's his girlfriend, right"?, asked Halle.

Sandra mused, "She literally forced herself on him.... I really don't understand why he tolerates her".

Varsha was quietly listening to the exchange between them, while one part of her mind still dwelt on Clement. "He's so good looking", she thought.... "and charming as well".

"Varsha"?, interrupted Sandra.

"Ya"?, she asked.

"Day-dreaming about our man"?.... Varsha had no answer.... Her face said it all.

"Hey, if you have the time, could you do the SWOT assignment for Clem too? He's quite busy as he works after college, and hardly has time to finish his work".

"Sure, I'll do it.... Why didn't you guys tell me earlier"?, she asked.

"I think he may have asked you, in due course..... but was interrupted by Cheryl", replied Sandra.

"No problem. Please tell him that I'll do it".

By the time Clement and Deepak came back post-lunch, he had cooled down. He walked into the class, waved at Sandra, and settled right at the back.

She joined him, asking, "Still mad"?

"No, da, I'm good.... Tell me"....

"Varsha is doing your SWOT assignment", she informed him.

"Hey, you shouldn't have bothered her. I was just joking", he replied.

"Well, I didn't really ask her to do it.... Just told her that you're quite busy, and she immediately volunteered".

Clement gave her a disbelieving look.... She had the grace to grin sheepishly.

"Anyway, she was most enthusiastic to do it", she added.

"Really"?, he said, "That's very sweet of her".

Inwardly, he felt oddly happy that she wanted to do it, for him.

"Babe.... Do you feel the way I do, about us"?, asked an inner voice. "Aw, shut up", he admonished it.

To Sandra, he said, "Give me her number.... I need to thank her".

"Sure", she said, and gave it to him, immediately.

She was secretly hoping that they'll hit it off.... Clement was one of her oldest friends.... She didn't want him to ruin his life with that slut, Cheryl.

Varsha was in her room, and had just started editing Sandra's assignment, for Clement, when her phone buzzed. Seeing an unknown number, she almost ignored it.... but some instinct told her to pick it up.

"Hello", she said, hesitatingly.

"Is it Varsha"?, asked a deep, male voice.

"That's right", she replied.

Didn't that sound like Clem, she thought....

"Hi, it's Clement", continued the baritone.

"Oh.... Hi".... she responded, softly.

"Sandra said you're doing the SWOT assignment for me".

"Yes.... In fact, I just started on it".

"I'm so sorry she imposed on you like that", he apologized.

"Absolutely not....I volunteered to do it", she assured him.

"Are you sure it won't eat into your time"?, he persisted. "No, it's fine..... I'll be done by tomorrow".

"Great.... Anyway, thanks a ton.... When you're done, just call or text on this number. I'll come and collect it", he told her.

"Sure, will do", she responded.

Any excuse to see you again, he was thinking, and so was she....

They talked some more.... mostly inane stuff, some serious too. They didn't really remember what they asked, or what answers they got.

They were concentrating on each other's voices.... His deep baritone caused strange sensations in her.... while her sweet, low-tone voice caused him to clench his fists, as he felt his body tightening.

They finally hung up, spending the remainder of the evening, and night, thinking of each other....

"How would it feel, to be folded into his arms"?, she thought, getting goosebumps. Even Cheryl didn't matter anymore....

"How would your body feel, pressed against mine"?, he mused, getting aroused. Even Cheryl didn't matter anymore....

They got their answers the following day, and not just on their inner longings.

They met in the canteen.... post-lunch, so that she could give him the completed assignment.

He ordered coffee.... They had just started having it, when the relative silence was shattered by the laughing of a group of girls, who had just come in. Unfortunately, one of them was Cheryl....

It was her friend who pointed out, "Hey, what's Clem doing with some random chick"?

Cheryl whirled, and saw that he was with the same female she had objected to, a day earlier.... She decided to tackle this head-on.

She quietly walked in on them.... Varsha was facing her.

Seeing Cheryl, her facial expression changed so suddenly that Clement turned back to see what had caused it.

He sighed.... muttering to himself, "Here goes.... This is going to be bad".

"Hi, Clem, spending time with your new-found fancy"?, she sneered.

"Shut up", he replied, in a dangerous voice. He was equally pissed off....

He turned to Varsha, smiling slightly, "I suggest you leave now. I'll call you later".

He then leaned across, pecking

her on the cheek, and added,

"Take care, sweetheart".... He anyway wanted to kiss her.... Cheryl's behaviour just provoked him to do it at that point.

Varsha thought Cheryl might physically assault her.... At any rate, that was her expression.

She smiled at him.... quickly gathered her books, including his assignment, and just left. She wanted to turn back, but knew that Cheryl was staring daggers at her.

She couldn't believe that he had just given her a kiss, and called her 'sweetheart'....

Cheryl had heard it, too....

"So, what's happening, Clem"?, she asked, "Are you planning on replacing me? But you can't do that so easily. My bro would mess up your life", she threatened.

"Shut the fuck up", he snapped, "and go to hell".

He turned and walked away, leaving her fuming....

Varsha was shaken, to put it mildly.... deciding to skip the remaining classes for the day. She texted Halle that she wasn't feeling too well, and was going back to her room.

Back in her hostel, she was feeling dejected.

"Cheryl will never allow us to be together", she thought. As if on cue, her phone rang.... She saw that it was Clement.

"Varsha, where are you"?, he asked.

"In my room, Clem"..... she replied.

"Ok.... What happened, you didn't have class"?, he enquired.

"No.... After that scene, I just wanted to get away".

His voice dropped to a sexy low.... "Don't be upset, babe.... and don't worry about Cheryl. I need some time to sort things out.... Just give me that time".

"But why.... Why is it important to sort things out? She's your girlfriend.... You both be happy.... forget about me", she replied. Her voice was breaking, though she was trying hard not to reveal it.

Clement sensed her feelings, saying, "You know I can't forget you.... and neither can you. Just give me a month.... Would you wait till then"?

"I'll wait however long it takes.... Since the day I saw you at that fashion show, that's all I've done, waiting", she said.

"Oh, babe", he responded, in a hoarse voice. "How would I know you saw me, then? You should have just told me about it".

Her sense of humour returned....

"Ya.... Imagine walking up to you, and saying.... "Hi, Clem, I'm Varsha. I saw you at the fashion show, on Talents Day, and have fallen hook, line and sinker.... What's your take on it"?

He laughed out, "That's a good pick up line.... Seriously, sweetheart.... You should have done that. We wouldn't have wasted so much time".

He continued, "Anyways.... now, I've fallen hook, line and sinker"....

"Oh, Clem..... Are you joking, or"?.....

"Who said I'm joking"?, he asked. "I've never been more serious".

He explained, "It's not what you think. I'm not in love with Cheryl.... She initiated the whole thing, around a year back, and

I went along.... for more than romantic reasons. Her brother's involved in my company, and he has a bit of a say, in certain things. I just put up with her, so as not to jeopardize my job at this point".

"Ohh.... I didn't know that", replied Varsha.

"Ya.... That's the scene. But off late, she's been getting to me, and.... I want out of it. Also, now that you're in the picture, I can't go on putting on an act of dating her. Just give me a month.... I'll convince her to call it quits. Then, we can be together", he promised.

He continued, "In the meantime, let's see how we can meet.... Not in college, I don't want people constantly talking about us.... somewhere outside".

"It's ok".... she said, "Even if you can't meet me, at least call"....

"Sure, I will", he replied.

He met her a couple of times outside her hostel, and one evening, took her out to dinner.

He was everything she had ever dreamt of.... charming, witty and so caring.

From his point of view, he just wanted to keep her happy and safe.... He was surprised at himself....

In fact, this intensity of emotion was totally new to him. He had had girlfriends in the past, had his fun..... He was no saint.... but he had never really cared what they thought about him.

With Varsha, it was different.... He wanted her to like him, maybe even love him.... At any rate, I'm falling in love, he admitted to himself.

But the next couple of months were not so great, as Cheryl's brother warned him of the consequences of cutting off his sister. He also threatened he would harm Varsha, if Clement continued to pursue her....

He didn't take that lying down.... He gave it to Lenny, threatening to kill him, if he so much as looked at her.

They continued to talk.... meeting whenever possible. He didn't want to make any announcements yet, as he needed time to handle Lenny and Cheryl in a smooth way, and get out of the mess. So, he purposefully kept it low-key.

He warned Varsha not to go out by herself, after dark... in college, not to go anywhere alone....

"Always be with Halle and the others", he had said.

He also told her to lock her room door at the hostel, and, not open it at odd hours.

She understood he was worried that Cheryl, or, Lenny, would harm her.... and, did as he asked.

Work-wise, it was a busy time for Clement....

Varsha sent his assignments through Sandra. She did more than one of them.... She'd insisted on that.

He submitted the others for evaluation, but not the one on SWOT. He was sentimental about that one.... and didn't want to lose it. The Commerce Department at college was huge, and sometimes, after evaluation, the Professors just junked the assignments.

He had explained to Cheryl, in plain language, that he wanted out.... that they part as friends.... but she wouldn't accept it. She screamed obscenities about Varsha. He was furious.... He spared her only because she was a girl, and couldn't imagine raising a hand against a woman.

Their conversation happened in the canteen.... Clement had told her to come there post-lunch, as he wanted to talk.... For once, she was reluctant to meet him, as she had guessed what was coming....

She had noticed the way he looked at Varsha.... He had never looked at her that way.

When they met, he explained, "Cheryl, let's not beat about the bush, anymore. I started dating you, coz Lenny said you're lonely, you need someone he could trust, to take you out.... I agree, it suited me too.... but there never was anything serious between us. You know that as well as I do. In spite of that, you started acting possessive.... I still put up with it, bcoz of Lenny, and frankly speaking, I couldn't care what happened.... The scene's changed now.... I'm in love with Varsha, and want to be with her. So.... please, let's just call it quits".

Cheryl snapped back, "What does she offer that I haven't? Sex"?.... She continued her nasty tirade, "I could also have given you that.... Only, you wouldn't come near me".

"Shut up.... and keep a check on the filth coming out your mouth", he growled.

He concluded, "There's no use talking to you.... Anyway, we're done.... and that's that".

Finally, just a week before classes ended for the semester, he and Cheryl clashed again....

He was starting his bike in the basement parking lot, along with his friends.... leaving college for the day, when she unexpectedly came and climbed onto the pillion seat. For a second, he thought it may be Varsha.... but seeing Deepak and George's expressions, he realized who it was.

He killed the engine, and in a low, harsh voice, said, "Cheryl, get the fuck off my bike"....

"Oh, come on, Clem".... she gushed....

He repeated, "I said, get off my bike".

Deepak got down and came towards them, as he was scared the situation would get out of hand. "Go on, Cheryl.... Don't unwantedly provoke Clem", he said.

He asserted that, "Deepak's right... Don't provoke me, you'll regret it"....

She ultimately got off the bike, but didn't give up.

"Come on.... I know Varsha's just a game for you to play, to rile me", she said.

"Are you out of your fucking mind"?, he asked, and continued, "Now, listen, once and for all.... I'm done with you.... I don't care how Len reacts. I'll deal with that when it comes to it. Varsha's my girlfriend.... and nothing you or anybody else says, or does, is going to change that, understand? I'm explaining things to you, repeatedly, because you're a girl.... If it was a guy in your place, I'd have broken his fucking jaw by now".

He signalled to Deepak.... They started their bikes, and left....

Cheryl was standing there, watching.... She had to tackle this from another angle, she thought. Varsha had to be humiliated, she decided... publically. That would teach him not to play around with her.

Clement and his pals stopped at one point.... They advised him that he had to tackle this from another angle.

"Ya.... You guys are right.... I think I know what I should do, and I have to do it this week itself. Cheryl had to be humiliated, he thought.... publically. He had been decent with her long enough.

That week had two important events.... The Department farewell, and the College farewell party.

The professors and management were involved only in the College farewell, while the department ones, they left it to the students. Still, it was a fairly grand affair, especially for the Commerce Department, since there were a large number of students.

It was two days prior to the College farewell....

He spoke to Varsha that evening, telling her not to be absent for it...

He requested her to be seated close to the second years, along with Halle, and some of her close friends. He explained that he wanted Cheryl to understand a few things.

The day of the Department farewell..... All the commerce students were gathered at the ground, where tables and chairs were arranged in groups.

Varsha requested Halle that they sit at a table close to the second years, especially in the line of sight of Cheryl and her group of friends.

When Halle questioned her about it, she replied, "Clem asked me to.... He's totally freaked out with her.... He wants to make things clear, publically".

Cheryl noticed where Varsha was sitting, and told her bestie, "Diana, she's pretty close to us..... makes it easier for me to give it to her.... I'm just waiting for Clem to show up. I want him to watch his beloved Varsha getting humiliated.... publically".

He came about a quarter hour later, spent a few minutes with his gang, walking over to where Varsha was seated.

As he approached her table..... A lot of girls from the first and second years were following him, with their eyes. One girl sighed, "Ohh, he's so handsome..... How I wish I was Cheryl", to which, her friend replied, "Cheryl's in the past.... He's now with that girl, in the first year 'A' section, Varsha Symonds".

"Really"?, said the first girl, "Boy, is she lucky".... Thus, news travels, no matter how much you try to keep it discreet.

Varsha saw him coming, and, her heart skipped a beat....

He was looking so good, she thought....

White linen shirt, with the collar up, and, sleeves rolled up midway, faded blue jeans.... Silver-black aviators folded into his shirt opening, and a black chronograph strapped onto his left wrist.

Varsha was looking ravishing, he noticed....

She was wearing a dark pink top, with three-fourth sleeves, and a white and pink printed long skirt, having a broad elasticed waistband.... She could carry it off beautifully, as she was so slim and petite..... Hair brushed and left loose, with just a silver bejeweled clip holding the centre hair in place. Her eyes were highlighted using eyeliner and kohl, with a light pink lipstick lining her lips and big silver hoops in her ears.

As he reached her table, he noticed Cheryl was just on his left.... He wantedly waved to one of her classmates, asking, "How's you, Diana"? She was surprised, and replied, "Great, Clem.... How about you"?.... to which, he gave her a thumbs up sign.

He had purposefully drawn the attention of their entire group....

He asked Halle, "Where's Sandy"?.... to which, she replied, "She's just gone to drink some water".

He added, "Tell her I'll call her later", and to Varsha, "Come on, sweetheart, let's make a move".

Varsha nodded her goodbye to Halle, and one more of her friends, quietly getting up to leave....

Clement turned, looked directly at Cheryl, and then..... enveloping Varsha's right hand in his left..... walked out of the ground, and college, with her in tow. He didn't let go of her hand till they exited the college gates.

Varsha was feeling very conscious, and kept her head bowed a little.

Many pairs of eyes were following them....

He had made his position crystal clear to everyone, especially Cheryl.

After he left with her.... guys and girls, especially girls, started looking at Cheryl.... talking among themselves, some of them snickering, and some, openly laughing..... at her, or so it seemed to her fuming mind....

She was truly humiliated, and wanted to get back at Clement... and that bitch, she thought. But his open declaration of Varsha as his girlfriend, made her a little hesitant to tackle her.... She didn't want to provoke him.... She knew his explosive temper all too well.

After leaving college, he had taken Varsha to dinner. She seemed happy, but there were still some doubts, he understood.

Going back, he stopped his bike at a small dead-end road, to the right of her hostel. It was isolated, as there were no houses.

He was sitting on the bike; she was standing next to him.... He was holding her hands, caressing it....

He asked, "What's wrong, babe"?

She looked at him with all her emotions reflected in her eyes, and replied, "Clem, are you sure about me, or is it just that you wanted out with Cheryl"?....

"God, why do you even think like this, sweetheart"?, he asked.

"Of course, I'm sure about you.... I just made it official".

"Ohh, Clem".... she murmured.

Her soft voice, the expression in her eyes.... It was all too much for him.

"Jesus... I want to kiss her", he thought. "I've waited long enough"....

He pulled her to him, enveloped her in a bear hug, and started kissing her. For just a moment, she was surprised.... then gave in fully, responding with equal passion.

He was in heaven.... He pulled her even closer, he wanted to feel her against him, every inch of her..... and continued to kiss her.... full on, his tongue probing her lips, teeth, tongue.... His lips were wet, and so was hers....

"Babe", he whispered, when he briefly lifted his lips from hers....
"I need you, sweetheart", he added.

She whispered back, "Clem, darling"....

The sound of a horn blaring, somewhere, interrupted their passionate embrace. She jerked out of his arms, utterly embarrassed.

Not able to look at him.... She murmured, "Good night", and started off to her hostel building. He called out, "Varsha, wait".... but she ran off.

She was again unsure the next day, he remembered.... She didn't respond to his calls, for almost a week.

He had never waited for anyone in his life.... the way he had for her, that week.... Finally, he had met her, and convinced her.

They started dating regularly.... those were the most unforgettable three months of his life, he mused..... He found more happiness with her, in that time, than all the years previously.... until it was suddenly snatched away from them.

Clement was jerked out of his thoughts by the sound of his phone ringing. It was his deputy, with some doubts. Absent-mindedly, he gave instructions.

He was exhausted, thinking of the past....

Dragging himself away from the recliner, he went to undress, and try to get some sleep.

Chapter 7

The next day found Varsha more composed, and as usual, she resumed writing.... after Sandeep left for work.

Varsha was just grabbing her books and tote bag, to head for college, when her phone rang.

Seeing that it was Varun, she picked it up, "Hi, Dan.... How come, so early today"?

"Where are you, sweetie"?, he asked. "I was just starting to leave to college"....

"Perfect.... I'm down, waiting".

"Oh, ok, I'll be there in two minutes", she replied.

Coming out of the hostel, she involuntary stopped, to have a good look at him....

"Drop-dead handsome", she thought.... "Whatever did he see in me"?

Today, he was in a checked blue shirt.... sleeves rolled up midway, collar turned up, light blue jeans and dark blue aviators.

"With his looks, he can get anyone.... Will he get bored of me after sometime"?

Banishing her negative thoughts, she smiled, "Hi"

He was, as usual, monitoring the trading software on his mobile.

Looking up, he smiled crookedly, though Varsha couldn't see his eyes through the aviators. He was, in fact, looking at her with the expression of a man who has found water in the desert, and thinking.... "She's going to think I'm desperate..... and that's what I am".

"Hi, Deb" he replied.... finally, taking off the coolers.

"Looking great", he said in a hoarse voice.

He was feeling pretty dazed, seeing her....

A wine-coloured top of some slinky material, paired with faded grey-black, three-fourth length jeans, outlining her legs, but unusually, slightly flared at the bottom.... those damn Roman sandals, with all the tie-ups.... face fresh without any makeup, save for eyeliner and lip gloss.... long silver hoops, dangling from her ears. She looked good enough to kidnap, he mused wryly.

As she climbed onto the bike, and he reversed it, she put her arms around him lightly, pecking him on the nape of the neck....

He turned, gave her a slow grin, and laughingly asked, "You're sure you want to go to college, or"?....

"Shut up, Dan", she laughed too.... He had a wicked sense of humour.

All the way to college, he practically rode with one hand, holding her right hand in his left.... twining his fingers through hers.

"Dan", she said, "This is such a pleasant surprise.... I never thought I'd see you today morning".

"Really? So, I'll pick you up daily, babe".

"But, you said we should keep a low profile in college", she stated.

"When I see you, a lot of my resolves go down the drain", he replied wryly.

She squeezed his hand. "You know, I was thinking.... How did you choose me at all"?

"Legs, sweetheart.... Your legs did me in", he laughed. She laughed too, and clipped him one....

"Oh, you're the Devil, Dan.... talking such unholy things, early in the morning".

"You find this unholy?.... Good you can't read my thoughts"....

Their banter continued till college. He dropped her off at the gate.... waiting till she disappeared round the corner.... Just before she turned it, she looked back, and gave him a smile that

made him feel he had been kicked in the gut.... Anyway, it kept him going for the day, and night.

The rest of the week was pretty hectic, with Varun dropping her most mornings to college.

Evenings were quite busy for him.... Classes went on till three p.m., and sometimes, even four. By then, Varsha would already be in her room. She had classes only till two p.m.

After theory, he had some reference to do, with regard to his final year internship and project.

Internship was at his office itself.... The Dean had been kind enough to agree to that, but the specific study that he was doing, had to be made into a report. It was the effect of Professional Financial Management on individual wealth creation, using a dozen subjects or clients of his company, versus people who didn't manage the same, professionally. For the latter, his subjects were a few lecturers of his college, who had obliged him, and the remaining his friends.

He barely managed to finish his library work, rushing to office....

He called Varsha during his dinner break. He worked from five in the evening to around eleven at night.

He was totally smitten by her, and that was a first for him. Not only with her looks.... She was also smart and efficient, didn't chatter non-stop like most girls, and most importantly, didn't have that unending curiosity and propensity, to question a guy unnecessarily.

She was even doing his assignments.... She'd insisted on it, knowing his schedule.

Varsha, on her part, had never been happier.... She had found a handsome guy, who was also intelligent, smart and resourceful.... and best of all, it was not a temporary thing.

They had decided they wanted to spend their lives with each other. Varun had never openly said he loved her.... She wanted to, many times, but hesitated.... not knowing if it would be premature.

Then, one day, when they were randomly talking, he said.... "I never imagined falling in love would be so great, Deb".... and she replied, "Same here, Dan".

They both laughed, and he further stated, "One thing, sweetheart.... I don't do anything in life, casually. So, you better be warned, I'm never ever letting you go".

Varsha replied, "I wasn't exactly planning to let go of you either"....

Great lines to say.... but life will always hold you ransom to such brave words, testing you to the limits!

A week later, on a rare day, Varun was spending time with his friends.... Mahesh, Harsha, Nathan and Paul. The five of them were relaxing in the quadrangle of their academic block, just talking.... when some of the guys from the other Commerce sections joined them.

One guy, in particular, Akash Gupta, didn't like Varun. They had had an argument during their first year, and the animosity had continued, especially from Akash's side.

So, when he greeted him, Varun was surprised....

"Hey, Varun", he said.

He gave Akash a steady look, muttering, "Hi".... He really didn't want anything to do with this guy.

Varun, though chilled out most of the time, had a nasty temper, if provoked. Akash did just that....

"Hey, saw you with a hot chick, the other morning.... Your regular date, or just passing time with her"?

"I'm not interested in detailing my personal life, especially to you", snapped Varun. "Just stay out of it".

"Oh, really"?, sneered Akash.... "She your private property"?.... and further continued, "I found out her name.... Varsha Francis, right? She's hot... If it's ok with you, we can share the spoils. Know what I mean"?

The next few minutes were remarkable, even for a college with as many guys as this....

Varun caught Akash by the collar and slammed him against one of the concrete pillars of the quadrangal. The silence that followed was deafening.... Everyone had stopped talking... staring open-mouthed, wondering what had happened....

"You fucker, I'll kill you", shouted Varun, "You say one more word about her, you're dead meat".

His friends were also stunned by the turn of events.... then, Mahesh pulled himself together, catching Varun before he slammed him again.

"Let go, da.... It'll become an issue", he said.

But, he was in no mood to relent. Pushing Mahesh away, he turned to Akash.... punching him in the groin.

"You asshole.... How dare you talk filth about her? I'm going to fucking kill you, right now"....

Akash slithered to the floor, crying out in pain, and clutching himself.

Hearing the commotion, one of the Professors from their Department, came out.

"Oh, crap", said Mahesh, "Now, we're all in deep shit".

The next thing they knew.... He, Varun and Akash, were waiting outside the Principal's office.... the Professor who witnessed the incident, accompanying them.

The college rules were very clear and strict. With close to three thousand guys, between the ages of eighteen and twenty five, they had to be....

Young men of that age group can be volatile, to put it mildly. Bike accidents.... short tempers, arguments and fist fights.... smoking, drinking and drugs.... These were just some of the

issues, the management had to deal with.... not to mention on-campus romances.... in addition to the usual attendance shortages and exam back-logs.

All the above came under college violations.... the penalties being suitably strict, and fast. Guys got their suspension and / or termination letters, within half an hour of the violation. It was this kind of strictness, and swiftness of punishment, that allowed the missionary priests, who ran the institution, keep such a large crowd of young men in control.

The actual meeting with the Principal took place about an hour later....

During that time, the Professor briefly excused himself to go to the secretary's room, to make a written report for the Principal.... warning them of dire consequences, if they so much as moved an inch of their asses.

Varun took this opportunity to call Nathan, asking him to come there.... He came in two minutes.

"Ya, da"?, he asked.

"Nathan, go to this fucker's class, and warn his friends that if they mention Varsha's name, I'll fucking kill all of them", he said, and nodding towards Akash, added, "tell this slime-ball, too".

Nathan sighed, turned to Akash, "You got it? You want to live, keep your fucking mouth shut.... and don't ever mention her name".

"Fine".... replied Akash, who was still reeling from that punch, to his groin.

He didn't want any more nasty stuff.... He figured no girl was worth this pain. His shoulder blades hurt too... Varun had slammed him, against the concrete pillar.

Once they were inside the Reverend Principal's room, he questioned Akash first, then turned to Varun.

Mahesh was there as an eye-witness, along with the Professor, who had submitted the written report.

He clarified that Varun had no attendance shortage, or backlogs. Akash had one backlog, and attendance shortage in one subject.... Hence, he was issued the suspension letter within fifteen minutes.

The suspension was for a week, during which time, his parents had to meet the Principal, and give it in writing that a second offence would result in his termination from college, with no chance of re-joining.

Varun was not issued a suspension letter.... but he had to provide his dad's mobile and office numbers.... The Principal would talk to him in due course, informing him of the incident.

When he questioned them about the specific reason for the fight, both remained silent. The Professor genuinely didn't know.... Mahesh said that he'd not heard the exchange of words between them..... He had only reacted, to stop Varun from assaulting Akash further.

"So, Varun.... What was the provocation for the assault"?

The Reverend Principal was also a Priest, and they could address him as, 'Sir', 'Father Principal', or 'Father'.

"Huh... Father, he said I owed him money, which is not true", replied Varun.

The Principal gave him a skeptical look, turning to Akash. "Is it true"?

"Huh... Yes, Father.... I did say that"....

"Does he owe you money"?, he probed.

"Well, not me personally..... He had borrowed from one of my friends, and I wasn't aware that he had returned it. Moreover, I just wanted to rile him", he admitted.

"Such a strong reaction for that"?, asked the Principal, staring at Varun.

He couldn't meet the Reverend Father's eyes.

"Ok, Akash.... collect your suspension letter from my secretary. You have one week to bring your parents, and try and sort this out.... If not, you'll be terminated from college. Now, dismissed".

He turned to the Professor, saying, "Prof. Duggal, please take care of this issue".

"Yes, Father", replied the Professor.... and further, signalled Akash to follow him out.

Varun was wondering what was in store for him, as the door closed behind them.

"Now, Varun.... I want the truth. What was the real reason for the assault"?

"Father, he spoke derogatorily about my personal life", replied Varun, knowing that the Principal appreciated honesty, and honest people.

"What did he specifically say"?

"He spoke unwanted things about my girlfriend"....

"Are you aware that romantic relationships are part of the college violations"?, asked Father.

"I am.....but I don't want to lie to you. Moreover, I don't meet her in college".

"Who is she"?, asked the Principal.

"I'm sorry, I'd like to keep her name out of this", said Varun.

"Really"?, he stated.... "The boy has some nerve", he thought, talking to me like this.....

Outwardly, he simply asked, "Why is that"?, to which, Varun replied, "She's at no fault.... unwantedly, her name will get spoilt".

"It won't get spoilt by being romantically linked to you? Today's incident is an example of that".

"I didn't start the conversation, Father. Anyway, I've warned them not to use her name, and.... I'm eventually going to marry her", he stated.

In his career of twenty-five years, occupying various positions, including that of Principal, he had never come across a boy like this... and he had seen quite a lot of them, he mused.

He was slightly arrogant, but confident too.... The way a man should be.... Also, committed and protective of his girl, the way a man should be.

Just to test him, he asked, "Do you realize that I could issue a memo, talk to your father about this, or even suspend you, for disobedience.... If you don't give me her name"?

Varun straightened himself, looked Father in the eye, and replied, "You could..... but you still wouldn't get her name out of me".

He waited for the explosion.... or worse, the order for a written memo, or suspension, but he found Father looking at him, oddly.... finally saying, "Dismissed, for now. If there's another incident like this, I'll personally write your termination letter, and lead you to the main gate, understand"?

"Yes, Father".... replied a relieved Varun, smiling slightly.

The Principal smiled back, wryly, saying, "Get out of here, boy".

Varun stood to attention, muttered an apology, and, left.

The Principal informed his dad about the squabble with Akash, requesting him to keep his son under control.... although, he didn't reveal the real reason behind it.

Varun's dad was already mad at him for working such late hours, for being too independent.... among other things. They really didn't share a great relationship. He loved his mom dearly, though....

Anyway, when his father questioned him, he answered vaguely... and left.

His dad was furious, but helpless.

He shouted at his wife, "Madeline, you are the one who has spoilt him so much.... One more such complaint.... I'll throw him out of this house".

Luckily, he never came to know of his father's threat, or else, he would have walked out, then and there. As it is, he tolerated him, only for mom's sake....

Eventually, though Varun had threatened anyone from using Varsha's name, low-voiced gossip happens..... and the news reached Haritha, who then told her about it.

She was appalled at what had happened.... but somewhere deep inside, felt happy that he was so possessive and protective of her.

Even the boys in her class now kept a discreet distance from her, including that guy, Hubert, she thought.... Otherwise, he was always trying to flirt with her. Luckily, I didn't tell Varun about

him, she mused.... Or, he may have spent some time at the local hospital....

When they met the next day, he was unusually quiet. Varsha touched his hand across the table, at Mac's, and he quickly grasped it.

She asked, hesitatingly, "Dan, I heard what happened, the day before.... all because of me".

"No, darling.... It's not your fault", he said, and continued, "Anyway, it won't happen again.... I've put the fear of God into those fuckers".

"Did the Principal speak harshly to you"?, she probed.

He grinned at her, "Naw.... secretly, I think Father empathized with me".

He didn't really want this conversation to continue, and so, tactfully, changed the subject.

She realized what he was doing, thinking he was probably embarrassed, talking about it. But, embarrassment was not Varun's main sentiment..... He was surprised by the intensity of his feelings for Varsha. He knew he was in love, but hadn't realized how possessive he was about her, until now....

All these feelings increased the longing inside him.... emotions he had kept reined in, were threatening to spill over. He found holding hands and kissing her in cinema halls, wasn't enough anymore....

He looked up, giving her a look that almost bared his soul.... She felt goosebumps on her skin.

"I need you, babe".... His voice was low and hoarse.... He was crushing her fingers in his palm....

She wanted him too, though she hadn't really realized how much.... This new side to Varun was a little scary, though exciting too....

"Tomorrow is a holiday, right"?, he asked, suddenly.

"Ya.... Second Saturday of the month", she replied.

"We'll go out somewhere.... Make sure you inform your hostel aunty that you'll be back only on Sunday".

"Ok", she said.... He didn't look in the mood to be questioned further, so she didn't talk anymore about it.

That was one of the best traits in Varsha.... She sensed what people expected, and behaved as close to that as possible.

In general, she didn't like conflict... In particular, with

Varun.

She had a lot of trust on him..... She didnt feel the need to question him for everything. It was probably due to her age and innocence..... Also, she was in love with him.

Of course, he was worth it....

That's precisely what he loved about her... The calmness with which she approached most things. Also, she trusted him, and allowed him to lead the way.... any other girl would have asked a minimum of another dozen questions.

Chapter 8

V arsha put down her pen, flexing her fingers.... She had written long enough today.

The stories were taking shape.... Of course, it was partly autobiographical.... She needed some release for the pain inside her.

No sooner than she closed her eyes to rest it a little, Clement came back into her thoughts....

"I still love him, as much", she mused.... "How is it possible, after all that has happened"?

"Because, your heart doesn't blame him for anything" an inner voice whispered.

"People get away with murder.... It was just his bad luck he got caught.... or was it"?, she continued to dwell. "It was because he chose me, over Cheryl, and her brother wanted revenge".

"God.... I'm the reason he's in this mess", she thought painfully, and that made her even more depressed.

However, his trial and penalty were over.... that much she knew.... Sandra had spoken to her, one last time, just before she was married off to Sandeep.

He had been sentenced for five years, out of which the first two years were rigorous, while the remaining three were slightly more lenient.

During the first two years, he had to help the law uncover more networks, due to his familiarity with them. That was the trade-off with the Bureau.... In return, he would get a more lenient three years.

It must be a year and a half now since he had been freed, she thought.

"So, why didn't he contact me, or even make an attempt"?, she mused.

"Maybe he did", she consoled herself.

Her old mobile number did not exist anymore.... Her father had made sure of that.

"Also, he may know I'm married", she continued to think. "He wouldn't know what kind of a marriage this is.... He would assume I have moved on".

She covered her face in her hands.... remembering how she had pleaded with her parents not to get her married.

"Just let me be", she had sobbed. "Or, if I'm an embarrassment, I'll leave this house. Please don't force me to marry someone else".

But no, they wouldn't budge....

"The stigma and embarrassment you have caused us, can only be rectified if you marry someone decent, and settle into your life", stated her mother.

They threatened her.... saying she either obey them, or they would all end their lives.

She was horrified.... What could she do? Finally, she gave in.

She had sobbed all the time.... Dressing up, going to church, taking the vows.... She didn't even repeat them, just mumbling something. To her, it was all a lie, a farce.... only her sister had stood by her, consoling her.

"Let this charade go on, Soph".... she had said. "You find yourself a job, become independent, and leave this guy after sometime". Shelly was young, and thought that life always worked out the way we wanted it to.... but it didn't. Her in-laws and Sandeep wouldn't allow her to work.

At one point, she told her parents.... I'm getting a divorce, one way or the other.... Again, the threat of ending their lives.

She once told her sister, "I would have ended it all myself, Shelly.... but Clem's out there somewhere, and one day.... I'll meet him again.... God can't be that cruel", she sobbed, her sister holding her.

"Yes, sweetie", she consoled her. "He's there somewhere, and he'll find you.... Just hold on".

She added, "I'm there too.... I've always prayed for you and Clem to get back together.... One day, our prayers will be answered".

Shelly was the main reason she had held onto life, thought Varsha.... that, and her unshakeable belief in Clement, and their love....

"Just find me, Clem", she found herself sobbing, again....

Clement felt some invisible hand touching him, and jerked out of a deep sleep....

He had dreamt of Varsha, again.... That he had found her. This time, the dream had been so life-like.... He had found someone sobbing into their hands, and when he touched her, she turned.... It was his Soph.

"Oh, babe.... Where are you"?, he thought. "Are you happy.... or do you want me back in your life"?

Chapter 9

V arun took Varsha to a resort, somewhere in the outskirts of the city.... They spent an unforgettable day and a half before returning.

Leaving the anxieties and prying eyes behind, they spent time walking around the extensive landscaped gardens of the resort, holding hands.... Talking mostly about day to day stuff, and some serious too....

It was the first time she would stay over.... she was pretty nervous about it.

She had been brought up in a sheltered manner; had not even dated anyone up until now.... let alone going out, and staying over.

She thought of how her parents would react, if they knew about this.... She could imagine their horror, and subsequent explosion.

Her dad would probably disown her.... Her mother had always been more understanding and accepting.

As it is, she suspected it was only a matter of time before she would be disowned by her father....

He would never accept the fact that his daughter had fallen in love; chosen her own life partner. For him, that would be unthinkable.... It was not about Varun, he wouldn't accept anyone in that place.

She sighed.... he sensed her emotions.

They had had a late breakfast and light lunch, killing time in the gardens....

He was purposefully delaying going to the room. He didn't want to scare her.... He thought she would be more receptive, later on.... Also, he sensed her nervousness, and wanted her to relax.

"Nervous, Deb"? he asked, encasing her palm in his, and squeezing it, gently.

"Ya, slightly" she replied, smiling.

"It's ok, just relax and enjoy yourself", he said.

He continued, "I don't want you to feel uncomfortable.... I won't force anything on you, babe".

"I know.... It's just that, all of this is very new to me", she stated.

"Hey, it's not a regular for me either", he laughed. She smiled back.

"To tell you the truth, the incident in college kind of triggered a lot of emotions in me, that I was keeping in check.... It needs an outlet", he explained. "I wanted to literally kill that guy, when he spoke bullshit about you", he added, "That was an eye-opener. I've never experienced such intense feelings for anyone".

"Oh, Dan".... she linked her arm through his, "I knew you were affected, I could sense it"....

"Let's keep a low profile from now on.... We'll meet only outside", she suggested.

"We hardly meet in college, I just dropped you a few days.... Anyway, you may have a point there. Father Principal might keep an eye on us from now", he replied.

"Didn't he ask you the real reason, for the fight"?, she asked.

"Ya.... After he sent everyone out. He's actually a cool guy, though, he threatened to terminate me, if I didn't reveal your identity.... Of course, I don't think he would have actually done it, just wanted to test me", he concluded.

"Oh, no.... Then what"?, she asked.

"Nothing.... I told him to go ahead and do what he wanted, but I wouldn't reveal your name".

Varsha was truly appalled. To oppose the Principal was unknown in college. Her face said it all, and Varun had a hearty laugh.

"You truly are the Devil, Dan", she admonished.

"Yep... that's me", he stated.

They had reached a secluded part of the landscape, and seeing a concrete bench, sat down on it. They were shaded by a nearby tree.... It was very pleasant.

"I love this place", said Varsha, "So peaceful and serene"

"Hmm... Let's amp up the excitement a little, sweetheart", saying which, he enveloped her in his arms, and did what he wanted to do since morning..... kiss her.

Varsha was taken by surprise, but after a heartbeat's hesitation, gave in.... this place, his closeness..... everything was having it's impact....

She slowly became aware that he was cupping her head with his right hand.... while his left was taut against her waist, clutching it possessively.....

He kissed lightly first, then slowly probed inside her mouth.... She felt he was probing into her core. As she responded with more passion, he let go of her head....running his right hand along her back.... slowly feeling his way to the side, and cupping her breast.... through the dress, he could feel her response.... It sent slivers of longing through his body. She was also moaning, making him go crazy....

"Babe" he whispered, lifting his lips slightly from hers.

"Dan" she moaned again, as he felt her tighten in his cupped hand, and stroked her with his thumb....

She hugged him, running her hands through his hair. As their lips parted, he continued kissing her... on the nape.... then, lower.... She wanted so many things.... Oh God! she wanted him.

Waves of feeling washed over her, and she trembled with the effort of keeping control. "Dan.... stop it", she pleaded.

Understanding that it was getting out of hand, he reluctantly pulled away. He looked at her with half-closed eyes, his face rock hard from the passion he was keeping chained.

Her eyes were glazed too.... Her face flushed, her lips looked so moist and kissable...

Clenching his teeth, he stood up.... and gave her his hand.

"Let's go to the room", he said, hoarsely.... She didn't say a word; simply walked back with him.

That saturday afternoon.... in the resort's room.... away from their families, friends and others... they made love....

For her, everything was new and exciting.... In his case, though it wasn't new.... it was still unforgettable and amazing....

Physical emotions apart, what he felt for her was scaring him a little. For the first time in his life, he felt vulnerable.... scared he may lose her, scared things won't work out the way they wanted....

Varsha's passionate response was also, partially, due to insecurity....

Though she loved him a lot, the fear of losing him was, in fact, driving it.... It surprised both of them. He had expected only a hesitant reaction from her, though it went beyond that.

He felt her vulnerability.... the way she was clinging to him, although he wasn't complaining. It felt strangely satisfying that she felt the same way.

His looks and popularity among girls probably had something to do with her insecurity. But though she was in love with him, she was yet to truly understand him....

He was a rare kind of man.... one who was fully committed to his woman, and genuinely had no interest in flirting with other girls or two-timing her. He played straight and fair, expecting the same honesty and loyalty from her.

He didn't doubt her feelings.... For him, insecurity came from the fact that he had to be financially secure, and be able to give her a good life.

The other thing that was bothering him was whether her parents would separate them. She had mentioned her dad's attitude, and he felt any major objection to their relationship would only come from him.

Of course, his father would object too.... but for different reasons.

"I'll deal with dad, not an issue", he thought to himself. The only people he truly cared about, other than Varsha, were his mom and brother.

In the weeks that followed, their relationship underwent a subtle, though positive change.

The desperation of the first couple of months was slowly easing.... they were becoming more confident of each other. The insecurities were still there.... but they took a backseat.

Exams happened.... then, a short break from classes, before the next semester began.

It was Varun's final semester in college.... He had to finish his internship.... also submit a report on the project undertaken. Theory classes would be reduced to three days a week, with the remaining two days meant for internship and report writing.

Varsha was caught between Varun and her mother.... Her mom was insisting she spend a week at home, out of her two-week break.

When she told him about it, he gave her a long, steady look, and said firmly, "No, Deb.... you're not going for a week. If your mom's insisting on you coming.... go for a couple of days, spend time with her, and get back".

Varsha was slightly stunned.... She had got her first taste of his firmness, and had a feeling that opposing him wouldn't be great for their relationship. She too didn't want to leave him for a week and go.... but had expected some pleading or cajoling from him....

Not this firmness of statement or purpose....

Anyway, she was a practical girl.... She simply gave him a demure smile, and said, "Ok, Dan... as you say".

The slight tension eased.... He took her hand in his, kissing it.

"The truth is, I can't survive a week without you", he said, "I've never admitted that to anyone in my life".

He grinned crookedly, and she squeezed his hand.

She explained, "Actually, I too didn't want to go for a week.... I just thought a day or two, that too, for my mom".

He put her on the train two days later, and stood watching as it moved away.

She was gazing at him.... He saw her eyes welling up; felt strangely alone....

Damn, it's only for two days, he thought. It's not fair on her, she needs to meet her folks too.... but it still didn't take away that strange emptiness inside him, as he made his way back to the parking lot.

He passed those days mostly at office, coming home only by midnight.

His boss, Anand, was pleased with his dedication.... though he admonished him to take it easy.

"Jake, this guy would stay 24x7 in the office, if we let him", he joked to his senior, Jake Reynolds.

"That's for sure", replied Jake, and further, said laughingly, "Varsha's lucky.... She doesn't have to worry about him making passes at any other woman".

Anand laughed too, asking, "Doesn't she object to this obsession with work, man"?

"No, boss.... She's very understanding, and right now, she's gone to her hometown, to meet her folks for a couple of days".

"Ahh.... that's why the hours at office have increased", said Jake.

He smiled slightly, and stated, "Who said I'm not interested in figures.... It's just that they have to be numerical".

Everyone had a hearty laugh....

"That's a good tag line for our office walls", suggested Anand, as he went back to his cabin, patting Varun and Jake.

Varsha spoke to him only for about five minutes, during the next two days, as she was constantly surrounded by her mother and sister. She texted him, to explain her dilemma, and he replied, "It's ok, babe.... I understand. Just come back fast".

Her mother was upset she was staying only for two days.... She consoled her, saying that she was working on a project; she couldn't take off more time.

Mom made her famous chicken curry, which she loved.... but strangely, even the delicious aroma of the curry could not generate a good appetite.

"What's wrong, Varsha"?, asked her mother, at the end of the first day. "You seem different.... always thoughtful, not talking a lot.... what is it"?

"Nothing, ma", she said, hugging her. She loved her mom very much, but the problem now was, she also loved Varun equally.... She was feeling restless and disturbed, without seeing or talking to him.

"This is how life changes", she thought.

Her carefree days with mom were over, she realized... Someone else has come into her life, and had taken over her mind and heart. In front of him, everything else paled.... except her love for her mother.

She was not that close to her sister and dad, so it didn't matter.

She made an effort for her mom's sake.... asking her about the condiments Home Business that she ran, with a neighbour; her grandma in their village, and also, her younger sister, to whom she was very attached.

At the end of two days, it was time to leave. Varsha's feelings were bitter-sweet.... sad to leave her mother, but at the same time, happy and excited to go back to Varun.

This is an eternal struggle of any young woman on the threshold of life, she thought....

She almost told mom about Varun, but stopped herself.... maybe next time. She felt guilty, till then, she had always told her everything. She was more a friend....

As the train pulled away, her mother and sister waved. She waved back, kept looking at mom. She saw her eyes well up.... so did Varsha's.

After a few minutes, she heard her phone ringing.... Taking it out of her purse, she saw it was Varun.

Picking it up quickly, she said, "Hi, Dan... I was about to call you.... he train just left from here".

"So, why didn't you"?, he asked..... and joked, "I was worried they won't let you go", although he didn't feel very funny.

"You're so bad", she laughed.

"Yep.... show you how much, when you're safely back in my arms".

"Dan"?..... Damn, she was asking something, he thought, and he hadn't paid attention. "Ya, sweetheart"?

"Will you come to the station"?, she asked..... "Of course, who else will"?

"I mean.... If you're busy at office, I can take a cab".

"No need of that", he said. He further asked, "Deb, do you have any extra bags than what you took from here"?

"No, the same bag, although it's a little heavier"....

"That's fine, then I'll bring the bike", he stated.

"How have you been? I haven't been able to talk to you, these past two days"....

"Desperate.... Just existed without you", he answered in a low voice.

"Me too... I couldn't enjoy anything.... I had to make an effort, for mom's sake", she replied.

"Just get here, babe", he said.... "I'll be waiting at the station".

When the train finally ground to a slow stop, Varsha was one of the first to get off. Her eyes searched for Varun, finally spotting him after a couple of minutes. He was looking... searching on the other side.... He then turned, seeing her.

She started to heft her bag, but he signalled for her to wait. His long strides covered the distance between them in half a minute, and keeping the bag aside.... He just caught her in his arms. She was so happy to see him, she forgot her usual reticence, and hugged him back.

A few passers-by smiled indulgently at them. One middle-aged man thought..... "Oh, to be young, and in love"....

Varun hefted the bag, and still keeping one arm around her shoulders, they slowly came out of the station.

Varsha was feeling a little embarrassed. "Dan, God knows who all saw us", she said anxiously.

"Aw, so what? Nobody's bothered anymore.... This is the Millenial City". He continued, "They must have envied us".

His perception was spot on....

Chapter 10

It was Sunday..... and Varsha went to church on Sunday.

However, she refused to go with Sandeep and his family.... She refused to defile the church with more lies.

To avoid the embarrassment of going without his wife, Sandeep had stopped going, altogether. His parents and brother went for the morning Mass, while Varsha went in the evening. Not many people came at that time; she found it peaceful at twilight, with only a few members.... The huge church enveloped by silence, and the Divine Presence.

As she finished Mass and was returning home, her thoughts drifted to the time when she and Clement had started spending time with each other. They had randomly gone out a few times, till then.... but were not really dating.

Their first date was on a Friday. He had taken her out to chow, and dropped her back only by nine-thirty p.m. or so, as her hostel had a time limit of ten p.m.

They had eaten at a small Chinese restaurant, then for want of anything better to do.... gone for a long ride on his bike.

She had suggested they leave the busy inner roads and go into the outer Ring Road, where it was fairly isolated.... but he hesitated. He was thinking of her safety... what with Lenny stalking their movements.

"No, darling.... That's not safe for you", he replied.

They finally went to a public park, settling down on one of the benches along the jogging path. It was almost eight-fifteen p.m.; very few people were there.... They were sitting on that concrete bench, when he took her hand, enveloping it in his....

She would never forget the expression in his eyes.... soft, sensual and loving.... He was smiling slightly. She smiled back, felt her face becoming warm.

"Varsha, I need to say something", he said. "Ya, Clem".... she responded.

"I don't know if it's too soon to say it.... anyway.... I love you, darling", he murmured.

Her heart started racing; at the same time, there came a peculiar feeling of peace inside her.... as though his words had assuaged all the pain of the past months. For her, the adoration, longing and desire.... had all started much earlier than him.

She smiled, but he could see the slight sheen in her eyes.... It was welling up now....

"Oh, God", he thought, squeezing her fingers with his right hand, enveloping her with his left.

"Don't cry, sweetheart", he said.

"I'm not crying..... It's just that I've waited so long to hear that from you", she replied, in a slightly choked voice.

"Is it reciprocated"?, he asked, smiling.

"Oh, yes", she murmured, falling into his embrace.

"Say it", he said....

She shook her head, resting it on his chest.... He could feel the longing course through his body. She looked up into his face, her lips slightly parted.... He couldn't resist anymore.

He kissed her briefly, keeping his emotions under check. Though it was late, and fairly secluded, people were still hanging around the park.

He reluctantly pulled away, kissing her on the forehead. She lowered his head towards her, and whispered in his ear, "I love you, Clem"....

He felt he'd been punched in the gut.... Her soft voice, demure gestures, shyness..... they all turned on the maleness in him.

Physical feelings apart, he wanted to hold her forever.... protect her, look after her.

He was no saint... but these protective feelings he had were a first for him.

Also, the danger of Lenny and his cronies added another dimension to their relationship.... the fear of losing each other. She may not have realized it fully, but he knew the real dangers.

That bastard was an addict.... and unstable in the head, he mused.... He couldn't predict when Lenny would lose it.

He decided, then and there, that he would find a job outside the city, or better still, out of the country. When things were ready, he could take Varsha and leave.

He also decided that he had to move his parents and brother out of this place.... but he had to do some ground work for all this. He had a few contacts; he would start there.

Little did he realize what life had in store for them....

They finally left the park around nine-fifteen p.m. He dropped her to her hostel, waiting, till she was safely inside the main door. Even so.... He told her to get inside her room, lock it, and text him....

She did, and he finally relaxed for the day.

He went back to his office.... He had some surfing to do.... The net was faster there than on his mobile.

The fact that he himself could be in danger didn't bother him.... He could, and would fight back... Lenny and the others knew

that.... the only way they could get to him was through his folks, or Varsha.

It was close to midnight when he reached home. Only his younger brother, Vinny, was up, watching TV.

Just before going to sleep.... unusually, he locked the front door; put all the bolts into place.

"What's up, Clem"?, asked his brother. "Why are you locking the door as though it's a bank locker"?

"Nothing, Vin, just like that".... but the expression in his eyes warned his brother not to question him further.

He then checked on his parents.... sleeping.... He further locked the back door too, and finally went to bed.

He took Saturday off from work, telling Harsha he would manage the main supply networks through his mobile software.... to call him for any emergencies. Harsha assured him that he and Cherith would manage, but before finishing the call, warned him of Lenny and Darryl's attitude.

"Those guys are nursing a grudge against you", warned Harsha.

"Ya, I'm aware of it", he replied.

"Anything to do with you dropping Cheryl"?, he asked.

"Could be", he said, but didn't mention Varsha.

He took her out for lunch and a movie. Movie halls are usually a favourite destination of young couples in love.... They give a false

sense of security and privacy. In the darkened hall, he finally felt they weren't being watched.

He put the handrest of her chair up... pulling her close to him. She was in heaven.... resting her head on his broad shoulder, fingers linked with his.... his right arm holding her firmly around the waist.

She felt her pulse quicken.... He was looking so good, in an olive-green shirt and faded grey jeans, the shirt slightly unbuttoned, sleeves rolled up mid-way. He wore no jewellery, except for a Tag Heuer Chronograph on his left wrist.

He had a weakness for watches.... He had spent a small fortune on it. Anyway, it was his only indulgence, other than his bike. He owned a 'KTM 250 Adventure', costing nearly two and a half lakhs.

His hair was thick and straight, and, he kept it real short.... It enhanced his square jawline, clean shaven. Deep brown eyes, a slightly hooked nose and full lips.... all complemented by dark brown skin that was taut over high cheekbones. He had almost model-like looks, except that it was a little rough to be considered classic.

Varsha was in an orange crepe top, blue jeans and delicate strappy sandals, with a couple of inches of heels.

He had noticed the way the top clung to her curves; so too, her jeans.

As he felt her waist, he wanted to run his hands over it.... over her back, her thighs.... God! How he wanted her, he sighed.

As though she could read his thoughts, she leaned upward, and whispered in his ear, "Clem.... I need you"....

She was surprised by what she said.... so was he.... that whispered request finally broke his control....

He cupped her face in his right hand and kissed her.... It was not the light kiss of the park bench, but rather like the one outside her hostel.... full on, probing inside her mouth....

His left hand was stroking her back, and slowly, he could feel her naked skin under the top.... She moaned, clinging to him.

His fingers and palm traced the contours of her body, and slowly, felt her right breast.... He cupped it in his left hand; started stroking her.... Varsha thought she was going to pass out from the feelings washing over her.

She ran her fingers under his shirt.... He was so taut and firm; she could feel his warmth. Her hand moved lower, towards his jeans.... He groaned, lifting his lips from hers, and whispered, "Ya, babe.... feel me".

She was trembling, his hand on her breast was driving her crazy. He pushed her bra down.... cupping it fully in his hand... feeling her response....

"Oh, God.... I need him now", she thought. She unbuttoned his jeans, and felt his manhood.... He clutched her hard, kissing her again.

Realizing it was nearing intermission.... that the lights could come on any time, he reluctantly pulled away, adjusting her

lingerie into place. He buttoned his jeans, while she straightened her top and ran her hands through her hair.

She was too embarrassed to look at him.... Just then, the lights came on.

He touched her hand.... when she looked up, saw him smiling at her, gently. "I'll just go to the restroom, sweetie", he said.... "Will you be fine by yourself"?

"Ya, of course, Clem", she smiled too, but quickly averted her gaze. She was still embarrassed.

He left, looking back to see if she was ok....

The second half of the movie was fairly uneventful. He kept the handrest of her chair in place.... for fear he would, again, lose it...

She realized it too.... but wanted some contact with him.

"Can I hold your hand"?, she asked.

"Of course, babe", he replied, and twined his right hand into her left.

"I don't seem to have too much control, where you're concerned", he smiled crookedly.

"Clem, why don't you call me Sophia, or Soph.... instead of Varsha"?

"Ya, sure.... Sophia is a lovely name.... and Soph is more intimate", he added.

"Only my sister calls me so", she said.

"Are you close to her"?, he asked. "Very.... other than you, I love her the most".

"What about mom and dad"?, he added, she shrugged, saying, "Oh, they're a bit weird..... They have each other, they don't need anybody else".

She wasn't really close to them....

However, she and Shelly were very close.... She was the only one who knew all about Clement. From the first time she has seen him in college, she had confided everything to her sis....

After the movie, he dropped her and went back to office. There was a special consignment that had to be taken care of.

As he was finishing up to leave, he saw that Lenny was calling.

"Ya, Len.... Tell me".....

"Clem, don't fuck up your life for some female, man", he said.

"Are you referring to Varsha"?, he asked ominously. "Yep", replied Lenny.

"You mention her name again..... I'll kill you... Do you understand me? I've already warned you once.... Just keep your fucking nose out of my private life", he warned.

"You know, it's not just interference.... I can bust you wide open with the cops", threatened Lenny. "Cheryl wants to meet.... You

could ensure your chick's safety, by working things out with her", he offered.

"Fuck you, Lenny..... and fuck Cheryl.... Go ahead and bust me. Don't forget, I can talk too, and I know most of your goddamn networks. So.... just keep it professional with me, ok? If you or your cronies, so much as look at Varsha, I'll kill every fucking one of you", he finished.... His voice was hard enough that Lenny understood he would carry through his threat.

Even otherwise, Clement was not your average guy, he mused. There was something dangerous about him, and the worst thing, he wasn't scared....

"Fine, we'll see what happens", he replied, and quickly disconnected.

The next day was Sunday.... Varsha wanted to go to church.... but, with Clement.

When he reached home after his talk with Lenny..... He found a text message from her, asking him whether he could come to her hostel, by eight a.m. the next day.

He would have gone if she had called him at midnight....

Anyway, he simply texted back, "Ya, love.... Be there by eight. It would be great if you called me by seven, coz I might just sleep through the alarm".

As he drifted off to sleep, he was thinking.... She didn't say why....

She woke him by seven the next morning.... Clement thinking.... what a way to get up, seeing her lovely face on his mobile screen.

"Yep, babe.... I'll be there", he murmured sleepily. "Any idea where we're headed"?, he asked.

"To church", she replied, as if it was the most natural thing.

"It was.... for most good Christians", he thought wryly, "but not me".

He almost fell off the bed.... because it was Varsha, and he was madly in love with her, he didn't blow....

"Babe, you woke me up at seven, on a Sunday, to go to church"?, he asked incredulously.

"Ya.... any problem, Clem"?

"Huh... No, I'll just have a shower and come", he sighed, rolling his eyes to heaven.

"Jesus".... he muttered....

His mom's mouth dropped open.... Seeing him showered and dressed, at seven thirty in the morning, on a Sunday. She asked, "Are you alright, Clem"?

"Ma... for God's sake", he laughed.

"I mean, what force on Earth could achieve this miracle"?, she continued ragging him.

He smiled... pulling out one of the dining table chairs, and said, "Give me a cup of coffee, and I'll let you in on the secret".

"Sure", replied his mom, pouring out the coffee... pulling up a chair too. "I'm all ears", she continued, "So.... who's she"?

"How do you know it's a she"?, he grinned.

"Sweetie, I'm your mother. If you have to wake up by seven, on a Sunday.... shave, shower and splash enough deodorant on yourself that you're a walking advertisement for the brand.... then it must be a she, and a very special one, at that", she concluded wryly.

"Ya, ma.... It's someone special", he said, hugging her.

"What's her name"?, asked his mother.

"Sophia", he replied.....

"Thank the Lord for small mercies", she muttered under her breath.... "At least, she's a Christian".

"She wants me to go to church with her, can you believe it"?, he laughed.

"Really"?, exclaimed his mom. "I love her already.... If she can get you to go to church, she has my blessings. You can tell her that".

"Thanks, ma", he replied, and hugged her once again. "I'll tell her".

"Bring her home, sometime", added his mom.

"Ya, definitely.... Ok, bye....love you", he said, and whistled his way out.

He was dressed in a white shirt.... collar buttoned down, sleeves rolled up three-fourths, blue jeans and black aviators on....

Varsha thought he looked more handsome as each day passed.... Clement was thinking something along the same lines, about her.

She was dressed in a white and black fitted top and long skirt, with a wide elasticized waist, accentuating it's slimness....

She was looking taller too, he thought.... noticing her three inch strappy heels.

Long earrings dangled, nearly to her shoulders.... Hair brushed and left loose. She had beautiful long hair, cut in waves or steps, or whatever.... She tied it partially, with a clip, or sometimes, like today, left it loose.... He wanted to run his hands through it.... then reminded himself that they were going to church.

There was a small Catholic church, close to her hostel.... that's where they attended their first Sunday Mass together.

It was so beautiful, thought Varsha.... as she opened the gate, leading to the driveway.

Those three months.... She sighed, and found her eyes getting blurred, again....

She quickly blinked them off, opening the front door.

Sandeep wouldn't be there.... On Sunday evenings, he and his brother went for their weekly drinking session.... Came back by

about eight, and had dinner with their parents. Initially, Varsha used to join in.... but since the last two years, she had excused herself.

Sandeep's tongue tended to loosen after a few drinks, and she was scared he would indulge in loose talk.... or worse, try to get physical with her.

He once tried to hug her.... though she quickly got out of it. She didn't want any repeat scenes of the kind.

By now, his parents had guessed that there really was no relationship between them.

Clement was in his office, that Sunday.... the weekly holiday being Friday, as per the Islamic faith.

He too was remembering that Sunday Mass he and Varsha had attended together.

In fact, they had gone to that church a couple of more times.... before that fateful week, when Lenny finally lost his head and busted him.... He regretted it later, he had told Vinny.

However, it was too late for regrets.... Clement's deal with the Bureau included information on Lenny's networks.

He didn't have a choice, he had to give the Narco guys everything....

Lenny had been caught, so also Darryl, and the others. They were serving longer and harsher sentences.... and Cheryl... Vin told him that she had emigrated to the UK, where she had relatives. Their parents were divorced.... She and Lenny had been brought up by an aunt of theirs.

Chapter 11

Varun finished his final semester, and passed out of college, while Varsha successfully completed her first year....

During the long break, she wanted to avoid another scene of her mom asking her to come over for a couple of weeks, and Varun getting upset about it.

She visited them for a couple of days and got back.

She then took up an internship at a company, which required students to help in accounting audits. The contact came through Varun.... She had to work between ten a.m. and three p.m. She worked there for six weeks, by which time college was almost reopening.

Her mom and sister came for a function, staying at their relatives' place..... the same folks who were Varsha's local guardians. She too had to attend the function, and joined them for lunch.

"We've hardly seen Varsha this past year", said Anne aunty, her mother's cousin, "except during the first two months". Varsha swallowed awkwardly, and shot a glance at her mom.

During the last few months, she had used the excuse of going to her guardian's place, at her hostel, more than once.... In fact, one of those days, when her mother had called, her mobile was out of reach.... She had, subsequently, called her hostel.... and was told that Varsha had gone to her guardian's place.

Now.... remembering this, she looked anxiously at her mom....

She gave Varsha a steady look, but didn't contradict her when she apologized. "Sorry aunty..... I've been a bit busy.... college is pretty hectic".

As she was leaving.... Her mom walked her to the gate, asking, "Are you seeing someone, Varsha"?

She was taken aback by the direct question, but realized it was pointless to deny it...

"Yes, ma", she replied.

"Who is he"?, asked her mother, "and why didn't you tell me about him.... like you do everything else"?

"I wanted to..... when I came home for the last semester break, and this one too... but Shirley used to be there most of the time", she added lamely, referring to her younger sister.

"We talk on the phone, twice a week.... You could have told me anytime", her mom stated.

"I was scared.... whether you'll approve, what your reaction will be", she finished.

"Who is he"?, repeated her mother.

"His name is Varun Thomas", she explained, and added, "He was my senior in college.... In fact, he just passed out this year. He's been working part-time, for the past two years, at a Financial Management firm, and now he's going to be there full-time. He's also planning to complete his masters at an evening college".

"Thank God, he's at least a Christian", stated her mom. " Is he trustworthy"?

"Ya, ma.... He's very nice.... He wants to marry me, after my graduation".

Her mother looked pensive.... "You know your father won't approve of this, right"?

"I know.... What do I do"?, asked Varsha.

"I want to meet Varun.... before I leave tomorrow", she said.

"Ok... where"?

"You bring him to this area..... We'll meet at a cafe, and talk..... let your sister be at Anne's place. See if you can come by three p.m., tomorrow..... at that time, everyone will be taking rest, including Shirley".

Varsha went back to her hostel and called Varun. They hadn't met that day.... When she told him of her conversation with mom, he readily agreed to meet her.

"We'll go together, Deb.... and don't worry, I'll convince her".

The next day, she took off from work. He couldn't.... He worked upto one-thirty p.m., then took permission till five. He picked up Varsha; they went to a cafe, close to her guardian's place.... giving her mother directions to reach there.

Her mom felt positive when she met Varun.... the way he greeted her, and spoke.... she could sense the sincerity and honesty in his eyes. She could also make out that he was genuinely in love with her daughter, not using her to pass time.

She asked him about his family, his work.... among other things.

Varsha hardly spoke.... She was tensed her mother wouldn't approve..... and for her, mom's approval was very important.

He answered all her mother's questions with a steady gaze, in a straightforward maner. He was also tensed, but knew better than to show it....

They had coffee and snacks..... At the end of it, her mom smiled slightly, including both of them in her gaze.

She looked at him and said, "This news will not be accepted by Varsha's father. He is not as understanding or accepting as me.... So, whenever you both decide to get married.... be prepared for a simple church wedding, or a civil one".

"I understand, aunty", he replied, and added, "My dad will also object, although my mother is like you... she'll support us".

"When are you planning for it"?, asked her mother.

Varun stated, "I need at least a year to consolidate myself. I earn well.... but I've only just become full-time. In a year's time, I would have enough reserve to take up a house, and take care of Varsha".

"Ok".... she replied. "I will also help, in whatever way possible. In the meantime, just stay focussed on your goals, both of you.... don't make any mistakes". The underlying meaning of what she said was pretty clear to them.

"Yes, aunty", he murmured.... though for once, he couldn't hold her gaze.

She got up to leave, and Varsha became emotional. "Ma".... she began, but couldn't complete the sentence, as her voice was breaking.

"It's ok, sweetie", consoled her mother. "You have made a good choice"..... smiling at Varun.

He was genuinely touched.... and went forward to hug her.

He put his arm around her and said, "You don't worry about Varsha, aunty.... I'm in this relationship for keeps, and will never let her, or you down".

"Thanks, Varun", replied her mom..... finding her eyes were wet.

She walked her mother to the corner of Anne aunty's house, while he waited outside the cafe.

As they parted, her mom hugged her, saying, "It's fine, Varsha.... He's a good, decent boy. But remember, he's a man. Don't have any physical relationship before marriage, or else he may not have a good opinion about you, or your upbringing".

"Yes, ma".... she replied, not looking directly at her.

Of course, her mother had her best interests at heart.... but she was from an older generation.... Also, she didn't really know Varun.... thus, she consoled herself.

When she returned to the cafe, he was waiting on the bike.

"Shall I go by rick, darling"? she teased.... "Remember what mom said.... Be focussed on your goals, and don't make any mistakes".

He grinned, and replied, "Haa.... but your mom doesn't know that my ultimate goal is you, babe... So, shut up and get on the bike".

They rode back, Varsha hugging him.... He, twining his left hand in hers....

"Dan, just because I let you kiss me and all, you won't think bad of my upbringing, right"? she asked... half-joking, half-serious.

"God, what's your upbringing got to do with us kissing"?, he teased.

"No.... just asking", she said.

"It's too late for that, sweetheart", he stated. "You're mine.... and nobody's changing that. If they accept it gracefully, like your mom, fine.... or else"..... He laughed, and squeezed her hand.

"Or else, what"?, asked Varsha.

"Or else... I'll kidnap.... and ravish you", he said.

"As though you haven't, already", she replied, smiling....

"Haa... What have you seen till now, sweetie"? I haven't even got started with you"..... he stated, mock-seriously, and gave her a small bite on her finger.

"Ouch".... she exclaimed, and clipped him one.

Chapter 12

That Sunday evening, Varsha was alone at home.... She glanced at the clock, and saw that it showed seven p.m.

Still an hour or so, till Sandeep and his brother came to their parent's home.... Another hour and a half, for family and dinner time, she thought.

She sighed.... It was seven years.... since she had literally been dragged home by her father, and put under house arrest....

Her parents wanted to marry her off immediately, but she begged them to allow her to complete graduation.

Going to college was out of the question, but after pleading for nearly a week, they finally agreed that she would take a lateral entry into one of the colleges in her hometown... finishing it in distance mode.

She was essentially buying time.... secretly hoping that Clem might become free in at least the next two years; would find her.... but that never happened....

She finished her course, and right after that, her dad arranged for her to marry Sandeep. He had already been in talks with them during the previous year.... things were settled quickly.

She didn't even have a phone.... Her father had deactivated her number, and destroyed her sim card.... making sure that she should never have a chance to contact Clement, again.

She did try his number several times, using her sister's phone.... but it was unreachable, and later, deactivated.

After searching through her books, she finally found Sandra's number, and gave it to her sister.... who contacted Sandra, to know what exactly had happened to him.

Sandra was relieved hearing Shelly's voice.... She told her she had tried to contact Varsha several times, but her number was non-existent.

Anyway, she requested to be connected once.... She needed to talk.

Shelly arranged for it, and they spoke for a few minutes, during which she informed Varsha that Clement had been charged for five years....

The penalty for trafficking of drugs was non-bailable, and no parole allowed.

She broke down, crying herself to sleep that night.... and several more days and nights.

A month later, she was married off to Sandeep.

She remembered how much she had wept the night before, holding onto her pillow and sobbing his name into it. "Clem... Clem... why? Why did this happen to us"?

Clement was in his cell, having the same thoughts.... though, he would only later come to know that she had been married.

He remembered that day.... After a week together, a week in which he experienced more happiness and love with her, than in his entire life.... They were sitting on one of the benches, at a public park near her hostel.

The park was huge, and shaded by large trees. The play area for kids was in the centre, while the surroundings were dotted with concrete benches..... nooks and corners shaded by huge tree branches.

He was reclining on the bench; Varsha was sitting in the space between his splayed out legs. He was holding her from behind, his hands encircling her waist..... while her hair was against his chest.

He buried his face in her thick hair, and lightly kissed the nape of her neck....

"Sweetheart, I want to tell you something", he said. "Ya, Clem.... what's it"?, she asked.

"I'm thinking of finding a job outside this city.... or better still, out of the country", he stated.

She was so surprised, she jerked out of his arms and turned back. "So, you're going to go away"?, she whispered, her eyes involuntarily welling up.

"Babe... I'm not going away alone. I'm taking you and going", he explained, regretting that he had not put it across properly, the first time around. God, she was so sensitive.... tears came easily to her.

"Calm down, sweetie".... He rocked her in his arms. "Would I leave you and go"?

She slowly regained her composure, and asked him the reason for wanting to do so.

"Things are not so good.... Lenny and Cheryl can screw it up for us", he explained.

Varsha had had her suspicions, for sometime now.... today, she gave voice to it.

"Clem, can I ask you something frankly"?

"Ya".... he replied, half-knowing what she was going to ask.

"Are you involved in anything illegal"?, she prodded.

"Well, let's just say.... it's borderline, Soph. I know of a few things that are not strictly legal, but I go along with it. Till now, it was ok.... I couldn't care too much. But now, life has started to

have value, with you. That's why I want to get out of it, and start afresh, somewhere else".

She rested her head on his shoulder, linking her hand to his....
"Ok.... you know best what to do. Just don't let go of me".

Her fingers involuntarily tightened on his, and he felt his pulse starting to race.

"No.... I won't let you go", he promised. He was confident he could keep his word.... He just needed another six months to finalize things, and get them out of there.

But fate didn't give him six months, just three....

Chapter 13

College reopened.... Varsha started with her second year, while Varun started working full-time.

Simultaneously, he also started his masters, in Financial Management.

He worked from nine to four p.m.... exempt for an hour, at his office, as he had to go for classes, from five thirty to eight-thirty p.m.... five days a week.

He would sometimes drop Varsha to college in the mornings, and carry on for work.... or meet her in the evenings, then go for classes. On some days, he even took her out, after eight-thirty p.m..... bribing the watchman to let her in a half hour late, by ten or so.

They spent the weekends together.... Going for a movie, or just chowing.

On a rare Saturday, he was off from work. His office was undergoing some renovation, and his boss had asked everyone to take a day off.... Of course, the software would continue to trade on their mobiles or laptops.

Varun had woken up by nine in the morning.... switched it on, and went back to sleep. He was due to meet Varsha only after lunch.

By eleven a.m., his mother figured he had slept enough, and came to his room to wake him up. His mobile was on the side table.... some messages were coming in....

She just touched its screen, and the messages clicked open.... It was from someone called 'Deb'....

One of them read, "Dan... Hi, darling, still sleeping? When are you coming today? Give me fifteen minutes at least, to get ready" The next one was, "Love you, babe"....

His mom had suspected for sometime now that he was involved with someone....

When she had asked his brother, Mark, about it, sometime back.... He had simply grinned, and said, "Possible, ma.... He's twenty three years old, good-looking, independent..... why shouldn't he have a girlfriend"?

Now, she had confirmed it.

Not saying anything.... she simply woke him up, giving him coffee.

"Morning, ma", he muttered.... sipping his coffee, and reaching for his cigarette pack under the bedroll.

His mother noticed that too, and asked, "Is there any bad habit you don't have, Dan"?

"Nope", he grinned.

As he started to go out, headed for the terrace... she enquired, "Who's Deb"?

He turned sharply..... "Who gave you that name"?

"Your mobile", she replied, wryly. "When I came to wake you, two messages were visible on your screen.... Didn't you read them"?

He quickly clicked open Deb's messages....

"If she calls you Dan, she must be special", smiled his mother.... "and not to miss the endearments".

He smiled sheepishly, and hugged her. "I wanted to tell you, ma.... It's just that things have been so hectic, I kept postponing it".

"How serious are you.... Who is she"?

"Her name's Deborah", he replied, adding, "She was my junior in college.... still in second year.... and.... I'm going to marry her, when the time comes".

His mom looked at him steadily, "Do you know how your dad will react"?

"Ya, I know..... I'll deal with that, you don't worry", he assured her. "Also, I know my responsibilities.... regarding Sonia, her future, helping the home..... I'm not giving up on my family. It's just that I love Deb as much, and I'm going to spend my future with her".

His mother never ceased to be amazed by her first-born.... The confidence with which he stated things.... and implemented them. He had always been like that, right from childhood.

"Ok, bring her home sometime", she told him.

"I will, ma", he said, and blew her a kiss.... then went to the terrace, to have his smoke.

He told Varsha about the conversation with his mom. She was feeling awkward... "Dan, did I get you into trouble"?, she asked.

"On the contrary.... I'm glad she saw those messages", he replied, adding, "I could tell her about you.... I'm actually relieved".

"But I used endearments", she said, looking sheepish. "That's ok, sweetheart", he assured her.

The next week.... They met up with Mahesh and Haritha, for a movie..... and had good fun.... It brought back the college days, especially for Varun and Mahesh. The girls were still classmates, but Mahesh was doing his MBA full-time, at some other institute... while Varun was busy with office and evening classes.

He took Varsha home, in due course, to meet his mom. They hit it off immediately, and he was genuinely happy.... The two women he loved maximum.

The year went by without any major incidents. They went resort-hunting, a few more times.....

She still did most of his assignments, as he was always short of time..... Anyway, she does a much better job than me, he mused.

As they were nearing the end of that academic year.... they met one Saturday evening, as usual. Varsha was a little too quiet....

"What's the matter, babe"?, he asked.

"I spoke to mom, Dan.... She informed me that dad was finalising some marriage proposal for me", she replied.

"But, right now"?, he asked, surprised. "You're still studying".

"Maybe not now.... That's what mom was saying.... By the time I finish final year".

Varun was thinking.... then took her hand in his, saying, "Don't worry, da... I'm quite ok now, financially. Anything like that, just give me a two-week notice.... I'll arrange for the formalities at the registrar's office. The sub-registrar of our area is one of my clients".

"You mean, for a civil wedding"?, she asked.

"Ya".... he replied. "Remember, your mother said, "be prepared".

"Yes"..... she said pensively, and leaned her head against his shoulder.

Chapter 14

Varsha switched off the telly and went into her room, after making sure the front door was locked; not bolted. Sandeep had his own key.... He could let himself in.

She didn't want to be around when he came in....

Off-late, he had started resenting the way their life was.... He once asked, "Why can't we live together, like a normal couple"?

'Together' just didn't apply here, she thought.... They were just two human beings who stayed at the same house. At least, that's the way she looked at it....

Anyway, as she was entering her room, the phone rang.... She saw that it was Santhosh..... Sandeep's brother, calling.

"Yes, Santhosh"?, she asked.

"Akka.... Sandeep is a little too drunk, so I'm taking him to my place", he said.

Santhosh stayed on the second floor. Their parents had meticulously planned, and made a house each, for both their sons, on different floors. Santhosh was yet to be married....

"Ok, that's fine", she replied.

Santhosh knew about Clement, through Sandeep, and.... or so it seemed to her, sympathized with her. It showed in his expression, when he looked at her....

One day, he even indirectly asked her, "Akka, why do you live like this? Why can't you find happiness, with the one you truly want"?

She had no answer.... Just smiled at him, through eyes blurred with tears. They were of the same age, but he insisted on calling her 'akka', which meant 'elder sister'.

She went into her room, closed and locked it. She had been following the practice for the past five years..... and now, it was like an involuntary reflex.

She remembered Clem's words...

"When you get into your room... lock the door, babe".....

"Don't go out after dark, sweetheart"....

"Don't go anywhere alone, in college".....

"You worried so much about me, Clem, even though you were around to protect me.... but the last five years, I have lived alone, in this house.... with this man, Sandeep, with nobody to turn to, if he misbehaved or abused me", she mused sadly.

Her sister, Shelly, called almost everyday.... sometimes, just to know that she was ok.

Of course, to give Sandeep credit.... He hadn't physically abused her, but verbally.... had argued with her over petty issues, insulted her.... and these days, there was a dangerous and resentful look in his eyes, which genuinely scared her.

She got into bed, and in no time, found her pillow getting soaked with tears....

She wanted out of this house, this marriage, this pain..... She had taken it for five years; she wanted out....

She thought.... at least if I'm alone and free, I'll find some way of contacting Clem.

"Maybe he's married and settled, you dumbo", warned the logical part of her brain. It had been more than two years after his release.... He must have left the country, like he planned to....

"But maybe, he's out there somewhere, still waiting for me".... appeased her heart.

He would say, "I've loved you so much, Soph.... I don't have any love left to give anyone else".... whenever she had had her bouts of insecurity about whether he would get bored with her in the future.

Her insecurity stemmed from those college days, when she had to wait almost a year to get his love and attention.

She had fallen in love with him the first time she watched him walk the ramp, for the 'Talents Day' fashion show, at college.

It was the week to exhibit the talents of the freshers, and after the competitions.... the seniors wound up the fest with a few programmes, of which the finale was the fashion show.

She would forever remember the way he looked, in those black leather trousers, paired with riding boots.... The white t-shirt, having the skull and crossbones.... and the black leather jacket, with silver-black aviators on his eyes....

He was the 'show-stopper' for the fashion team, and came in only towards the end. He was the only one without make-up or accessories.

He later told her that he'd threatened he wouldn't do the ramp walk, if they forced him to wear make-up, or hold any accessories.

The best moment was when he took off his aviators, just as he reached the end of the ramp... giving his most seductive smile, and a little wink.... girls were screaming.... "Clem, love you".

She had asked Halle who he was.... Seeing Varsha's expression, she laughed, "Forget it, kiddo.... He's already got a girlfriend, and lots of other girls, waiting in the queue"....

Her heart had broken a little.... she sighed.

Halle had then pointed out his girlfriend, Cheryl....

"She's looks like she's going to have a cardiac arrest", thought Varsha....

Cheryl almost had a heart attack, that evening, seeing Clem's popularity with the girls....

Even otherwise, he was very popular.... Not just because of his looks, but ironically, because he didn't care too much about it.

He was one of the most down-to-earth guys. Generally, someone that good looking, and who had so many women swooning over him, was bound to be arrogant and condescending.

Not Clem.... He had friends all over, guys and girls... treated all of them equally.... the guys with a casual, friendly attitude.... the girls with tolerance, peppered with a self-deprecating sense of humour, and sometimes, if he was in the mood.... a little flirty.

Till Cheryl became a part of his life, while he was in the second year of graduation.... She brought so much negativity with her, thought Varsha.

She started verbally abusing the girls who were close to him.... once, even physically. Slowly, he shut down.... not wanting anyone to suffer Cheryl's abuses.

Only in my case, he reacted against her, and put his foot down....

That's why all this shit happened, she reminded herself.

Her last thought, that night, as she finally drifted off to sleep, was that she was genuinely going to make an effort to end this marriage.... her parents be damned.

Shelly had been advising her the same for the past five years....
but she was scared they would carry through their threat of
ending their lives.

However, seven years of loneliness, pain and frustration had
brought her to the breaking point !

Chapter 15

Things came to a head when Varsha was in her last semester, the next year.

Varun had, in fact, finished all his theory papers..... only project submission was left.

One day, her father called, and told her to come home in two-three days. Dreading the answer, she asked, "Why, papa"?

"I have finalized a boy for you, Varsha. He and his parents are coming over to meet you. After your final semester, you will marry him.... any further studies, you can continue to.... they have no objection to that. But they want the wedding as soon as possible. Very good family; the boy is well-educated, and has good future prospects", he concluded, in his usual autocratic manner. He hadn't even bothered to ask his daughter what she wanted....

"Ok, papa", she replied.... the line clicked.

She later spoke to her mom, that night. "Ma, what do I do"?, she asked.

Her mother replied, "I told you and Varun that day, isn't it? Now, you talk to him and decide".

It was quite late by the time she finished talking to her mom.... She didn't know whether to disturb Varun or not. They had spoken about an hour ago..... After debating for sometime, the urgency to inform him overtook everything else.

He was just settling down to sleep. He was thinking of Varsha.... the fact that they were not able to spend enough time together, these days. They had met yesterday, but that had been so hurried.... He was already running late, so he just dropped her to college... just a short bike ride. Of course, she made it special by pecking him on the nape or ear, when he least expected it....

He would, most of the days, ride one-handed, twining his left hand with hers, but yesterday, even that was not possible.... Traffic was heavy; he had to concentrate on the road.

Right then, there was a missed call.... Surprised it was from her, he immediately called back.

"Hi, babe... I was just thinking of you", he said, in a low voice.... "Did you read my mind"?

"Dan, I want to talk to you, right now.... would that be a problem"? The urgency in her voice knifed him into attention.

"No, no problem.... Just give me two minutes, I'll call you back".

He pulled on a woolen roll-neck sweater over his t-shirt, and, went out to call her. It was almost the end of November, and the nights were chilly....

Coming out of the house, he settled on his bike and dialled her number.

She picked up on the first ring.

"Dan.... My dad called today", she said, nervously.

"Ok..... What's it about"?, he asked. He knew she hardly spoke to her father.... He was quite distant and autocratic, according to her.

"The same issue, Dan... He has finalized the proposal to get me married, and wants me to go home in the next two-three days, to meet them".

Varun was caught off-guard, but quickly recovered. "Don't worry, Deb... I told you, I can arrange things in about ten days; we can get married".

"Ok.... but, what about the next two-three days? I don't want to go home. Who knows, he might even get me engaged. Or worse, he may not let me come back.... I can't take that risk", she replied.

"Can you ask him to postpone the meeting with those people, by a week"?, he asked, to which she replied, "He won't listen to anything, Dan.... If I avoid his calls, or just don't go, I'm scared he'll come in person, and force me to go back. If I go, I'm scared I'll get stuck there. Either way.... If I get separated from you.... I can't imagine it".... she was sobbing, by then.

"Sweetie.... Don't get upset. Let's think this through, rationally. You have to make up some excuse, and postpone it by a week.... I'll hurry things up; we'll get married in a week. But you need to give me a week. Anyway..... just don't go home, at any cost", he concluded.

"Oh, Jesus.... What excuse can I make"?, she wondered. She breathed deeply, to regain her composure.

"Ok, Dan.... I'll think up something, by tomorrow morning.... You'll start the proceedings at the registrar's office, isn't it"?

"Yes, of course.... That's the first thing I'm doing tomorrow.... I'll tell the sub-registrar it's an emergency; let's see how fast things move", he replied.

"Babe.... Don't panic, just stay calm", he consoled her. He had never seen her this upset....

"Dan.... Don't let go of me", saying which, she broke down again.

"No, sweetheart.... I won't.... whatever I have to do for it, I won't let go of you", he promised.

His voice had an edge.... The way she was sobbing, he just wanted to hold and comfort her.

"Sorry, I'm behaving like this", she said, through more tears.

"It's ok.... Just go to bed. I'm there.... I'll make it ok.... think up an excuse, and don't go home.... Good night, sweetie. Go to sleep, and don't cry", he finished, in a slightly rough voice. God, he couldn't even be near her at this time....

The next day, he contacted the sub-registrar by about eleven a.m.; briefly explained the situation to him....

Luckily, Varun had helped him diversify his financial portfolio since last year, and he had made quite a few good investments. He was impressed with him; was happy to return the favour now. He assured him that he would get everything ready, in three to four days....

He had to submit the proof of their I.D.'s and addresses, passport-size photos, and the charges for the advocate. Their office would arrange for the lawyer, as Varun didn't have time to find a suitable one, right then.

"Don't worry.... I'll start the proceedings, back-dating the application, and by tomorrow, will give you the date. It should not go beyond next Monday.... Send me the data I listed out", he concluded.

"Sure, Sir.... I'll whatsapp everything within an hour", said Varun.

He then called Varsha. He had spoken to her in the morning; to his relief, she seemed composed. She said she had thought up an excuse, and would convey it to her mother.

"Just delay it till Tuesday, Deb.... The sub-registrar has practically promised me it'll all be done by Monday. Also, whatsapp me pics of your passport-size photo, I.D. and address proof, right now", he added.

"Ok, Dan..... will do", she said, "I didn't go to college today.... I wasn't feeling up to it".

"That's ok.... You just relax. I'll see you in the evening", he replied, and the connection clicked.

Varsha had thought hard as to what excuse she could make, to delay going home, by nearly a week. Her father would'nt listen to anything about missing college, assignments, or tests..... She finally decided on the one thing any girl can fall back on.... Her monthly cycle, and its associated problems.

She told her mom to inform him that she couldn't travel this week.... she was suffering from abdominal cramps.... He would get the point.

When she spoke to her mother, her tone indicated that he was sitting close by, so she didn't say anything else. Later on, she gave her the details.

"Do you have a saree to wear"?, asked her mom.

"Ya, ma.... That wine-coloured crepe saree I bought for my graduation day.... I'll get the blouse stitched, and wear it".

"Ok", replied her mother, getting emotional.... "I won't be there, when you're getting married".

"I, too, feel bad about it.... but what else to do"?, she asked. "Let's hope we can have a small ceremony in church, later on.... If it happens, you can come for that".

"Varsha, when are you informing your father, about this"?

"It will all be done by Monday.... I'll tell him on Tuesday. If I feel scared, I will ask Varun to talk to him", she stated.

"Ok".... sighed her mom.

"Ma... You pretend you didn't know anything about all this, or else, he'll make your life miserable", she suggested.

The date at the registrar's office was fixed for Monday, next week.

The actual procedure had a notice period of a month, but Varun's closeness to the sub-registrar speeded up things.... by-passing some of the steps.

He informed his mother on Friday, explaining the circumstances that had led to this sudden development. She understood..... though she was upset. But what to do?

Varsha also spoke to her, and apologized.... His mother was gracious enough not to show any negativity to her, simply consoling her that it was all the Lord's Will..... and asked her to come home, after the formalities were over.

"Yes, aunty.... I will", she promised. Her voice was choking; his mom understood her state of mind.

He wanted to inform his father, too.... but his mother advised him to postpone it, until it was all done.

"You never know how he'll react, Dan", she said. He thought it over, and agreed. He didn't want any more complications or emotional blackmail, at this point of time, he reckoned.

Monday morning found Varun in a crisp, button-down white shirt, dark grey formal pants and black aviators. His only accessory was the Tissot chronograph he wore on his left wrist.

Varsha came out of her hostel, prior to them heading to the registrar's office.... He was left speechless, seeing her.

She wore a wine-coloured crepe saree with a silver-shaded blouse, also matching silver danglers and bangles. Her hair was kept in place by a silver clip.... Her eyes were lined with kajal and eyeliner, lips coated with a slight pink sheen, from the lip gloss.... She looked ravishing, he thought wryly. The deep wine colour of the saree highlighted her wheatish complexion beautifully, and it clung to her curvy figure.

It was the first time he had seen her in a saree; he was flat....

His eyes said it all.... she blushed.

"Dan, don't look like that", she said.

"Like what, darling"?, he asked, hoarsely.

"You look great", he managed to say.

His mouth was dry; he felt his body tightening....

"You're looking good too", she said, her face still flushed.

The formalities at the registrar's office went smoothly.... Mahesh and Haritha signed, as witnesses. After that, they all snacked at a close-by joint, and finally, Varun took her home.

His mother blessed them.... saying a small prayer at the Altar. Varsha was moved to tears.... She hugged his mom, and they both cried....

Only his brother was there....

Sonia, his sister, had classes, and couldn't miss school. She had, however, left a card for them, wishing them all the best for the future.

Varun was genuinely surprised, and touched....

"When did the little magpie grow up"?, he asked his brother. They both laughed, but were happy that she was, at last, learning to be mature.

Mark hugged them too..... He said, "I'll save my gift, for when you guys take up a house".

"We haven't yet decided", replied Varsha.

"Oh, it'll happen soon enough", stated Mark. "As of today evening.... when he informs dad, he's going to get thrown out.... and then, he'll figure.... Why should we both stay separately, in PG digs? Might as well take up a house. Right, bro"?

"Spot on, da", laughed Varun.

Varsha was shocked they were taking this so lightly, and said so....

"Dad's been trying to throw me out since I was in high school", he smiled.... "So, the emotions have kind of died down"....

"You both are incorrigible", she laughed too.

"Yep, that we are..... Satan's deputies", answered Varun.

His mother also knew the reality, and was already emotional about it.

"He's going to throw you out", she sobbed.

"Ma... as it is, he stays only for a few hours, at night.... It really won't make any great difference", joked his brother, trying to diffuse the situation.

"He's right, ma", consoled Varun. "Wherever I am, why are you worried? I'll come and see you, whenever you want".

"Ok... Let God decide everything", sighed his mom. They spent a little more time, and, then left....

They went out for lunch, Varun holding her round the waist. When she glanced up at him, he gave her a look that sent waves of feelings through her... He felt it too.... She was so close, yet so far.

"Enough of waiting", he mused. "Mark was right..... Just rent a place, and start living our life".

"Sweetie.... However my dad reacts, let's just take up a house", he told her. She smiled shyly, and his resolve hardened. "I'm a little worn out with these ten-minute bike rides and two-hour movie dates", he reflected, adding, "I want you with me, always".

"Always, Dan"?, she asked sweetly, but her eyes were welling up....

"Hmm.... always", he said, squeezing her hand.

She then told him, "I texted mom.... I'll call her in the evening. Will you talk to my dad, tomorrow? I'm too scared to tell him".

"Sure, love.... today, my dad, and tomorrow.... your dad".

Varsha's father's reaction was only expected...

Varun introduced himself.... explaining the sequence of events, ending with the fact that he had married his daughter.... Her dad didn't abuse him verbally, or otherwise.... In fact, he acknowledged what he said.

It was followed by a significant pause, he then asked, "Is Varsha there? I want to speak to her".

"Yes, uncle", he replied.... and gave her the phone.

"Yes, papa"?, she asked, hesitantly.

"Is all this true"?.... His voice was ominous.

"Yes, papa... I love Varun, and couldn't marry anyone else. That's why".... she trailed off.

"From today, there's no more connection between you and my family. Do you understand"?, he stated.

Varsha was shocked by what he said, and the coldness of the statement.... but before she could say anything more, she heard a click.... realized that the line had been cut.

She looked at Varun; he simply enveloped her into his arms. She started to cry....

While speaking to her father, she had turned on the mobile speaker, so he had heard it all.

"It's ok, babe... don't be upset. It was only expected, right? Life is all about choices... and you made yours. He'll come around, after sometime. Right now, he's just hurt and angry", he consoled her.

"Ya, Dan... It's just that.... It hurts".... she managed, between sobs.

"Stay calm... things will fall into place, in its own time", he added.

On the other hand, the day before.... Varun's father's reaction was totally unexpected and logical. He heard him out, asking, "Where are you planning to stay? Are you bringing her here"?

"No, dad.... I'll take up a house... That's better, for now", he replied.

"Yes... that's better, son"....

"I'm sorry if I've hurt you", he muttered, not meeting his dad's eyes.

His father looked at him steadily, and, stated, "It's ok, Varun.... You've always been independent. You didn't do anything wrong. Just what any man would... and should do. If you've committed yourself to this girl, it's your duty to love and protect her, all your

life.... She has left behind her family, trusting you. Don't let her down".

"No, dad.... I won't", he replied, in a hoarse voice.

He was stunned by his father's reply.... and deeply moved. He didn't know if he should hug him... they had never been too close.

His dad solved his dilemma by getting up, and patting him on the back.

"Take you time, find a place of your own", he continued, "this will always be your home.... It's just that we are not prepared for another person, right now".

"I know", he said, having regained his composure. "Thanks for understanding me", he added.

His dad just nodded, and went into his room.

Chapter 16

Clement was in his cabin, working late.

There were some consignments coming over for the Prince, and he had to personally receive them. He had no idea when the couriers would arrive.... so, he was just finishing up some routine pending work, like replying to e-mails, and stuff like that.

After he had been released, he had tried to contact Varsha, even though he knew she was married. Her found her number to be non-existent, her e-mail account had been deactivated..... She had never been on social media, right from the beginning.

Even then, he had searched for her, but didn't find anything....

His own social media account, mobile number and e-mail account, had all been deleted.

He never contacted any of his close friends, as he didn't want to endanger their lives in any way.... Neither his boss, nor colleagues.

He told Vinny to inform them, to deny all knowledge of any couriers through their office supply networks. He didn't want to implicate them in any way....

During the initial days after his arrest, Deepak and George came to meet him.... He warned them never to repeat it.

"You fuckers", he said, his voice breaking.... "We'll treasure every moment we've spent together, but don't ever try to keep in touch with me, for your own safety. Tell Sandy too"....

Sandra cried, for nearly a week, when they relayed what he had said.

But, such was Clement's nature... that nobody in his circle held his arrest, and subsequent detention, against him.... even the investigating officer, in charge of his case, developed a bond with him, by the end of two years.

"I'm going to find her", he thought.... coming back to the present...

Over the past year, especially the last six months.... the pain of losing Varsha was bothering him a lot.... He wanted to know, once and for all, what had happened to her, how her life was....

If she was happy in her marriage, he wanted to lay to rest the ghost of their relationship.... though, it was altogether another matter that he couldn't ever forget her.

But at least he could stop hoping.... Every time he saw someone vaguely like her, his heart missed a beat.

"I feel it in my gut that she's out there.... waiting for me.... that she still cares for me, still loves me".... his heart appeased his brain.

Karen came into his room, knocking briefly, before entering. She was one of the secretaries cum administrative support staff of their team.

She smiled a little seductively, and asked, "Staying late, Clement"?

"Ya, Karen... You carry on, if you're done", he smiled back....

She thought, "What a guy.... good looking, confident, intelligent and sexy. You hardly find such a lethal combination anymore.... and he's not interested in women.... but, why"?

She had tried to probe, once or twice, but found he shut down.... There was a look in his eyes, she mused.... a far-away look, a look of pain....

She was divorced and single. She had indirectly, and once directly, propositioned him. He had not been embarrassed, just smiled, saying, "Karen, you're a beautiful woman.... but I'm not in the frame of mind to be in a relationship".

Then one day, she found his purse on the table.... He had accidentally left it out, forgetting to take it. She was about to lock it in his drawer, when curiosity overtook her, and she opened it, to see if there were any photographs.

Sure enough, two of them..... One looked like his mom, while the other was that of a beautiful young woman, smiling sweetly....

She had removed the photo gingerly; turned it over....

At the back, in Clement's handwriting, were the words, "My love, Sophia".....

He hadn't had an easy time either, these past seven years....

The initial two years of his sentence had been debriefing.... which meant, giving information to the authorities, to crack the drug courier networks, to what extent he was aware of.

The information he provided helped them break quite a few chains of trafficking.... guys like Lenny, Darryl and a host of them, were busted.

He also helped them analyze probable current and future alternate networks... Analysis with his case officer went on for months.

One or two of the higher-level couriers were also exposed from the above analysis, and that scared him... He feared for his family and Varsha. If course, he couldn't get across to her...

Regarding his family.... anticipating what could happen, he had advised his brother to immediately move to a small town, close to where his sister, Catherine, and her husband, Ryan, lived.

As he moved them soon after his arrest, his family became inconspicuous and safe.

He didn't know how to contact Varsha.... just hoped, she too would be safe.

Deepak had told his brother that she had been taken back home, by her father.

Clement asked Vinny to contact her, and give her the news of his whereabouts. He had tried her number, but it was disconnected....

Ironically.... Her parents, though they behaved so cruelly to her, were her saviours. Her father had taken her home, immediately after Clement's arrest, and literally, locked her up. That saved her, and them....

His brother-in-law, Ryan, was a real gem. He never judged him negatively for what had happened. Instead, he arranged for his passport and visa formalities; kept it all ready for him.... to leave the country, as soon as he was released.

Of course, the heat had died down.... The drug dealers had formed new networks and couriers, but Ryan didn't want to take any chances.

Clement met his parents and family briefly, before flying out.... He wanted time to search for Varsha, but he knew he couldn't.... though, he did try her number and e-mail, but both were unsuccessful. Her number was non-existent, and the e-mail bounced back...

The year he came to the country that was now his home, was a hectic one....

He had been given this appointment due to a lot of influence on the part of Ryan's boss, an Islamic businessman, who had relatives in the Kingdom, and in the Royal Family.

However, Clement quickly proved that he was an asset to the Trouble-shooting Team of the Company.

Towards the end of that year, he foiled an attempt on the Prince's life.... taking a bullet, in his left arm, in the process.

During his recovery, His Royal Highness had come to meet him, personally....

"I owe you, Clement", he had said. "From now on, you're not just a member of the Company Trouble-shooting Team.... You'll be on my Personal Team".

He had elevated him in position... His salary had doubled, he had been given a swank, fully-furnished apartment to stay in, a four-wheel drive of his choice.... the works....

But, as he always thought, "When I finally got all that I wanted, I don't have the one thing I need.... my Soph".

The luxurious life eased the pain a bit, but it didn't really go away....

The next year, he had brought his brother too, to the country....

Vinny was working as a Marketing Executive with an American firm; he had also married.

His wife, Sharon, was now a school teacher, at one of the British schools.

It was an arranged marriage.... She was a nice, cheerful and loyal girl.

He hardly met them, maybe a couple of times, the whole year. Seeing them together, he was genuinely happy, for Vin.... but the pain of losing Varsha became more poignant.

Chapter 17

Varun took up a small apartment, within a month.... He and Varsha made it their first home, together.

They exchanged a pair of wedding rings in church, one Sunday.... after the Evening Mass.

They also bought some basic furniture, and moved into their new home.... It belonged to an elderly couple, who stayed on the ground floor.

They were Jake's friends.... They had no kids.... and slowly adopted Varun and Varsha as their own.

They didn't have too many luxuries.... but the three years they spent there had more happy, romantic, sensual and downright fun moments than any in their lives...

Varsha completed her graduation.... Varun insisted on her doing her post-graduation too, so she did it in distance mode.

She started teaching at a nearby school.... She too wanted to contribute, financially....

She became close to his mom and sister; even his dad slowly accepted her....

Her mother and sister visited them a couple of times, but her father was still upset with what had happened... Her mom told her to be patient... "He'll come around some day, Varsha", she consoled her daughter.

Sonia was now in college, studying Psychology.... Mark had also settled into a corporate job, as a Business Analyst.

Varun, of course, was in Financial Management... with the same company. It had grown quite a bit, and diversified too.... He was doing well, and slowly they saved enough to shift to a two-bedroom apartment with all amenities.... being able to afford whatever they wanted.

He kept his promise to his mother.... Helping her financially, and supporting his parents with his sister's education.

Varsha, after completing her post-graduation, joined a private bank.... as a Financial Analyst.

The nameplate on her desk read.... **'Varsha Deborah Daniel'**.

Chapter 18

Varsha woke up a little late, the next morning....

As she looked at the clock, she saw that it was almost seven-thirty a.m. She suddenly realized it was Monday morning, and quickly went to the kitchen, to make coffee.

She was not sure where Sandeep was.... Here, or in his brother's apartment.

Hearing the main door opening, she saw it was him..... walking in, with a bleary-eyed look.

"I suppose Santhosh told you about last night", he stated....

"Yes", she replied. "I'll get you some coffee", she added, "and then, I need to talk".

He sensed a new determination in her voice, and felt uneasy about it. Varsha was in a rebellious mood these days, he mused.

Anyway, after having the coffee.... He tried to evade the talk, muttering that he was late for work.

"Sandeep, I have to talk to you.... I don't care if you're late for work", she said in a firm voice.

"Ya, ok.... What's it"?, he asked.

"I'm moving out, and going to file for a divorce", she stated.

"What's gotten into you"?, he asked, stunned at what she had just said. He knew she was fed up, but he still didn't think that she would take such a step....

"Think of our parents", he said.

"I've thought about everyone, that's why I've gone through this much pain. Well.... I've had enough, and want out of this marriage".

"Are you hoping you'll find your Clement? He's probably married and settled by now", he taunted her.

She gave him an ominous look, and snapped back, "Don't you dare comment about him. Whether he's married or single, it's none of your business. The only person who'll be affected by that is me.... and I'll deal with it".

He realized she was in a dangerous mood, and switched to a placating tone, saying, "Ok, fine... I won't comment on him. But, listen to me.... Anyway, you've put with me, and all this, for so long. Please wait for another two-three months. Santhosh's

marriage has been finalized, and it wouldn't look good if I'm going through a divorce at this time".

He realized the only way he could hope to change her mind, was to buy some time....

Varsha was taken aback by the announcement, but didn't back down.

"It's ok..... The wedding is going to take place in two-three months, right? Even if I file the divorce petition now, the earliest the court will grant it is within six months, by which time, Santhosh will be married and settled".

"Where will you stay"?, he continued. "During the wedding preparations, when his would-be in-laws come, and they don't find you here... they might suspect something".

"They won't come everyday", she countered. "When they are coming, you can inform me.... I'll be present".

Nothing seemed to make her change her mind, so finally.... He just shrugged, and left for work.

They discussed it with his parents and brother, in the evening. His parents were upset, but surprisingly, his father and brother took her side. His mother, of course, was nasty to the core. That had always been the case, anyway....

His brother openly said, "Let her go, Sandeep. Let her lead her life, on her own terms, at least now". To everyone's surprise, he added, "You've taken a good decision, akka..... Go ahead with it, and don't worry about my wedding".

She smiled at him through tear-filled eyes, and in a voice which was breaking, managed to reply, "Thank you, Santhosh".

Varsha was relieved, and informed her sister of the developments. Shelly was very happy.... asking her if she wanted to come stay with her, for a while.

"No, sis", she replied. "I have some money now, earned through the two books I published. Using that, I'll find a small apartment, and move into it. Then, I'm going to send Sandeep the divorce notice, after consulting with a lawyer".

This she did, in due course, within the next two weeks.

She found a tiny studio apartment.... moving in with only her clothes. Everything else, she had to buy.... She didn't want to use up too much of her funds, so she bought minimum stuff.... for basic cooking, and a bed-roll for sleeping. The apartment was semi-furnished with a cot, a table and two chairs.

She just had enough to get by, for the next six months, including rental and the lawyer's fee.... by then, she had to find herself a job.

Sandeep's father informed her parents about the development, and they immediately called up.... threatening her with dire consequences, if she went through with the divorce.

"What do you want to do, ma"?, she asked her mother. "Kill me? Or kill yourselves? Either of it is ok with me, but I will not go back on this decision. I've had enough", she concluded firmly, and before her mother could make any reply, cut the call.

As she spent the first days in the new apartment, she realized it was the first time in her life that she was living totally alone.... but she wasn't scared. She had been more fearful and tensed, staying at Sandeep's house.

Over the next month, she found a fairly well-known lawyer.

Explaining everything to her, she filed the divorce petition. The first hearing was fixed a month later..... that was the earliest the court had to offer.

Meanwhile, to keep herself occupied, she continued writing her stories. One was complete, the other was still on....

She wondered why it took her this long, to come to this decision..... and found two reasons for it. The threat from her parents, and the fact that she didn't have any money, till the previous year.

Only last year, she had been able to publish one of the two books she had written, and got a retainer for it. That, of course, wasn't enough for anything. So, she waited till her second book got published. The returns were better, this time....

Both, put together, gave her a modest amount of money.... enough that she could at least think of leaving Sandeep's house.

She had surfed the net, during the last six months, for any reference to Clement, using social media and other sources.... but couldn't find anything. Before that, she couldn't even afford a smartphone....

Sandeep had offered to buy her one, but she had refused.

He had always been miserly, even about buying things for his own home.... and off-late, had been increasingly irritated with her, for not cooperating with him.

Her parents had handed over her wedding jewellery to her in-laws; warned them not to give it to her, or any money, other than the monthly amount needed for household purchases.

Their intention was, she should not have any financial resources that she could use, to contact Clement....

Another reason why she put up with all this, for so long, was that she was just twenty-one, when her parents married her off. At that age, without any money... and all alone, she didn't have the guts to oppose anyone.

If Clem had been with her, it would have been a different story.... she thought. But, he had been taken away....

Anyway, she decided she would first get these divorce proceedings over with... and then, when she had a job, or published the present book she was writing, whichever happened earlier.... She would try, in earnest, to find him.

She thought, "Even if he's married, or not interested in me, let me find out"....

If the result was negative, she could lay to rest the ghost of their past.... Of course, she couldn't imagine any other man in his place.... and she was sure, she couldn't ever forget him.

Clement had a vivid dream, and woke with a start. Stretching out, he groped for his mobile, to check the time. Three in the morning....

In his dream, Soph was standing on the other side of a wide chasm, and trying to reach out to him.... It was such a life-like dream..... It was the second time it was happening to him, within a month.

He had never been religious, or, hardly ever prayed.... but somehow, he felt some Divine hand here....

The only time he had prayed, was when he was serving time, and had felt so helpless.

He had prayed to keep his family safe....

He had also prayed for his Soph..... "Jesus, keep her safe... and give me another chance, at life with her".

Sitting up, and lighting a cigarette to clear his head, he decided to search for Varsha, in earnest.... starting from that day....

He didn't understand why he was, unconsciously, delaying it....

For the past six months, he definitely had had the resources and influence to start tracing her..... Maybe he was scared what he would discover.... that she was married and settled, happy in her life.... that she had moved on, beyond him. Maybe that was the secret fear in him.

But he decided, whatever's the truth.... I'm going to find out.

He used his influence and contacts, from the Kingdom's Ministry of Interior, to contact the relevant officials in the embassy of his home country.

He gave her name..... That's all he had. He didn't know her identity, or address proof codes..... Anyway, he exerted sufficient pressure, so that they promised him they'll trace her out. It would take some time, though.....

In the meantime, Varsha had her first hearing at the Home Court. Her sister, Shelly, accompanied her.

At this time, the court inspected the statements of both parties, and subsequently, they had a counselling session, where their statements were recorded by the Marriage Counselor.

After the lawyers of both sides presented the facts, as they were, they were asked if they agreed, mutually, to go through with the divorce.

Varsha immediately agreed, or rather, her lawyer stated her consent. Sandeep, however, did not consent..... and in his advocate's words, did not want to separate from his wife.

He further stated that she was maintaining contact with her boyfriend; that was the reason for her wanting the divorce..... not incompatibility and mental cruelty, as was given by her.

She was stunned.... She never thought he would stoop so low.

All this led to the court asking Sandeep's lawyer to provide proof of Varsha's extra-marital connection with her boyfriend.... fixing the next hearing, a month and a half later.

She was upset, but her advocate calmed her down, assuring her that since she had not had any such connection, they couldn't prove it.

"Anyway, after you've stayed apart for a minimum of six months, the court will, in most cases, award the divorce, especially since you're not demanding any alimony from Sandeep", concluded her lawyer.

"Ok, ma'am", replied Varsha.

"I'll call you, at least twice a week", stated her lawyer, including Shelly in her gaze, adding, "This girl is very sensitive..... She needs someone to boost her confidence".

"I know ma'am", replied her sister, saying, "I call her everyday.... to give her a pep talk".

The advocate, however, had exaggerated her words to Varsha, knowing that she was in an emotionally fragile state of mind.

Contested divorces can drag on for months, or even years. She gave her sister, Shelly, the realistic picture of what could happen, as Sandeep was contesting it.

"At the earliest, it would take a year, or maybe more, for this case to get settled", she stated.

"Oh, God".... replied Shelly, heartbroken.

She prayed, "Jesus.... do something. We need a miracle here".

Chapter 19

Clement was relaxing a bit, that morning.... It was Friday, the weekly holiday.

Even though the country closed down by twelve noon, on Thursday itself, for the weekend... He worked full day. If there was a need, even on Fridays.

He had made coffee and eggs, for breakfast, and was lounging on the sofa.... The telly was on; broadcasting the morning news. It was a huge one, giving life-size images....

His thoughts slowly strayed towards Varsha.... and that day, when he had brought her to his house.

About a month after they had started dating.... He came home one Saturday evening, after meeting her.

She had completed her first year at college, and had just started the second.... He had passed out, and was working full-time now. He was also putting into place his plans to leave the country....

As he opened the front door of his house, coming in..... He found that his dad, unusually, was home, watching something on TV.

"Hi, dad", he said, and his father replied, "Hi, Clem"....

Dad usually came home late from work. He was very hard-working, but as he was not highly qualified, his job as a supervisor, at a private firm, gave him only an average salary.

After Clement started working, things eased a lot at home. He gave his mom enough to run the house, so his father would not be stressed.

"Clem, your mother wants to talk to you.... She told me to tell you, as you came in", he stated.

Wondering what it was all about, he went into the kitchen..... and found her getting dinner ready.

"What's up, ma"?, he asked.... "Dad said you wanted to talk to me"....

"Clem, we've to go for a wedding tomorrow. You know my cousin, Bella.... Her second daughter's wedding is tomorrow evening".

"That'd be Cynthia, right"?, he confirmed.

"Yes.... You remember her"?, asked his mom.

"Ya.... She was still in school, the last time I saw her".....

"Sorry, I forgot to tell you", added his mother. "They sent the invite by whatsapp, and I forgot about it. I even told your dad, only yesterday".

"That's ok", he replied. "Anyway, how are you guys going? Their house must be easily fifty to sixty kilometres from here".

"We'll go by cab.... Vin is coming along", she stated, and further asked him, "Do you want to come too, sweetie"?

"No, you'll carry on.... there's some office work I need to look into", he answered.

"Vin, will you book the cab, man"?, he called out, to his brother.

"Ya, will do.... only thing, I need some cash", he replied.

"Sure.... It'll cost a bit, plus buy a gift on the way. I'll transfer about five thousand to your account, would that be enough"?, asked Clement.

"Oh, yes.... Good enough"....

"Clem, I have some money", said his mother, "We'll use that".

"No... You keep that", replied her older son, giving her a hug. "Just take a break, and enjoy yourself".

They had dinner.... and his parents and brother went to bed. They had to get up early, to leave for the wedding.

He checked that the back door was locked, then came out into the porch, settling on his bike.... lighting up....

Though he had been with Varsha just two hours back, he felt like hearing her voice again.... He dialled her number, and she picked up, almost immediately.

"Hi, Clem".... she said, in that low, soft voice.... He felt soothed, at once.

"Hi, babe.... Just wanted to hear your voice", he replied.

"What about your folks"?, she asked. "They have to go for a wedding tomorrow..... so, they've all gone to bed early", he replied.

"What're you doing, sweetheart"?, he asked, in a low voice....

"Just getting ready to go to bed", she replied, shyly.

He felt a longing inside him, and asked, "What're you wearing"?.....

"A nightie", she answered, demurely.

How he wished she was here with him, now..... It was a balmy, late June night, and begged for romance.

"I wish you were here right now, Soph", he added, "It's such an evening".

"I know..... I miss you too, Clem", she said. Hearing his deep voice, started the butterflies inside her, again....

He took a sudden decision. "Babe, can you be ready by nine, tomorrow"? he asked.

"Ya, sure..... where are we going"?

"That's a surprise, sweetheart.... but definitely, not Church", he laughed softly.

"Ohh, Clem..... You're the Devil", she laughed back....

"Yep.... St. Lucifer himself", he joked.

His folks left by about eight a.m., after which he shaved and showered. He first took Varsha for breakfast, then brought her home.

His house was one of those old-style, Anglo-Indian bungalows, of the British Era.... with old tiles for the roof, scalloped window grills, and a huge lawn in front.

She was fascinated by the place.... asking him where he had brought her.

"This is my house, sweetie", he laughed, and added, "I've been wanting to take you someplace".

Somehow, he didn't feel safe anywhere, these days, where Varsha was concerned. He had a bad feeling about Lenny....

"We could have gone to some resort..... but I thought home's good enough".

"Of course, Clem".... she replied, admiring the lawn, and the rose bushes, scattered at intervals.

"How beautiful", she stated..... "I feel like just sitting here".

"I would prefer my bedroom", he winked at her.... She blushed, quietly going in.

He closed the main door, and bolted it.

"Want to watch anything on the telly"?, he asked, to which, she replied, "No.... let's go to your room".

She surprised herself, and Clement, by saying it....

He took her hand, and led her to his room. It was on the first floor.... A huge one, at that. It was surprisingly neat, and she said so.

"Ya.... I'm not too messy, but today, I actually put it in order, as you were coming".

He closed the door, hugging her from behind.... burying his face in her thick hair. It was left loose, and turned him on..... Not that any part of her didn't, he sighed.

"Darling, I want to make love to you", he whispered, in her ear....

"These park-bench and movie-theatre kisses are not enough anymore", he continued. "I want to love you, every inch of you"....

"Oh, Clem", she murmured.... and turning, put her arms around his neck.... lowering his face to hers.

They kissed, Varsha standing on tip-toe to reach his lips.... He was hugging her, running his hands over her back, groaning.

He pulled her even closer, plastering her body against his.... feeling every inch of her....

He took his time undressing her, savouring each step of it, kissing every inch of her....

She was too shy to look at him, so buried her face into his chest.

She undressed him too, after he asked her to....

"Babe, don't be shy"..... he whispered, "You're with me"....

"I love you, Clem", she murmured, softly.

"Love you too, darling.... you don't know how much", he replied, in a hoarse voice.

It was an unforgettable day, for both of them.... They made love, for the first time....

For Varsha, it was a totally new world of sensations and emotions, while for Clement.... although it may not have been new.... feeling the way he did, was definitely novel.

They then ordered some food from outside, and after a late lunch, went to the mall, wasting some time there..... before, finally, calling it a day.

What a day it had been....

Clement was still reclining on the sofa.... In his apartment, hands over his eyes, dreaming about that day with Soph.

Chapter 20

V arsha was thinking too, but about another day she would never forget in her life....

About two weeks after Clem took her home.... they met in the evening, like they often did.... spending time together, at some restaurant.

He told her his plans to find a new job were slowly falling into place, and that she had to be prepared to leave.

He said, "If I can't take you with me.... I'll go, get set into the job, and come back for you, babe".

"How long would that take"?, she asked.... "I'm scared to be here, without you", she added. "Cheryl scares me"....

"I know.... It won't take more than a couple of months. Hopefully, I'll try and take you along with me, the first time around itself", he assured her.

"Don't we have to be legally married for that?"

He nodded.... "Ya, that's right.... Once my job is finalized, we'll get that done too. I have some contacts in the Sub-registrar's office".

She suddenly smiled, and clasped his hand across the table....
"I'm waiting for that day, Clem"....

The joy on her face was so spontaneous, he felt he had been socked one on the jaw....

A famous line came to his mind.... "There's nothing more irresistible to a man than a woman who's in love with him"....

When the time came to split, he was reluctant to let her go. It was almost ten p.m., and her hostel time limit was stretched. Finally, she detwined her fingers from his, saying..... "I really wish you could come with me, Clem"....

Her eyes were slightly moist.... and his darkened, with love.

It took him all of ten minutes, after she left, to make up his mind.... He called his mother, telling her he would be at the office till quite late, and not to wait up for him.

He then parked his bike.... crossing the road to her hostel gate.

The watchman understood English, but only haltingly. So, he switched to Hindi!

"Bhaiya, mujhe andar jaana hai", he said. ("Bro.... I need to go in")

"Lekin, kyun saab"?, asked the guard. ("But, why, sir"?)

"Kisi se milna hai.... thodi der ke liye", he replied, and added, "Mufat mein nahin.... yeh rakh lijiye"..... peeling off a few notes for the guard, that added upto almost one-fifth of his monthly salary. ("I need to meet someone, for sometime..... Don't do me a favour for free, I'll pay you")

"Ab, gate aur darwaza kholiye", he said firmly. ("Now, open the gate and main door")

The poor watchman was scared, but the bribe offered.... and Clement's tone of voice, didnt brook any arguments. He sighed, cautioning him, "Sambhaalke, saab.... aur zara jaldi waapas ayiye". ("Sir, be careful.... and please come back fast")

He knew her room number; that it was on the second floor. He climbed the stairs quickly, his long legs taking two and three steps at a time.

When he reached the corridor, luckily all the room doors were closed. He knocked on Varsha's door....

"Who is it"?, she asked..... "Soph, open up.... It's me, Clem", he replied in a low voice.

She was stunned, to put it mildly.... and quickly opened the bolt. He got in, and re-bolted the door.

"Clem".... She couldn't find her voice, to say more.... "How did you"?.... she stammered....

"I bribed your watchman", he grinned..... pulling her into his arms. "In spite of the bribe, I only have permission for sometime", he added.

Varsha didn't know which emotion was uppermost in her.... fear, happiness, shock, or desire for Clem.... Finally, desire won the day, especially when he started kissing her.

After an hour, during which time they laughed, kissed, made love.... all on that little single cot that was there.... He dressed, kissed her one last time, for the night.... and quietly left. She barely had enough energy to get up, to lock the door.

Five minutes later, she called him to know if he had got out of her hostel without any incident....

"Ya, babe.... don't worry", he said, and added, "Sleep well.... Love you".

"Love you too".... she whispered, and finally, slept.

That was how Clem functioned, she thought..... Sitting on another little single cot, in her studio apartment. He was not afraid to take chances, and his confidence and firmness brooked no arguments, from most people.

The bribing sequence happened a couple of times more..... Once, he just spent some time comforting her, as she was suffering from abdominal cramps, due to her menstrual cycle.... Rare for her, but so it happened that month.

Varsha was initially embarrassed to tell him the reason for her discomfort.... but he elicited it out of her.

When he entered her room, she tried to sit up, and make an effort to be cheerful, but he could sense she was really in pain..... He just sat down on the bed, put her head on his lap, and told her to relax. Maybe it was his presence, the pain actually came down!

When she apologized to him, a couple of days later, for the inconvenience.... He stopped her, saying, "Sorry for what, babe? For something that's a part of you? How're you to blame for that"?

She was genuinely touched, and it showed in her eyes....

"Soph".... he continued, "I'm with you, not just for the good times.... I'm with you through the good and bad".... saying which, he enveloped her into his arms.

Varsha sat up on the bed.... tears running down her cheeks....

"You were so wonderful, Clem", she cried, "but, left me so soon".

Chapter 21

It was barely a month after that.... Lenny brought the cops.....

That evening, in the basement of that hotel.... thought Clement, getting up from the sofa, to drink some water.

The maid-cum-cook, a motherly Pakistani woman, was not due till late afternoon. She cleaned the apartment, and also cooked dinner for him.

Today was a rare day that he was home, at lunchtime.... so, he just ordered some food from outside.

Chowing on pita bread and lamb curry, he continued to think....

The real charges against him would have got him only around two years, but Lenny framed him for a few more consignments that he genuinely was not aware of.

He cleverly framed him on those days, when he was with Varsha....

When his lawyer asked him the details of his whereabouts on those days, so they could prove his ignorance of those consignments, he replied, "If I reveal the details of those particular days, someone else's name will come into it.... She'll be asked to come and testify. I don't want that.... They'll anyway send me away for a minimum of two years.... Let them go the whole length, and put me away for more time".

"Clement, they'll put you away at least five years, easily, if you can't refute these additional charges. Think about it".... warned his attorney.

"I have, sir.... but I don't want Varsha to come to court, and be questioned by these guys", he replied firmly. "I might as well be hung for a sheep, as for a goat".

So, he finally got five years, with no parole....

He went through it all, without ever showing any weakness....

"I can take it", he thought.... "I can fucking take it"..... "Just let my family, and Soph, be safe", he said aloud.

It was the closest he had ever come to praying....

After finishing lunch, Clement called up the official from his home country, who had promised to trace Varsha. He told him that they were on the job, but required some financial assistance, for the same. In other words, a bribe.... he thought.

"That's fine.... I'll transfer the required amount to your account, but please, speed this up".

The embassy official gave the account details of his brother, so that, later on, the transaction could not be traced back to him.

After the money was transferred, progress was much faster.... They got him Varsha's address in two weeks' time. However, he didn't know that it belonged to Sandeep's house.

Varsha, unaware of these developments, was waiting for the next hearing. To pass time, she continued to write.... although she didn't know how to conclude the second story, being her own....

Clement took about three days off from work, and flew to his home country..... nearly two and a half years after he had left.

He called his mom, informing her that he was coming down for some work, but that he wouldn't be able to meet her, this time..... Of course, he spoke to her on a weekly basis.... as also, his sister and brother-in-law.

Around six months prior to these developments.... He was talking to his parents, one day.... When his mother asked, "Clem... It's been almost two years since you were released. You're well-placed now.... Why can't you think of getting married? That girl whom you liked, has moved on, isn't it? Vin told me"....

"Ma, I'm sure she's been a victim of circumstances.... and was forced to get married", he replied.

"Maybe", said his mom, "but the fact is, she is married..... She may have made peace with her destiny"..... She continued, "Why don't you also want a life, sweetie"?

"I can't".... he answered, in a slightly rough voice, clenching his teeth, to rein in his emotions. "I've loved her so much, I don't have anything left to offer anyone".

He added, "I'll find her one day, ma.... I'm sure she's still waiting for me".

"And, if you don't"?, asked his mother.

"Then, I'll just live alone", he stated, firmly, "but no one else"....

His mother broke down after the call, seeing her son suffering like this....

"Please, God.... help him find his love", she prayed, "Let me see him happy, again".

Chapter 22

Clement had a contact in the city, linked to his team in the Kingdom, who received him at the airport. He put a car and driver at his disposal.

He found his way to Sandeep's house, with the address that had been given to him.

As he got out of the car... entering the gate, he had two strokes of luck.... Firstly, Sandeep was not at home, and secondly.... his brother, Santhosh, was just starting his car, to leave for work.

Seeing a stranger, he came forward to enquire.

"Yes, can I help you"?, he asked.

"I'm looking for Varsha Symonds"..... asked Clement. "Does she live here"?

"You are"?....

"Clement Sanderson", he introduced himself.

Santhosh was shocked, to put it mildly. After all these years that akka waited, he had finally come....

He recovered his voice, saying, "Please come up to my apartment.... there are certain things that you need to know".

"But, who are you"?, asked Clement.

"Varsha was my sister-in-law, married to my brother, Sandeep John, until the last two months", he explained.

"Was"?....

"Yes.... Akka finally walked out two months ago, and filed for a divorce", he replied.

Clement was surprised and relieved, at the same time.

"But".... he began, when Santhosh interrupted... "Please, let's go up to my place. I'll give you the scene, in brief, before my brother comes".

Sitting across from him, in the living room, Santhosh briefly explained the scenario, and the events of the past five years, to what extent he knew.... also, gave him Varsha's current mobile number.

"I don't know where's she's staying", he continued, "but please find her, and save her", he concluded. "She has suffered a lot, these past years"....

He was stunned by what he heard, thanking Santhosh profusely for all his help.

He stated, "You might be wondering, why I'm going against everyone and helping you.... but, I'm doing it for akka.... She's such a lovely human being, and everyone has been so unfair to her".

"Thanks a lot, Santhosh", replied Clement, "I'll rectify everything", he promised, and left.

He called Varsha, but on the first two or three attempts, she didn't answer. He was about to text her, when she called back.

"Excuse me" she said, in the same soft voice he remembered, "I got two-three calls from this number.... May I know who it is"?

"Soph"..... he breathed into the phone, and heard a gasp at the other end.

"Clem.... Clem, is that you"?, she asked, urgently.

"Ya, Soph.... It's me", he replied, his voice breaking.

"Jesus!" she sobbed, "Oh, Jesus!"

"Sweetheart, give me your address", he said, slightly regaining his composure.

Between sobs, she gave it to him.

Showing the location to his driver.... he told her, "Soph.... I'll be there in an hour, ok"?

"Ok".... she managed to say, her voice still a little choked.

He added, "Just another hour, sweetie.... Hold on".

"Ya, Clem".... she was sobbing, again, "Just get here".

She was dazed, to put it mildly! After the line disconnected, she just sat there, stunned!

After all these years of waiting, he had finally found her....

She forced herself to get up.... She needed to freshen up, and change. It took her about fifteen minutes, the whole process taking longer than usual, as her hands were literally shaking.

She went into the tiny living room.... realizing there was nothing to do there. There were just two chairs, and a writing table, in one corner. She then went into the kitchenette.... Nothing to tidy up here too... She anyway kept it spotless. She finally went into the bedroom, straightening up the bed, and a few clothes....

Coming back into the living room, she lit a candle in front of the Icon, placed on her writing table, thanking the Lord....

The hands on the little time-piece would not move faster.... She was so restless, waiting....

At last, she heard footsteps outside her door, and flung it open.

There he was, looking even more handsome than she remembered.... though, more mature now; also, his face looked harder.

Seeing her, his eyes softened immediately, and he thought...."She looks even more beautiful.... the same expressive eyes, which were welling up with tears now.... the same delicate face, long hair and petite figure".... In fact, she looked even slimmer than he remembered.

She smiled through her tears, and he came in, closing the door.

"Soph.... sweetheart", he called, in a low, hoarse voice.... holding out his arms.

"Clem".... she whispered.... She broke down completely, being enveloped by him, tightly.

She continued sobbing.... wetting his shirt front.... but, she didn't care, and neither did he.... they held onto each other, for quite some time, till their emotions came under some control.

Slowly, they disentangled.... Varsha asked him to sit down, still sniffing.

He did so, pulling her onto his lap.

She recovered a little composure, and managed to ask, "Shall I get you something, Clem"?

"Some coffee"?, she offered....

"Later", he said.... "Just sit with me, for now"....

"We have to make up for the past seven years, though it's not possible in one day". His voice was harsh from controlling his feelings.

After a few minutes, she pulled away from him, asking, "How did you find me, Clem"?

He told her, briefly, about how he had traced her out.... landing up at Sandeep's house, and his unexpected meeting with Santhosh.

"He's the one who gave me your number, Soph", he concluded.

"God bless him" replied Varsha.

After an hour, during which time, they shared the important milestones of these seven years, he asked her, "So, when will the divorce come through"?

She answered, "My lawyer said six months from the time I filed it.... and that was one and a half months ago".

She continued, "I had hoped Sandeep would agree to mutual consent, but during the counselling session.... He said he's not willing for that.... also, that I have maintained extra-marital contact with you, that's why I'm asking for a divorce".

"What"?, exclaimed Clement, "How dare he say such lies"?....

"I was shocked too, that he would stoop so low".....

"The court has now asked his lawyer to prove the allegation, within the next six weeks, when the next hearing is slated for", she said.

She further added what her lawyer had stated that since they couldn't prove any such thing, she would get the divorce in six months.

"I don't think so, sweetheart", he replied. "Even if he can't prove contact with me, he can delay the final ruling, by contesting it".

He thought for a while, then asked, "Can I talk to your advocate"?

"Yes, of course..... This is her number".

He told her to dial from her phone.... When the lawyer picked up, Varsha greeted her, and asked her if she would talk to Clement.

She had, briefly, explained her connection to him, after the unexpected development at the counselling session. Sandeep's lawyer had used Clement's name....

"Of course.... but when did you meet him, Varsha"?, the attorney asked. "I thought you said you haven't seen him in the past seven years".

"Yes, ma'am.... It's all a miracle. He's been trying to contact me, for sometime now, and it finally happened today", she replied, in a choked voice.

"Ok.... Let me talk to him"....

Clement introduced himself, and briefly, explained how he had traced her. When the lawyer replied, there was a new-found respect in her voice.

"Clement, you're right in assuming the final verdict would get delayed, as he is contesting the divorce.... even though he can't prove any extra-marital contact with you. I assured Varsha she would get it in six months, because I was scared of her mental

state.... She's so vulnerable, and can't take too much stress anymore. But now..... you may have to use some strong-arm tactics with Sandeep. He thinks she has no one, and is taking advantage", she concluded.

"I know, ma'am", he replied "Let me just find out more about him, and what are his weak points.... only then, can I corner him".

"How long can you be with her"?, asked the advocate.....

"I'll be here this week, but after that, I have to return.... Anyway, I'll be in touch with Varsha, on a daily basis, from now on.... Also, I won't leave her alone, anymore", he stated.

"Ok, Clement.... nice talking to you.... keep me posted", concluded the lawyer.

"Yes, ma'am, will do.... thank you so much, bye".

"What happened, Clem"? What did she say?, asked Varsha, anxiously.... "I'll get the divorce in six months, right"?

She was trying hard not to break down.... but her eyes were welling up, and he could see her hands were trembling.

Understanding the strain she had gone through, all alone, these past years.... He quickly pulled her back into his arms, and assured her, "Don't worry about anything, love.... I'm here now.... I'll take care of everything".

He continued, "It doesn't matter what Sandeep tries to prove, or what he has in mind..... I'll make sure he signs the damn papers, one and a half months from now".

His face was rock-hard from the anger he was feeling.... but she didn't see it, as she was resting her head on his chest.

For the first time in seven years, she felt safe....

As he was comforting her, he decided a couple of things.... The first was to take her back with him, to the hotel, for the present week..... and then, before he went back, arrange a temporary visa, for a period of three months, at the minimum.... so that, he could take her back with him until the next hearing.

The second was to find out Sandeep's pressure points, so that he could make him agree for mutual consent.... releasing Varsha.

He made her a cup of coffee, and one for himself, too..... in her tiny kitchenette.

She protested weakly that she should be making it, but he overruled her objections.....

He then told her to relax in the bedroom, for sometime..... He had to talk to his colleague, and also deal with a few things.

Coffee cup in his left hand, he opened the door of her apartment, and went into the entryway. There was a small balcony attached to it.

Leaning against the railing, he made the first call to his office..... Conveying to his deputy that he would be delayed by a further two days, and to keep him updated, on a daily basis.

"Ok, boss".... said Khalid, his deputy, who took care of everything, in his absence.

He had hardly taken a day off till now, so leave was not a problem....

Clement himself reported to no one, except the Prince. Their system was that fortnightly reports had to be submitted to him, by his team, comprising of a dozen staff.... He then compiled it into a single sheet, of the most important events, for His Highness. Smaller matters..... He had to take decisions on his own, and execute them.... This was the Prince's clear order.

"I trust you completely, Clement", he had said, and added, "inform me of only the most important things".

"Yes, Your Highness", he replied.

He had realized early on, that citizens of the Kingdom, and especially members of the Royal Family, trusted very few people.... but when they did, expected one hundred percent loyalty and discretion from them. In return, any and all liberties, luxuries, and almost unlimited power was entrusted to them.

Clement was one of them.... It was a great honour, but it also entailed enormous responsibility, absolute loyalty, discretion, and a tireless dedication to his work.

He was not aware of it, at that time, but each employee was observed, for the first year, by agents in His Highness's payroll.... especially people in critical positions, like troubleshooting.

Clement had been watched too, and the report that was given to the Prince, at the end of one year, was..... 'Highly dedicated to the tasks entrusted, honest, decisive, a good team player, and most importantly, extremely loyal to the company and the Prince's interests'.

Added to that, his lightening reflexes had saved the Prince from an assassination attempt.... That sealed it, for His Highness.

He has entrusted him with the most sensitive information about the Company, and his journey, in the Royal Line of Succession, to the ultimate prize..... The Throne to the Kingdom, or at any rate, a part of the Throne, by governance.

Though the Prince had around half a dozen rings of security personnel, surrounding him at all times, Clement and his team's role was investigating anything that was not-so-obvious, but nevertheless, a threat to the Company or His Highness.

In fact, with regard to the assassination attempt on the Prince, he had submitted a report, warning of such an attempt.... It had not been taken seriously enough, by the previous head of the Trouble-shooting Team. When His Excellency learned of the report, he had been replaced by Clement.

Investigations were done by members of his team; so also, compilation of the information.

Deduction and analysis of the compiled information, was Clement's area of expertise....

He had a knack for sniffing out trouble.... This had saved the company, and the Prince, millions; not to mention safety of the Company's Oil Wells; also, His Royal Highness's personal safety....

Due to the nature of their work, he and his team kept a very low profile. Most of the regular employees of the Company didn't even know them, or even if they did.... they all had cover-up designations, including Clement.

The Kingdom, and the Company, had official security and intelligence teams, in place, as also, electronic surveillance systems.... to detect any type of espionage, industrial or political.

Over and above that, discreet and unofficial on-the-ground investigations had to be conducted.... so also, surveillance.... this was where Clement, and his team, fitted in.

Clement, in addition, was also entrusted with ensuring the Company and the Prince's safety.

His position was such that, he had access to the highest levels of authority, at the Royal Court.

Though his record had not been explicitly mentioned, at the time of his appointment to the Company's Trouble-shooting Team..... when he had been transferred to the Prince's Personal Team, he requested fifteen minutes of

His Excellency's valuable time.... telling him about it.... what had led to it, the charges and the penalty.

Far from getting upset or enraged, the Prince had heard him out, then stated, "I appreciate your honesty.... Let me get back to you on this".

It took him a week, to check on the facts....

When he called for Clement, he had half-expected to be fired. Instead, His Highness simply gave him a long, steady look, and said, "Get on with the responsibilities I have given you".... That was the end of that!

"Khalid, one more thing. I want a complete report of these two firms, by tomorrow, at the latest", he told his deputy. He gave him the names of the companies.... One was Sandeep's family business.... The other was the firm with whom they had their major contract, both of which he had learned from Varsha. As luck would have it, it was with one of the Kingdom's Islamic neighbours.

"Ok, boss... I'll compile it, and mail it as an encrypted file", replied Khalid.

The next call he made was to the Kingdom's Ministry of Interior, asking for a temporary visa, for three months.... for the particular Passport Number he would be texting them.... It would be issued under Clement's 'Work and Residency Permit'.

Varsha had to submit a formal application for the same.... The electronic version was submitted, and would be issued in a day.

He then went inside.... finding her sitting on the bed, looking more composed.

She smiled at him.... all the love and hope she was feeling, reflected in her eyes.

He felt the all-too-familiar longing.... looking at her.... but he simply smiled back, and asked, "Sweetheart, how does the idea of being with me, for the next month, sound to you"?

"Wonderful, Clem".... she replied immediately. "So, you're going to be here, for a month? But will your company give you that much leave"?

"No, babe.... I thought you can stay with me at the hotel, this week, and by the time I have to leave.... I'll get your visa ready, so that you can come with me. We'll get back in time, for the hearing".

"That's great.... but how will I get a visa, so fast"?

"You don't worry about all that.... Just pack whatever you need, for a month and a half. Of course, after reaching home, you can buy what you want".

"Ok".... she said, bemused.... and wondering whether she was dreaming it all!

She pulled down her suitcase, but he could feel she was getting tensed again....

"Take your time, Soph.... I'm not in a hurry", he assured her.

"Ok.... Just give me a half hour. But.... Clem.... I don't have too much money with me", she said.

"Just keep what you have, sweetie.... Don't spend that. If you need anything now, I'll buy it for you.... and once we're home, you can use my cards", he stated.

"Clem".... She hesitated, not knowing how to say it. "I'm troubling you too much"....

"Soph"..... He caught her hands, and lifted her face to his....
"Why do you talk like this? This is me, your Clem.... Don't see me as separate, sweetheart. We're one, isn't it? Whatever I have, is yours too.... and as of now, I'm doing well. I'll tell you the details of how I reached this position, in due course. Just understand that I have no shortage of money.... Your job is to enjoy it. I also have a lot of influence, through my work profile. Ok, darling"?

"Ok, Clem".... she smiled at him.

He kissed her on the forehead, and let her go, to continue her packing.

Chapter 23

They went to the hotel, where Clement was staying....

It was a luxurious one.... The double room was huge. There was a living area, separated from the bedroom.... the attached bathroom was off its corner, having an additional dressing area.

The humidity was high, and he immediately switched on the air-conditioner.

Even otherwise, he had got used to an environment with constant air-conditioning, these past two years.... because where he lived, the heat was scorching.... So, offices, apartments, malls.... everywhere, centralized air-conditioning was the norm.

Varsha realized that Clement's lifestyle had changed drastically from the past, in more ways than one.... and now, she would have to adapt.... Her naturally graceful nature made it easier, for her, to change.... also, her love for him was still strong enough that she would do anything to keep him happy!

They ordered lunch in the room.... after which, relaxed a bit, watching some telly. He was watching his country's channels after a long time.... He switched to one, showing a football match.

"Want to watch anything in particular, babe"?, he asked.

"No.... I just want to sit with you, and convince myself that this is all not a dream".

"It's not a dream.... It's finally reality", he said.... "By God! I'm not letting you out of my sight, ever again", he stated.

"Oh, Clem".... she murmured, and settled into his arms. The feel of her against him, after such a long time.... caused his body to tighten, and tense.... He knew she was emotionally battered.... He didn't want to force anything on her.

He was trying to bring his feelings under some control.... when she looked up at him, saying softly, "I've missed you, Clem"....

Her closeness, her soft voice.... It was all too much for him. He cupped her face in his hands, and breathed.... "Me too, Soph.... so much".

"Then why aren't you kissing me"?, she asked....

"Oh, babe".... he said, hoarsely, "I don't want you to feel forced or anything".

"I won't, Clem.... I want it.... I want you".... she said, pulling his head down towards her.

He lost it..... the control he was trying to keep.... and gave in to her. Their lips met, and he thought he'd die for this moment. They slowly started kissing.... lightly, then deeply....

"Soph"..... he whispered, when he finally lifted his lips from hers.... "I love you, babe... love you".

"I love you, Clem"..... she murmured back. "You don't know how I've gone through these years.... searching, waiting for you, at every turn".

"I know.... I'm only just realizing it", he replied. "That's why I want you to mentally relax first, and then, we have all the time in the world", he added.

"It's not that I don't feel for you.... I'm just keeping it under control, so that you're fully comfortable, before"..... He left the rest of the sentence unsaid.

"You know, the only good thing, these past years"? asked Varsha.

"What"?....

"Sandeep was involved with someone else, initially..... anyway, he told me he didn't want anything to do with me.... that suited me just fine. In fact, if he had touched me.... I had decided I won't stay alive", she finished.

"Oh, God", he said.... "Don't say such things.... I could make out something was amiss, when Santhosh told me that you stayed in a separate room, but with all the other issues, I didn't give it too much thought"....

"Ya.... from the first to the last day, I stayed separately, and used to lock up and sleep at night. After about two years, that girl broke up with him, and then, he started acting weird.... I think he expected me to fall in line, wanting a 'normal' life with me, as he put it.... but, I put my foot down", she concluded.

Clement was genuinely thankful for the turn of events.... although he would have accepted her, anyway.

"Her mind's been with me..... that's what's more important", he thought, to himself.

She could see his eyes darkening with desire..... He kissed her again, this time slowly, probing inside her mouth.... By the time he stopped, her lips were slightly swollen, and also, cut a little.

"Sorry, da.... I got a little carried away", he smiled at her, crookedly. "It's ok".... she said, settling back into his arms, hugging him.

They had dinner at the hotel's in-house restaurant, and coming back to the room.... It was an effort, for both of them, to stay away from each other.

He told her to sleep on the bed.... He would use the sofa.

"You won't fit into it, Clem", she stated, and added, "Come.... sleep on the bed. I'll be a good girl, and be at the other end".

She smiled warmly at him.... He laughed.... "You'll be a good girl.... What about me"?

They finally settled down at two edges of the bed, and tried to sleep.... He could see the nightdress outlining her contours; wanted to pull her to him.... Seven years of loneliness and pain was making him desperate, he thought.

Varsha, though she had turned the other way....was thinking the same thing. She wanted to assuage their emptiness.... Seven years of waiting, and longing....

After an hour or so, she turned back.... and found him standing in the balcony, enjoying the night air. In reality, he was trying to bring his emotions under control. He couldn't do it, lying two feet from her....

He suddenly sensed her presence, turning around.

"Clem".... she whispered, "I can't take it anymore, I want you"....

"Jesus", he murmured.... "How can I refuse"?

"Babe"..... he breathed into her hair, pulling her to him....

What followed was a beautiful experience, for two people who were still madly in love with each other, and expressing it in the most sensual way possible....

He didn't want to scare her.... He forced himself to love her gently, but she responded with a fierceness that he had not seen, even when they were together, in the past.

She was still shy, but the pain of seven years, was driving her passion now.... She was moaning, and repeating, "Clem.... I love you"....

"Me too, sweetheart".... he whispered, hoarsely, pulling her tight against him, slowly savouring her.... every inch of her....

I'm like the proverbial guy in the desert, he mused..... who at last found water !

Chapter 24

Khalid sent Clement the reports he had wanted.... Now, he had enough information, to confront Sandeep.

He and Varsha went to Sandeep's office.... Clement asked her to call him....

Seeing Varsha's number on his mobile screen, Sandeep was taken aback. He answered, "What's up"?

She asked, "Would you please come down, for sometime.... There's something I need to tell you".

"Alright.... I'll be there in ten minutes", he replied.

Wondering what it could be , he came down.... and was surprised to see her standing with a tall, dark man.... The guy was staring at him, the look in his eyes being decidedly unfriendly.

"Sandeep, this is Clement", introduced Varsha.

"Clement"?, he asked, his mouth almost dropping open.

"Yes".... She didn't elaborate.

She felt there was no need to explain anything, to him. He had treated her so badly, all these years, and the accusation in court.... That was the worst, according to her.

Clement turned to her, saying, "You go sit in the car, Soph.... I need to talk to Sandeep, privately".

"Ok, Clem".... she replied, and walked towards the car.

"She's a pretty obedient towards you", sneered Sandeep. "How did you suddenly find her"?

"I didn't suddenly find her. This has been the result of some efforts, on my part, for quite sometime.... Now, what is important is that you agree for mutual consent, by the next hearing, so that the divorce can come through as soon as possible.... Do you understand me"?, asked Clement, in a steady and low, but nevertheless, harsh voice.

His demeanor and confidence were starting to intimidate Sandeep, who had no real courage.... and only survived by manipulating people.

"What makes you think I'll obey your orders"?, he replied, in a slightly raised voice, not wanting his fear to show.

"Sandeep.... You're playing games with the wrong person", continued Clement, still in that low, harsh voice....

"I've enough influence to cancel your firm's major contract, and also make sure you don't get any further contracts, from that part of the world", saying which, he listed out the information he had got from Khalid.... to the extent that it was relevant.

"Want to challenge me"? he questioned, "Go ahead.... I'll give it to you, in writing.... this contract will be cancelled within thirty days. Want to take that risk"?

Sandeep was aghast.... "What kind of a guy was this, anyway", he thought.

"Fine".... He reluctantly agreed to sign for mutual consent, at the next hearing.

"What kind of work do you do"?, he asked, curiosity overriding his pride.

"You really wouldn't want to know", answered Clement, in the same, deadly tone of voice.... "Neither would you want to know where I was, these past years.... You live a secluded life, you've not seen, or dealt with the scum of this world. I have, and am still dealing with them", he concluded, turning away.

"So", he added, as an afterthought, "Just sign the papers at the next hearing, releasing Varsha. Or else, you'll regret it, for every single day of your remaining life.... I'll make sure of that".

When he rejoined Varsha back in the car.... she asked, anxiously, "What happened, Clem? Did he agree to sign for mutual consent"?

"Of course, sweetheart.... I told you, I'll make him agree", he replied.

"Thank God".... she breathed.... "I don't know what you threatened him with.... I really don't want to know", saying which, she smiled at him.

"That's the spirit.... You don't worry too much about anything, from now on. I'll take care of everything", he assured her.

She clasped his hand in hers, and smiled warmly at him.... He wanted to fold her into his arms.... but they were in a car, with a driver who may have already noticed many things.... He wanted his private life to be as discreet as possible.

A man's personal life is usually his weakness.... The kind of work he was involved in.... any point of weakness could prove dangerous, and could be used against him.

"Soph.... What do you say, we'll go somewhere out, for lunch.... Today kind of demands a celebration, right"?, he asked.

"Ya.... sure", she answered.

He asked the driver if there were any good diners available, close-by, and was suggested a place that served authentic Persian cuisine. They had lunch there.... both of them eating less, and talking more.... trying to fill in so many pieces, from the past seven years....

At some point, Clement pointed to her finger, and asked, "You kept my ring on, babe"?

"I fought so hard to keep it", she replied, her voice choking a little.... "Everyone wanted me to take it off, and wear the wedding band".

He was still only realizing the true nature of her struggles.... A young, twenty-one year old girl, with no help, and no one to turn to.... The very people who were supposed to protect her, had thrown her to the wolves.... that's why she was so traumatized!

He wondered if her parents really understood what they had put her through.... Only her sister had stood by her.

Her in-laws were no less, keeping her almost imprisoned, in a life where they knew she was not happy.... He clenched his teeth, to control his anger.

His thoughts were interrupted by her hand, touching his.... "What happened, Clem"?, she asked.

"Nothing, babe".... he said, and twined his fingers with hers.... "I'm so sorry all this happened", he said, softly.

"It's ok", she replied, "Now, it's all ok.... I can take it, because you're there with me"... He didn't want her to become emotional again, so he quickly changed the subject.

After lunch, she spoke to her sister, Shelly.... telling her about all the developments, since the previous day. She inevitably broke down, when she mentioned how Clement had found her.... Her sister cried too.... because she was the only one who had shared the pain, with her.

Clement then spoke to Shelly.... thanking her, for supporting Varsha in his absence.

"Oh, Clem.... That's fine. I mean, I'm her sister, it's the least I could do. Anyway, I'm so happy, for both of you", she concluded.

He informed Shelly that he was taking Varsha, back with him....

"That's great", she replied, and added, with feeling, "Bring her only for the hearing. Also, see if you can kill that bastard, Sandeep".

"I really wish I could", he answered, "Anyway, I've put the fear of God into him.... So, he'll sign the damn papers".

"I'm so glad", continued Shelly.

"You know, everyone used to taunt her.... Even I had given up hope, inside.... but she believed you'll come back one day. It's her faith in God, and you.... just hold onto her, always".

Shelly's voice was breaking, and he replied, "Yes.... I'll never let her go.... I'll make it up to her, for all these years".

"Of course, you've suffered too", observed her sister....

"That's ok.... I knew what I was doing, the dangers involved.... I took a chance, and it back-fired. But, I'm a man, I could take it.... Not like her", said Clement.... "She's so traumatized, I need to really bring back the old Soph".

"Only you can do it", stated Shelly.... She was absolutely right.

He asked Varsha whether she would like to inform her parents too, but she refused. "No.... I don't want to tell them anything, till the papers are signed. I don't know what they'll do next"....

They went back to the hotel, and while she watched some telly.... He finished up some of his pending work, using his laptop.

"You never really take off from work, isn't it, Clem"?, she asked.

"No, Soph.... You're right. I'm always on it. Probably, only at night.... when I'm asleep, do I not think about it", he laughed.

"What did Shelly say"?, she enquired.

"Oh, generally.... the events of these past years.... By the way, she specifically requested me to kill Sandeep", he said, grimacing a little.

"Ya.... She hates him", replied Varsha.

He put away his laptop, and they spoke some more.... of the old days.... Also, new hopes.... new plans for the future. They planned to meet both sets of parents, and take their blessings.... after Varsha's hearing.

Clement informed her that they could come only for a couple of days, at that time.... as he couldn't afford to take off another week from work. Anyway.... that was a month and a half ahead.

Coming back to the present.... that day was a Tuesday. Clement had flown in on Monday, the previous day. He expected her visa, in a day.... and had postponed their tickets to Thursday.

They would fly out on Thursday, close to midnight....

She wanted to buy a few things urgently.... so, they did some shopping, the next day.

Clement asked her to buy an 'abaya', the long gown worn over daily clothes.... also, a 'hijab', the cloth used to cover the hair and neck.

In the Kingdom, it was compulsory for all women to be modestly covered, in public.... whether or not they followed the Islamic faith.

The body had to be covered completely, including the hair and neck.... but it was not mandatory to veil the face, for non-locals. The face veil, or 'naqab', had to be worn only when visiting religious sites.

They found a boutique selling abayas, headscarfs, and other women's clothing.... buying two pieces, for Varsha. One was the traditional black, while the other.... a light-pink coloured one.... both embroidered with delicate filigreed gold and silver threadwork.

The saleswoman taught her how to wear it.... She diligently studied it.... as henceforth, she would need it to use it, whenever she stepped out of their apartment.

She felt it was a small effort to be made, in exchange for the happiness God had finally given her. He had given her Clem back.... She was willing to make any number of sacrifices, in return.

Each culture has its own rituals and habits.... If one wanted to live in a particular country, one had to follow their traditions.

The Kingdom was a Theocratic Monarchy.... The Royal Family, and its members, occupied the highest posts of polity and governance. It was administered based on the 'sharia', the religious and philosophical set of rules and guidelines given by the Holy Koran; the Sunna (the deeds of the Holy Prophet); and the Hadith (the sayings of the Holy Prophet).

Chapter 25

Flying back to the Kingdom, Varsha donned the abaya and hijab, before the flight landed.

As they drove to Clement's apartment, from the airport, she was fascinated by the new and strange world around her.

The place seemed mostly dry and sandy, though Clement told her not to be fooled by the dryness.... Sudden rains and high humidity were part of the climate, in this city of the Kingdom, due to it's proximity to the Arabian Gulf....

"Sandstorms are quite common, in summer time", he explained, "and can be quite dangerous, if one gets caught in it".

The city revolved around the Oil Company, he added.... almost two-thirds of the resident population being employees of the same.

It was ruled by a Prince of the Royal Family.... to whom Clement reported, as part of his work profile. He was one of the

important heirs, as it was one of the high-value provinces of the Kingdom, due to the presence of the Oil fields. He was only second or third in the line of succession to the main throne.

They finally reached his apartment.....Varsha found it equally fascinating. Especially the size.... the rooms were huge.... It was fairly neat, though the credit for that went to the maid, informed Clement.

He deposited their bags in the smaller of the bedrooms, and came back to where she was standing, quietly taking it all in.

"This is it, Soph"..... he said, "It's our house.... your house, from today. It's upto you, to make it into a home".

Her eyes welled up.... Looking up at him, she couldn't hold back the tears, which spilled over.

He quickly caught and wiped them, pulling her to him.... "I know the past is not easy to forget, sweetheart.... but I want you to try and leave it behind you. As it is, it's all very new and strange.... the house, the apartment complex, the city, the way of life here. That's a blessing, in a way. Your mind will be occupied in understanding, and following it.... That'll take a while. Use it to heal", he concluded.

"Yes, Clem.... I will", she replied. "I want to be happy, from now on"....

"You will be. In fact, we will be".... he stated, and continued, "You're back with me.... I don't need anything more in life, as a blessing. Everything else that comes our way, we'll handle it together. We've endured loneliness, pain and frustration, for

seven years, alone.... Now, we can definitely deal with anything, together".

Varsha felt the same. She didn't even care if he legally married her or not.... although, he had promised her it would happen, in due course, after her divorce formally came through.

She only wanted the past out of her system.... She didn't want to be bound to anyone other than Clem, legally, or in any other way.

She slowly settled into life in their apartment, Clement taking her out.... whenever he was free, in the evenings. He showed her the apartment complex and its various amenities, and most importantly, the supermarket. They also went around the city and the neighbouring towns, all part of that province of the Kingdom.

She got used to wearing the abaya and hijab.... and after a couple of weeks, actually started feeling pretty comfortable in it.

The maid used to clean and cook dinner for Clement.... Varsha told her that, henceforth, she only needed to vacuum and dust the house. Cooking, and maintaining the kitchen, she would do it herself. She cooked quite tasty food.... She had mastered the finer points of cooking, these past years.... Her cooking skills were a revelation to Clement, and he said so.

He really was a great partner, she reflected. She had forgotten how caring he could be, and after so many years of being alone.... She found his love and attention, heartwarming, to put it mildly.

He felt the same way, though he was not as emotional about it as Varsha. He had got used to living alone, suppressing his pain

and emotions.... just getting through each day, like a robot. His hectic work schedule, these past two years, had been a relief from the emptiness within....

Now that Soph was with him.... She had made the apartment into a home.... a welcoming refuge from the outside world. She made him eat more than he had got used to.... fussing over him. She also understood what he wanted, and gave it, without him ever having to ask for it.... whether it was food, love, attention, or solace.

He thought to himself, "I'd forgotten how wonderful she can be"....

Their love slowly worked it's magic.... and eased the pain within both of them. It spilled over into their lovemaking.... where they truly felt one with each other.

One morning, Clement woke up before she could wake him, with a steaming cup of coffee.

He knew she would be in the kitchen, getting breakfast ready. As he padded over, he found he was right.... and saw, to his pleasant surprise, she was softly humming an old tune, while setting up the first meal of the day. It was the first he had heard her singing.... He understood that she was finally starting to heal....

One morning, after Clement had had breakfast, and was getting ready to leave for work, Varsha came out of the kitchen.... Into the dining space, from where she could see into the living room.

She was stunned by what she saw.... He was standing in front of the Altar she had created.... having a Crucifix, and also, the Icon of Mother Mary with the Infant Jesus, that she had brought with her.... He was, actually, praying.... She had never known him to pray, and understood that he was finally starting to heal....

They met with Vin and Sharon, a couple of weekends, and had a great time....

A week before they had to go back for Varsha's court hearing, her advocate called up.

"Congratulations, Varsha", she stated. "For what, ma'am"?, she asked.

"Sandeep has withdrawn his contest petition, and has now agreed for mutual consent.... though the Judge had a few harsh words for both him and his lawyer.... "Making a mockery of the court processes", was what he essentially said.

"Oh, that's great news, ma'am", replied Varsha, in a relieved voice.

Chapter 26

At the end of six weeks, they flew back to their home country, where Varsha finished the formalities of signing the divorce papers....

A couple of days before, though Varsha's lawyer had assured them, Clement had called up Sandeep, and reminded him, "I hope there's no change in your willingness to sign for mutual consent".

"No, I'll be there.... and will sign the papers", he replied.

He didn't want any damage to his family business.... Upon making discreet enquiries about Clement's influence, through his client, had confirmed that he was perfectly capable of cancelling their contract. Just the mention of his name evoked awe and fear....

No matter how low a profile he kept, Clement's reputation now preceded him.... dangerous, decisive, and someone who tied up the loose ends, rather permanently.

Varsha was right.... that was the way he functioned. He was not scared to take chances.... His confidence and firmness, and now, his reputation.... made most people unwilling to cross him.

They thanked Varsha's lawyer for all her help; she said she would courier the legal papers to them, once they were ready.

They then visited Varsha's parents.... Clement insisted on it, though she really didn't want to. Shelly and her husband were there, too.... and somehow, it wasn't as unpleasant as she thought it would be.

Varsha's father spoke to Clement.... asking him about their future plans. He promised her father that he would take care of her always, and that they would get legally married, once her divorce came through formally.

Her father was, surprisingly, more accepting of their relationship, giving his blessings. Her mother was still upset, but only time could cure that....

The same day, they took a domestic flight to his parents' home, spending the night there.... His sister, Cathy, and her husband, Ryan, also joined them.... Everyone had a good time.... remembering the old days. They all made Varsha feel one among them.

Clement had purchased that house for his parents; also took care of their expenses. He'd insisted his dad stop working.

The house had one bedroom on the ground floor, used by his parents. The other two were on the first floor. After dinner, and catching up for an hour or so, Cathy and Ryan left for their home, promising to reach by ten a.m, the next morning, for the blessing and exchange of rings.

Clement's mom had asked him to bring a pair of wedding rings.... Since they couldn't have a church wedding, she at least wanted them to exchange rings, in the family's presence.

As they were getting ready to settle down.... He showed Varsha the first-floor bedroom, and added that he'll join her in a few moments.

"Let me just have a smoke, babe.... and I'll be there", saying which, he turned to find his mom looking at them, with a slightly scandalized look in her eyes.... He quickly understood why, and turning back to Varsha, said, "On second thoughts, Soph.... you go to sleep. I'll watch some telly; probably crash on the sofa itself".

The look in his eyes conveyed the message, and Varsha understood.... "Ya, sure, Clem", she replied, managing an awkward smile at his mom. She quickly went into the room.

He smiled at his mother, saying, "Just leave a pillow and cover on the sofa, ma".

"Ok, Clem", she replied.... Her eyes became a little moist. He had always been such an understanding son, she thought.... forever shouldering responsibilities, much earlier than he should.

Later on, after his parents had retired, for the night.... He quietly climbed up to the first floor. Opening the bedroom door, he found Varsha reclining on the headrest of the bed, listening to some music, on her mobile....

She smiled at him, saying, "I knew you would come, Clem.... I was waiting".

"I knew you would be waiting, darling", he smiled too, and gave her a wink. He added, "I didn't want to hurt mom's sentiments, at that time".... he trailed off....

"You really know how to manage situations, so smoothly", she complimented him.

"That's why I'm a trouble-shooter", he laughed, and enveloped her into his arms, saying.... "We've stayed apart enough. I'm not spending another day, or night, away from you"....

The next morning, his mother found him splayed out on the sofa, sleeping soundly. He woke up to a steaming cup of coffee.... Sipping the hot cuppa, he checked his watch.... already nine a.m.

He quickly shaved, showered and dressed, in a white linen shirt and beige slacks.

He was just coming out of the second spare bedroom, on the first floor, when Varsha opened the door of the other room.... She looked stunning, in an off-white saree.

It was the first time he had seen her in a saree, and his heart missed a beat.... feeling his mouth turning dry, he slowly ran his tongue over his lips....

"Jesus".... he breathed....

"You look beautiful, babe", he said in a low, hoarse voice, his eyes darkening with love and desire.

"Thanks, Clem".... she replied, shyly.

For the ceremony at home, Varsha wore an off-white crepe silk saree, with beautiful cut-work silver embroidery along the border.... and a short-sleeved, flared crepe silk blouse, in silver. It was complemented by silver jewellery, with her hair brushed and left loose, just a small silver barret holding it, partially, in place. She had put on minimum make-up, with just kohl, eyeliner and gloss.

In front of the family, his mother read a passage from the Holy Bible, and made them exchange rings....

"Now you can have a civil wedding, whenever you want", stated his mom, adding, "As far as we are concerned, you are tied together, in the presence of the Lord".

Clement smiled, and hugged her.... They soon bid their farewells, and left.... a day, and half a night later, they had landed back in the Kingdom.... back to their home, and life....

Three months after her divorce came through, formally, they got married, in a civil ceremony, at their home country embassy.... as was the protocol. Vinny and Sharon signed, as witnesses.

Varsha changed her name, legally.... She had requested Clement that she wanted to.

When the official paper came, she read her name out aloud....
'Sophia Clement'.

She finished writing the second story.... now that she knew the ending, or rather, the beginning....

The first story.... that of Varsha and Varun, was not a figment of her imagination, though she has tweaked it a bit.... She'd had a friend, whose name was also, coincidentally, Varsha, and her love was Varun....

She wrote it as a comparison to her own love story, with Clement....

One was almost perfect.... and the other, was far from perfect.... Though, in the end, their love brought them together, in one case.... and kept them alive for each other, in the other !

Epilogue 1

Varsha looked across at her husband, Varun, who was working on his laptop.... She thought, "What did I do, to deserve such a great partner and spouse".... Just then, he looked up, and smiled back.... They knew they were blessed to have each other.... It was an almost-perfect love story....

Epilogue 2

Sophia looked up from making coffee, to see her husband, Clement.... standing in the balcony, lighting a cigarette, as he always did, first thing in the morning.

At last, her dream had won over reality, and she was back with him.

He turned, and smiled back.... They knew they were blessed to have each other.... even though their love story was far from perfect....

But, love need not necessarily be perfect, just true.... so also, love stories !

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