

DESTINY IS A CERTAINTY
PARANDA

FICTION. ACTION. THRILLER.
A TALE OF UNCERTAINTIES SCULPTED BY TIME.

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Dedication

The book is dedicated with deep reverence and gratitude to the revered Pitru Devatas, whose blessings are believed to guide and protect generations and to all the well-wishers and morale boosters who have stood by the author from within the family as well as from the wider circle of friends and acquaintance.

हर लम्हा यहां कशमकश का पैमाना है,
गर रात रोशन हो, हर चिराग इक अफसाना है
बुलंदियों के बस्ती में हौसलों का बसेरा है,
ऊंचाइयों के घेरे में चुनौतियों का डेरा है
शह और मात की बंदिशों में मुकद्दर कातिलाना है,
आग का दरिया है और बुलंदियों को छूना है
सपनों की गलियों में लेकिन अंदाज वही पुराना है,
गर रात रोशन हो हर लम्हा यहां नजराना है

Characters

Gurupreet:@Preet: Tanvar

Vibrant/ dashing/ Joyful – fair-boisterous/ Talkative
Emotional - Punjabi/ Haryanvi unmarried Girl –
braided long hair with Paranda - TV Journalist cum
Anchor- generally in Salvar Kurta- attractive
figurative personality wears Paranda frequently.

Comes from agriculture oriented family background -
prosperous

Manali@ Manu: Chopra

Smart and dashing Army Commando Captain
heading a company unit in the rocky/forest terrain of
J&K on the way to Gurej Valley. Trim and fit –
forthcoming- Very active –lively but equally -cool &
collected - a patient listener - army hairstyle-
precisely long braided hair in tight bun. Fair
unmarried - attractive, strong personality and figure
conscious.

Lives with grandparents in a rural area with
affectionate loving younger sister Lado.

Military family background – Mother and Father
(Colonel) – died in grenade explosion planted under
their car-some time back making her more vengeful
against terrorists

Hobby winter sports

Lado:

A typical younger sister; of Punjabi background - in late college years. Fair and attractive. Loving and affectionate; mind reading capability /secret sharing younger sister for Manu

Rohit: Rai

A handsome tall and sturdy- dashing company chopper pilot for offshore oil rig services.

Prosperous background Mother lives in parental property in rural Kerala (Father – late businessman) and live in rural area; South Indian

Chapter/Division I

At 8 p.m. (August) it's one more scary night at Arabian Sea. Cloudy overcast, windy gusts, steady drizzle, occasional lightening, chilling weather, & wind blowing 30 to 40 knots adding to the tunes of rumbling of waves of an angry sea rising 2-3 meters high.

A towering structure of 150 meters high from seabed of an oil rig emerging behind a thick curtain of mist and fog was barely visible beyond 1000 meters with its powerful floor and gallery focus lamps making a futile attempt to break through the curtains of fog and mist

Only to end up in projecting a picture of a shady outline of the towering structure embedded with hazy twinkling lights, moving in a slow rhythmic up and down movement with the movement of waves. Carrying along with an orange and red shaded glow at the top; emitted by the ever-burning gas chimney as a vermilion.

The progressive night added more darkness to surroundings; the routine movement of helmeted workers on decks clad in clothes and jackets in vibrant colours suiting to safety norms had slowed down; & clattering of metals due to shaking of platform had become more audible in otherwise a scary silence around

All of a sudden, the peace changed into a turmoil A flare of a flame meters in length and parallel to one side of the structure leaped in the open sea; brightly

illuminating the close proximity. A gas valve had leaked.

Fire alarms were auto activated, & the floors witnessed a brisk activity of helmeted workers and engineers. A professional curative action quickly capped the fire sounding “all clear signal” in minutes. But the damage was done.

As normalcy returned 10 minutes later; 3 workers engaged in valve operation were earmarked for intensive Medicare in an earmarked onshore hospital-ready in basket statures (in view of persistent rains) with attendants for an airlift

PAN PAN’ SAGAR A3 BR3 CALLING ‘INDRA A4 BR4’ ARRANGE AIRLIFT MEDICAL EMERGENCY 3 PATIENTS BURN INJURIES” A HELIDESK OFFICER was calling from the rig to his counterpart onshore radio station.

ROGER, THIS IS INDRA A4 BR4 to SAGAR A3 BR3 EVACUATION BEING ARRANGED. SEND FEED BACK ON REAL TIME MET FIGURES & STANDBY FOR FURTHER DETAILS “ was the immediate response\

ROGER ON STANDBY!” Rig HELEDESK OPERATOR ACKNOWLEDGED

Half hour later powerful landing lights of a chopper showed on the top of rig helipad.

Quick Response Team had finished landing & take off protocols on fire & safety norms. The Chopper landed safely; while the rotors kept spinning and windsock fluttering on the deck of the rig.

On-board loading of basket statures; hooking them to position was complete in minutes amidst a steady

drizzle the attendants took their seats. A professional approach & display of a system.

Again, the rhetoric's now with the pilot and rig radio officer.

SAGAR A3 BR 3 TO CHARLI 306 ALL CLEAR FOR TAKE OFF. WIND SPEED 40 KNOTS PROCEED WEST.

ROGER 'CHARLY 306 to SAGAR A3 BR3 TAKING OFF WITH PAY LOAD the Pilot replied.

Helicopter changed modes and the engines geared up with a shrill note accompanying the heavy spinning sounds of the chopper. It disappeared in clouds with a vertical lift for a while- blowing strong gust of air for the attending QRT (Quick Response Team) crew

The Next Shot

AS the helicopter descends and settles on a rooftop helipad of a super speciality hospital, a sound of clapping is accompanied by a voice" Kudos Captain ROHIT!

"Thanks Captain Prem, you are on the bench tonight?"

"RIGHT! I am on the night rolls next"

"GOOD luck Captain the things are a bit difficult to night! Take Care!" Captain Rohit said with an affectionate handshake.

NO Worries, Captain! It's your version '**Housle buland ho to unchaiya ghat ti nahi aur unchi ho jati hai**'
"Good Night"

Once in his living apartment "Gullu" the maid servant informs his sirji about incoming calls from his mom from Kochi. (Kerala)

He calls back “Hello Mummy, how are you? What’s up? Called at this odd hour. Anything Special?”

“Earlier you were not available dear ANY WAY -Maybe It’s not special for you, but, for me Yes! A fine proposal for you! A fine girl suiting to your...

“I know mummy Rohit interrupted: – I am not in hurry and for the present -planning a tour with a girlfriend in J&K in near future. Can we discuss your proposal at a later date?

“OK. If she is your choice, then let it be so but why not to introduce her to us and get engaged.” Mom insisted.

Mummy, Jise piliya ho gaya ho, use sab peela hi dikhta hai. Aisa kuch bhi nahi hai, she is just a friend believe me”

“Whatever maybe the case, I give you next 6 months to decide this way or that way. OK?”

“OK Mummy, it’s a word from me. Now go to sleep, Good Night and take care.”

He puts through another call to Preet.

“Hey dear, what’s up?

“Rohit, daddu and bebe are pestering me for marriage. Why not to go for an outing for a while? A pleasure trip to get rid of this problem, let this be for some picturesque valley in J&K.

“Fine, that suits me too. We are sailing in the same boat as far as marriage is concerned. Can it be “Gurej Valley” in Kashmir this time? About 130 kms from Srinagar and 350 kms from katra to Vaishno Devi if you are intending so!”

"A car journey from Srinagar to Gurej can be picturesque tour to think about!" Rohit added

"Let me work out the details. Once that is done, I will get back to you" replied Preet

O.K when & where do we meet?

Leave it to me! May be that I will be in Srinagar for some autumn photo shoot and will seek a month's leave from Sept 20th from there itself. This is August and it suits the visiting time for GUREJ valley till Oct. Is it O.K.?

Done! But where do we meet? I will plan a Srinagar flight so as to reach there by 8 AM on 20th Sept: Rohit

Call me thereafter. I will receive you!

At the Airport?

May be! It all depends! She ended the call

With the dawn of mid Sept it was a unique blend of natural beauty and peaceful ambience in Kashmir valley. The deep green leaves of summer Chinar trees had transformed the land beneath into a fiery red gold and orange colours of the foliage, truly reflecting the name of the tree as "Tree of fire". Immense in size & longevity.

The temperature ranged from 9 to 20 degrees and was the best season for harvesting saffron and apples. The lush green meadows were an eye pleasing sight.

It was a cool and pleasant morning with clear skies and cool- crisp breeze" After landing as he called Preet- a grim & terse male voice answered" Good Morning Captain, Rohit" A cab is waiting for you outside the Airport with a placard."

But where is she and who are you? Rohit was now getting restless with anxiety and maddening thoughts.

“She is OK, & with us and waiting for you. No more questions please.” -Same male voice

The waiting taxi brought him on Boulevard Street of Srinagar Ghats of Dal Lake and again the same mail voice greeted him” now the Motorboat is waiting for you on the banks of the lake”

“But where is she? Why isn’t she speaking to me?”: Rohit

“You will get your answers once you are there” The call went dead.

15 minutes of motorboat journey was putting loads of weight on Rohit’s mind. The surrounding scenic beauty of snow-clad high mountain peaks of Himalayas, the cool and crystal-clear water of the lake, the Chinar trees on the fringe turning gold orange red had all failed to make any impact on him.

His only concern was welfare of Preet, which was inordinately increased by now by her silence and the grim and quipped male voice responding in her place.

Where is she? He looked around on the Char Chinar Island to find her amongst idle movement of few tourists. Be-wildered he called her again. And the playful voice of Preet trickled. I am there under a Chinar. Find for Yourself.

Yes Right! There is a Kashmiri girl there. He moved quickly. And was stunned by the looks of standing Preet in full Kashmiri dress with charming smile and glowing face.

He was unable to speak for a while- dumb founded by her beauty in Kashmiri attire and trying to ride over his anxiety about her welfare.

“Hey- It’s me Rohit-“Preet! She awakened the dumb founded Rohit

Then with great effort Rohit said: Preet what type of prank was it.?

Rather—How was it Rohit? Preet chuckled and said” Stop staring at me like this.”

“It almost killed me damn it!” Rohit uttered with great effort

Then revive yourself now. I am O.K and fine!

A shikara is now waiting for us. Refresh yourself. Cool your eyes and mind. We start tomorrow on tour! She mocked at him

Dismayed and befooled Rohit simply Nodded

Chapter/Division II

After a short while in shikara Preet suddenly said “what was it?”

“Where?” asked Rohit

There! I saw a faint ethereal and ghostly figure gliding across the water beckoning her to come closer before disappearing into thin air”

Rohit laughed aloud and said you are now day dreaming dear. There is nothing there!

But Abdul the boatman, intervened saying “May be the madam is right.

There is an apparition here that at times- this scene occurs and is attributed to ghostly stories of Dal Lake. Long back a woman had drowned in Dal Lake, he added

Forget it, Preet! That could have been yet another shadow play of mist on the surface of waters. Rohit said casually

She went silent but the sight did make an impact on her mind

What was it? She wondered” A bad omen?

Rohit picked a lotus flower and offering it to her, he chuckled just enjoy your trip.

The day passed off peacefully without a major event and was spent on shikara unwinding past memories, viewing boats loaded with variety of flowers and

accessories and seeing the sun set; they were busy In making primary local purchases for the tour like a powerful emergency light, a power bank (in view of intermittent and erratic power cut in Gurej valley and a few thermals.

In the evening they entered a wool emporium for a special visit on request of Preet; who presented Rohit a “Kani” cap- a variety of Kashmir valley and Rohit reciprocated with a present of embroidered Pashmina shawl for Preet.

They started at 05.30 hrs Am by a hired self-driven JLR (Jaguar Land Rover). The night was chilly. A few stars were giving glimpses of their fading existence in the sky in a brief interval before their disappearance with the sneaking of morning light.

After an hour and half just before sunrise from behind the hills, they parked the JLR roadside. And they set out for a roadside stroll to witness the scenic beauty of a hillock covered by lush forests,

A sparkling white waterfall was making a rippling sound, blending with early birds chirping, whispering of wind and rustling of leaves to create a rich layered forest melody, & providing a serene, relaxed state of mind to any soul around.

Outside, Preet made him wear the Kani cap and Rohit pulled the Pashmina shawl over her shoulders

Hardly 100 meters in deep woods, Preet heard a hissing sound passing from near her ear and striking in a wooden tree trunk nearby; followed by a whispering sound “Bevkoof Chup Kar. They watched two shadowy figures armed and disappearing in deep woods

Startled; both of them hurriedly retraced their steps towards their car only to find that the pashmina shawl worn by Preet was stuck in a trunk of the tree and was to be pulled with a jerk to make it free, leaving a “hole” mark on it

“What was it?” Preet

“Probably a gun shot. Sounds something sinister” answered cool Rohit- to worried looking Preet.

“It was pretty close,” she said. The shawl is damaged

“Yes! Forget it, By God’s Grace You are safe! No worries now! We shall see what to do about it later”. He added.

“Not a good start! Isn’t it Rohit?” She said

He kept his cool and turned on the car key saying “when you are well everything is well. It’s a good omen Preet, its god’s wish to see us safe and sound together”

On the way he saw a pair of Army’s Road Patrol commandos.

He stopped the car. Went near them & asked “is there an army camp nearby?” Preet watched curiously

Kyuon? (why?) Asked the guard suspiciously.

“I have to talk to the commander.”

“Kis liye? Kya baat hai?” (What for? What is the matter?)

“I told you! It’s only the commander; whom I want to talk to”: Rohit

Kahan se Aaye ho? (where from?)

Srinagar- tourists

Kahan jaoge: Gurej (Where to?)

The guard minutely scrutinized the identity papers of the two- gave a cursory glance to the interiors of the car whereas the other stood in attention.

OK! Upri Baji! Road par Ek check post milegi. Uske Left side par camp hai. (Upper side- You will get a check post. The camp is located to its left.)

On the left side of check post, the road led them to the camp side- with barbed wire fencing all around and on the main entrance – a guard stood with machine gun behind a stack of sand bags. Two more sentries appeared from behind the entry gate as the car stopped in front of the gate.

Preet murmured: why to invite trouble Rohit? Leave it! It will spoil the mood and our tour” He ignored her and briefed the guards about his wish to meet the camp commander to reveal something important.

The leading sentry asked them to park their car outside the camp after a cursory look inside. Checked their papers and asked them to wait in the car and wait for orders from inside. He called someone on the field telephone. “Unhe Captain saab se milna hai” 5 minutes later Rohit and Preet crossed the DFMD (Door frame Metal Detector) in lieu of frisking & boarded a “Jonga” (jeep) which carried them to the interiors of the camp.

They were asked to sit inside a tent with a flap gate & a sentry outside. Few moments later a sound of stamping of boot of the saluting sentry outside was heard followed by a terse but soft voice of a female officer; with the opening of the flap entry.

Good morning guys & welcome to my camp. In came a Lady Army officer in full combat uniform, bearing captains rank- her face glowing with a charming smile. She extended her hand for a hand shake watching them curiously.

And suddenly said "Wait! We have met before. Hav'nt we? Looking eye to eye with Rohit" and said softly "Rohit is that you?"

Yes! And you are "Manu"- Sorry! Captain Manu! He replied.

Damn it! Where were you? Tears rolling down her cheeks she clung to him, forgetting she is in uniform. Leaving Preet bewildered & dumbfound.

Time passed off eternally before both came to senses and separated. "Calm down Manu!" he said and introduced Preet as T V anchor & and a journalist girl- friend. I am a commercial Pilot by profession.

But why no contact after collage finals? She demanded and he replied – a long story. Now that we have met- everything is well that ends well. Preet; She is Captain Manu Chopra my collage mate- best friend!

"You have not changed Rohit" She said winking at Preet." Rohit smiled. She continued "He is like this" Always a friend of friends"

Cooling down and sitting in front of them she asked "what will you have? Breakfast is also ready.

"Not really we just had on way. Now listen to what I have to say." Rohit said

Both of them narrated the incident on-way. Preet showed the marking on her shawl. Manu listened

attentively & patiently. Her calculative mind alert - She murmured” Must be them” Her face turned grim & stern.

She went outside for a while and returned saying “well we will always be in touch hereafter. But for now it seems there is an urgent task ahead. I can’t wait. I must move now. I have left instructions to take care of you two””

Outside some quick orders were heard along with brisk movement of stamping and running boots and revving engines of heavy vehicles. A task force was ready to move at very short notice with Captain Manu in the lead.

She bid farewell to them and the convoy left the camp gathering speed blowing clouds of dust with it.

“She is like this moody- determined and dedicated to her cause above all.” Rohit said to Preet and they left the camp.

On way Preet said” Rohit -what a personality Manu is! Left a deep positive imprint on me”

Rohit did not say anything. She called him twice. No reply! She touched him on shoulders and slightly shook him” Rohit” she said in a loud voice. Dear I am talking to you.” He as if awake from deep slumber said “OH what was it? Yes! Yes Manu is like that.”

“Be steady Rohit. Focus on driving. I can understand.”

Did you notice Preet- he added” She received no calls during or after our meeting. Everything was normal. But suddenly she talked about an urgent task ahead. I am afraid she was working on our tipoff”

Silence prevailed and then in no time “they were in Gurej valley! - Hardly making any comments on the scenic beauty on the sides of road.

Few days passed in non- local tents camp- trekking and fishing on kishanganga banks enjoying pleasant feel of lush meadows in close vicinity of lucrative snow-capped Himalayan mountain peaks-long morning strolls- yoga on the banks of river.

One fine morning Rohit was restless. I saw Manu in dreams leading a commando operation and getting hurt therein.

But you don't believe in such things. Isn't it Rohit? Strange you saying so. But I always stand by you whatever you decide I will approve of it.

We got to get back soon at the earliest

As you wish. Said Preet with a worried look

Chapter/Division III

Back in Srinagar in pre-booked helicopter ride of 30 minutes, a scrutiny of newspapers by them revealed reports of an encounter at the place; disclosed by Rohit and Preet to the army & that Captain Manu, was wounded in gun fire; while leading the commando search operation and admitted subsequently in Srinagar Hospital.

Preet in simple sari and a paranda in her long plated hair and Rohit in a plain blue suit visited the Military hospital with flower bouquets by 10 A.M. in the morning.

They got the detailed version from Army Officer in the hospital

Manu gave them a weak smile with a pale face and said in a feeble voice” you were right Rohit. They were them”

“Relax Manu!” Consoled Rohit “we will talk about it later. For now just get well soon and take care. Your courage and Valor is the talk of the town by now and the media is full of it”

You too! Take care! She gave the feeble smile again closing her eyes for a while (as if praying for him)

While both carried a bouquet of flowers; Preet put a label with her name and Mobile/No. and profession as freelance electronic media journalist; on hers.

Preet said “Well Manu, my number and card is there. We meet for an exclusive interview after you are fit and fine O.K.?”

Manu looked at Rohit, who simply nodded.

They left after a while.

What do you think Rohit? She is very weak and frail
“Preet Said and suddenly asked “are you theist or atheist- do you believe in God?”

“You know better than me!”

“Then I must say we must make special prayers for her!”

“What have you in mind?”

“We should visit Kheer Bhavani temple just 30 kms away from Srinagar and then Vaishno Devi (Godess Durga) temple. And pray for her speedy recovery.”

Fine! We finish Kheer Bhavani temple tomorrow. I will make flight arrangements for Jammu and for chopper flight from Katra.

At the Kheer- Bhavani temple campus, both made offerings of milk and sugarcane and prayed for quick recovery of Manu. They squatted for a while in the temple campus, when a middle aged lady, clad in a red and gold border sari and a big red bindi & vermillion on her forehead –plush hair and gleaming face came and sat beside Preet.

“You are going to Vaishno Devi aren't you? Do a favour to me. Carry this small box of vermillion for the temple there as my offering.”

Dismayed Preet asked” It's OK but how come you know about our plans? Who are you?”

“I stay in nearby village. My name is Saraswati. I cannot make frequent tours to Vaishno Devi because of workload here. Years of Practice and I come to know as to who is going to Vaishno devi temple from here; simply by looking at their face. Will you do this favour to me?” She asked again.

In utter disbelief Preet extended her hand to accept the small box. The lady blessed them that their aspirations will be fulfilled and without a look back merged with crowd to disappear. Strange! Preet exclaimed.

The tour to vaishno devi was uneventful

At Vaishno devi after darshan and offerings they handed over the small box to the priest; who looked at it carefully; saluted it humbly and gave a red Chuneru to Preet in return.

They were returning & hardly 100 metres from the temple, when a voice of a girl from behind, stopped them.

Turning back they saw a girl of about 12-14 yrs of age dressed in red Chania Choli, (a vibrant traditional 3 piece Indian outfit from Gujarat and Rajasthan featuring a long skirt and a fitted blouse and a scarf/dupatta famous for its vibrant colours intricate mirror work and embroidery which women wear in Navratri festival) red prominent bindi & with long hair braided with a paranda, green glass bangles and necklaces of beads and pearls was running in their direction & waiving at them.

“You forgot it in the temple –she said it panting & producing a red chuneru.

“But- Preet said “we have not! We already have one.”

Yes but the Priest said you are two not one” to the dismayed Preet.

Before Preet could recover and ask anything .the girl ran back and disappeared round the corner without waiting for further queries.

It was afternoon when they walked back to Helipad almost speechless- all the while engrossed in thoughts and analyzing chronology of events.

At the Helipad Preet broke the ice:

“Rohit, what is all this? First at Kheer Bhavani and now here?”

“Beyond Imagination! God’s wish what else?” Rohit answered lifting his shoulders in a gesture of being perplexed.

Helicopter was Airborne for Katra.

After a few days of recovery Captain-“Manu” was sent to Shimla for rest and refreshing herself.

She called Preet for interview she asked for and insisted that Rohit too should join them for a short tour to Shimla.

Now- possessive conscious Preet reluctantly invited Rohit too, who readily agreed to join.

Courtesy visit gifts included; a Kashmiri silk sari and a special red Paranda (ladies braid the same in their long hair plait-- in Punjab) and a greeting Card of a bunch of Roses on the cover page with an inside note “Love You” from Rohit and a gold plated sari pin from Preet.

A couple of days before the gathering ended – Captains younger sister Lado had joined them. She had brought presents; as directed for by her elder sister-Capt. Manu- ----a kurta salwar to Preet and a Papillion chest pin for Rohit.

It was during this visit that Preet picked a thread from the story of Rohit as a life saver for Manu in collage days; which had been referred to by Manu in their first visit.)

Manu smiled closed her eyes and recalled: Lado too listening.

The event was a lifetime memorable event for me & all those college colleagues present and watching. Popularly known as gym boy- Especially amidst girls, he as good as vanished; after final exams. Not traceable even for me –“. It's only some time back that my best friend Veena had recalled Rohit's memories and sought his whereabouts.

“I was considered to be close to him’ she blushed.

Coming to the point: she continued....

It was yet another cold but a bright day with clear visibility in Sonang valley of Manali. Faint winter sun shining and all landscapes; tree canopies; mountain peaks all clad in a white soft powdery snow coat were presenting a refreshing replica of a paradise on earth with lingering memories of fresh snow fall last night.

While I chose skiing, Rohit had opted for para gliding from heights just above me. Everything was routine and normal.

And then it happened, Rohit had spotted an avalanche forming and slowly sliding towards me. Me unaware offcourse!

There was some kind of 'shor' (commotion) from downside crowd, which I could not understand.

BUT Rohit did! No panic—he aligned his para glide enroot avalanche and my ski course of skiing; & in a flash of a second picked me up for a few moments at a clinically right time to allow the main thrust of sliding snow to pass under my feet and placed me down again- all the while manoeuvring the course and momentum of his gliding.

It was thrilling and stunning for all those who witnessed' she concluded leaving Preet dumbstruck

Oh Great! Stunned Preet exclaimed and is left with a strange admixture of a look in her eyes in appreciation for Rohit; and jealousy for Manu; who blushed again as Rohit entered the room.

Manu's eyes become dreamy when she recollected that in those days Rohit had proposed her but did not reveal it to Preet, who was looking at her curiously with expectations of more additions to the story.

'She was not all that heavy then' said Rohit jokingly.

'Damn it Rohit I am still not a heavy weight' retorted Manu mocking at him.

All laughed!

The short time visit passed joyfully with fun fare in Shimla including mini train riding/ camp fire/ mall visits/yacht-boat sailing, etc.

The visitors are gone Lado revealed to Manu

“I was looking at you Didi. You were looking great while telling the story specially, whenever you blushed, while referring to Rohit of your dreams. “

If you were Rohit’s first “crush”, nothing like that Didi. You are made for each other. Believe me you will make a great match. Rohit can be the best life partner for you”.

Manu engrossed in thoughts said absent mindedly with Preet in mindset “Perhaps it’s too late now “

But the memories and Rohit continuously haunted her and kept tingling in her mind.

Chapter/Division IV

Eventually “Baisakhi” festival came and this time the invitation of Captain Manu for Rohit and Preet; was for home town in rural area in Punjab, where Agriculture galore as the main occupation.

A bullock cart race was a star attraction (Punjab govt. has lifted the ban on such races with effect from early 2025) of the event. Despite cautions of likely hazards and a possible injury from Manu and Preet; Rohit as a participant stood 3rd in the race. (A spectacular event in the village). He was applauded as a local hero to the pride of both of his girl-friends.

Here the key role of making the entire Baisakhi scenario lively and vibrant at home and in the field was primarily played by playful Lado,

She danced gracefully with Preet playing second to her. She got very close to Preet, who had similar personality traits (traditional dance songs etc).

Disillusioned Captain Manu was however indifferent and a bit ignorant making a futile effort, to hide her temperament; in the agony of losing Rohit to Preet

A day before departure Rohit once again confessed his love for Manu in a silent corner of the house; lamenting on the gap of precious years; before their reunion as a stroke of luck.

He also admitted that his relationship with Preet- was pure and pious- a strictly close knit friendship.

Incidentally Lado and Preet; who were about to enter the house overhear their talk.

Whereas Lado in privacy insisted on Manu to grab the chance. Preet became introvert and silently engaged herself in house chores- but not with usual interest

To keep herself engaged Preet drives Tractor, participates in harvesting/dancing activities' milking cows suiting to her agriculture background and wins the heart of everyone in the family and outer circle.

A watchful eye on Preet's behavioral patterns. Manu tells Lado that her Battalion logo was Parakram (Valor) and Tyag (sacrifice).

"That she could not build her own edifice on broken soul of Preet; whose love for Rohit was genuine and true. Though Rohit was unaware of Preet's feelings about him; the fact that she was having an intense desire to become his life partner was a foregone conclusion.

The short tour passed off with overjoyed family and a bit of Captain's nervous note.

Preet leaves with a note of despair in mind; for not getting desired attention from the Rohit during the visit.

After watching late evening hours news in the living room of Preet's house at Delhi, Rohit rose to retire at 22:45 hrs; only to find a predetermined Preet blocking his way.

"Wait Rohit I have something here to ask to you!"

Surprised Rohit: At this hour of night?

Yes!

And what is it?

Have a seat and tell me. What Manu means to you?

Just an old friend!

Don't kid yourself Rohit or you are kidding me.

What are you up to?

I have seen aspirations in her eyes & expectations in her looks with you in the centre place

SO WHAT?

It's not mere friendship, its love! Damn it!

What's the problem with You Preet? Like? JEALOUSY?

NO I too love You, I too have a right to claim you as my life partner, based on time tested friendship and association. I am "pretty" given by your own words, figurative, affectionate and loving for you. Why not me? What's wrong with me?

"Oh so it's personal then?

Why shouldn't it be? Rohit, I am not a doll. I too have emotions & aspirations.

"Wait Calm down Preet. Let me explain---- Rohit was interrupted by Preet

Enough It's me Rohit -Understand? Not your mom! You are no more kidding this time alike every time you do with her, when she raises this topic. You skip her. Come on tell me right now! Do you want to get married or not?

Marry? Yes! Of course! Even more early now looking at the situation. But the riddle is not that simple Preet. Both of you are precious to me. Your

contributions in my life have made it rich with golden moments and phases at different stages; elevated my morale in crisis at times and in some way or other served me as a guide.

You both are integral part of my life- may it be in past or present. If I cannot cheat myself it's the same for both of you. Cheating is not my character.

It's very well said- he added "you cannot run for ever". Eventually a point of no return comes and you are forced to show your cards wishfully or against your wish"

O.K Rohit; then come out of the shell and tell me – Who? SHE insisted

Don't push up things Preet. Please give me some time for an elaborate consideration before arriving at a conclusion. You are a sensible and an understanding lady and time is the only solution.

It's not mere maths Rohit that you add 2+2 to make it four" Sentiments won't permit that." Preet argued

"I do understand that but life! What is it? Everything is pre destined & time bound. No one has persistently won or lost here. Whatever comes your way you have to accept it. Your likes or dislikes have no role to play. Waiting and not pushing is the solution."

"What in case I am at the losing end?"

"Here your understanding about life and time is of prime importance Preet."

Life & time always provide for an alternative plausible opening if you are blocked" Be Patient. Let me think. Give me Time. I will come out with a specific and justified answer in specific time frame.

Don't be so cruel Rohit!" Said Preet – now tears rolling down her cheeks.

Patting her hands in his; after gently wiping her tears Rohit said" Time Not Tears heal all scars. Believe me and it's but natural that Time & life always give Alternatives for a new openings.

Easy to say it Rohit!

You always say

"Housle buland ho to unchaiya kam nahi hoti-badh jati hai."

"O.K. if that's your wish let it prevail. I trust your decision. My only wish is to stay in your company as long as I can.

"Agreed!

Can it be one more prolong world tour abroad?"

Said cool and ever smiling Rohit' "yes as you wish Good luck to both of us. GOOD NIGHT & HAPPY DREAMS!"

A 90 days tour to Europe and US?"

O.K!

One thing more!

What is it?

I forgot to hand over to Manu- the 2nd chuneri the girl gave us at Vaishno Devi. Please send it to her.

I understand! I will send it to her by courier.

Now what is it?

I forgot to hand over this to Manu. She went inside and produced the 2nd chuneri the girl gave them at

Vaishno devi. She said slightly wiping her eyes. Please send it to her.

An August morning in the rural areas of Kerala -often referred to as "God's own Country," was a sensory dip into a vibrant, wet, and intensely green world, defined by the peak Southwest monsoon.

The air was thick with moisture and the scent of wet, rich soil, with temperatures ranging comfortably between 22°C and 30°C.

Everything was draped in shades of deep and light green, moss. Rain-soaked palm trees swayed gently while banana plants bowed under the weight of water droplets.

In the hilly regions like Wayanad or Munnar, the morning began with thick mist clinging to the mountainsides, slowly lifting to reveal lush tea plantations and cascading waterfalls.

Paddy fields were in full, lush growth, sometimes partially submerged. The air smell was fresh, damp, and earthy—a combination of moist soil, wet coconut husk, and the aroma of nearby spice gardens. Slightly carrying the smell of waters particularly near the back-waters

A calm, slow-moving river or a network of backwaters running through the village, reflected the sky like a mirror, with small wooden boats or houseboats resting on the banks

Locals could be seen walking on narrow, unpaved red-soil paths, often carrying traditional umbrellas.

The silence of the dawn is broken by the melodic chirping of birds and the distant, rhythmic chopping of wood or tapping of rubber trees.

“Good Morning Mommy” Wished Rohit and hugged a middle aged woman from behind who was watering a Tulsi Plant in big court yard of coconut grooves.

The woman turned quickly. Kept her hand on her lips and uttered in dismay. I don’t believe my eyes. Rohit? You? You Nasty boy- why can’t you inform in advance. Always like whirl wind! Then she shouted with over-flowing energy and joy--

Paru kutty! Kunjam! Appan! Come all of you, see who has come. It’s my son!

Rohit met all members of joyous crowd of house workers with enthusiasm and cursory enquiries of their welfare.

His baggage was carried inside the room of his big ancestral tiled house; which was surging with activity now with Mommy passing instructions over dusting and décor of the house coupled with cooking menu for Parukutti.

“No leaving before Onam this time! Rohit - Understood?-as Fresh Rohit emerged from his room. I have a long list of girls in waiting for you.

O.K. Mom, but Can I settle first? My boss is not very considerate and calculative like you. He raises eyebrows with a slight mention of long leave or for that matter even a talk of leave!.

But let it be later. Let me enjoy your lovely company and that of house ambience for couple of days. Other topics can wait.

What happens to your boss when you are with your girlfriends? Mom demanded

Leave it Mom! My sweet mom. We have a number of other problems to settle in priority. Wait! We will certainly sort out your problem too!

Is there any one in your mind? If so please tell me.

OH Mummy nothing of that sort. I will sort out your problem at the right time. O.K? It's a promise! Please Call it a day now.

For the moment I wish to smell the fragrance of open air in my home town and will have a round in the shopping centre of the town and return in half an hour later after an exercise for relaxing the limbs. OK? She smiled. Good old habits.

An hour later he returned and asked his mom "Do you believe in miracles?

Why?

Tell me.

OK Yes but what is it?

At Vaishno Devi I and my girlfriend had met a girl, who had given -to our surprise, an additional red chuneri to us. I saw her in the market, but could not catch up with her. She disappeared round the corner once again. The chuneri is still with me for despatch to Manu.

Who? Mom was alerted

Nothing special in that

I feel your marriage time is near now". She murmured in soft voice not knowing what she was up to.

The day passed off peacefully. The sky was again a moody mix of grey and white, with consistent, gentle drizzles broken by sudden, intense downpours. The sunlight was muted, occasionally breaking through to make the wet foliage glisten.

Despite the rain, life moved slowly and peacefully. Locals can be seen walking on narrow, unpaved red-soil paths, often carrying traditional umbrellas.

Don't venture out Rohit- the weather is inclement. Shouted Mom from inside as she noticed Rohit opening an umbrella.

I am not going outside- very much in our courtyard. He shouted back.

Not more than a couple of minutes and there was big sound of "Thud" and a fall of human body dropping to ground the running of house workers and Rohit was brought inside unconscious. He was hit by a bunch of coconuts fallen due to a swift gust of wind.

Saarinu oru apakadam sambhavichu kaaranam: Kunjam shouted (Saar has met with an accident)

The panic prevailed in the house till the doctor summoned hurriedly, declared him out of danger. The Umbrella had considerably reduced the brunt of falling weight. No need for hospitalisation. He added and put on the saline bottle.

The worried mom continued sitting on the bedside when Rohit's mobile rang. Seeing the photo of a lady Mom picked the phone.

Hi Rohit Its Manu here!

MANU"! is she the same? Rohit had seemingly referred her name. Startled Moms hands were

shaking now. She collected herself. And said “Manu! I am his Mother on line” He is in Kerala.

But how? He never told of going to hometown. Can you give him the phone?

No! And she let go a sob against her will.

Wait! What happened? The voice from other side crackled!

He is unwell and had met with accident today. She disconnected the phone and did not respond at the immediate second ring. She switched off the phone.

The next day evening there was a stirring in the body but Rohit had not come to senses.

The sky was darkening again, some conversations were heard coming from outside. Kunjam was speaking to someone in Malayalam. He knocked on the door, which was opened by Mom.

This madam is asking about Rohit Sir, I can’t understand her” he said in Malayalam:

I am Manu! Rohit’s friend from Haryana, the visitor said.

Ooh! Come inside Puthri (daughter)! Aghast at the standing personality and the timing of her arrival.

Without a word they straight went to Rohit’s Room. Manu placed her palm on his bandaged forehead and taking his hand in hers” she said” wake up boy I am Manu here”. Tears rolled down her cheeks.

When the mom was narrating the incident of mishap- a feeble voice said “where am I? Its Manu’s voice.” Hope I am not imagining things or is it a hallucination?

No-No No-Yes! Yes it's me dear! Manu! Mata Durga - She never lets me down. You escaped unscathed dear from a possibly major accident Manu said in excitement but husky voice half drenched in emotion.

I was alone and worried. "Now that you are here- he is all yours" Said mom moving to other room- gratified in one corner of her mind at the selection of Rohit.

The doctor entered keeping his schedule in the late evening hours and looked at Manu inquisitively.

Indeed a fast recovery!

Rohit informed "Doc, she is Capt. Manu of Army Commando unit and my collage mate. She Para jumped here just sometime ahead of your visit. She is Omnipotent and Omni- present Don't' know how!

Ente vadhuvakaakan pokunna penkutti (my future daughter in law) Mom interrupted.

The doctor laughed – oh that's why I now understand the reason for speedy recovery. Rohit raised his eyebrows saying---Mom!

Confused Manu asked what Mom said." Nothing except that you are too pretty to be a commando." Rohit remarked

You cheater! She mimicked at him raising a hand.

Next three days she carried out the nursing duties for Rohit

She also prepared Malabar special fish dish for all the house staff to the pride of Mom.

On 4th day she said no more leaves Rohit, I must go back now.

Wait I have something to give to you. Preet gave it to me for safe keeping and assured delivery to you.

He handed over the chuneri to her narrating the story behind it. He also did not forget to tell her he saw the same girl in the township market a day before mishap.

She took it respectfully. And asked how come there was no call from Preet so far.

“She does not know Mom told me that the news was also broken to you accidentally. Preet will go mad if she knows. Better keep it a guarded secret” Rohit closed his eyes saying so.

It's O.K. Rohit but what next?

Do you want me to propose you once again?

Damn it, you are a sloth- a slow mover. Now Your Mom has also approved of me!

Is it? How do you know?

I am smart enough to read faces and draw meanings even from languages I am not familiar with. I could guess what she said in Malayalam. Although Not a perfect meaning.

Yes! You are smart for sure:

He informed: the day after we returned to Delhi after Baisakhi Preet was very disturbed. She was crying and was demanding a decisive answer from me on marriage.

What did you say?

I borrowed six months and told her time will take care of everything.

And she agreed?

She silently shed tears sitting by my side and gave this chuneri to me for you.

How long do you know her?

Last 5 Years.

Rohit You are really a sloth! Now going for a toss?

No: I believe in destiny- the destiny when human brain fails destiny guides you to the right place.

Both of you are precious assets of my life and I just could not think of losing one. I can visualise changes in Nature as a pilot but cannot be judgemental about human nature. May be a weakness in my character. I am waiting for the destiny to give a decisive call.

OK I am waiting for 6 months or for that matter eternally.

He grabbed both hands of Manu and kissed them.

Two days after departure of Manu. Rohit called for Preet.

After so many days? She retorted. Am I still in your memory? Please do not harass me.

Listen Preet! You have a permanent place in my memory. Don't get angry. I am in my home town with my mom for some legal work. That's why the gap.

You could have asked me to join. But No you don't want me to get into inner circle.

Don't be so judgemental Preet. It's not that. Mom was adamant and the decision to go home was so quick---

What happened? Are all at home O.K.? How is Mom?

Absolutely fine Preet.

Now listen carefully I am putting our plan of foreign tour in action in September and I don't want any reasons to abort the same.

At your service Preet!

Who is she now?

Mom entered the room as he ended the call but heard "Preet".

Getting suspicious- she warned "Look Son. Our family and traditions do respect women – do not allow ditching any one! It is a sin of first order. Especially so when it comes to life partnership. You are everything for me but if it comes to violating founding principles of our family, perhaps I will not be the one to stand by your side.

I understand Mom and will not let you down! Said Rohit

5 long years, meeting Preet-Really? Rohit immersed in thoughts.

It was a fine sunny morning of March in Mumbai. The venue was Cuffe Parade south Mumbai where a Vintage car rally was organised by a prominent car club of Mumbai.

Cuffe Parade is a highly affluent, premier residential and commercial locality in South Mumbai, known for luxury high-rises, stunning Arabian Sea views, and top-tier infrastructure. Situated near Colaba and Nariman Point, it features many landmark buildings like the World Trade Centre, Hotel Oberoi and Air India etc.

The vehicles were categorised as vintage, classic, post-war, and others.

Virtually there was no clear-cut demarcation into these categories but in wider sense around 50 to 75 yrs back.

From a stunning 1906 Renault to the 1938 Mercedes and Adler — also of 1938 — the iconic vintage and classic cars that took part in the rally included 1912 Standard Coventry, 1913 Stoewer, 1919 Citroen Topedo, 1926 Studebaker Erskine, 1929 Austin 7 Tourer, 1932 Baby Austin, 1935 Rytcraft, 1936 Rolls Royce, 1937 Wolseley, 1937 Dodge 1956 May fair and many others.

The Indian classics which graced the grand show were ambassador 1956 Premier Padmini and Fiat etc.

The air was thick with the rich aroma of aged metal and the rhythmic thrum of historic engines. Chrome glinted in the soft morning light, spoked wheels hummed over the tarmac, and the wind carried the scent of ocean salt and petrol.

The vintage legends gleamed as people watched the timeless elegance of the machines with nostalgia.

He (Rohit) was occupying a side front seat with Shekhar his close friend, in an Austin 8 Tourer, when Preet had approached with her cameraman.

Hello Sir good Morning. Is this car your's? I mean You are the owner of this car?

Not me! He pointed a thumb towards Shekhar: He! By the way "Shekhar"

A stunning piece of a journalist. Rohit thought- "The paranda is an additional complement to her beauty.

He hurriedly added- but Shekhar- he is a bit of an introvert. You can speak to me. I am Rohit- Rohit Rai

Shekhar gave him a mischievous smiling look. We have one more vintage car too but it is only an exhibition piece. And parked in over there.

Shekhar's grandpa had bought and maintained them since.

Now it's Shekhar who is the caretaker. This is Austin 7 Tourer" 1937 Model. And is in operating condition.

Rohit provided the initially required data blunting all the questionnaire of Preet. She smiled and said thanks.

The parade is to start now. Would you like to have a ride? Rohit offered.

Again flirting! He won't change.

Shekhar smiled to himself, with the thought. So quick a friendship! He is not only a handsome personality but quite smart too.

Any problems Shekhar? Rohit asked, turning to Shekhar.

Not at all.

Wonderful I never imagined it. Overjoyed Preet, jumped like a school girl. Nothing like it. It will be a great pleasure.

Ever smiling Preet, was overwhelmed with joy and hurriedly took her position in the back seat with her cameraman. I am Preet-Gurupreet Tanvar and Ashok is the cameraman.-R T.V she introduced.

Shekhar applied the key and pressed the start button. The car hesitated for a second before its engine caught a low, steady rumble that felt more alive than mechanical¹.

That wasn't just a drive. It was a rolling tribute to a different era — one where every gear shift carried weight of its heritage, every rumble had a story to tell, and every mile demanded attention of the people. The owners behind the wheel were looking like proud parents, whose wards had stood the test of time with flying colours.

The event had transformed the streets into a vibrant living museum as crowds gathered to witness meticulously restored craft work and maintenance of the modular beauties. The sight of rare rolling sculptures was a treat for vintage car enthusiasts.

Every drive in these classics was an adventure filled with fairy tales.

Preet was no exception. She profusely thanked Rohit for the treat & had enjoyed a cup of hot coffee with him at the end of parade.

Do you love to and always attend to such public functions "Rohit asked. Shekhar was busy in attending to his car.

Either way but you know – it is a part of my job. I am a reporter for an electronic media or what you call it in General; - T.V. Media.

And How about you? A bureaucrat? She asked

Do I look like? Funny! I fly.

Please do not play puzzles.

True I fly! By God. He mimicked and added- A chopper pilot for offshore rigs.

She opened her mouth in dismay and said “Oh” Unbelievable

She once again shook hands with him and opened her purse and handed him her visiting card with personal and R TV contact phone number.

We meet in leisure time soon. She said before taking leave.

Not far off if you see it right. Said Rohit

Do you always talk in riddles? She asked

The event of marathon – “5 kms Run” from Gate way of India is next Saturday. We can meet then.

Oh yes. It slipped out of my mind. O.K. For sure we meet then.

Then he asked politely but with a goaded question” do you always carry a satellite with you.

Again I did not get what you meant?

I mean the cameraman he added without looking in that direction

Now she laughed aloud. And remarked “A witty fella”

Join the marathon with me and without him. He commented.

O.K. And bye

Fine let’s meet then. Bye

Saturday morning the venue of Gate way of India was crowded with all age group across sections of

enthusiast runners in sports turnout. Age was almost no bar.

Rohit and Preet met at the fixed R.V. and complimented each other over the smart turn out in crested tee-shirt and white sport pants.

Rohit was in black crested bulbul graphic print and Preet in red porcupine pattern t-shirt.

The run was another mile stone to increase the closeness in the close-knit friendship in years to come

At the end both had a light breakfast and chatted for a while.

Where do you stay Rohit and how many of you?

I am single and stay in own spacious flat in the vicinity of Marine drive. (Marine Drive in Mumbai is a iconic 3.6-kilometer-long, C-shaped boulevard along the Arabian Sea, famous for its picturesque promenade, "Queen's Necklace" night view, and Art Deco buildings.

At night, the, streetlights curve along the coastline, creating the illusion of a sparkling pearl necklace when viewed from an elevated vantage point).

My hometown is in Kerala and Mom stays there in ancestral house with house servants to assist her. We are relatively a prosperous family. He informed.

Wow, Marine Drive is certainly a great place to stay. And Kerala is a land of God. The combination is a good match.

I too am single and belong to Delhi. I am posted in Mumbai for a while. Then I will go back to Delhi. I stay with one of my friends in suburbs. She narrated.

Likeminded and similar age group -we must meet as friends in our leisure time Preet! Do you agree to become friends? I like friends and passing time with them.

How many girlfriends do you have? Preet asked suspiciously.

No joke but after years I found one in you. Would you believe that?

If you say so May be Yes! Trust is the foundation of friendship. Looking eye to eye with him-She added

I will like to add you as a guest club member of mine. We can meet on holiday's leisure time to engage ourselves in sporting activities.

No Issues! Fine with me

Yet another fortnight and in called Rohit in the evening Preet: love to go to a magic show?

I am free. Can think of it.

O.K I will arrange for tickets.

Done!

By 8 O'clock we meet at the hall.

The posters of the show and that of the performing magician had been prominently displayed in colourful settings at the theatre hall in bright lights and frames with a focus of dropping lights.

Preet was dot on the time and met waiting Rohit outside.

Am I Late? A routine question and a routine answer
“Not at all.

Both went inside the dimly lit hall with stage setting in dark red heavy curtains decorated with a garland at the centre. The seats were in first few rows from the stage.

The air was heavy with a palpable sense of anticipation and mystery with the surround music playing a suspenseful music.

The tempo changed with dramatic music and the curtains went up on a brightly lit stage with the entry of the star performer who took control of the theatre hall with a confident and charming presence engaging the audience with witty banter and interactive tricks.

Wearing a tail coat and a Royal turban and a vibrant elegant costume he engaged the audience with his magic wand moving in a thin air and producing a pigeon.

The show became captivating as it progressed with the mind bending and grand illusions defying laws of nature with a sleight of hand.

Then came the act which forms the itinerary of almost all Magicians. He asked for volunteers from audience to participation in the show. Many hands went up. But he invited Rohit and Preet, who were seated silently on adjacent seats.

With slight reluctance they were on the stage.

Welcome Sir and the ma'am. You both related?

No just friends!

That's a great relationship. Now tell me whether you had given your heart to anyone?

Both shook their head in negative

Now let's see how honest you are!

Ma'am will you please give your ring to me for a while!

Preet removed the ring from her finger and gave it to the magician who exclaimed "what a co-incident the ring had is of heart. He showed the ring to the audience.

The audience laughed aloud and then waited expectantly for the next step.

Here I put this ring under this cup. He showed the ins and outs of the cup and waived his open palm and fingers for the audience to inspect. And asked Rohit to lift the cup and hand over the ring back to Preet.

Rohit lifted the cup but there was no trace of the ring.

Where is it? Vanished. He said in dismay.

No? It has gone to its rightful claimant.

The magician turned to Preet and asked who can that be? And she shook her head saying she can't guess.

The magician moved aimlessly on the stage for a while, showing fake surprise as to where the ring could vanish. Then suddenly he turned towards Rohit and asked "You?

"Please check inside left Pocket of your coat.

He searched and came out with a ring. It was the same ring, which Preet had given to the magician earlier.

So it's you! You are the" Chit Chor" (heart stealer) then?

He Stared at Rohit.

Though Preet was smiling, she was trying to hide a strange feeling rising from inside. She was keeping straight face but was in fact restless all the while. Rohit was dumb stuck- smiling but not knowing what to say.

Astonished audience kept guessing about the timing, and place of recovery No one could imagine, how the ring had reached in a short while, to where it was claimed to have been found.

The magician spoke to the puzzled audience "It's so simple sometimes you are not aware of things in your close vicinity. No issue of my defying the law of nature. There was a big applause and clapping.

He thanked Rohit and Preet smiled at them meaningfully and requested them to take their seats.

Then came the grand illusion. The apex- flash point of the performance. With a foreword for a war the magician created an illusion of a fighter plane on a sortie.

A fighter plane with jets roaring and engines making a shrill screeching noise of engines in full power, flew over the heads of the audience making an impeccable sensory impact and impression on the mesmerised audience, which they carried home, even after the show ended

The show was over but Preet was not in her normal self and had become a bit introvert. Her mind worked endlessly to solve the riddle of the ring and comments

of the magician about “Chit- Chor and of being unaware of things in near vicinity.

Rohit had marked it and said Preet “Are you O.K.” And consoled her saying “Look he was just an entertainer. You need not take his comments seriously.

She looked at him and gave an uneasy smile. Embarrassed-She only knew why! Was Rohit her Chit Chor in real sense? She wondered.

Next few days were uneventful. Then there was a call from Preet: Hi Rohit –a good news. I am transferred back to Delhi.”

“Congrats but it’s no good news for me.” Rohit replied.

“Don’t lament it’s not the end of our friendship we will interact to keep it as fresh as ever and will meet intermittently too. The distance between us, will in fact bring us closer.

“My Departure is scheduled in next three days”

When should be the farewell party?

We meet today evening for a grand dinner and a round in a fresh air of choupati- the beach.

She agreed. The evening with a cool breeze blowing over the vast expanse of sea to the shore was refreshing.

Preet was looking attractive in premium elegant indigo kurti dress and Rohit in Kansas” white shirt half sleeves with a combo slate pant and sport shoes. Both greeted each other with hi fi clapping.

You look smart Preet commented

You too are no less charming complemented Rohit.
What's the plan after a brief stroll asked Preet.
Where to from here?
To the "Times Square"
Again riddles!
To Titan" the shop.
What for?
To buy a nice parting gift for you.
No jewellery please. Not my choice by my nature.
It's not jewellery it's a wrist watch. To keep track of
time lest you will forget me!
Never! Not from now.
O.K. it's for reminding you how much time has
passed since you last talked with me.
You won't change as the friends refer you.
They visited the shop & bought a nice wrist watch!
What are you doing tomorrow and yes do you believe
in God?
Why absolutely. I do.
Then tomorrow is Thursday and I do go to Prabhadevi
(a suburb of Mumbai) every Thursday to offer Prayer
at the famous Lord Ganesha"- Siddhi Vinayaka"
there. Will you join me? Please try to make it
convenient will you?
O.K what time.
Morning 8 'O clock.

Done.

They departed after a grand dinner at Taj International.

By 8' o clock both were in the temple and offering included a coconut and a hibiscus flower considered dear to lord Ganesha.

What was it you asked for? In the prayer. Asked Preet
Your perpetual friendship

And you? She blushed and said "Same"

Rohit was present at Mumbai Central Railway station to bid farewell to Preet.

Please convey my regards to Dad and Bebe. Tell them I will surely come to meet them soon. As the departing time of the train drew near.

Preet nodded and the train started. She saw Rohit disappearing in the crowd of visitors on platform- not before noticing his flying kiss.

The third suburban station from Mumbai "Lower Parel – parallel to Prabhadevi suburb and she closed her eyes with devotion and prayed to Siddhi Vinayaka"

"Give Long life to Rohit"

The train gathered momentum with a jerk.

Chapter/Division V

With a heavy heart Capt Manu was there at Delhi Airport to bid them “bon voyage”

The only contrast was she was wearing a white Bengali sari with broad red borders and a full length attractive Paranda, whereas Preet was in full western dress of a fancy V-Neck A Line colorful Maxi with high heel sandals and shoulder cut hair.

Rohit in full suit was looking awesome- cool calm and smiling without giving up any glimpses on his face of the stormy weather in his heart.

Calendar pages fluttered and changed and time escaped without notice.

From Nordic landscapes –Northern lights- Swiss Alps to Iconic capital cities of Athens Paris Berlin, Prague Stockholm Vienna- Vatican- Venice- Barcelona- sunny coastal destinations like Amalfi coast – everything on way was covered in solo train riding.

Common hotels & adjacent rooms was the common feature though the countries & cities changed periodically

Fun fair again had become a daily schedule. Ancient architecture, symphony, Movie and Music concerts, museums, occasional Night club visit everything was a part of schedule. For both it was a paradise on earth

At the fag end of tour in U.S-one day in his own exploring nature & happy go lucky style--- Rohit said:

“Preet a last wish! Of course if you agree”

“And what is it? I never said No to you for anything!” she said indicatively” “But you have your inhibitions- rather say principles” Come on what is it now. Your wish is supreme for me!”

“Let’s try our luck in a Casino”

“But Rohit, its risky and dangerous at times. Once in the game Men don’t stop –May it be a loss or for that matter- a –gain”

“If you are beside me I am able to deal with any eventuality” said Rohit.

In the evening both dressed in tee shirt and Jeans and sport shoes, were out for Casino Royal in Lass Vegas from their sprawling Hotel campus -open parking slot, in a hired car to be driven by them.

Las Vegas: The Royal casino

George Moore, the chief manager took his seat in his spacious cabin at 1700 hrs as regular and would remain in charge for the whole night. Henry Brown, the manager in charge on duty attended him.

What’s up Henry? How the things today? Normal?

“Not exactly! Sir, Paul and couple of his bouncers are already in and Joe is likely to arrive an hour later. He spoke to me a few minutes before.

Arrangements for special suites on upper floors, have been made with separate entry and exit to avoid any unwarranted confrontation between the gangs. Lucy;

Tracy their favorites and two others have been earmarked for entertainment.”

“Well its strange coincidence that both are coming on same day. You should have alerted Joe! : George said.

No fun! In that case, he would have make it a prestige issue to come.

That’s also true! Henry; then we are on tenterhooks till their departure not before late midnight” George said. The police Captain Informed?

“Yes! Sir! Said Henry” but the main crisis is that of bouncer Martin is with Paul. He had holed up thus far and is seen in the open for the first time. Joe’s people are after him for too long to settle old scores. If Joe’s men notice him anything can happen.

More over Paul has a habit of inviting outside visitors especially new comers to play Poker with him in his suite.

Huum! Exclaimed George. Keep a watch I want peace here! To be on safer side; I will also invite Police Captain Rodrigues to join tonight’s entertainment with his wife Rosy. His presence may make a difference.”

Swift Pop music- the performing dancers, sounds of slot machines, Roulette and the cheering of enthusiastic players greeted Rohit and Preet in the main hall as they entered.

After an inspection round Rohit tried his hand at different games and won and lost both. Preet reminded him that it was enough. They had been there for an hour or so, it’s time to return.

Then it was! There was a soft tap on his shoulder.

“Good evening young man Interested in Poker? A new comer are’nt you?”

The stranger asked.” My boss would love to play Poker with you in a specially facilitated chamber. Yes! But the stakes are a bit high 300 times on the bet of only 100\$. If you accept the challenge!” It was Martin.

Preet pulled Rohit’s sleeve” Better we make a move out now”

Rohit Said “It’s a challenge- I must accept it sportingly. I will play only one round and quit, OK?”

Both followed Martin to the suite of Paul who courteously received him” welcome young man I love your nature of accepting challenges. I am Paul. No need to worry. You can quit any time you feel like.” And

“Welcome young Lady- Indian origin? She nodded. Please have a seat”

Preet said” No need I am better off here and stood by Rohit refusing to sit on adjacent seat. Both said no to a drink offered.

O.K. Thanks and let us play. Rohit said taking his seat.

A bet of 100 US Dollars a round @ 300 times if you win (30000\$).

A win in the first round and Rohit played two more with a winning streak. =90000\$ (8250795INR), when Preet became adamant and he decided to quit.

Paul chuckled “a great pleasure of having tasted a defeat like this in years”, “No worries a word of gentleman. You can quit”

Rohit profusely thanked Paul and was about to leave the suite, when Paul asked him “Wait Martin will help you at the counter to settle the accounts”

At the counter Martin cleared the account and the cashier asked Rohit, if he wanted cash or transfer to his bank account by wire.

Rohit preferred cash. The next question was whether an escort was needed. To which Rohit said NO. The cashier looked at Martin with a surprise.

Martin was alert & watchful continuously for any impending danger and had also marked the presence of Joe’s man around the counter. He briskly made an exit to avoid more exposure.

At the counter one of the Joe’s gang members also recognized Martin, who reported it back to Joe. Joe was mad with anger but was pacified by his group quoting the presence of Police Captain in the main hall. “Get him and execute” He ordered

Martin was also now aware of impending danger and informed Paul.

Paul was surprised:” How come I was not informed about Joe’s presence here at this hour. I will certainly settle it with George but for now.....

“Well get out of here fast. Get the Indians mid-way if you can and reach directly to my residence with the cash” Paul said.

Both Rohit and Preet in the hired car were unaware of all these developments and were enjoying the ride.

Alert Preet all the while asked” Rohit are’nt you afraid of carrying this much of a cash- all alone?”

“Not at all. Paul was rich and friendly. For him the amount was petty cash. It was all a stroke of luck for us and we have not offended any one. That’s all”

“But I am afraid Rohit we are not alone there is someone who is tracking us she pointed to the rear mirror.”

“I did not notice Preet but we can cross check. He took a sudden U turn. And quipped” probably you are right. There is someone in that black sedan-interested in us.”

A traffic signal enroot to their hotel; cleared their car but not that of the black car’ which jumped the traffic signal in a hurry to take the sudden U turn, while continuing the chase. There was a sound of screeching tires as sudden brakes were applied and released.

The action of jumping traffic signal did attract a police rider, who chased the car for serving a challan, with a siren blowing.

They (Preet and Rohit) had entered the parking area of their hotel and were in the parking lot. They saw the black car being intercepted at a distance by the police rider who argued with the lone driver to come out and take the challan refusing to settle the issue otherwise.

By the time the driver was out and the policeman was serving the challan- a third car arrived at the scene and in presence of the policeman, three rounds of gunfire were heard and the black car- driver slumped to the ground.

The third car sped away as the confused policeman fired two rounds in vain in the direction of speeding car. He looked down at the fallen man.

“Martin” was dead)

At the hotel counter cool and smiling Rohit said to Preet: Thanks dear! We check out tonight by 2300 hrs to some other location than our plan.

Chapter/Division VI

On the other side after Baisakhi celebration and departure of Preet. Captain Manu became suddenly uneasy and coughed blood. The doctors opined that a splinter is still imbedded in her lungs and her shifting to Delhi AIIMS becomes a necessity for a complicated surgery.

After days of successful surgery one fine morning:

“Good morning ma’am” greeted the incoming medical attendant to her hospital recovery suite.

Good Morning! What’s up?

A good news Ma’am! All parameters O.K. You are slated for a discharge in two days

Oh Thanks dear!

Engrossed in past memories she switched on, the TV only to find a pre- recorded version of a special report.

Pretty Preet was showing a special report as an anchor-in a totally different attire and a changed outlook of a sari, a bindi and waist long hair braided into a single but complex plait with “**a paranda**”

She-was presenting a special report on distinctive Women personalities therein featuring Manu (on Women’s Day).

The report comprised of Manu's adventurous career & her advent to the post of a commander of a commando unit in active zone

On lighter moments of her life, she projected; an AI (Artificial Intelligence) scenario of Manu; being saved from an avalanche. Her being proposed by Rohit during sky diving.

Mesmerized by her appearance on TV she called for Lado

Did you tell Preet that Rohit had proposed me earlier?

"Yes! I did reveal it to her Didi- inadvertently- not purposefully- during the course of talks." Guilty conscious Lado replied

"Oh God- She knows then"

Lado explained "She did not know about the proposal during college days but had overheard your conversation with him at our house during Baisakhi festival. I was with her."

"That's why the Europe tour--now I understand! It's a desperate last attempt of Preet. Oh God! Have mercy on all of us" Manu prayed with folded hands and let go a deep breath."

"Any way call Preet and enquire about their return plan."

"No need! She had called me yesterday as there was no answer on your number. They are on last leg of their tour – on some island far -east and may be returning in a day or two. They don't know you are hospitalized. I did not tell them." Lado explained

“Well done! Now please keep me informed every day on progress of their tour Program.”

O.K. Didi ”Lado quipped.

Koh (meaning island)- somewhere on western coast of Thailand

The calendar pages fluttered and the days passed by.

The serene and tranquil maritime climate- the cool & crispy land breeze; the mind soothing soft light before the sunrise;- the feel of cold sand under the feet ,and the accompanying soft music played by the lighter morning waves had a different story to tell every day.

Brisk morning walks in soft light; the yoga; the beach combing excursions for shells; drift wood, seaweeds; & smooth stones/pebbles had been the schedule for entertainment in morning hours; to be followed by a more strenuous options in the A.N. like swimming ,surfing and boating sessions for fishing

Thinking of Dinner in the dimly lit banquet hall at 8th Floor with its specialized interiors and delicacies of inter-continental cousins had always been a refreshing thought. And down below it was the plush sprawling lawns; with a large swimming pool serving as a mental teaser & appetizer

Illuminated galleries; scaling heights; and the grandeur of the towering structure of hotel created a scintillating and a thrilling look to any onlooker from the proximity.

A tall mast bearing a red aviation warning light glowed at the top of the building with rhythmic blinking depicting a monk in yog mudra and his

brains emitting divine light of his spiritual attainment.

Relaxing in one of the lounges; Rohit after dinner pointed out “Preet we are checking out tomorrow by the A.N.

How was the day like?

There was no answer only 2 tears rolled down her cheeks.

“I want to open my treasure trove of memories of this tour and of earlier too and live with the same all alone tonight”.

No outing today Rohit” Please leave me alone now” she said with a heavy tone

O.K. You prevail. Rohit slowly walked away.

Next day morning by 0630 a.m. on the beach Rohit repeated” Good Morning! Preet How do you feel now?

“Just the same as yesterday morose and nervous”

“The silky and soft sea waves; which always greeted me serenely in the morning; are playing strangers to me today” She added with a sigh.

“Their appearance today is akin to tribal dancer’s rhythmic circular motion of- 2 steps forward and 3 Backwards. The dim sound of soft & light waves is sounding like distant beating of drums, ever increasing in momentum as the time of sacrifice of a living prey; drags near!

“That’s not true Preet. Wake up. He consoled her.

In fact you are getting home sick. You need your Daddu and Bebe more than me now” holding her close to him he said.

“It’s not like your usual self Preet. My Preet is ever inspiring- ever refreshing as a morning dew”

She shook her head vehemently twice. “I wish to stay with you as long as possible”

“Then look above. See that chopper? In a mind diverting effort he said”

“It’s Robinson R44- 4 Seater –utility/ luxury chopper– for corporate charter flights. Our hotel owner owns it.

Leading a retired life the owner couple visits this place on weekends in that chopper –perch and park on the top terrace and return to mainland after a day’s halt.”

He continued.

Seen the luxury Cruise on jetty yesterday? & the crew? It’s’ their’s too!

That’s how they spend the day on this island cruising and fishing on high seas.

Let’s get back to the Hotel Rohit I am getting simmers” said Preet

O. K. the cruise has already left the Jetty. Meaning--- ---it’s already 8 A.M. now”

Once in their rooms, in the hotel, all of sudden things started oscillating and vibrating violently. There was already turmoil outside; when both barged out of their adjacent rooms a loud voice screamed from somewhere.

“It’s’ a massive quake. Run for Your lives, Avoid lifts.

The vibrations stopped for brief seconds and started again.

While Preet tugged Rohit’s hand violently shouting “Run Rohit Run.” BUT Rohit was steadfast, holding his ground. He pointed to the glass windows saying it’s not only a quake. Worst is to follow. The sea waters are receding fast.

”We don’t go down stairs” he shrilled raising voice over the outside turmoil. Instead he pulled Preet, inside a lift to go up to terrace. “What the hell you are up to Rohit? Preet screamed.

Without a word Rohit dragged her with him. The concrete structure of the building shook violently once and started losing height indicating to pillars in ground floor parking zone pushing down as if they are hydraulic pumps crushing & twisting every car and whatever was there in parking zone under its weight.

It’s sinking said Rohit to himself

Parts of the building were disintegrating and falling on ground with every vibration with cracking sounds of window glass.

Bewildered Preet on the verge of fainting soon, saw with hazy eyes Rohit was pulling off a tarpaulin on the parked helicopter and briskly pulling and pushing a system of switches & buttons on board’ to start it.

“Come on baby, Wake up. Wake up! No time to waste; you must! I need you! He whispered to himself as if talking to the Helicopter; without paying any attention to turmoil in the surroundings. The engine

gnarled once and then rotors started spinning slowly & gathering momentum.

He pulled Preet half in senses inside the cabin.

Then there it was! The massive wall of sea wave struck the coast with so much of a violent force and deafening sound that all structures on coast collapsed like pack of cards including the hotel building. All Vessels capsized and the whole world downside appeared to be that of a “Kingdom of Lilliput’s’ swimming in swirling waters.

Lado carried the news of tsunami and mass destruction on the island hurriedly to Manu informing in addition that it was the same camp of Rohit and Preet where they had stayed last. And that there was no news of them. All razed to ground and covered by sea waters.

Leave me alone “Manu quipped as Lado broke the news

Closing her eyes she immersed in deep thought visualizing Preet and Rohit of her memories as a couple & she cursed herself murmuring “Damn it! It was me- yes me! A cause for all this. It was my malignant stare that jinxed and ruined them.

Then she said loudly- sobbing “NO! It’s all Incorrect! Immoral! And unethical! Preet is so brittle- so soft--- she will break under the pressure of leaving Rohit. I cannot be a part of this sin.

Tears rolled down her cheeks”Oh Goddess Durga” she prayed with folded hands “Bring both of them alive and unscathed and I vow to thyself, that I will move away from between them.”

She closed her eyes again clenched her fists with certain determination and began sobbing uncontrollably; her body shaking violently unable to bear the thought of it.

Open your eyes Preet. “BRAVO” We are airborne. He shouted excitedly with a “Thumbs up” sign

For God’s sake Rohit “This is not ours” pointing towards rising helicopter said Half-awake Preet,

Yes! It’s not” that exactly sounds like my true Preet he uttered “Honest to the core”

Rohit smiled & pointing a finger to a prominent looking cruise bearing hotel insignia –capsized and floating rudderless in the free flowing mass of ocean waters.” Said

“THEY DONT NEED IT ANY MORE”

For next two days Manu as good as cocooned herself in a shell. Barely speaking a word and staring pointlessly at the wall- leaving Lado worried. Manu also handed over her mobile to Lado as every sound of a caller tune or note voice disturbed her to the core with the apprehension of a bad news

And then came the news of their survival.

Preet called Lado:

“Hey dear By God’s Grace we have survived. Safe and sound. Again-- it was Rohit who saved my life.”

Unable to control her emotions Lado said: “Hold it Preet. Hold it! Break this news to Manu. I am.....am having her phone. She is in the hospital. And critically worried about you two for last two days.

Hospital? A pause How come? What happened? Why no talking to us about it so far?

Speak to herself”

Choked with emotions Manu simply said crying “Leave everything and come here as fast as you can.”

Now tears rolled from her eyes in a stream and she sobbed in silence. Fists raised high, she gave the war cry” of her Battalion “Durgamata ki Jai” in shattered and broken voice.

Lado went to Airport to receive Rohit and Preet and returned to Hospital suite directly from there.

To every one’s surprise Manu was in the door of her suite with a Aarti thali. Wearing a white plain Bengal sari with red borders and a large round vibrant red bindi on her forehead. With a broad and pleasing smile she said smiling

“Welcome Home you both”

“What did you think only you can give good news?

“I too have equally Good News for both of you”

She let the stunned three enter inside and turned around with a sari & Paranda in her hands that Rohit once had gifted her and handed it to bewildered Preet-

Saying

“Sorry Rohit! I could not resist the desire of my grandfather. I am engaged in the chosen family by him elsewhere!”

Didi?”Lado intervened but-with a sweeping hand she silenced Lado. “She did not know”

Now again it's your turn Rohit and Preet to give me a Good news of your marriage"

"A sacrifice indeed! Suiting to Army traditions and culture." Rohit imagined and understood but could not say a word

The developments were so sudden and surprising that a chilled silence prevailed for a while when Rohit broke the ice saying silently:

It's OK Manu! Relax we can discuss it later.

No Rohit! It's final. I am ready for discharge from hospital any time from now. Fit and fine. No issues on my health. Now it's your turn baby! Assure me on Preet and the episode ends.

What do you say- Preet? OK with you? She turned to Preet and asked.

Preet simply made a face of being perplexed and blushing.

No answer

O.K. Rohit quipped.

Fine! Kuch Meetha ho jaye and she produced a box of sweet and offered a piece to both of them.

Rohit "she added smiling "damnit won't you give me the sweets? She advanced the box to Rohit and Preet who reluctantly did it.

When is the discharge? Rohit changed the topic.

Any time from now.

Both of us will be here to pick you up.

No need! Take rest for the jet lag. Exact time is not fixed and Lado is with me. Will call you at the leisure.

After the meeting was over, it was Lado who was restless all the while, in worried excitement; she intervened and asked -what was all that Didi? When was Grandpa's call? When did this happen? Who the other guy is?

How come—she was interrupted by Manu saying” one at a time. “Lado”. I made up my mind last night.

But why? You as good as ruined yourself. Perhaps your mind needed more treatment than your physical self.

“Everything is fair in love and war”

“The maxim does not apply in this situation”

To a novice it may not! But for me- it does Lado. It's all over now.

What next?

Life is too big to accommodate.

Hello Mom Rohit called from Mumbai” you always complain that I never inform in advance. Now listen I am coming next Saturday. “

Fine Tell me how long will you be here. Shall I align the list of girls I have in mind or Manu is coming with you?

No Preet is coming with me.

What bout Manu? Where is she? She has won my heart. A nice Girl and a great choice of yours.

Absolutely you are Right Mom. But it's a long story I will explain later. Now it's Preet full and final. You can arrange for an engagement ceremony.

I will always do that on first priority. I have not met her but must be an equally great choice of yours.

I will also ask Nambi the boatman- if you both like boating in canal network of backwaters he will be available 24x7.

Nice of you mom. Will be meeting soon. Bye.

For next few days Manu was making all efforts to look normal and kept herself cool & busy in reading /watching T.V. and other light house chores, Lado always following her closely.

On full moon day she was alone on the terrace of her house in cool breeze and slightly chilly night. Stars were still present but significantly harder to see on a full moon. The intense, dispersed moonlight had created a "washout" effect (light pollution) that had obscured fainter stars, leaving only the brightest stars and planets visible.

The chirping sound of crickets was disturbing the surrounding silence but not to Manu in deep thought. Lado followed her after a brief while and placed a shawl on her shoulders.

Yoga for peace of mind? She said in low voice.

Yes for a while!

Come on let's go down stairs and rest now. It's almost midnight.

You go. I will follow soon.

No you will come with me. How long will this continue? You will have to choose an alternative.

I have already. I am going to join duty.

Hope you are not mad. You have not yet recovered fully. You have to extend leave.

I have! She said vehemently! I am fit and fine! I can live like a free bird once back- again in my unit. Come on now let's go downstairs.

The Regimental base camp Headquarters at the foothills of Shivalik range on the southern side of Himalayas was a serene sensory feeling with visible snow clad Himalayan peaks showing on the horizon and lush green meadows around the roadside camp covered by wire mesh fencing of 10 feet in height with an overhang of 2 feet. A service road diverting from the main road led Manu to the camp gate.

Receiving salutes of jawans; all the way; who had an acknowledging and admiring look in their eyes having heard her story of glory; she was in Adjutant Sharma's room with a gleaming face and booming energy and greeted

"Good Morning Sir I am joining today. She gave a smart salute.

Manu You back! Major Sharma rose from his seat and gave a warm handshake

Yes Sir! I was given to understand you were likely to extend.

No Sir! I was missing you and the campus all the time.

"Sir, Colonel Saab is in the chamber" a sentry informed. And Major Sharma hurriedly left to greet the Station Commander.

What's new Major?

Captain Manu has joined today Sir! Major Sharma saluted.

Splendid! How is she? Please send her in. Major left with a salute again.

Captain Manu gave a smart salute and greeted Col. Tyagi.

He rose and gave a warm handshake. "Eventually you are back home. Very nice to see you fit and fine and as fresh as lotus flower Manu.

Thank you Sir. Everyone in family O.K?

She paused for a while and said absolutely O.K. Sir.

He looked at her inquisitively." Sure? How is grandpa?"

No worries only mild complaints of old age.

He pressed the Buzzer and in came Major Sharma

"We have a hero in our unit Major- Captain Manu is awarded a gallantry Medal. I was informed yesterday night from Army Hqrs. Congratulations Captain." The CO complimented Manu

Oh Great! Right candidate! It calls for a unit celebration Sir. Said Major Sharma.

Absolutely correct. Please make arrangements accordingly.

Yes Sir! Major Sharma replied.

Manu was dumb stuck. Her eyes sparkled with joy and she said energetically.

Thank you Sir! And saluted again.

And keep her in your staff till further orders.

Yes Sir!

But Sir, I am specialized for field. Captain Manu interrupted

Yes Dear! But you know about this- he pointed to a board with writings”

Rule 1: Your boss is always Right

Rule 2: When you disagree Rule No. 1 applies

He laughed aloud and was accompanied by other two present in the mild laughter.

He called Major Sharma a short while later

I believe she is not probably comfortable or fully relaxed on family front. Try to find if I am right. I will appreciate if I am proved wrong.

Sir! Saluted Major Sharma before departure.

How was the first day Captain asked Major Sharma in the evening on playground?

Great! Specially going by the news broken by the C.O.

Decorations make us. It's like LIC slogan “Jindagi ke saath bhi aur Jindgi ke baad bhi”

“Sahi kaha” (rightly said)

Personal puch sakta hu? Major endeavored (Can I ask something personal)

Are Kya baat hai? Aisa kyouin puch rahe ho- Jo merji aaye wo puchiye. No issues at all. Main to Kori kitab hoon. (why be so formal Ask anything I am now a blank note book)

How about “other decorations in life. With your personality -any interesting Prem- katha or Prem Rog.? (love story)

She was immediately alerted and a look of being startled flashed momentarily in her eyes. Then she laughed aloud.

“Main pahilehi jabab de chuki hoon”. Ha! Thi! - Katha thi! (I have already answered your question. Yes there was a love story) But In past tense! Mostly happens in ones’ life sometimes you know? Now waiting for a new katha to start some time. Don’t know; I am that lucky or not. She looked at the open sky with closed eyes. Then suddenly asked: How about you?

Not so lucky so far Ma’M.

Wait and watch!

Both laughed.

Manu? Me Rohit here!

O.K. I know dear I have your number saved. Go ahead and give me the date!

First tell me where are you? I was not getting your number hence I called Lado It was she who gave me the new number but not the location.

That’s Right! I was to send it to you but a very busy schedule hardly a day gone.

But why did you join? You were just out of hospital!

Not unwell any more Rohit I am in my usual self. Other places haunted me! I find a serene life here.

Your memories haunted me too. Said Rohit

Rohit --- Preet is now with you.

Not always and now too. You played it smart. You remember? You had asked me at my home town – whether I am going to decide my life partner on a toss?

Yes. And you had said its destiny when human brains fail to find a solution--- You were right Rohit “It was destiny”.

It includes your cheating on a toss.

How come?

The spin was in your favor but you played it smart. You trapped me in awkward position at the hospital. I was hardly left with any option either way. I could not say Yes or no at that moment.

Leave all that. And come to the point!

“Tell me the date & how is Mom-? Where is Preet?”

Mama was all in tears specially learning about your ailment. She is vying to meet you. She saw Preet on T.V yesterday. She did not say anything but appreciated her appearance with a braided **Paranda** you gave her. We may be going there in a day or two to meet mom and settle things thereafter. By the way she now knows both of you –you personally and Preet in images

I am sure Preet will win her heart too both are very amicable and loving; added Manu

Now Listen – engagement will be over in a token ceremony. The marriage date may follow soon- when to expect you?

Now you listen carefully. This is army. And no dumb fool will expect of getting any leave- for that matter

even of a day- after availing this much of leave just a while ago.

Then we will come there.

Don't make it a prestige issue Rohit. Try to understand.

Mom and Preet would never agree to any such proposal of your absence at the marriage ceremony.

That's your job and you are apt in it. She said jokingly punching at him

As Major Sharma entered the room; she said hurriedly I have a call in waiting Rohit! We will be speaking soon with Preet by your side. Bye. See You!

She smiled in the corner.

Premkatha? Mimicked Major!

Yes but not exactly.

Rohit drove Preet from Kochi airport to his home town in car.

The house servants and Mom was waiting this time to welcome the duo. The news of "Marumakal"- daughter in law of the house had spread. The immediate neighbors had also joined.

Graceful Preet and handsome Rohit were the star attraction, of the occasion; who were led inside by Mom after the traditional welcome formalities.

Mom performed aarti in traditional brass lamp (Nilavilakku) to ward off evil spirits and a welcome with love.

Preet was asked to carry a lit oil lamp signifying that she brings light prosperity and joy to the new home.

A formal visit to the kitchen (Adukkala Kaanal) and the entire house was also a part of the program planned by Mom.

9 th April Captain Manu in her underground control room on night duty was in a relaxed mood after performing the protocols on security management of the Headquarters campus. She had taken rounds, checked alertness of sentries on duty and night patrolling of sections personally after midnight and had been monitoring control panels for quite some time.

Everything was normal and as usual. It was a cool & starlit night in the northern- Regimental command camp.

She opened her notebook to get acquainted with important events on the day. Oh its D day for Preet and Rohit tomorrow.

Getting Married! Oh god- the time passes so quickly. “She whispered, closed her eyes and past events gradually floated in front of her eyes.

Her college days- unforeseen reunion with Rohit in the camp-the interception of infiltrators- the wound in the chest -Simla health recovery Centre- - emergence & interaction with Preet as a rival in a triangle of love-visit to Hometown of Rohit and his Mom and the mental struggle in Delhi hospital. All flashed before eyes in a sequence

The long journey has ultimately resulted in to their marriage which is scheduled for tomorrow- “Destiny as Rohit called it” She wondered:

How Rohit would have planned the wedding? A Cozy event or a grand celebration?

“Kerala Hindu weddings are known as “Kalyan Samayam” are rich in traditions and rituals that reflect cultural heritage and spiritual essence “she remembered a book quote.

She had read articles on marriages in Kerala, while dreaming of Rohit

And where could have been a photo shoot?

Heritage photo shoots at Kochi fort or at romantic tea gardens of Munnar, where memories are perfectly captured or aerial shots?

Who would perform Madhuparkam - kanyadanam ceremonies as bride’s parents were too old?

She imagined, Preet in Kasavu white sari with golden borders

Traditional “Kasumala” a long necklace made by carefully assembled gold coins. &

Palakka Mothiram gold necklace typically green with mango designs

Oddiyaanam: a belt worn by bride to keep saree in place.

Preet with all this must be looking like an angel with stunning combination of matching Paranda- braided in long hair.

Oh what a beauty she whispered! She must be having many gorgeous saris in her stock as an alternative on various occasions. Is’nt it?

And Rohit? The wonderboy? Rohit in mundu (traditional dhoti) with zhari border & a kurta or white shirt- she imagined and laughed at the look of Prince of her dreams.

She could not have been inquisitive on such matters earlier either with Rohit or Preet for obvious reasons and had to keep content with her imagination only

She thought of the grand feast “Sadya” on Banana leaf ----Rice with Sambar and Rasam & Payasam the traditional desert -they were my favorites once.

Then there were swarms of bees rising from adjoining forest area and attacking the guests at marriage Mandapam to create a pandemonium and chaos.

She was startled & awoke with the call from watch tower. This is T1 calling control over. Tiger control Roger: “Two closed vans have descended from main road to service road leading to our camp main gate. Maintaining a good deal of distance in between+. Over to you tiger!

Roger! T1 keep continuous vigil and report.

She alerted the main gate sentries sensing trouble.

At 5 0 clock in the early morning movement of closed vehicles on a solitary and lonely service road- leading to main gate was no ordinary situation- for sure spelling danger.

Hurriedly she completed all formalities on calls and messages to be made/given defined in contingency plan, to deal with situations of impending danger and waited all the while for reports on tracking movement of vans, on road based on reports of watch towers.

Then the first vehicle crashed and exploded blowing with it the main gate. And the second vehicle which followed it, made a speedy entry inside. Out came 5 figures clad in black clothes opening a continuous fire through AK 47 rifles.

Emergency siren sounded in campus. And the campus was bathed in focus lights Captain Manu was giving Constant combat orders sticking to the security set up and guided by movements of intruders.

The situation continued for a while, when Col Tyagi, Major Sharma and other officers also joined her and monitored the field situation.

It is a Fidayeen attack Sir. They had blown the gate with a van filled with explosives. Two gate sentries dead. Out of 5 intruders 3 eliminated in first 5 minutes, they having lost the element of surprise. Two still active and have sneaked inside towards ordinance store area & barracks: Going by ground reports. Contingency plan taken care of in advance Sir

A good Job indeed Captain commented the CO

The field deployments of the campus had by now spread over opening counter fire.

It's a dangerous situation C.O. said. And Captain Manu endeavored to tackle them alone.

No need we will arrange for an alternative. C.O. said

They were out of underground control room & a burst of fire nearby made them move for shelter.

You are still not fully recovered Captain; going by the reports I have gone through.

Major Sharma' whom do you consider to be the best option? It's a difficult but important tackle

Time is running out Sir. Manu- interrupted after a while. I can confidently handle the situation with

three more hands to assist. They can give me a cover fire. Manu said- adding I am trained for that.

The C.O. looked inquisitively at Maj. Sharma, who nodded slightly.

O.K. You take over! What's the plan?

I and my people will sneak in from behind our standing lines. Given the cover fire I will be on the elevation point of the terrace of Barracks where from I can handle them. Lights in that part of the area would be cut off immediately from now on till I give the OK signal. I am familiar with the topographical set up of the campus and will find my way to where I want to go.

The others would in the meanwhile help the existing security deployment at the ordinance store.

O.K. Move said the C.O.

She vanished in the darkness behind their standing position. Minutes later the expected signal was received from her and the area was again lit with flood lights. There were burst of fire and cross fire heard with a grenade explosion.

And then there was a deadly silence all over.

The operation was over with the last two intruders getting eliminated.

However Captain Manu was brought with her hands on the shoulders of the jawans. She was limping.

Great Job Captain- a bar to your award! Seems you are hurt.

Thank You Sir! She saluted and slumped to ground.

“Manu” shouted the CO. Major Sharma with two other rushed to hold her. She was unconscious.

By then vehicles of Police; dist administration, ambulances & fire services had started rushing inside the campus.

The contingency plan of Captain Manu had worked well.

Injured men were being shifted to ambulances. There were only two casualties- that too in gate crash and following explosion- 10 Jawans were injured.

The doctors rushed to Manu and opined she is critically injured somewhere in upper part of the chest and rushed her to hospital. Major Sharma and couple of officers followed in tow.

At 6 “o clock in the early morning same day the house of Rohit in his home town was humming with activities. He had made arrangements for Preet and her family members in an adjacent vacant house and her daddu and bebe (Father and his sister) had arrived by flight, overflowing with joy and enthusiasm with the imagination of celebration of marriage of their affectionate Preet.

Photo shoot program was hectic but had concluded days earlier with various venues on the list and assortment of videos were in final stages of processing.

Madarengese (mehendi) ceremony was over a day before and

Murthasese (the Auspicious moment) was going on with Preet seated on a specially decorated chair facing east. Sumangalese (Married women) applying green

bangles to the bride's hands and placing a toe ring on her, marking her transition to a married woman.

From early morning tunes of Nadswaram (wind instrument) accompanied by Thavil (percussion Instrument) considered to be extremely sacred and auspicious to bring divine blessings and create a joyful celebratory atmosphere were renting the air in both Pandals elaborately decorated with jasmine flowers, mango leaves, and areca nut leaves.

Preet in typical traditional Kanjeevaram green, saree and adorned with intricate temple jewellery, including the *Kasumala* (coin necklace) was an incarnation of beauty. Her long hair with a braided paranda was adding an additional glamor.

Rohit in a traditional Mandu (white dhoti with zhari borders) and a silk shirt was presenting a perfect complement for the bride.

The groom was received at the venue by the bride's family, with a traditional *aarti* and by washing his feet.

The wedding platform featured a *nilavilakku* (traditional brass lamp), *nirapara* (Nirapara (a traditional brass vessel for measuring rice) is a vital auspicious symbol representing prosperity, abundance, and fertility) filled with paddy, coconut flowers, and betel leaves.

The bride's father or guardian placed her hand in the groom's hand, symbolizing the giving away of the bride amidst chanting of mantras by pandiths.

Rohit tied the sacred **thali** (Mangalsutra a small gold coin) around the bride's neck, to the loud sound of traditional music.

Elders and guests showered the couple with raw rice mixed with turmeric and vermilion, offering their blessings.

The wedding was complete by 1200 hrs.- in quite a short period. Followed by a grand feast with a mix of traditional and contemporary elements.

And Preet came to Rohit's home welcomed by Mom with traditional formalities.

"Today is Rohit's wedding, Please send a congratulatory message!" Half-conscious Manu murmured in hallucination in a very feeble voice.

Yes Didi! Said Lado- loudly. Who listened with careful attention for every word -with her ears near the lips of Manu in Srinagar Military hospital.

Lado had been brought to the hospital in a chopper flight from her home town. Her eyes were swollen as she had been crying the moment she received the news.

By 12:15 pm Manu started breathing heavily and gasping for breath. She was shifted to ventilator but in Vain.

She was No more!

The condition of Lado was precarious she just became speechless and dumb.

She did not speak a word nor shed any tears anymore even in local funeral guard of honour for Captain Manu, where political leaders and Core and Divisional commanding officers lined up to place floral wraths on her coffin wrapped in national flag.

She accompanied the coffin to her home town in Punjab where the bereaved family was in deep grief.

Rohit and Preet were just relaxing after the busy schedule of wedding when the lightning struck.

A military officer called from Chandigadh on Rohits mobile "Sir I am directed to inform you the sad demise of Captain Manu in an encounter in the afternoon today. The funeral is arranged in the morning tomorrow at the home town!

It's not true! Shouted Rohit – startled Preet watched

"Unfortunately it's the truth Sir. She is now 'Shahid Captain Manu.'" The phone went dead.

Rohit caught his head in his hands and sobbed uncontrollably. Preet was shocked and became speechless.

She called for Lado: No answer!

The house ambience changed suddenly from jubilant to gloomy with mom joining them

By 8.30 hrs. Next morning the funeral was ready in the large compound of her house.

Rohit- Preet and mom, arrived same morning by a chartered flight & were informed about Lados condition stating: she has become a moving statue. She is in deep shock. She had given just a blank look to the trio from Kerala.

Lado was brought outside for the last rights by Rohit and Preet and funeral pyre.

She took face of Manu in her palms and kissed her forehead.

She looked up at Rohit. And all of a sudden Lado broke free ran towards the house and returned with a red Chuneri in her hands.

She handed it over to Rohit and said” This is what the only thing she has left for you”

And then she sobbed uncontrollably and cried aloud-
resting her head on the chest of Rohit. Preet
consoling her back

The funeral had begun,

The flag draped on the body was removed and handed over to Lado

A designated firing party (7 soldiers) raised their rifles to the sky and fired three volleys (rounds) of blank ammunition in unison on command.

(The three volleys represent Duty, Honour, and Sacrifice.)

A burgler sounded the "Last Post"

THE FUNERAL PYRE WAS LIT

The End