



LOVE STORY OF A COMMANDO

SWAPNIL PANDEY



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An alumni of Birla Institute of Technology Mesra, Swapnil Pandey has worked in many places and held several positions, which is the trademark of any Army Wife. She has worked in Wipro, HDFC, taught at Lovely Professional University and the Army Public School, to name a few. She is also an active AWWA member.

Swapnil is a fitness freak, and a green tea addict who loves shoes and perfumes. She wears her 'silent rank badges' proudly, and loves compiling stories about life in the Indian Army on her blog. The extraordinary Army life has given her a vast canvas of stories, and helped her gain an insight into human emotions and struggles. The courageous veer naris, the extroverted Army brats, charming Army wives and the gallant soldiers whose lives are filled with joy, sorrow, adventure, and even horror, have inspired her to be a storyteller. She believes people should not only know about a soldier's valour, but also about his hidden emotions. *Love Story of a Commando* is her second novel after the bestselling *Soldier's Girl: Love Story of a Para-Commando*.

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*We are all broken and damaged
and we aren't quite fixed yet,
A lot of us have gone through hell,
But you know what?
We come back, and come back stronger
You know why?
Because we are warriors,
And warriors fight!*

*To the bravest of all, Indian Army Martyrs and the courageous women they
left behind.*

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Acknowledgements

Hello my lovely readers,

Thank you for choosing this book over the many others out there, and showering me with your love, affection, criticism and, above all, acceptance. It pushes me to be a better author. I'd also like to thank the readers who connect with me through the many social media channels, where they leave kind words; it makes me feel rich.

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A Soldier's Letter

Dear World

This is not my story. This is her story and she will tell you all about it. But I requested her to begin the story with my letter to you. A letter which was never meant to be written in the first place! You see, I am a Commando, bound by duties and tangled with obligations that come with the uniform I wear. Warriors like me don't have the luxury of leading a normal life filled with bliss and everlasting peace. We dare to go where others fear to go and we do what others fail to do.

We are the country's most elite counter-terrorism faction of the Special Forces and you know us by the name 'Black Cats' or as the 'National Security Guards'. The black uniform and a deadly weapon or a survival device are our trademark. Also, we only aim for the heads of our enemies unlike other forces. We are swift, sharp and dreaded just like the black cat insignia on our sleeves. We are the death warrants for terrorists who dare to come to our cities and harm our citizens.

One bullet, one enemy! That's the simple part but the tough part is fighting our own demons.

I have seen the face of terror in its worst avatar. The image of broken pieces of a skull splattered all across a blood-soaked ground sometimes awakens me in the middle of the night only to be stung by bone piercing trepidation. I fight my own demons.

You know, you are always at the risk of turning into one when your job is to eliminate every kind of homicidal savage who threatens the sovereignty of your nation. Harrowing blood-soaked gun battles and the mourning silence afterwards make up my routine life.

Then, one day, she entered my life like a cool breeze after a hot sunny day and overwhelmed me with her beautiful presence. How do I describe her? A beautiful mess? An organized clutter? A mystifying aroma gently filling my lungs and coming out as my own breath? How do you describe someone who was meant to create chaos in your life and muddle that self-imposed hard-earned truce with your own soul?

My life suddenly found its purpose and I felt alive.

The mourning, the howling, the curses suddenly disappeared. All logic was thrown out of the window and suddenly, a warrior feared by the

deadliest people surrendered meekly to a girl who was never meant to be a part of his life.

We collided when we first met. It was my fault actually.

One glance at her glowing face, when a chance breeze lifted the damp hair at her temples and ruffled the hem of her patiala suit, and I was stumped. I could not move when I should have. Instead of holding her firmly, I let her fall over me. Trust me, it was not intentional. But that precious moment is still frozen in my mind, carefully wrapped in my dreams. I don't know what she thought of it. She must have considered me some kind of pervert.

But thankfully it did not put a full stop to my little love story there.

We were destined to meet again. It was some kind of game the gods were playing with me, with her or us. Frankly, I was never meant to meet her again. At least my heart was on a leash and how good it would have been to leave it like that.

But I did meet her again, in those corridors of the burning Taj where bombs were exploding and monsters were lurking around and humanity was dying every second. But she was there, and I saw her drowning. Once again, I turned to stone. I left my 'hit' of four for her. You could say I abandoned my team, a rare feat, you see, because we are trained never to do so.

We hunt in teams, and leaving your hit means you put everyone and your life in danger.

I saved her but lost my heart forever. I never meant for anything to happen, there in those lonely corridors, but her sheer presence in my arms and her quivering lips had more power than any nuclear arsenal. I loved her like no man could have ever loved his woman. She sealed my heart with an emotion I never knew...LOVE! It still beats to her rhythm.

How stupid I was! What was I thinking?

Perhaps, the blood, the burning dome, the blasts and uncertainty of the next moment and, most importantly, the fear of losing her again took away my senses. It was not hers, but my vulnerability that led me to lower my guard. But I saved her, and I am so glad I did, otherwise I would not have survived.

But then what did I do?

Did I get down on my knees and ask her to be mine forever? Hell no! I had to leave once again. This time, for my advance NSG trainings by the Mossad in Israel. I could feel my heart sinking when I chose to disappear from her life again. She never forgave me, and she still does not. But did it end there? No, our story was meant to reach an extraordinary conclusion far away in the Pakistani jungles.

But this is her story, not mine! And she will tell you all about it herself!

I will disappear, like I never existed. I have cried in pain and hope but most of all I have lived through times, others would say were best forgotten.

Sincerely,
A Black Cat

1. The Collision

I met him at an art exhibition. The kind of exhibition that absorbs your entire being into its beautiful, mad colours. At first, you'd think that there is nothing in common between a dull, boring canvas and the spirited, vivacious colours on it. But they are meant for each other and it is together that they create art and culture, and sometimes, even history. Together, they have the power to shake the world and also inspire generations. Their very irreconcilability creates the opportunity for an extraordinary relationship where the existence of one is solely based on the presence of the other.

If only I knew that one day I too would witness a relationship just like a canvas and its colours in my own life.

It started when I met him for the first time.

Actually, it was more of a collision than a meeting.

We collided into each other like shooting stars, illuminating the dark space around with magical light. My world was shattered, elucidating the state of my illuminated heart. In the movies, this kind of thing usually happens to the guys. Our handsome hero spots a beautiful girl and things slow down as he falls in love with her. But things don't always happen the way they do in the movies or in romance novels! Even women can be smitten by love at first sight.

But anyway, that is not the point. The point is, I was mesmerized by his broad shoulders, tall frame, masculine face, hazel eyes and full lips. He was an army officer. At least, that is what I could gather from his uniform. He wore a regal olive-green uniform with six golden stars on his shoulders, like the ones that twinkle in the sky. His boots were glossy, and his olive-green shirt was tucked neatly into his pants. The dark green beret was resting rather smugly on his head. He definitely stood out in the crowd.

You don't exactly associate a warrior and art together, do you? And so, it struck me as rather strange to find a warrior in an art gallery. After all, it was not an arms exhibition but an art exhibition.

I was here because of other reasons too. I, along with a few friends, had decided to bunk our horrible physics class which was taught by Mahapatra Sir. In a way, it was a protest against his horrible self-imposed, rustic ideas. He belonged to a village in Orissa and loathed all urban dwellers. He had a theory that it was city folk who were responsible for his

childhood miseries, of belonging to a poverty-stricken, drought-prone village, the kind of place shown on TV.

Of course, no-one deserves a fate like that, but tell me, how can it be our fault?

We're just a bewildered and lost generation who are fighting our own battles while embracing our new-found independence as youth and the responsibilities that come with it. And to top it off, we're at the age when our parents compare us to some Sharma ji ka beta and glare at us disapprovingly. Our mentors and teachers shake their heads at us. The heartbreaks are as common as the sun during summer. The mind wanders in the jungles of quizzes, assignments, projects and dreaded examinations, which will eventually decide our future.

A future, which looks bleak and where hope is an alien word.

Our nights are spent listening to crappy music like 50 Cent and Good Charlotte over a beer can and sometimes with a little porn thrown in, which frankly is lame because at that age we truly believe that 'Love is God' and the porn on the internet feels so fake. Where is that passion and affection that created Heer-Ranjha, Laila-Majnu? Where is the fire to ignite the souls into one flame, which could easily be felt even while watching two flowers doing hanky-panky onscreen in Zee Classic movies? That love doesn't exist these days. Is there even such a thing as 'true love'?

My mother keeps saying that love is the strongest energy on this planet which sustains our survival and perpetuity. I wonder if I will ever witness the intensity of true love as my mom describes it or as my dadi fondly remembers. The creases beneath her sunken eyes suddenly start shining and her eyes twinkle every time she talks to me about Dadu, whom I never met.

I guess I will never know.

But I love being young and reckless. I love the feeling of being rebellious, watching *Splitsville*, listening to pop, rock, country, rap, worshipping David Guetta, swaying to Ed Sheeran tunes. And I do believe that *Fifty Shades of Grey* is all about true love. Such are the pleasures of college life!

I never knew the world beyond this, and my limited exposure hindered the wisdom life could bestow upon me. In this life of comfort, I did not know that there exists passion, bravery, agony, gallantry, supreme sacrifices and love. What was true love? How was it supposed to be? I didn't know there were some audacious souls who love our nation above all! Exactly the kind of love by which you don't hesitate to sacrifice your life and leave your people in the cities to live amidst danger and risk your well-being just to save the honour and integrity of the thing you love. That is one true love not so common these days. I wish I could have known that I was

destined to be part of this world soon, then I would have prepared better and cried less...if only I would have known!

But back to Mahapatra Sir.

However lowly he thought of us, we thought our state was worse than the drought- or flood-affected people. We had our own battles to fight. But he took it upon himself to personally avenge his forefathers and torment all kids born with a silver spoon in their mouths. It was not fair. We had six lectures in a week with him where he would conduct surprise quizzes, with no dearth of cruelty.

That fateful day we gathered our courage, bunked class, and hopped over to nearby Janpath to ease our nerves by indulging in some street shopping. The shopping went on for three hours straight and then we decided to check out 'Celebrations of Life', an art exhibition by Subroto Mukerjee. There were two reasons we picked the exhibition—it was free, and since it was really hot and humid outside, the air-conditioning inside the gallery was a bonus. Delhi heat can be deadly even without its soul sisters—smog and pollution.

Even though my patiala salwar suit, khadi jhola and Osho chappals were not appropriate, I couldn't be bothered. No one in our pack of four was appropriately clothed for that kind of sophisticated event. Everyone else there looked dapper and suave in their tailored suits and designer dresses. They mingled naturally with the rest of the debonair people there while we looked terribly out of place. The occasional stares were meant to make us feel insignificant and worthless, but we roamed around the gallery like we owned it.

I stopped before a vibrant oil painting. It was huge. A princess on a horse was kissing a warrior in armour who stood with a sword hanging at his side. He was holding the princess with one hand and the other held the reins of the horse. Everything beyond them, the trees, the mountains and the river, was blurred. The intensity of their romance was so deep that I stood transfixed in front of them for a long time. Such love stories are rare these days. People don't risk their lives, strip away their pride or get stoned to death to live an enchanting romance even if only for a moment, inspiring generations with the ferocity of such forbidden relationships.

Just as I turned around, still thinking about that fascinating painting, I ran smack into someone who was standing behind me. My bag slipped out of my hands and I started falling; all because some jerk could not keep his distance. I wanted to kill him if I didn't die of the approaching head injury. Within a flash of a second, I took him down along with me straight to the marble floor.

Immediately, I felt two strong arms around me, a strong, musky masculine smell filled my nostrils, and my gaze rested on a set of hazel eyes

which looked amused. I could feel his warm breath on my cheek and hear his heart thudding beneath me.

All in a second!

This entire world, the whole universe and the entire human species stopped existing in that one second. It was as if I was waiting for that moment all my life and now this moment was going to define the reason for my existence. Something unexpected had moved inside my heart to shake my soul and leave me gasping.

I am still looking for a word to describe that eternal moment which has the power to alter one's beliefs and change one's life. It happens!

I did not want to move, and I did not see him making an effort to do so. But just then, one of my friends noticed me. We have our personal little monsters to ruin every perfect moment designed exclusively for us. In this case, it was Susan.

'Hey! Oh my God! Riya! Shit man! What happened? Are you okay?'

She lifted me up, pulling me away from him and thereby breaking that wonderful moment, that perfect enchantment. I turned again to look at him properly. I saw the most handsome face I'd ever encountered in my life. I was already devastated. An old Falguni Pathak song, '*Maine payal hai chankayi aab to aaja to harjai*' started playing in my head.

'I am really sorry, ma'am. I hope you are not hurt?' he straightened himself as he apologized.

Ma'am? Oh, he was referring to me !

'Oh, yeah, I am absolutely fine. I am really sorry for my clumsiness.' What was I saying, I wondered. That is not how I talk to people! My usual reactions were along the lines of '*Oh, you! Can't you see? Where is the police? You're trying to eve tease? Listen, mister, I am a Punjabi kudi and I will beat the shit out of you. It's all your fault! Okay ?*' As simple as that! But something was not right.

'Are you sure, ma'am?' he said. 'I am really sorry. I just didn't see you turn around.'

'Oh no! It's actually my fault. I could not see you. I apologize.'

Something's definitely not right. Sigh!

'No, ma'am, you don't need to do that. I did not see you. I am really sorry,' he said.

'Yes, mister, it's your fault!' Susan interrupted. 'You better be sorry .'

Susan was being extra helpful now when I did not need her help. Where was her friendly concern when I literally pleaded for her perfect C++ code notes for our assignments last week? She had refused to acknowledge my presence that time and had many brilliant excuses.

‘Susan, don’t worry about it!’ I said through gritted teeth. ‘He actually saved me from falling and hitting my head directly on the floor.’

Frankly, I had never liked Susan. She was my classmate and part of our gang, but we never really got along.

‘No, she is right, ma’am. I should apologize,’ the handsome stranger said.

‘By the way, I am Captain Virat.’

He stuck his hand out for a handshake. I took it and gripped it for a long electrifying moment. Electric shocks advanced across my body instantly. I am not a pervert, nor I have been devoid of male presence in my life and I had my share of flings by the time I was nineteen.

But nothing like the head-over-heels kind of love I’d seen in the movies. Most of my relationships were pathetic and lousy because of my non-committal nature, which resulted in catastrophic break-ups eventually. The saving grace was that I at least had relationships where guys were not psycho killers or possessive nippers controlling every inch of their girlfriend’s lives.

When I was in class ten, I lost my heart to a college senior. He would hang around my school, and it was a matter of pride for me in my peer group that an older boy wanted to roam around with me—until the day I come to know that he had eloped with my best friend Nicky. That was embarrassing and catastrophic at the same time. I did not even have a BFF to cry to because the love of my life (as I presumed that time) eloped with my only best friend.

Needless to say, I stopped making friends for a long time.

The relationships which I thought were perfect could not withstand shifting of cities, schools and testing times. My first official boyfriend in college whom I actually introduced to my parents dumped me because he could not deal with my A league summer internship in which I was placed in a five star MNC while he struggled to get one even locally. It did not matter to him that I had a backlog paper in Algorithms, and I needed to make up for it desperately. By the time I returned to my college after my month-long internship, he already had a girl in his arms. Such a misogynistic bastard!

Something was missing!

‘Hi, I am Riya,’ was all I could utter.

‘Please tell me what can I do for you?’ he asked.

‘Everything,’ I said

What was I saying?

‘Err...I meant what are you doing here?’

‘Ha ha! What do you mean? Exactly the same thing you are doing here,’ he smiled.

‘No, I mean you seem to be on duty. Uniform and all!’

Oh my God, Riya. Really? You have just met him. Try to be better than that.

‘Actually, I have been assigned to buy a few paintings for our Officers’ Mess but honestly I know nothing about paintings. So, you see, I was struggling to find the perfect pieces, and, trust me, firing bullets are a lot easier.’ He gazed at me expectantly and I realized that I should laugh because he was being funny and looked damn cute saying all those things.

I laughed. Maybe a little too much but he looked pleased.

‘I am sorry, I’ve just been talking about myself,’ he said.

‘Oh, no problem. I am Riya and I am doing B.Tech in computer science from Delhi College of Engineering. And we are here for...err...an educational excursion.’ Well, telling him about our bunking would be embarrassing.

‘That is so nice. Riya, could you please help me buy a few paintings. I am sure you possess great taste in art and culture,’ he asked very politely, and I could not have said no.

If only he truly knew about my taste in art, he would have surely looked for an alternative. But I knew how to shop, how to find the hidden marvels at every street side shop and finding the right kind of exclusive looking items at a throw away price from little shanties. These were just some exquisite-looking overly priced paintings.

I was confident of doing a good job there.

I needed to ditch my friends. Buying the paintings would take some time and my friends were in no mood to wait. It was better to work in peace than tolerate their taunts for helping out a stranger in uniform, even though it was technically service to the nation, I was helping a soldier after all. I also had an urge to be with him and that meant I needed to get rid of my friends.

I was not a desperate girl wandering around looking for love, or the kind of girl who would ditch her friends over a guy, but I was just not myself at the time. I was elated, overjoyed and maybe a little dreamy too. Maybe this happens to everyone who falls in love or perhaps this is how love at first sight is supposed to be. Although I did not recognize my exact feelings at the time, I was happy at the thought of being with him. It’s not that I am promoting the concept of blind dates or dating strangers who could turn out to be psycho killers, but this was different.

It was like I had known him over the centuries and had longed for him forever. It sounds flimsy, but it happens, that’s all I can say about it. Hanging out with him seemed like a very nice idea at the time.

If only I would have known, that that little interaction was going to change my life very soon...

I asked my friends to give us some space. Manisha, another friend of mine, laughed and said, ‘What? Now you are already leaving us for him?’

'Go, please,' I pleaded.

She blinked at me.

'Goooo, just go and take everyone along with you. Okay?'

She hugged me and waved goodbye. That was easy.

2. College Life

Our dalliance with the colours on those canvases began. It is amazing how each painting has a language of its own. How pink, blue and red evokes passion in your heart and agitates you to the very core, and how brown and black smeared ruthlessly on the canvas can make you sad and disturbed. Art has a language of its own. Perhaps that is the reason why the Neanderthals painted their caves beyond the boundaries of language and created a simple world. How many stories and emotions those little caves might hold, I wonder!

It was magical. Sometimes we would talk about how the painter had done injustice to a particular painting and how it felt incomplete. At other times, we would just stand transfixed before another painting, appreciating every single colour and emotion that it held. Finally, he ended up buying five beautiful contemporary abstract paintings for his Officers' Mess.

Right then, the reality hit me hard that we were still strangers and might never meet again.

But life is pretty mysterious. And sometimes, a chance encounter can change the course of your life without you even realizing it. Such chance encounters, with powers to alter the course of your life and change you as a person, are not very common, but when it happens it is more powerful than a nuclear bomb. Such chance encounters might birth myths and legends for generations to muse over.

Do you believe in such stories? I did not, until I witnessed it myself one day. Miracles do happen.

'Thank you so much. I really don't know what I would've done without you...err I mean without your help. My Commanding Officer will be very happy,' he said.

'Oh, no problem! It was my pleasure! Anyway, time to go now.' I tried my best to sound bright and chirpy.

'Hey no! I owe you a cup of coffee. You can't leave,' he said.

'Well, my hostel closes in an hour. I am really sorry, but I have to go.'

'Oh no! That is not done. Okay, give me your phone number,' he said.

‘Umm! I am actually very busy and I hardly use my phone.’ Now I was sounding more like myself. You are not supposed to give your phone number to just about anyone so quickly, let alone a stranger.

‘Don’t worry, I am not a stalker. It’s just that I owe you a cup of coffee as a token of my gratitude and also, I will ping you my super hilarious forwarded messages.’

‘Seriously? Could not you come up with something better?’ I smiled.

‘Actually, I have never tried that line before, so you see it’s just a beginner’s skill. Grant me this please,’ he said, and smiled.

In the end, he dropped me back to my hostel in his gorgeous black Chevrolet Cruze and said he would ping me soon.

How I wished time would have frozen right there! But life is never meant to be simple. Is it?

In spite of waiting for his phone call for over a month I did not even receive a message from him. I cursed myself for not taking his number. It was a dead end. Soon, I forgot about him, not literally, but he was pushed to the bottom compartments of my brain. It was easier to do so then because my mind still controlled my heart. After all I had a life of my own and, in fact, it was a pretty challenging one, as I was an engineering student who was coping with her last semester.

The final placements were coming up. Placement season is the most important time at any engineering college. Usually, students are placed by the end of their third year, which leads to a carefree college life throughout the last year. You feel invincible; cheerful, arrogant spirits are a commonly found trait among fourth year students. Most seniors transform into ‘The Great Khali’ while interacting with professors, juniors and sometimes even with unknown people walking on the road.

Popular perception is that engineering colleges are magical places where learning takes place but the truth is, they are actually beautiful places where beer flows in amber currents, inviting faces are chased by prospective suitors, snooty college sweethearts are considered property and generally remain virgins, coffees are turned into essays, electric kettles are next to God, nights are an exclusive time for leisure, mornings bring a plethora of unwanted tasks like visiting classes, and professors are best ignored.

Basically college life is a Shangri-La rite of passage into adulthood which involves rampant consumption of alcoholic beverages, flagrant and promiscuous sexual behaviour and a general and fundamental disregard for any form of responsibility by its inhabitants.

But life can be so tragic sometimes.

Due to global recession at the time, placements were postponed for the fourth year which brutally clipped our invincible wings. There’s nothing worse than not getting hired by a multinational company for an engineering

student. This changed our college environment drastically and once again we were burdened with piles of assignments. Seniors were often found with bags under their eyes, wound up on caffeine, eating Maggi while working on assignments before the next class. The smug smiles of our professors and their sudden rise in confidence while dealing with us announced the fulfillment of their long-held grudges. Juniors giggled at us, and we swore to take revenge as soon as we were placed.

It felt like a complete fail, a terrible series of events, a failed plan. No senior deserved that.

In short, life sucked.

Finally, 'D Day' arrived when 'Day Zero' announced the arrival of top multinational companies. There are usually three types of IT companies that approach engineering colleges for placements. MNCs with global offices, MSEs which may or may not have global offices, and start-ups which are usually based in India. Most students get placed into IT companies owing to their comparatively hefty packages and prospects of onsite projects abroad. Other than that, core companies also visit college campuses to recruit students. The placement cell functions with full efficiency during this time of year and behaves like royalty unlike the rest of the year when they hide in their nerdy dungeons and others think of them as complete college misfits.

Every company, irrespective of the pay packages, looks to hire smart brains and ensure that every hired candidate is the top of the lot. Good aptitude, good at logic, good at communication, well versed in basic technology, a topper since kindergarten and what not; they truly believe that all these qualities can be found in one single student.

In the lead up to the placement day, Gods and Goddesses replaced Justin Bieber and Rihanna posters in our rooms. Heart rates were on the verge of causing massive heart attacks, the bathrooms were converted to strategy centers and cigarette butts were commonly sighted everywhere. Each batchmate who found a placement was an outcast, spontaneously ostracized from the main social circle. The placed students had a hard time finding a mate to boast about their glories or even to raise a toast over their secured future. Break-ups among couples were high and they began to behave like arch enemies if one was placed and the other was not.

In short, it was like a nightmare.

Thank God, I got placed in a medium-tier company and that too not so soon, although the inter-batch rivalry and jealousy lasted till everyone was placed. Once the whole lot was placed, the 'Herculean spirits' were back again, and generous hugs replaced the cold stares among peers and tears patched up the break-ups. We were one big happy community again with more important and significant agendas like ragging the juniors,

organizing a grand party, hitting the discotheque, packing bags for a hike to some godforsaken place and even doing all the banned things in the college rule book which we could not do earlier.

Acche din aa gaye the!

The last month was spent high on weed and partying like the apocalypse was looming. Juniors were grounded again and they sincerely prayed for our departure. We revealed secrets and cried our hearts out over vodka in plastic cups and uninterrupted sutta sessions. We lived our life one last time before striding down into the boulevards of broken dreams and harsh realities of the world outside the college boundaries.

Finally, the day of bidding goodbyes and making promises arrived, when our hearts were heavier than our packed trunks. It felt a bit weird. I had never thought leaving this place, my home for the past four years, would leave such an everlasting impression on my mind and turn me into the person I am today.

College is a place where you eventually find out who you are! The college premises is a place where you leave a huge chunk of your heart and the people who were your foes suddenly turn out to be the ones who will bring a smile to your face and college crushes will always linger fondly in your mind.

You love your college more than you hate it.

As Bryan Adams once said, ‘ *Those were the best days of my life !* ’

3. Homecoming

My return home made my parents very happy and created a buzz among colony aunts and old lovers for a while, but there was nothing left for me to do there. The air felt dull, TV and Facebook became my new best friends, and my phone pinged all the time from friends I did not even know existed back in college. I craved to start my job.

My mum was on an extensive mission of fulfilling all her motherly duties by stuffing me with ghee and oily food along with the constant worries over my physical weakness (presumed). She sincerely believed that four years of my college life had robbed me of my health and glowing skin and only copious quantities of home-cooked food could save me from my doom. My dad would try to strike forced conversations with me once he returned from his office to make up for all those lost years of communication with his only child. But we ended up watching the news together after a little discussion over current affairs and national politics.

Only to move apart again once Mom would call us to dinner.

We would collect our plates and settle ourselves before the TV in the bedroom again, ignoring my mother's constant rants and curses at my father for teaching me some seriously bad manners. After some sincere efforts, she stopped calling us out, and would serve us food right there in the bedroom.

Admittedly, my parents were much cooler than most Indian parents.

They never asked me about my future plans or gave me the standard lecture about getting married which most college graduates receive in India. Also, the perks of being the only child meant I would always be a baby in their eyes. Those idle days of lazing around reminded me of Captain Virat again. I tried very hard to stalk him but he was nowhere to be found. What kind of person doesn't exist on Facebook? Only ghosts!

I even received two wedding invitation cards from my batchmates while I was still looking for a suitable boy to date. Some batchmates even got their joining letters and happily WhatsApped about it on our college group. Those of us who were still awaiting their joining dates thoroughly cursed and congratulated them half-heartedly.

I missed my college terribly. You get this strange feeling once you leave your college, like you will miss not just the place and people but also

miss the person you were at that time because you will never be that way ever again.

So when I got an invitation for the college convocation ceremony, I enthusiastically packed my bags for a brief stay at my alma mater. The reunion began with hugs and kisses among friends. The trunk of memories was opened mercilessly. We laughed, complained and blamed. That day was dedicated to the nights that turned into mornings with the friends that turned into family and we agreed unanimously that our college times were legendary, and nothing could replace those memories.

The convocation was organized on a very large scale and Mr Amitabh Bachchan was the chief guest, and his speech was mesmerizing.

He said, 'For what it's worth, it is never too late to be whoever you want to be. I hope you live a life you're proud of and if you are not, I hope you have the strength to start over. Every dream is supposed to be hard, if it's not hard everyone would do it. The hard is what makes it great. Believe in it and stand for it.'

His speech was followed by the distribution of degrees and medals and a grand dinner.

The next day, we bid our goodbyes with tears in our eyes and a heaviness in our hearts. We exchanged numbers and promised to meet soon. At that time, you think the best days of your life are in front of you. And you decide what they will be and aim to take control of it. No apologies or excuses. No one to lean on or to blame. The cage has been opened and you're a free bird ready to fly high in the sky, but little do you realize that the sky is endless, and you will always crave to go back into that cage. The carefree days of chirping around were long gone.

Life begins at the end of your college life and you miss college for the rest of your life.

College life was over and the reality of growing up was still sinking in. People had expectations from me. For taking initiative and carrying out responsibilities! Of what I would do in my career five years down the line and who I'd get married to. These were the side effects of staying at home for a long duration. Even the bai would ask about my pay package and Sharma uncle would always be inquisitive about my ability to pay rent from my own pocket, Gupta aunty's hawk eyes would look at me as if I were a bride over the expiry date, which would make my parents restless.

The aunts of our times have a weird theory that getting married at the right age is more important than marrying the right person.

There also came a time where my mother insisted I learn some basic culinary skills which she thought would be more important to me after my wedding than my engineering degree. I also attended some of the mohalla weddings and mingled with the guys who had once been roadside Romeos

and now had turned out as respectable shop walas. In my school days, they had shamelessly hovered around me, circling around me on their bikes while some ogled at me, standing in a nook or under a tree.

I had loathed them once, but now I found them adorable.

They looked at me like I was a diva, way out of their league. The cold drinks would never stop arriving and snack plates would be filled at those weddings. The nostalgia was really overwhelming. They never judged me for my cooking skills or marital status, just put me on a higher pedestal.

It felt great.

But my mom and Gupta aunty shot me disapproving looks and soon my mother stopped taking me to weddings. Perhaps her ideas about finding the perfect groom at weddings, like it happens in Bollywood, were shattered.

I would sleep for hours, soaking my soft pillow with saliva, getting up way past afternoon. Brush slowly and blast music while bathing. The room would be a mess and most of my clothes were usually on the floor instead of in the wardrobe. Not that I needed many, my shorts and 'I don't care' printed tee would suffice for days.

My mother had now relegated to me the task of bringing home the groceries, accompanying her for vegetable shopping from the weekly haat and witness the ultimate adventures of robbing the poor sabjiwala over a stiff bargain and extra nimbu-mirchi. I would also quickly run to the local sweet shop for samosa and rosgulle if any unannounced guest would visit us. I felt truly accomplished now that I was helping my mom and most importantly, my mother suddenly thought of me as an important and responsible person.

No degree can ever raise you in your mother's eyes as much as a simple round of vegetable shopping can do.

Often, I would slip out of my house for sutta breaks in the most abandoned nooks of my colony. Despite the disgusted looks from the shopkeeper, who also sold cigarettes to my father, those sutta shots felt very fulfilling. But he never told on me, being a true professional.

One day, I was smoking under the neighbourhood banyan tree when Gupta aunty saw me. She had come to light her Shani Dev ka diya laden with pure mustard oil, believed to ward off the evil eye. I don't know about Gupta aunty, but Shani Dev definitely looked pleased with me. After that incident, Gupta aunty's groom hunting for me stopped altogether, and she even stopped visiting our house. Thankfully, she never said anything to Mom. It was not like I was a smoker. I only did it because I was bored.

God never shuts all doors at once. Just when you think you're in the middle of doomsday, he will show you the path to salvation or send some angel to drag you out of your misery. And this happened to me. Finally, I got my joining dates and would soon be on a plane to the city which never sleeps—Mumbai.

I was happy, excited about the fact that I would soon be leaving, but suddenly the laid-back attitude in my home changed. Things turned emotional. My mom stopped ranting about my laziness or the mess in my room. She cooked all my favourite dishes, ditching the dreaded torai, lauki, saag which I hated. The days flew by and soon I was packing my bags. My mother would not stop crying. Dad took the day off work—something he hadn't done in decades.

Honestly I felt like crying too.

I hugged them tightly, kissed my mother a lot, tried to cheer them up as they waved me goodbye at the airport. It was harsh. I suddenly felt lonely and insecure. I had just left my whole universe back at home. The same home where only a few months ago I was dying of boredom. Indian parents never express their unconditional love to their kids but their kids mean the world to them. They talk about you every day to everyone when you are not around and feel content when you are around. You occupy all your mother's heart and your father's mind.

We are not just bonded by blood but also by love. True love!

4. Mumbai Meri Jaan

There exists a bitter rivalry between true blue Delhiites and Mumbaikars. A thousand pens and a million voices have sketched myriad images of ‘Dilwali ki Dilli’ and ‘Aamchi Mumbai’ in several shades and the unspoken war to score over each other is centuries old. Delhi grasps you in its peculiarly unsettling aura, grabs you by the scruff and tries to shove its own dented version of Dilligiri down your throat, screaming ‘my way or the highway’. Mumbai too approaches you with a mildly unnerving cocktail of aggression, affection and apathy—depending on the time and place—but all that quickly evolves into a generally comforting feeling of belonging.

Both cities have their own pace and tone. People in both these cities think they’re living in one of the world’s greatest cities and express themselves in their own distinct languages. While a true Mumbaikar has his own lingo and no sentence can be complete without endearing words like *jhakkas*, *pandu*, *vtakle idhar se*, etcetera, a true Delhiite cannot talk without abuses, but don’t get them wrong, they’re just emotions. The paranthe of Chandni Chowk and the kebabs of Purani Dilli have the power to bring a Delhiite to tears, and similarly a Mumbaikar feels just as nostalgic about his vada pav and Bombay sandwich.

In spite of being a true blue Delhiite, I found Mumbai liberating and passionate.

The grandeur of Lutyens’ Delhi and campus politics were replaced by Bollywood vibes and multicultural amusements where each individual had the space to chase his dreams, his own way. Mumbai looked magnificent from my airplane window seat, the glittering lights felt welcoming and the huge ocean assured me of a better future.

That was it. I already liked the city.

When I finally walked out of the airport, I was greeted by a cacophony of voices and a mass of humanity stretching as far as the eye could see. All pushing, jostling, elbowing and shoving in an attempt to be the first in the queue or making their way to the taxiwalas, which almost qualified as a superman stunt. The stench of cautious revulsion bordering on misanthropy in the demeanour of those taxiwalas perturbed me but the instant reminder of Rajiv Chowk Metro Station during peak hours pleasantly overwhelmed me with a sense of nostalgia for Delhi.

Eventually, after frantically searching the rows of identically clad potbellied men holding up signs outside the airport, I found someone bearing my name and my company's name.

He led me across the road, striding out into the oncoming traffic until we arrived at a battered Swift Dzire, which was thankfully air conditioned. The streets of Mumbai passed by in a blur and I could register that pot holes were common on Mumbai streets; Delhi that way has better roads, beautiful parks, more space and people can actually afford to have a bungalow.

I was aware that the cost of living in Mumbai was higher and having a roof over your head here was counted as a luxury because half of Mumbai lived in endless rows of slum dwellings with blue tarpaulin-lined roofs or slept on footpaths. But Mumbai has its own charms despite the stark difference in the life it offers to its townies and burbies. Just so you know, townies are the upscale pretentious pricks of South Bombay while burbies are their supposedly less-privileged counterparts. They are like siblings who constantly bicker about everything.

Finally, we arrived at my new home—an apartment provided by the company, which was basically a shabby building just off a busy intersection in Colaba, one of the most touristy areas in Mumbai.

The apartment, which I had to share with three other trainees, was close to my office in Nariman Point. I stepped into an ancient, creaking lift which looked like it had not been cleaned in years and entered my shady little apartment. The interior of flat number 402 on the fourth floor did not look much better than the outside of the building. It was furnished simply with a tasteless blend of dark grey curtains and minimal furniture. There were two decent-sized bedrooms, each with two single beds sagging sadly in the middle. The bathroom and kitchen continued the minimal decor theme. The kitchen was equipped with a four-burner gas, some basic provisions and a fridge that hummed loudly. The small microwave-oven was a surprise though.

All in all, nothing too fancy, nothing too pathetic. I was not in a position to expect more.

The silver lining was that I got to choose my bed and cupboard. I dumped my stuff onto the corner bed near the window which looked right over the Arabian Sea. I could see miles and miles of ocean right from my bed. I grinned; it was good that I arrived before the other roommates.

I was glad I was in Mumbai. I had a job and a flat. This was the start of my shiny new life and adulthood beyond the limitations of college life. I fell asleep to the chorus of dogs barking and horns beeping below. Colaba was a busy neighbourhood.

I woke up to a bright cerulean sky, cloudless and luminous in its intensity and an excellent ocean view.

I freshened up, buttered a piece of bread which I had along with a boiled egg and instantly missed my mother. I made an attempt to wash my hair and pulled it back into a ponytail. I donned my newly bought pencil skirt along with a white formal long-sleeved shirt, which I was told was the unofficial dress code of Mumbai corporate girls. The pointed pumps added to the overall charm of the corporate attire. This was going to be the first of many days of office.

I tried to contain the feelings of excitement as well as nervousness that were bubbling up inside me.

I was excited and scared at the same time but the humid Mumbai air was very reassuring. I got in a taxi and made my way to office. The roads were packed, traffic was bumper-to-bumper and crowds thronged the streets. Everybody was in a rush to reach their destinations. Mumbai certainly has a faster pace than Delhi. I smiled at my spontaneous reaction of comparing everything in Mumbai to Delhi. My thoughts were interrupted as the taxi screeched to a stop right outside a magnificent office building on Marine Drive in Nariman Point. It was a huge twenty-storey commercial tower built in a very impressive manner—the corporate headquarters of the company in India.

When I entered the lobby and completed all the formalities, there were already twenty-five freshers, all looking lost. The GET or Graduate Engineering Trainees, were put together for further training with the sole purpose of transforming the unpolished and unsophisticated students into hardcore suave professionals.

That was a huge blow to our egos and feelings of independence. Most of us had assumed we would have shiny little glass door cabins with piles of files awaiting our magical skills. The HR employees projected smug smiles with complete foresightedness in their eyes about our bleak future. We were enrolled for a structured program so that we could decide on our real strengths and career goals. Then the management would evaluate our orientations and slot us for the right roles. And it all seemed like a long time before we would have our own cabins.

Life can be tragic sometimes!

We were introduced to countless people, shown various areas in the office buildings and provided loads and loads of office manuals on day one. It passed in a blur with a little window of a fifteen-minute break for lunch during which I quickly met my roommates. I briefly told them about the sad state of the building, lowering their expectations immediately. They all came from small towns in India with high expectations and unreasonable hopes for Mumbai.

After all, the rest of India looks upon this financial capital in awe.

We were all from North Indian states, except Swami, who was from Kerala. Nidhi was an IITian from Kharagpur, Dipti belonged to Lovely Professional University Punjab, Gaurav was from NIT Jamshedpur and I was from Delhi College of Engineering.

After the lunch break, the instructors asked us to form small groups of four to five people; we would work in teams. Nidhi, Dipti, Gaurav, Swami and I quickly formed a team. At the end of the work day, all of us except Swami, who was allocated another place, came back to the apartment. Gaurav was asked to share a room with us girls. It was a bit awkward for a small-town boy like him. We assured him that we would suppress our lust and longing for him as much as possible and try our best not to attack his honour. Then we ended up laughing hysterically for at least half an hour while Gaurav went back to his room shyly.

It was a good start.

We spent the rest of the day wandering the streets of our new neighbourhood, which was characterized by towering apartment blocks and bustling markets with tiny dusty shops jammed together in rows.

We found a small restaurant with a long menu comprising vegetarian and non-vegetarian dishes. We decided to go dutch and placed a sumptuous order for paneer butter masala, butter naan, chicken do pyaza, rice and daal, which we hogged mercilessly and then hopped to a little grocery shop nearby and bought a few provisions to keep us going. Three packets of bread, a fat chunk of butter, jam, chocolates, rice, daal, toiletries including Harpic and Tide detergent powder and other regular stuff to keep a house full of working people functioning.

By the time we got back to our flat, we were tired and fell into our beds like dead people.

The next day, survival pushed us to a whole new level of multitasking; Dipti was smearing butter over half burnt toasts while Gaurav was waiting outside our single bathroom for Nidhi to come out, I explained to my mom why I could not take her call last night while struggling with my stubborn hair which was refusing to transform into a perfect ponytail. But eventually we made it out of our little flat successfully and hopped into a taxi.

While I grabbed the window seat, Gaurav and Nidhi were explaining to their parents that the challenges of the new job was why they hadn't been taking calls from home. Dipti, being the smartest one, spent the entire twenty-minute ride napping.

Work life is stressful. Or at least, not as exciting as I thought it would be. Damn, all those Hollywood movies where the damsel meets her warrior in a corporate suit and their love life starts with a bang.

Shit! Speaking of warriors I was again reminded of Virat but I shook my head vigorously to register my protest against that rebellious thought and that name which had nothing to offer but agony. I had already spent many sleepless nights and meaningless days thinking about him, when he was nowhere to be found. Why did he ever come to me? I had been happy, at least content with my life. And now? A weird numbing sense of expectation from a stranger who never meant anything clouded my days.

No! Not him again! I have to focus on my career.

There was absolutely nothing happening on the job front. The Human Resource department was on some sort of secret mission of tormenting the newly recruited trainees as long as we were in their grip. Every day our pride at being employed there was being replaced slowly by a feeling that we were slaves. Our jobs ranged from bringing coffee for HR to attending to their daily grocery needs to working on their PowerPoint presentations and excel spreadsheets. No assignment was given to us even in two months and we were subjected to regular quizzes and surprise tests evaluating our various technical and interpersonal skills just like in college.

Swami being the nerd that he was turned out to be the brightest star of our batch of newly joined employees. He was the only one memorizing the pile of boring manuals thrown at us. Though his popularity among HR guys was directly proportional to the hatred among the trainees, it did not bother him an ounce. Some genius from the HR department came up with the very original idea of introducing morning yoga to our batch which looted its peace. They believed yoga would help us focus better, gain confidence and strengthen our corporate ethics.

Once we also swept the streets in the Dharavi slums as an initiative by our company's 'Swach Mohalla Abhiyan'. The head honchos of the company truly believed it would connect us with the locals. But we saw them laughing at us while we collected garbage with constipated looks on our faces. One five-year-old kid even had the audacity to pee openly on our collected garbage and run away instantly. Don't believe in shining India ads. It's not all that easy. Though the corporate managers of various departments were supposed to participate, at the last moment, they decided to send the batch of new trainees to help them gain some exposure to community services. They knew we had no way out but to dance to their beats.

Also it is important to mention here, while we acquired the status of 'Sharma ji ka Beta' back home finally, we did everything our parents and relatives never imagined we would.

In short, life sucked!

But there was a silver lining amidst the black clouds. We grasped the pulse of the city and loved every moment in Mumbai. It would never stop mesmerizing us.

The bhelpuri at Back Bay, the gola at Chowpatty, the pav bhaji at Mumbai central station, the kebabs at Byculla, are not just food but the yearning of the hard-working souls of this fast city. Bandra Bandstand, Worli sea face, Chowpatty and Gateway of India are not just beaches and seashores but the very identities of this great city And the monsoons? Monsoons make Mumbai lively.

Colaba was pretty close to our office and a happening locality in Mumbai, always bustling with something or the other. Street shopping was as much fun as shopping in sky-high shopping malls which were scattered all across the city. Mumbai's markets are full of life and tourists from all around the globe. The Gateway of India, Taj Palace, Café Mondegar and Leopold café not only represent à la mode Mumbai but also speak of the grand renaissance Mumbai has witnessed.

The coffees at Leopold and sandwiches at Mondegar were our staples. It was fun to live in that part of the city and walk on the compact pavements of spirited Colaba.

Just when we were on the verge of breaking down, HR assigned us our projects and respective departments. The dark days of corporate slavery finally ended. We were relieved. Nidhi and the gang made grandiose plans to celebrate our newly acquired freedom.

No more coffees at Leopold, we needed a swanky celebration!

The Taj Palace hotel topped the chart for our preferred places to visit. It was expensive but we all had some money by then and we wanted to make our night special. We locked down on the Taj.

5. The Promotion Party

We were set to join our respective departments on Thursday, so we decided to visit the grand five star hotel on Wednesday night. Taj is just not a hotel; it is an iconic structure which defines Mumbai. Every room holds a thread of history. It is a heritage hotel facing the Arabian Sea which has seen all the waves and ships coming and going, it is the pride of Mumbai.

You know, when life offers you a few promises everything in your life feels like it is going on fast forward. Unlike those times, when there is nothing going on in your life, when dull, dreaded and lifeless moments grip the very essence of your being, when you feel like you are living an eternity of miseries. The only fact that sustains the future of this planet is that 'nothing lasts forever'. Nothing is permanent in this wicked world, not even our troubles. Life is full of uncertainties, ups and downs, difficulties, obstacles, possibilities and opportunities. The only thing one can do is to embrace the uncertainties and go with the flow.

We blinked and Wednesday arrived.

I cannot forget the zeal and enthusiasm that was bubbling up in us. We were ready to celebrate our first work promotions, which felt so special, almost like conquering Mount Everest. We were elated, overjoyed and filled with infectious exuberance. It felt as if everything would remain so forever.

If only we would have known 'forever' is a relative term and that everything would change very soon.

All those halter tops bought from the Colaba-Causeway were put to good use. Nidhi and I wore almost similar halters in blue and red along with Calvin Klein skinny jeans and Steve Madden sneakers. We felt rich. Dipti decided to wear a lovely frilly and floral maxi dress. We shared each other's lipsticks and kohls. The tint of Bobbi Brown high shimmer gloss set the celebratory looks right. Our Prada and Givenchy perfumes lingered in the air and the room was a complete mess.

We blow dried each other's hair to make it more messy and for it, in turn, to reflect our stubborn spirits. We shook our hair free to register a visible protest against the office ponytails and smiled knowingly. You can tell a lot about a girl's mood just by observing her hair. The style of a girl's hair indicates her spirits, her moods, her whims and fancies. A messy hairdo indicates playfulness whereas a tight bun means she is in no mood to take

your shit. Bangs shout out loud—where is the party tonight or let's go shopping! And a blunt cut tells you not to mess with her.

I loved my girl gang.

By then we had bonded well; we had each other's back and complemented each other almost perfectly. Every girl needs a girl gang where you aggressively believe in each other, defend each other and think your girlfriends deserve the best. We were no more strangers to this big metropolitan city.

Soon, Gaurav joined us before the mirror. He looked dapper in his formal blue shirt and blue jeans. I smiled; good times and crazy friends make the best memories.

'Hey girls,' Gaurav said. 'I hope you are aware that our dinner is tonight only. How long do you really need to get ready? Swami has borrowed his uncle's car and has been waiting outside for the past fifteen minutes and we should not piss him off more. You know how particular he is about time and considering the fact that this super handsome boy is accompanying you girls, I don't think anybody is even going to glance at you all. Let's move.'

We pushed him aside and made our way out of the door.

It took us an hour to cover the distance of fifteen minutes to reach the hotel. Mumbai traffic can be deadly. It really sucks.

Anyway, one step out of the car and I felt so insignificant before that architectural marvel of Moorish, Oriental and Florentine style of the Taj. I turned around and looked at the mighty Arabian Sea as a gentle sea breeze ruffled my hair. Everything felt so welcoming, so warm. There were promises in the air.

We entered the Taj and soon we were inside the epitome of luxury and elegance.

The flower arrangements were stunning and the decorative appointments were extraordinary. We were then ushered by an exceptionally courteous member of staff, Mr Javed, who instantly made us feel special; after all it was not every day that we were treated like royals. Even the munna at our local food joint was accustomed to ignoring us most of the time. We threw each other a knowing smile, walked straighter than usual while surrendering to the 'Wah Taj' feeling.

We reached Masala Kraft, the restaurant that Gaurav had made reservations at. Even though the Taj had some six to seven restaurants, Masala Kraft was one of their best Indian food offerings. We also crossed the Japanese restaurant Wasabi on the first floor. Even though it sounded exquisite, just trying Japanese food for us Indians is kind of a self-accomplishment unless you are one of those rare individuals who like eating huge octopuses or are in love with raw sushi.

Thank God Gaurav had chosen Masala Kraft! I instantly fell in love with the restaurant. The flowers, the music and the ambience made it all so dreamy. Gaurav, Dipti, Swami and Nidhi looked equally awestruck. We had this huge discussion over what to order and what not to, but finally we settled for our typical paneer, mushroom, naan and daal. In the meantime, we were served cool sugarcane juices.

Life for once, felt surreal.

I had this huge sense of satisfaction that I had chalked out my life plans well, executing it even better at that point of time. I was happy to be with them and celebrate my success, achieving what I always desired and ultimately to live life on my own terms.

Nothing would have been better than this. Life was all black and white for me at that moment and my chest was filled with pride. For once, it felt like I had complete control over my life.

But I wish I'd known that we were mere pawns in the bigger course of universal plans. No matter how much enthusiasm and enticement we muster, the universal forces maneuver us in a manner that we don't quite understand, at least until it is too late.

Chaos is the ultimate truth and control is a myth!

Once we were done with our soup, we started clicking selfies to share on social media. Dipti's floral maxi against the backdrop of the Taj gathered hundreds of likes on Facebook and she fluttered her eyelashes like a diva. Nidhi and I tagged people on Facebook in order to push them to like our pictures, setting aside the bouts of guilt and embarrassment rising within us. Gaurav did not even try. He just WhatsApped his pictures to his close group of school friends who in return filled the group with comments like 'Cha gaye guru, launda jawan ho gaya hai,' which encouraged him to try some more of his silly poses while some sophisticated-looking folks seated next to us laughed at us.

In short, everyone knew we had never been to a five-star hotel before.

After a few more drinks, I got up to use the restroom. I could see the Taj was glowing with the liveliness of the most affluent and acclaimed, who gathered there to celebrate their entrepreneurial success and indulge in the dreams and hopes that this city has to offer to them. After all the Taj was just not any hotel but the iconic identity of this legendary city and a symbol of opulence.

I smiled without realizing that it was going to be my last smile for a very long time.

The restrooms were located in a relatively quiet corner, separated from the central dome area by a corridor. When I got back from the restroom, I could sense a sudden uneasiness in the air.

Something was just not right but I continued walking towards the hall. Suddenly, I saw a glass window shatter and heard the sound of gunshots.

6. The Burning Taj

I spun around and saw two heavily armed men storming into the central hall. They were hurling abuses and firing at anyone and everyone who caught their sight. I felt like I would collapse but somehow that inner survival instinct pushed my frozen feet to run and seek shelter. There was chaos, panic and fear in the air. People started running everywhere and frantically calling out for help. I stopped running and crawled under a nearby dining table. I was shivering in shock and praying.

All of a sudden, I remembered my parents and missed them terribly. I was separated from my gang and did not know about their whereabouts. I felt a wave of apprehension and accelerated heartbeat, as a feeling of extreme helplessness surrounded me. Sneaky emotions of hysteria made me realize that I was a speck of nothing in this vastness that only defined my insignificance.

It was a nightmare!

I could see countless bodies now, some dead, some injured, some hiding. It was a miracle that I was alive and that I still had control over my consciousness.

Slowly the gunshots grew faint and I thought that maybe it was over. I had to leave quickly. I crawled out from under the dining table and saw some people coming out of the bar area. It was pure horror and we were all scared to death. Somehow that collective horror and our instincts for survival transformed us into a group of terrified people who started frantically seeking shelter.

After a few steps, we found more guests rushing towards the banquet hall. The fear was tightening its grip on us and snatching our survival instincts of hope and intelligence with each passing second. Time was of prime importance and so, without even giving it a second thought, we all started following that trail which was formed unconsciously.

Suddenly, it seemed that everybody inside the hotel was pouring into that hall and, much to our relief, we found some of the hotel staff already there, comforting the guests. There were young brides, little children wailing in fear, mothers gripping their toddlers, anxious fathers trying to comfort their families and random people who were now all bonded by the fear of the unknown. A few of us were sobbing and a few crying for help.

It felt as if the apocalypse had arrived and it was just a matter of seconds before we would all be doomed.

But you know what has sustained us as humans and kept our race alive? It is humanity, the very bond which still unites us as humans amidst all the hatred we have cultivated deep inside us. It has the power to cross through all the constraints and touch the weakest of souls, igniting them with rays of hope.

Even at that horrifying time, humanity and the spirit to help other people stared death in the eye.

People showed exemplary hospitality and benevolence. A few staff members were offering us sandwiches and a few were comforting us as much as they could, while others were actively managing the situation.

What kind of people don't forget their duties even during testing times?

They could have easily left us alone and run away in the quest of saving their own lives, but they chose not to. Somebody bolted the doors of the banquet halls of the Crystal room from inside and I don't know how many hours we spent like that without any clue about the events occurring outside.

We kept hearing the gunshots and, sometimes, explosions. It would make us shiver and shriek but the hotel staff kept our hopes alive and did everything they could do. Our cell phones were jammed and we could not make any calls.

I don't know who suggested escaping through the exit doors because with each passing hour, we were sure that there was not going to be any outside help. The hotel staff tried to persuade us to wait until help came but suddenly nobody was listening. Eventually the hotel staff joined us too, more to protect us than to save their own lives. We were around a group of fifty trying to escape through the narrow corridors which led us to the swimming pool which eventually opened up to the outside area through which we hoped to escape.

The hotel staff were leading us when suddenly a bullet ricocheted off the wall and the plaster above fell into my eyes and I fell down. Suddenly, two heavily armed men appeared and opened fire in all directions. Everybody started running everywhere except the hotel staff who were now trying to make a human circle around us, providing us with cover as the first line of defense.

Tears were running down my eyes and I could see people getting shot and falling down all around me, but I could not move, I had sprained my ankle.

There was panic, chaos and fear everywhere.

Suddenly, one of the terrorists threw a grenade at us and even before we could realize it, the loud explosion and smoke engulfed everything around us. The gunshots stopped and astonishingly I was still not dead but fell into the swimming pool with the sudden impact. It was a sheer miracle. My arms and legs refused to move and I was drowning. I lost all hope and was trying to adjust my mind to the idea of death when suddenly somebody caught me and started pulling me out.

I turned around and saw that tough guy through the fluttering eyelids of my closing eyes.

It cannot be. It was Virat!

His face was sparkling in the water and his hair was flowing. I could see the wrinkles on his forehead and dewy eyes wide in bewilderment. Perhaps he had not expected to see me too. He looked even more handsome. But there was something different about him, his familiar demeanour looked a bit odd, something looked strange and new in him.

I was dying and in pain yet these little thoughts easily crawled into my mind and I smiled.

It just meant, I was still alive.

Then everything blanked out.

When I opened my eyes, I thought Virat was kissing me. But he wasn't. He was giving me mouth-to-mouth CPR. I got up at once, coughing miserably.

'Hey, it's okay. It's okay. You are fine,' he said.

The reality hit me again and I panicked. 'Where are we? There were people shooting at us. I saw them killing everyone mercilessly. Where are they?'

'Taj is under terrorist attack,' he said nonchalantly.

Terrorists storming the Taj with the sole aim of wrecking it to the core! How is that even possible? I panicked. Perhaps he noticed.

'It's okay. You are safe. Don't worry. We are still in the hotel but I will find a way to get you out.' He looked grim and determined.

I looked around. We were in one of the luxury suites. I looked back at Virat and heaved a sigh of relief. He had moved towards the balcony which had a spectacular view of the Arabian Sea with glittering lights and a dark horizon. I followed his gaze and saw a huge gathering of people outside the hotel. Reporters, policemen, army personnel and other people who might be the lucky escapees, the worried relatives of the people trapped inside or maybe just courageous curious souls. Who knew!

And suddenly I could see hope rising in me! There may be bomb blasts, and terrorists may siege the city, but no one can ever take away 'the spirit of Mumbai'—always resilient and finding a place between hope and despair.

‘Can you climb down out of the window?’ he suddenly asked me.

‘What?’ I gasped.

‘I mean, if I could make you a rope with the help of these bed-sheets and curtains, would you be able to climb down and escape? There are people down there and they will surely help you,’ he explained.

‘What? No, no—I have a fear of heights and I just cannot.’ I was more scared of this idea of climbing down out of the window than the terrorists inside the hotel.

He held me by my shoulders and shook me. ‘Look into my eyes, nothing will happen to you. You have survived till now and you will survive this too. You trust me. Right?’

‘Yes.’ I nodded obediently.

He started rolling up all the bedsheets and curtains in the room and braided them into a rope and jerked all the knots vigorously to test their strength. Once content with the makeshift rope he looked at me and said, ‘Ready?’

All I could do was nod nervously.

He came closer to me, his breath touching and leaving my skin and his cologne filling my nostrils as he tied one end of the rope to my waist and said, ‘Now, just hold on to the rope tightly while I lower you down.’

And I gripped it with all the strength I could gather between my palms. Then he let me down with the rope through the balcony and slowly began lowering me down. I looked down and then up only to let my gaze lock with his intense eyes. Suddenly everything around vanished, leaving me swinging in the air. The world looked pretty beautiful that moment but only for a moment.

A massive explosion went off, shaking the ground beneath me and knocking me off balance. The frightful explosion struck my ears and I saw blood, smoke and a sea of people stampeding and calling for help. Suddenly the building shuddered, one more explosion hit close to me and shattered the window glasses all around. The rope slipped out of my hands and I was swinging in the air half conscious.

I heard someone shouting my name at a distance.

My vision was still blurred and I was hanging in the air, tangled badly in the makeshift rope which, by God’s grace, was still holding.

‘Riya, Riya! Listen to me! Climb up! Climb up!’ It was Virat.

‘What?’ I was trying hard to regain my consciousness.

‘I am trying to pull you up but you need to grip the rope firmly,’ he yelled from the window.

I gripped the rope with whatever strength was left in me. Fortunately I was not hurt. I should have died by now. What’s keeping me alive, I wondered.

Virat used all his strength to pull me up while I gained and lost consciousness. I was close enough to get back into the room. Then he held me by my waist and dragged me up, through the window, and I lost whatever balance I had managed and fell over him, taking him along with me straight onto the thick Persian carpet.

Our eyes met, flashing with all the memories we had from our first meeting and stirring feelings hidden safely in my soul.

The wistful longing of missing him for so long, the feeling of trepidation and nervousness all converted into blatant lust and craving that moment. I was not in my senses and the one who had stirred my soul and captured my imagination for a very long time was right before me.

Nothing else mattered right then.

The universe stopped existing at that very moment and the earth exploded into a sheer blast of fire and passion. I felt as if I was burning to the core and that only he could save me. As if in a dream, I moved my head so that our lips touched. His grip tightened around my waist and he started kissing me; I reciprocated passionately. It seemed like the vicious yearning was just not inside me but hidden in him too. The flames were burning around us and the thinking capacities of our brains were long lost.

Grief, pain and fear have the power to overcome our judgments and overwhelm rational decision-making. Or maybe it was just the heat of the moment while I desperately sought security in his arms. I don't know what exactly happened, but we lost ourselves in each other's arms with gunshots firing occasionally in the background. I was not scared anymore. My body was aching with pain and I craved more of him.

Tears were rolling down my cheeks, encompassing pain, pleasure, fear and helplessness all together.

We slept holding each other for quite some time, only to put our clothes back on quietly once we regained our senses. There were sounds of gunshots and grenade blasts still emanating from the hotel corridors. The reality hit me hard and I started shivering again without saying a word.

We were not supposed to meet like this.

He moved and held on to me like he did not want to lose me. His arms wrapped tightly around me. He let me press my head against his chest and bury it there. He loved me! He has not forgotten me! I meant something to him, even if it wasn't everything. I could feel it in his embrace. It's strange how a single touch can say everything that even a thousand words cannot!

And then I wept, it was the cry of the forsaken.

The grief and fear ran down through tears and then I gathered myself and asked him, 'What is going on? It is so unbelievable. How come you are here?'

He nuzzled my temple lovingly and said, ‘The Taj is under terrorist attack and I was summoned from my bed to control the situation here. I came here with an NSG team and we formed a group of two. Group one is responsible for search, rescue and cordon operations for civilians and group two to eliminate the threat as soon as possible. I am a member of group one.’

The reality hit me hard and my eyes flew open in awe.

I realized that he was not adorning his typical olive green army uniform, but was now covered in black. This was new about him! He looked more ruthless and dangerous. It shook me to the core that I just had a once in a lifetime sex escapade with this ruthless-looking man. He was clad in black drill cotton coveralls and had a black cat insignia on his uniform. He had fancy star-studded epaulettes on his shoulders and a maroon emblem on his arms. He wore a combat helmet with protective goggles wrapped over it.

The black bulletproof vest, knee and elbow pads were giving him a ‘meant to kill’ look and I could totally see a Heckler and Koch MP5 submachine gun swirling in his hands. The bulletproof vest had several compartments and pockets which held many survival utility items and equipment like night vision devices, thermal camera, communication set, GPS technological systems and other such devices. There was also a Glock knife and semi-automatic pistol hanging from his rugged black belt.

Overall he looked like an exact replica of the God of death aka Yamraj in those black dungarees!

‘Who are you really? I just realized, I don’t know you at all,’ I asked meekly.

Those memories of him smiling in his olive green were just the fragments of my imagination. This person standing tall and erect before me was a complete stranger.

‘I am no longer part of the Indian Army. I am now in the country’s premier counter-terrorist response force, the National Security Guards, which comes under the Ministry of Home Affairs. I am an elite anti-terror commando now, whose prime job ranges from counter terrorism to bomb disposal to hostage rescue to many things more, you won’t understand,’ he said slowly.

‘How? But how? All of a sudden you vanish and then appear in this new avatar like some kind of James Bond and say all these dangerous words? How could you do this to me?’ Suddenly anger replaced everything nice inside me.

‘Riya, I am really sorry. But just after our chance encounter, I was selected for NSG trainings for which I had applied a long time ago. The training was rigorous and I was not certain of my future then. I felt that I needed to put all my focus into my trainings. I could not afford any distractions, and neither was I in a position to make any promises. I was sent

to Israel for further training and I just could not contact you. I only wanted you to move on with your life instead of giving you any kind of hope and leave you in uncertainty,' he said.

'And who were you to decide things for me? You could have informed me at least,' I snapped.

'It is not all that simple, Riya.' There was a sense of apology in his tone.

'Anyway, how did you find me?' I asked him again.

'Well, we heard grenade explosions and by the time we reached the place, the terrorists were gone and people were dead. It was a massacre. Suddenly, I spotted someone drowning in the pool and when I jumped in, I saw you.' There was a brief pause before he spoke again.

'I was shocked for a while, never in my dreams would I have imagined you here drowning in a pool after a lucky escape from a grenade explosion. I dragged you out of the pool but by the time I came out, my pack was gone. Maybe they've moved somewhere else to neutralize the threat. Maybe they were attacked. Maybe they had to operate a sudden rescue and cordon. I don't know. In these kinds of situations, nothing is predictable. Then I carried you along with me to a safe spot before you regained your senses and then everything happened before you.' He said the last few lines shyly and he kind of looked cute then.

A moment's silence later, he said, 'I need to get you to safety before I join my pack. They must be too engrossed to notice my absence or maybe they're trying to contact me and anyway I should join them as soon as possible. Though my job is to safeguard every single civilian here, I cannot leave you on your own either.'

I nodded dutifully.

Not a tinge of sentiment, just the sheer display of his commitments like it never happened! I mean 'whatever' happened between us. That sure was not the plan of the rescue operations for which he would have been sent. He could have at least clarified his modus operandi there too. Even a simple 'I like you and knelt down before your charm' statement would have sufficed after what happened between us.

It is astonishing how men and women choose to live together, forever!

The warmth of a touch, the value of a smile or the longing of two hearts can hold entirely different versions in a man's point of view and a woman's point of view. As John Gray has already established, Men are from Mars and Women are from Venus.

Ouch! It hurt!

How could he be so casual about everything? After what just happened between us? I mean that was surely passionate, spiritual and out of

the world. It surely meant something. Isn't it crazy to think that I just made love to a stranger in a building that is under terrorist attack?

Women are attached emotionally with this whole love-making thing, unlike men for whom it might just be another chance. For us, intimacy is not purely physical, it is an act of connecting with someone so deeply that you feel you can look into his very soul. There is even a word for it in the dictionary, it is called 'Demisexual (n) a person who does not experience sexual attraction unless they form a strong emotional connection with someone.' All women are demisexual in all probability and I would rather not comment on the other sex.

I watched him for a really long time while he was hiding low in the balcony and trying to assess the situation.

I was so absorbed thinking about him, oblivious to the passage of time that I did not even realize when he stood beside me, clutched my wrists and started moving towards the exit door. His grip was so tight that I whimpered. He turned his face towards me and noticed two little drops of tears making their way out of my eyes and suddenly loosened his grip.

'Oh, I am sorry. It's just, in the heat of the moment I did not realize my grasp was causing pain,' he said.

'It's okay. It is nothing. Where are we going?' I sighed with relief more for getting back his attention than because his loosened grip.

'I just contacted my teammates and they have given me a location to reach them in the lower corridors from where they have just rescued a few of the hostages and are importing them out of the hotel. I just have to ensure a safe route and then you can easily be out of this terror,' he said.

'Okay! Can I ask you one more thing? Of course, if you don't mind!' I asked slowly.

'What?' he said.

'Did you not miss me even for a second? I tried to find you everywhere on Facebook, Twitter even Tumblr but you are nowhere. Also, you had my number and you could have reached me easily...' I said.

'Hmm... Looks like somebody has been stalking me. You creepy little stalker!' he said and smirked.

'Well, what else do you expect me to do? The guy who promised me a cup of coffee disappeared without a goodbye. I thought we shared the spark,' I said curtly.

His smile fell and he said, 'I was bound with official commitments and could not meet you in spite of longing for it every single day. I just told you everything. Then I was appointed as a commando in the Special Action Group of NSG and have been busy with all sorts of operations and trainings that I felt it would be useless calling you when I cannot even promise you

the next call. Though the memories of our chance meeting always lingered in my mind.'

All I could make out of his little speech was 'calling me was useless' and I blasted like a little cracker, 'Oh wow! Applause! You mean to say you find me useless to call because of your duty but you did not bother about it when you were pulling that little stunt with me just a while ago, when technically you should have been just saving me. Where did the code of conduct of your job go that time? Such an opportunist you are or rather, a hunter?'

He frowned, moved towards me and suddenly slammed me against the wall and began to trail hot little kisses all over my neck. Then, looking furious, he knotted his fingers in my hair and pulled my face towards him. His jaws were clenched and lips tightened.

Everything froze in that moment, my vision blurred and he tightened his grip around me, bore his gaze into mine and said, 'You are my love at first sight and you are going to be mine one day. Till then I will let it go.'

Then he released me. I sucked in my breath sharply, a little scared by his ferocity. He clutched my wrists again, a little careful this time, and I followed him like a little lamb.

7. Clash of the Killers

He was moving swiftly, alert and sharp. His MP5 submachine gun was always a step ahead of him, clenched tightly between his palms like a trusted aide. The corridors were lonely and an eerie silence had befallen the place. The lull was ripped by a fusillade of gunshots once again only to be followed by deafening silence.

Above us, the central dome was burning and fire seemed to envelop most of the hotel.

I shrieked as I stumbled upon a few dead bodies in the same restaurant that I'd dinner at some time ago. It was a ghastly scene; blood everywhere, bits of flesh and body parts splattered across the floor. It was savagely violent to see bullet-ridden bodies slumped all around. A few bodies looked like they had been mutilated and tortured too. The place was reeking with the stink of fast decomposing bodies.

The terrorists had no religion and cared about nothing.

It was as if humanity did not exist anymore and an apocalypse had descended. As I passed by two foreigners lying in a pool of their own blood, I puked violently. They had been brutally murdered and had bullets in their backs. Perhaps they were shot down while trying to escape the monsters. There does not exist a word in the dictionary that could describe the barbarism of this urban warfare.

Religious teachings and human ethics raise us to be human beings who don't believe in killing each other because it is a sin worthy of condemnation. Taking a life is something so consequential that it is decided only by the Almighty. It is only God who decides who will die and who will remain. How could someone fight in the name of God when actually they are challenging his authority? God loves his creations and reserves all the rights to sustain or destroy; nobody has the right to claim anybody's life.

Such is the value of human life! It is sacred and pious!

Are they human or am I justified in calling them demons? Is it not a ghastly story of mental dysfunction, social failure, grotesque narcissism and temptation of apocalyptic delusions?

Virat held my hand throughout, as we made our way silently.

Suddenly, there was another round of explosions and firing taking place nearby and Virat grabbed my waist, making me duck under a deserted

bar. There were bullet holes in the wooden bar from the earlier shoot-out through which I could easily see everything beyond. It was not even a second while I blinked my eyes only to open it to see a young man quietly walking in fully loaded with an arsenal of weapons.

I cowered in the corner as the shoot-out erupted again. Virat turned towards me and signalled for me to keep quiet. I clenched my mouth shut. The terrorist did not look demonic really, if I ignored his stiff posture and weapons. He was really young, maybe around seventeen or eighteen—much too young to turn into a brutal mass killing machine, than be a man of flesh, bone and of course emotions. He was nothing like I had imagined but something beyond the limitations of my mind. But in reality he was a demon with the sole aim of destroying everything that vouches for life.

We could hear some gunfire in the distance.

Perhaps they had decided to split up to maximize the damage, putting their utmost faith into their advanced arsenals over their partners. The shrieks were turning into agonized cries and I could not control it any longer. A howl escaped my lips and he opened fire on us within a fraction of a second. Virat returned the fire, ducking quickly behind a flipped over table. The gunshots continued for fifteen straight seconds till he stopped firing. Perhaps looking for another way around when he realized that the other person was equally equipped with deadly weapons.

Virat leaned towards me, fully alert, with his hands still on the trigger.

He whispered softly, ‘Don’t worry I am going to kill that bastard. Nothing will happen to you.’

I gazed back at him, his eyes were dark and guarded, giving nothing away, and his mouth was pressed into a hard line, but the electricity between us was palpable. It was beyond duty I guess, perhaps a genuine concern for my safety. Tears swam in my eyes but I said nothing. He ran his index finger down my cheek before crawling back to his position with furrowed brows.

Is something wrong with my horoscope? Instead of meeting the hero of my life over a cup of hot coffee and cupcakes, I meet him over firing bullets and falling shells.

I was not even sure of the next moment and my heart was overcome by extreme fear and overwhelming emotions for him. People enjoy the standard protocol of meeting, dating, liking, romancing, loving, smooching, raging desires, sleepless nights and then the actual sleeping kind of love affair together. Was it too much to ask for some quality romance?

WHY ME ?

It was not long before he shot a second round of bullets at us. A hail of bullets flew across to us and God only knows how they missed us. Virat swiftly crawled along the floor, changed position, and aimed for the

chandeliers all across the ceiling—the effect was devastating. The shining chandeliers shattered into millions of sharp glass pieces with mini explosions. They proved to be deadly and we could hear him growling in pain.

Virat now came out of hiding and opened fire on him with full force. The terrorist tried to storm into a nearby room seeking cover but Virat continued firing. He fell to the ground howling and screaming only to die a brutal death.

It was over within minutes and those minutes proved the longest time of my life and taught me a great lesson. To respect time in seconds! After all these are the fractions of time that decide life or death or sometimes shatter your existing identity. The world we live in is a complete myth and in a matter of seconds it can change forever shattering your entire existence into bits and pieces.

Time is the only truth.

I was shivering uncontrollably when he dropped his gun and wrapped his arms all around me. He pressed me into his chest like a baby and put his nose in my hair. Even though I felt a lot more secure I was still trembling and whimpering in terror. He knew that.

The violence pierced through my soul and even though I knew I was safe, the unsettling feeling refused to leave me alone. It kept coming back to haunt me. I was helpless.

‘Look at me. Look at me,’ he whispered and I glanced up.

Our eyes locked and we were lost for a moment. His eyes were intense, concerned but still dark, heavy with some unfathomable emotions while mine were drowned in an ocean of tears. It is strange how much eyes can talk when words don’t find their way through our lips.

‘It’s over. You are safe. You are going home,’ he whispered again.

I was dragged back to reality.

Home? This is home. Your arms feel very much like home. Isn't it? Where am I heading to? What is going on? Something is not right.

The mental trauma was now taking over me and I felt delusional and clueless.

Perhaps he knew and he nodded distractedly, altering his stance only to scoop me up in his arms and carry me into a washroom nearby. There he ran the tap and put my head very carefully under the cool water. The gushing water awakened my senses and pulled me back to reality and I moved my head away, feeling embarrassed. The lengths he was having to go for me!

For the first time in a very long time he broke into a smile.

‘You know you are looking funny. I mean don’t take it personally, but you remind me of a scary witch straight out of the Harry Potter movies.’

‘What? It is personal. How rude of you to say that! By the way you’re looking like some lowly paid body double of Gabbar Singh straight out of *Sholay*,’ I retorted.

‘Come on! Gabbar? Oh, come on! Many girls say that I look like Brad Pitt. But you? You should have a look in the mirror.’ And he grasped me by my shoulders and turned me towards the mirror.

I looked like a disaster.

My hair was all wet and lumpy by the weight of all the dust particles that had cozily settled in there. They looked like noodles hanging from my head. Then my face was no better with a few cuts and bruises here and there. My beautiful silky halter top now looked skimpy and my feet were without any shoes. The Steve Madden sneakers were long lost. Losing them was almost worse than facing the hail of bullets from an unknown terrorist. I loved them so much.

I looked like hell.

In a struggle to accept my looks I finally broke into continuous giggles.

He joined me and we laughed for a long time. And then I swallowed and broke down into tears. A lump in my throat swelled as I recalled my anguish just a moment before. He hurriedly moved towards me and swept me into a big bear hug.

‘Hey! It’s okay. It’s all right. You are safe. Don’t cry. Why do you girls cry so much?’ he said, running his index finger down my cheek.

‘How mean! I am scared.’ I punched him.

‘I know. On a serious note, I feel you are very brave. I could not imagine anyone else handling this theatre of reckless killing better than you. It takes guts to handle blood and bullets for the first time. But you did great, we are on the correct escape route and really close to the rest of my pack. Soon you will be out safely. Trust me.’ His voice filled me with courage and I nodded obediently.

He released me from the comfort of his arms, picked up his gun and moved out of the washroom determinedly.

Stealthily he kept moving down and up staircases, corridors and open areas of the hotel. We crossed a few open lawn areas before entering another side of that once magnificent hotel which was now shedding tears of destruction, with fires blazing here and there. At one point we even sighted half a dozen dead bodies lying along a narrow staircase. It was sickening and utterly sad at the same time. Who would have thought that the city’s symbol of opulence would turn into a haunted house in a matter of seconds.

It was heartbreaking.

He talked to his teammates through his advanced audio communication set to confirm the location. There was still gunfire going on

with occasional grenade explosions in the background. The heat was causing a lot of discomfort and chaos everywhere.

The signs of destruction and annihilation felt unreal and scary. Taj under attack! How is this even possible?

Fortunately, we did not encounter any other terrorist on our way back to join the rescue team and neither did we encounter another soul. With the approaching sunrise the place started getting bright and at the break of dawn we finally reached the secured lower levels of the hotel building where the evacuation of guests was taking place with the help of a team of at least a dozen NSG commandos. One of them came towards me and grilled me with a hundred questions regarding my identity and my purpose of visiting the hotel and how I lost my friends etcetera.

Finally satisfied with the details, one of them signalled to me to stand in the nearest queue of guests. I looked back to Virat, still standing close to me, and he nodded.

He asked the other commando, 'What is going on? Is the threat neutralized?'

He replied, 'All the floors have been sanitized except the eighteenth floor where the terrorists are holed up. The rest of our team not involved in rescuing the guests and securing the levels have trooped in and taken positions there. The bastards are using grenades and firing bullets. They seem undeterred by the retaliatory fire. The number of terrorists is still not clear but they have been contained in room and won't be able to cause any further damage.'

Virat growled, 'Yes, let's secure and sanitize first and then we will eliminate.'

The other commando said through his gritted teeth, 'Right! Let the guests evacuate completely and this arena is all ours to show the bastards how it is to come uninvited to our country.'

Virat grasped me by my hand and moved towards the outgoing queue and whispered, 'Riya, it is time to bid farewell. I can kill the bastards, now that you will be out of the hotel soon.' My stomach was churning and I could not breathe.

It was like a dagger that just pierced my heart. It did not feel right to stand there in the queue so far away from him. It felt way more soothing to be with him in that hell but now it was all so strange. Leaving the site of destruction was not something I was looking forward to. He would be going back to the hell, hurling grenades, bullets or whatever they do to those monsters hidden in the dark of the hotel. I could not control myself anymore; I ran up to him, and grasped him tight in my embrace.

It felt as if time had stopped and everything around stopped moving. The continuous buzz in the air suddenly turned into a lull, only to erupt into

cheerful hooting and giggles all around. He stood there transfixed, embarrassed, cheeks blushing red, highlighted more in his black uniform. I released him as soon as I realized what was going on around, embarrassed.

‘Hey mate, looks like you are doing more than just saving lives,’ one of the commandos chuckled.

Virat took a step forward, held me in his arms and kissed me. An applause went through the crowds but all I could see was his handsome face.

Then he broke the trance and said, ‘Please go! Be safe! I will find you!’

Human emotions like love, laughter, humility and concern inject incredible strength in you to go beyond the darkness created by hatred, atrocity and revenge. Even during the darkest hour of massacre, hopelessness, narcissism or holocaust, these feelings have sustained humanity and kept it alive or the world would have buried under the ashes of hatred long ago.

I moved back to my queue and was taken out of the hotel soon after.

There was a huge crowd of the friends and families of the hotel guests gathered outside the hotel along with numerous media channels. There was stiff competition going on among media personnel to report every single moment of the situation regardless of the safety of the people and status of the ongoing operation.

It was a race above human sentiments where each one of them wanted to succeed.

I looked around and saw numerous police vans and army buses parked outside the barricades placed within the perimeter of the hotel. There were many policemen and commandos taking cover among the shrubs and trees surrounding the stone promenade along the seashore. There were some more policemen simply to hold back the people from going near the hotel beyond a fixed distance. There were many women and children rescued, sobbing and crying out of hunger and panic. There were other people who had made it out of the hotel, but their friends or relatives were still trapped inside. A few were just onlookers whose curiosity had got the better of them.

I got to know that there were other terrorists attacks happening in other parts of Mumbai and forces were trying to minimize the damage, save innocent lives and fight back. The 51 Special Action Group of NSG commandos that specialized in counter terrorism and hostage rescue missions had especially flown down from New Delhi.

I shuddered realizing that I had survived two days of bloody chaos inside the hotel.

I really cannot recall how I got back to the safety of my flat where I was reunited with my friends. Miraculously all of us were alive. We hugged

each other as we cried, thanking God for saving us and mourning the deaths that we witnessed.

We were changed people now. Nothing could have been a more brutal life event than this.

As soon as I had gone to the bathroom my friends heard the gunshots and were warned by the stewards to evacuate the restaurant. Two of the stewards ushered most of the guests towards the fire exit staircases which led them directly out. There were still some guests left at the restaurant who refused to go out despite constant pleading from the stewards. There were two more stewards who decided to stay with the guests willingly and God knows what happened to them. Once out, my nervous friends fled after waiting for me for some time.

Frankly, they thought I was dead by now.

None of us were going to be the same ever. The effervescence and warmth that existed amongst us were lost like dew in the sun.

Nidhi could not sleep comfortably after that incident. Gaurav chose to be silent about it, like it never happened. Dipti would eat, sleep, cry and repeat the pattern and chose to wrap herself into a cocoon which never opened after that. It was as if we never existed for her. We could never be sure about Swami as he left the city the very next day without even bidding us goodbye.

And I?

I would be drowning in my misery every single second. The agony of losing him would burn me each moment. My arms would be sweaty all the time, my heart palpitating and eyes would be bloodshot. Losing Virat once again, that too after living an eternity inside those burning corridors, was brutal. The hope would linger in the middle of the night but would soon be replaced by sobs.

The fight between humanity and terrorist brutality continued for one more day, eventually leading to ten terrorists being killed mercilessly by the NSG commandos and one being captured alive by the policemen. A team of Navy Marcos had also played a pivotal role before the specialized NSG team arrived, in securing the arena and cordoning the Taj hotel once the terror attacks were confirmed. Reports revealed that the terrorists armed with AK-47s, grenades, pistols and other explosives entered the city through the Arabian Sea and split into pairs of small kill teams with a sole aim to annihilate the city.

Had it not been for our armed forces, Mumbai could have turned into a graveyard but they could not cause the levels of damage as expected by their handlers, all due to our armed forces who stand vehemently between death and people, whenever an enemy threatens the sovereignty of our nation or risk to civilian lives rises. All because it is not just a job but an oath

for them. The years of blood, sweat, toil and training our soldiers undertook demand them to be the warriors their nation needs. They risk their lives so that we can enjoy the liberties of being in the nation of the free.

And, you know a little secret, it is a soldier who prays for peace the most, for it is the soldier who suffers and bears the deepest wounds of a war.

My soldier was lost again, leaving me behind to cry, to wait, to curse and not to live as I should. The terrorists' rampage gripped the stunned city and held the world in horrified thrall. The terrorists roamed freely, killing at random, mocking our desperation to save lives. Innocent people were used as a human shield and many were taken hostage and later killed. The aftermath resulted in more than a hundred lives lost including those of common people, dignitaries, security personnel and foreigners.

The commandos rescued more than eight hundred lives inside the hotel and many more outside. The policemen lost many of their brilliant officers while trying their best to save the city. A few commandos were also killed and my heart would skip a beat every time the dead and deceased list would be shown on TV.

As they say, every cloud has a silver lining ; Mumbai stood united and came out of the attack and the whole world prayed for it. The unknown faces became the exemplary examples of humanity who rose, shone and helped others during the hours of distress. There were many people who saved others sacrificing their own lives. Ordinary people showed magnificent hospitality to those in need and united against the demons going beyond caste, creed and religion. The doctors, nurses, police and everybody else present in the city worked with full force even in the wake of terror threats. It was like the entire city versus the terrorists who were hell bent on wrecking Mumbai to its core.

It was an attack on humanity, not just on Mumbai, and humanity won, defeating the atrocities and flashing the message loud and clear that humanity will prevail ...forever!

8. To Love and to Lose

The days turned into nights and the nights turned into days. Life picked up its pace as usual, as if nothing had ever happened. Such is the undying spirit of this city. But those who lost their relatives and the survivors were scarred forever. For us, the world was a different place and everything that had mattered before was frivolous now. The power, passion, money, hobbies and everything important was now in shambles. They knew, now, what mattered the most—‘the love and life of the loved ones around.’

And I was amongst them.

I lost track of time. Our little friends’ circle dissipated. We now behaved like acquaintances with each other.

Nobody blamed anyone; it was just that we were different now. Nidhi and Dipti resigned from the job and left for their respective homes. Gaurav took a transfer to the local branch office in his city. He felt safer there, he told us before bidding us goodbye. I helped Nidhi and Dipti pack their stuff silently and we bid each other silent goodbyes.

The emptiness of the flat was killing me and, at one point of time, I thought of quitting too, but the thoughts of reuniting with my lost soldier kept me rooted there. ‘*I will find you*’—his last words kept echoing in my ears. Visuals of reckless killing and savage violence would haunt me in my dreams and I would wake up sweating only to clench my pillow in my arms and cry. It was harsh. I still don’t know how I survived that time. Sometimes suicidal thoughts would creep into my mind, wiping out whatever courage I had, but the temptation to meet him again would keep me going.

I immersed myself in my work, which seemed like the only available way to forget my miseries. I willingly opted for overtime and would leave office past midnight only to stand at the Gateway of India, facing the sea, my back always turned against the Taj.

The sea breeze would ruffle my hair, play a little with my soul and then leave me alone, mourning over the things that were not supposed to happen.

The Taj was closed for a few months only to reopen with glory and grandeur like never before. It was repaired, and all signs of terror were buried under the whitewash and new Italian marble. The Tatas refused to bow down before terrorism and neither did any Mumbaikars. A waterfall on

one side of the lobby was constructed with the names of the fallen engraved on it. It cascaded silently, mourning the untimely deaths of those who were never meant to lose their lives so early, so unwillingly.

Outside, life was still as frenetic as ever, only with tightened security.

The auto rickshaw walas would still honk irritatingly, the women in colourful sarees and hijabs would freely stroll around and tourists would still click pictures of the majestic Taj, which would glare back at them with a confidence to contradict the abominations that once happened there.

After all, life has an undying spirit to go on!

I was working on a client server project which provided various functionalities and services like data sharing and resources regarding Kashmiri orphans to multiple government offices in Jammu and Kashmir. These kids primarily belonged to militant-prone regions of Kashmir, and had been orphaned due to various conflicts. Encounters, terrorist attacks, riots, confrontations with security forces, or sometimes brutal murders in broad daylight, to name a few.

We maintained the largest single server in Mumbai, which acted as the data centre to their government offices. Our job was to provide our Kashmiri clients full IT support, update the database punctually, replace the faulty components without shutting down the running server and keep the connection live with the servers based in their Mumbai location.

It was a very covert project and the data had to be secure so that there were no risks to those helpless kids being kidnapped only to be trained as mujahideen. The risk of Kashmiri offices and rehabilitation centres being bombed was high. They functioned as refugee settlements and there was also the risk of vicious propaganda before international communities. The Mumbai-based server was situated in a high security zone and was always backed up by the best resources for uninterrupted communication with client servers. The best IT professionals were maintaining it and I was the communication head of the project who also played the middleman between the Kashmiri clients and my project leader.

It was so covert that the agendas were never reported at regular office meetings.

Basically, I would never have anything to say during meetings which eventually led my colleagues to think that I had still not dealt with the trauma and was sulking over my miseries, which was true but it never affected my professional competencies. I did not make any new friends after the Mumbai attacks and preferred having my lunches alone at my desk, and burying myself in my work. I skipped social gatherings and office parties, which had never interested me anyway.

Soon I was enjoying the whole new identity of a snooty, sulking, crying baby from Delhi and I did not mind it too.

After surviving the Taj attacks, nothing else mattered!

I would get lonely on Sundays and other holidays and would spend my time reading Eric Segal or E.L. James' romance novels on my couch or in a corner at Starbucks over a cup of my favourite Espresso Frappuccino. Sometimes, I would also order basil, tomato and mozzarella cheese sandwiches. I quite enjoyed them.

The hustle-bustle of the coffee shop, the chirping of young girls, the quiet conversations of lovers or the casual meetings of business executives would provide me solace. The smell of freshly brewed coffee and the aroma of coffee beans, topped with the faint smell of cheddar cheese and mozzarella on sandwiches, would make my senses tingle and once again I would crave his company.

The holding of hands and nudging of the elbows of lovers who frequented my favourite coffee shop would make me smile and wonder—would I ever be able to live so casually, so sweetly, so normally again?

Virat was gone.

For a very long time, his voice echoed in my ears—‘ *I will find you* ’. But then, it began to fade away and it felt mostly like a dream. Like he never existed and I was just carrying some forgotten ghost memories. More than six months had passed since the incident, but there was not even a faint whisper of his existence.

Outside, it was all normal working professional corporate girl, but inside lived a traumatised, miserable, crestfallen and heartbroken person!

It was like having a split personality. One would negotiate fiercely with life and lead it on her terms and the other one would cry in the night in despair. My parents asked me to either get back home or they'd join me in Mumbai, leaving everything of their own life behind. My colleagues advised me to quit and get married but I'd shut down and, moreover, refused to live life according to anyone else's terms.

My boss was the only person who looked pleased about whatever I was doing. I got him extremely profitable outputs and that is what mattered to him, besides the fact that he had a full-time willing corporate slave under his thumb. In the era of human rights and labour laws, these things are luxury. My mom was grief-stricken and could sense my mourning, but there was nothing she could do about it unless I allowed her.

I was brutally cynical and hardened by every sob those days.

More than the attacks, it was Virat who took whatever was left of me along with his fading existence after the event. He was not supposed to be this ruthless. How could he do this to me, after everything that had happened in those corridors and in that royal suite? He said I was his first love and that he would come back to get me. But where was he now? How could he be so cruel?

Perhaps he never existed!

One day I got a call from my Kashmiri link, a powerful bureaucrat back in Jammu and Kashmir. He said he wanted to come over to the Mumbai headquarters to manually enter some data into the servers and also wanted to perform a quick inspection of the ongoing operations. He sounded stiff and asked me to pick him up directly from the airport and head straight to the data server building after that. I was about to ask him other details, like if he required a hotel room, vehicle, etcetera, mostly out of courtesy, but I realized he had cut the line rudely.

I stared at my mobile phone in disbelief and then put it away with a sigh.

Government officials, from Kashmir to Kanyakumari, project a uniformity and there hardly exists any cultural difference in their modus operandi. There is an uncanny resemblance in their work ethics and professional attitude. They can make you feel small, insignificant, and intrusive all at once. These are some gifts the British have left us to deal with. These kind of bureaucrats are obsessed with the kind of democracy dictated by their organization. The space for new ideas and innovation is lacking which could have been easily created if the basic set up of running the country with government officials would have relied more on interacting with the common people than directing them and calling it rules and regulations.

Doesn't it sound more authoritative than democratic?

I asked my company to provide me a vehicle as it seemed like a bad idea to pick this arrogant person in a taxi which was the most I could afford. His flight was to land by 11 a.m. at Chhatrapati Shivaji International Airport, which meant that I needed to start by 8:30 a.m. from my place in Colaba to be there on time. Mumbai roads could get pretty congested during peak hours.

The humid weather and killing traffic, with all the honking and chaos, did not help either.

After getting stuck in traffic for some good twenty minutes, I managed to reach the airport an hour before his arrival. The domestic flights arrive and depart through Terminal 1, which is still lovingly called Santacruz airport by the locals. Fondly remembering its old glory days several years back. There were a few nice bakeries and coffee houses outside the airport and I decided to savour some airport snacks, loudly anticipated by my growling stomach.

I had skipped my breakfast in a rush to reach the airport and now was the time for some quality snacks. I ordered one whole wheat sandwich along with an espresso and picked up the *Mumbai Mirror* quite happily. All this was an early morning luxury for a corporate professional. But bad days can

be brutal and the romance between the coffee mug and my lips, which insisted on long soothing sips, were broken down by the annoying ringtone of my cell phone. I hated the call that moment. It was from Mr Durrani, the client.

Even before I could say hello, his stiff voice filled the phone. ‘Where are you? I have been waiting for the past five minutes.’

Five minutes? Really? He sounded like it was the end of the world.

‘I am just coming. I thought you’d arrive by 11 a.m. but it’s just 10:45 and I thought...’ I stopped mid-sentence and realized he had disconnected the phone already.

I left my half sipped coffee and untouched sandwich and rushed out. It is not every day that such delicious little delicacies get such a rough treatment by their sophisticated buyers.

When I finally reached the arrival gates of Terminal 1 it took me no time to locate the stocky short man with extremely fair complexion. He had an imperfectly placed paunch which looked rather funny on his stocky stature. But he was quite muscular, which I guess is characteristic of people from the mountains. His grey hair was combed neatly and his facial hair were trimmed. He was dressed in a civil servant attire—a pitch black suit and a black tie over a white shirt with a small briefcase in his hands. He did not realize one thing—that the hot and humid Mumbai weather would roast him in his suit. The beefy, bull-necked official was rolling his eyes while looking at his wristwatch the whole time.

Nothing remotely similar to my idea of a sleek-looking government officer gathered over the years through Ajay Devgan movies. *Sigh!*

‘Hello sir!’ I put my hand out for a handshake.

He narrowed his eyes for a moment and grasped my hand rather authoritatively.

The way you shake hands with someone speaks a lot about you. For instance, the palm down handshake, when your palm is turned to face downwards, projects immediate authority and domination over the other person. I read in a self-improvement book called *Good Grooming and How It Affects Your Social Relationships*. If it is to be believed then it was not even two seconds and we already had negative vibes between us. What was he expecting me to do? Salute?

For two minutes straight we shook each other’s hands and broke it uncomfortably only to observe two more minutes of uncertain silence before I decided to take control of the situation. After all, what is the use of being an urban, liberated, free-spirited professional girl if I cannot even deal with petty handshakes.

‘Welcome to the city, Mr Durrani,’ I said, breaking the uncomfortable silence.

‘Hmm!’ Was that all he could utter?

Sheer disbelief was floating in my eyes, yet I was not ready to give up. Do or die!

‘So what are your plans, Mr Durrani? Do you want to drop your luggage in your hotel-room or would you just like to go to the servers,’ I asked in a very businesslike manner.

‘Servers.’ One single word!

Poor me! Eyes still wide in disbelief.

‘Would you like to accompany me in my car or do you have an arrangement?’ I asked again, not ready to give up.

If chivalry is a word then he surely was not aware of it.

Instead of replying, he took out his mobile phone, pressed the keypad and growled, ‘Yes!’ That was it.

Not even a single second passed and a white Hindustan Ambassador car flashing a red beacon screeched to a stop near us and two police personnel jumped out of the still moving car and saluted him crisply. I stumbled a bit and flinched, totally dazzled by the quick events. He got into the Ambassador and uttered a single word ‘come’ without even turning back. I followed him at once, not thinking about my own driver and car which was in the parking area.

There was utter silence inside the car and right then, typical of Mumbai weather, it began to mist just enough for the car windshield wipers to skip and hop like a tap dancer as we moved steadily towards our destination. The rain in Mumbai is beautiful. Then the petrichor emanating from the roads and soil delights the olfactory receptors! I was tempted to roll down the car window and stick my face outside and let the breeze play with my hair, but I decided against it, sighed and let that thought go, with a very austere Mr Durrani projecting a rigidly puritanical outlook sitting just beside me.

Our ride to the data servers was in silence, save the swish of the windshield wipers!

We finally reached the data server building which was situated in Navi Mumbai Mahape IT Park. Navi Mumbai is a very well planned city and known to be the hub of software-based companies that acted as IT solution providers, providing software, hardware, data centre services or website hosting solutions or many other services to offshore clients while the desi employees would also be recruited by the same multinational companies as cheap work force for clients abroad. These are some high security and highly energized zones of Mumbai, known as the ‘Silicon Valley of Mumbai’.

Our technology-enhanced flagship office building was a state-of-the-art nine-storey office built on the highest security zone of the IT park where most government or intelligence offices were situated.

I could not resist the sight of the grandeur and glory that this facility radiated.

Every aspect of the building from workspaces to the conference rooms to a fitness centre and the parking space was thoughtfully designed. There were large open floor areas and the top floors were set back a few meters from the boundary in order to provide an outdoor deck, while the ground floor was set back to form a reception and shopping colonnade. The building was made up of frames, vertical tubes, horizontal and vertical plates with an excellent view of the city landscape. There was a concreted trail surrounded by shrubs and trees leading to the main building, enhancing the natural beauty around. Utterly beautiful!

When we entered the elevator the others there glanced at him more than usual. One could sense his legitimate government official persona which was such a misfit in that high end corporate culture with people roaming in slit skirts and linen shirts. He looked unmoved by any of the glances, reflecting only sternness from his face. We stepped out of the elevator to the eighth floor which was solely dedicated to data servers. We went through the regular security check and I introduced him to the tech guys who took him inside.

I heaved a sigh of relief and plopped down quite gladly on the plush sofa which was at the reception area along with a Birchwood table. I flipped through a few magazines, played a few mobile games, tried calling a few friends, closed my eyes for a while and even strolled in the compact area for some time till he came out with those two tech guys and shook his hands with them quite warmly.

That hurt!

I had spent an entire day with this man, even received him from the airport, and he behaved as though I was an insignificant creature. And look at these two guys who were with him for some two hours but managed a real warm handshake from him. The job of a middleman sucks actually.

The humiliation did not end there as I had to escort him back to his government guest house in Naval Nagar where I signed all the papers on his behalf as instructed by my company, made him comfortable and then headed back to my place by nine o'clock at the night. Meanwhile I also got a nasty call from the company driver who shot out some W words like what? where? why?, only to hang up happily once he knew I'd return by myself.

That was one savage day in my life that went by in a jiffy with the end result of me going to sleep quite miserably and hungrily.

Some days are just like that. You have no control over them. You will scratch your head, curse the planet or simply keep going but it would end only with the setting sun and sparkling stars up in the sky. There is not much

you can do about it. It feels as if some karmic wheel is rotating with all its ferocity with you playing a pawn.

It reminds me of Bhallaladeva, the primary antagonist of the movie *Baahubali* who possessed some sort of scythed chariot drawn by a pair of horses in the Kalakeya War. The powerful chariot would be drawn by two Guar bisons with three spinning scythes with a mechanism to shoot multiple arrows simultaneously at small intervals.

Sometimes, life comes at you like his chariot, and you cannot even run and hide. You get slaughtered and wait for it to get over.

Thankfully my day ended and I hoped never to see that arrogant man again.

9. Life after Him

The next day Mr Durrani flew back to Kashmir. Before leaving, he gave me a carefully sealed envelope to be handed over to the same tech guys. He told me to guard the envelope with my life or so I thought from whatever I could make out of his terse words. No goodbyes, good evening or even a smile, Mr Durrani hurriedly turned around and left.

Nobody, I repeat nobody, had ever treated me like that!

I would ask for a different project if I had to deal with clients like him, I decided. With vengeance in my heart, I headed straight to the data server and literally tossed the envelope on Raghav's table, once I got hold of him.

'Woohoo! Hey what happened? Miss Sunshine, you look angry.' He smiled.

Actually Raghav and I had been friends for a while. We joined the company almost at the same time and we had a few management classes together where I shared my bench with him for team management assignments.

'I am pissed,' I replied.

'Why?' He looked puzzled.

'This Mr Durrani, the same guy you met yesterday, is getting on my nerves,' I said.

'Yeah? He has left I guess. He is quite reserved, but if I may say so, nothing looks offensive enough to piss you off unless he actually proposed to you on his knees.' He chuckled.

'Really?' I stared hard at him.

'Sorry! What happened?' He pretended to be serious.

'Yaar, I wasted all of yesterday running his errands and trying my best to make him feel comfortable but all I get is this lousy envelope to be delivered to you guys, and he never even thanked me. All the while, he made me feel like a lousy errand boy! Imagine!' I said it all under my breath.

'Haha! He does not look that bad. In fact, he was quite pleased with our work.'

'Yeah! Yeah!' I pouted.

His fingers were playing with the tapes on the envelope while he conversed with me. My mood was already scaling towards the happier side

when suddenly some photographs slipped out of the envelope, scattering all over the floor. As I bent to pick them up, a shriek escaped my mouth. It was a brutal sight.

Pictures of dead, massacred kids were scattered all over the floor!

A few dead bodies were mutilated. There were pictures of people carrying the dead bodies of those little kids, mothers crying. Some pictures were taken from the blast sites with the backdrop of ice-covered mountain peaks, where there were more dead bodies, children with no arms or legs on blood-soaked crimson-red ground, contrasting with the rest of the white snow-covered ground.

My stomach churned and my mind swirled. I clutched my mouth and rushed to the washroom. I had to throw up.

Raghav hastily put the photographs back into the envelope, taped it and entered the bathroom where I was trying to compose myself.

He held me by my shoulders, pushed me towards the wall and said, 'Riya, have some control! What did Mr Durrani tell you when he gave you this envelope?'

'Noth...nothing!' I was shivering.

'Riya, gather your courage. It is nothing,' he shook me violently.

Something hit me hard.

'Nothing? You said nothing? Are you blind, those were little kids! Hundreds of them dead! I saw the pictures. Okay? Brutally killed, lying there on the blood-soaked soil and you say nothing?' I growled back.

'I deal with these pictures daily. It does not haunt me anymore. Okay? So stop throwing a tantrum and behave like someone sensible with whom I can talk,' he hissed.

I was scared, distraught and shaken. I said meekly, 'Yes! Tell me, I am listening.'

'Riya, I don't know why he chose to deliver these photographs through you. He said he had some more data to be scanned and uploaded into the system but his source had not delivered it to him,' he said.

'Data?' I was curious.

'Yes, data! Information regarding Kashmiri kids through pictures or stats are our data which we enter into the system through top secure lines to maintain a record of the human rights violations and terrorist attacks in the valley. This is top information which is relayed directly to the home ministry and it is maintained as Top Secret and never revealed to the public,' he was whispering.

'Why?' I asked.

'I think it's because the Indian government doesn't want to elevate the Kashmir tensions or spread hatred across the country. Maybe the government wants to safeguard these people and help them freely in their

own democratic way away from the hue and cry of human rights activists or media glare. Or maybe the government does not want the enemy country to speak to the UN about the failed governance in the Valley,' he said.

'Whatever! You see how brutal this information is? It is definitely not for public knowledge,' he emphasized.

I did not say anything. Maybe I was in a state where the mind stops processing the facts only because of the sudden outburst of too much information.

'There could be opportunists who will misuse such classified information to propel their propaganda and divide the nation, there are many media channels on Pakistani payrolls to exaggerate the whole issue. Promise me! You won't discuss this with anyone. It would not be good for any of us,' he said, looking me straight in my eye.

'I...I promise!' I said.

'Now let's go before anybody notices. Leave like nothing happened! Please don't fall or swoon or anything like that. You can do all that from the luxury of your couch. Sob, cry out loud, break things, question the Almighty's presence in your solitude or anything else you feel like, but not here. You are already looking pale.' He tried to lighten things.

I smiled meekly and nodded obediently.

I left silently. I don't know what pushed me all the way to keep me moving normally. Once home, I drank one whole bottle of water to quench my thirst and agony both. Then I sat naked under the shower, drenched, and leaned my head against the shower wall, exhausted. I took a really long shower and lifted my face to the cold water as if it would wash away all the sadness my heart was holding now. When I emerged from the shower it was quite dark. My stomach was rumbling but I did not feel like eating. I nestled down into the bed and fell asleep.

In the morning, I got a call from Raghav, enquiring about my well-being. He said, 'I know how it feels the first time, Riya, and so I am concerned.'

I did not say anything.

He continued, 'Take a day off from work and hang out with some friends or just have a drink. At least this was what I did to keep my depression at bay.'

He told me that he had contacted Mr Durrani to ask why he had risked giving the envelope to me, and he had said that I looked sincere to him. His source met him that morning only and he could not risk taking it back to Kashmir, plus he was pretty aware of our security clearances. All such pictures were burnt and destroyed once uploaded into the system.

Raghav once again asked me never to speak to anyone about it.

After he hung up, I took the day off, but hanging out with friends did not seem like a good idea. Instead I spent my day watching old Hollywood classics like *Gone with the Wind* and Charlie Chaplin. Then I changed into my jogging tracks and running shoes and headed to the Queen's Necklace for a walk along the promenade.

I sat there watching the city lights and cherishing the melancholy music created by the waves hitting the shores. As much as I enjoyed Marine Drive, I was equally worried. Perhaps life was trying to show me some sort of sign, otherwise why would it decide to bestow all the adventures of this world on my petite shoulders.

The Taj attacks felt like the apocalypse, the loneliness was killing me, the withdrawn self was not helping as well and my job was not interesting anymore. The battered soul still craved for the warmth that Virat had once promised me, which now seemed like a distant dream.

The dead bodies of children were still floating before my eyes.

They would have been alive some time ago, playing and cuddling their moms, and suddenly they became pictures to be saved on government servers. It was brutal, something not meant to be and it was happening every day in some place really far from here.

Sometimes I would confuse it with a nightmare.

Mumbai had always fascinated me with its magnanimity and generosity, but perhaps it was not meant for me. I needed to move on with my life and Mumbai did not promise me anything but haunted memories. I could not wait anymore, I had to give up chasing what was never meant to be mine. I decided to quit my job and move out somewhere far off to start afresh.

While sauntering back to my place, I felt good. Relaxed, relieved, liberated!

The next few days went by in a jiffy in the haze of my sudden resignation. Corporate companies are very particular about their assets and usually reserved about relieving an employee unless the head honchos don't want to kick out that employee by themselves or if recession is going on. I went through a hundred counselling sessions of how continuing with my work would provide me a better future.

I did not say anything but they could not understand one thing, that it was not the future I was worried about but the past that kept haunting me. The reckless, restless life in Mumbai had no meaning for me, just some cruel memories.

My boss tried to persuade me to stay, but I was firm. My parents were quite happy about my decision as they thought it meant I was coming back home to them. But I was in a great dilemma. I wanted to move on to some place really far away where I could hide easily without anyone

bothering about me or even calling my name. My parents' place was definitely not very promising, but after the resignation I had no reasons left to be in Mumbai.

But you know as much as I loved being an atheist those days, I realized that God never actually closes all the doors. The flickering bright light would enter my life even when I thought there was no hope.

One day, I got a call from an unknown number. I was sipping coffee near my sea-facing window and I picked it up quite lazily.

'Hello?' I said.

'Hello! Miss Riya?'

It took me a while to realize that it was Mr Durrani.

'Yeah! Hello? Mr Durrani?' I was confused by the sudden call.

'Yes! This is me and I heard you have left your job.' The two-liners were back again. Bingo!

'Yes! But how do you know?' I asked.

'I am in Mumbai actually and when I contacted your company, someone else picked up and informed me that you have left the job,' he said.

'Okay! But what do you want from me? I have nothing to do with the company now and I am not obliged to entertain you on your Mumbai visits.' I had been dying to say something nasty for a long time.

God does not really close all the doors. I smirked.

'I wanted to ask you if you would be interested in working for us? The job does not pay anything at all but we can provide you with food and accommodation.' He seemed unmoved by my remark.

My ears instantly perked up and I said, 'Job? Well, what kind of job are you offering me and why do you think I'd be interested?'

'I really liked your work credentials and it would be great if you could look after the kids in a school in Tral, Kashmir, which also provides shelter to orphaned Kashmiri children apart from educating them. All you have to do is to teach those kids about computers and other things to help them stand on their own feet. It is a small project but we basically try our best not to let these orphans fall prey to terrorism and get trained across the borders in terrorists camps or turn into suicide bombers,' he replied.

'Okay. But I am not sure whether I'd be able to do that and that too in Kashmir. Frankly my parents will not approve. The security risks are high,' I said absentmindedly.

'See, you don't worry about the security. The locals are very friendly to the NGOs; it's just the armed forces they hate and many of the army personnel from the Special Forces keep a close tab on the government employees there. Nothing has happened till now, apart from clashes between the locals and security forces now and then,' he said.

My heart skipped a beat at the words 'Special Forces'!

I wish I would have known that God keeps leaving the clues here and there, all you need to do is to pick it up and embrace wholeheartedly.

‘I will think about it. I really need a break from city life. But how and when do I join?’ I said.

‘Look, I am leaving in the next two days. I can book your flights back with me or else you can join me whenever you like. But it will be easier for you if you come with me. Joining is not a big deal as I am the sole in-charge. There will be some paperwork, but I will take care of that. You can live in one of the accommodations in the shelter home premises, and we’ll provide you with food from the common mess.’ He sounded eager which was in contrast with his ever neutral tone.

He really wanted me to be there.

‘Okay, Mr Durrani, give me some time to think about it. I will call you back,’ I said.

I hung up. The ball was truly in my court.

There was something about this offer that was making me think, pulling me to pack my stuff and leave this concrete jungle of dead selfish people at once. Maybe I was just cynical but there was something amiss in the city for sure. Maybe I was gloomy or something as I had really loved this city once. It would hardly matter to anyone if I left the city or jumped off a cliff, except that, it would take a lot of persuading to convince my parents.

I was seriously worried that they would disown me after this.

I had always been reckless, but recently it was like I had detached myself from any parental bonds. Though I never intended it to be that way, my hectic work life and inner turbulences kept me from sharing my heart with them. I hadn’t allowed them to share their concerns with me either. To seek their advice and guidance is what parents expect from their kids. And it only makes sense because they have accumulated valuable knowledge over the years to pass on to their kids. I really did not know how to break the news to them. But I had to do it if I was going to move in two days, so I dialled my mom’s number immediately because she was a better option than Dad.

‘Hello Mom,’ I said.

‘Hello beta.’ Her voice sounded like jingles to me. She surely lit up on the other side of the phone.

‘Riya, what is this? I called you at least fifteen times yesterday but you did not bother to take or return my calls. What is keeping you so busy now that you have left your job? Do we raise kids so that they don’t even take their parent’s phone call?’ she said.

‘Mom! We just talked two days ago and I told you guys that I am safe, sound, healthy, eating and sleeping well. I cannot update you daily.’ I tried to defend my unseemly behaviour.

Not picking up the phone is registered as highly offensive and an immoral sin in that little protocol book of parenthood. It is a mandatory rule for every child around the globe to take their parents' calls even if they call fifty times a day. No matter if the kids are conquering Mount Everest, negotiating with ISIS heads or playing cricket in a stadium like they showed in an ad with Sehwag—a call from mom cannot be missed.

And I had just missed it fifteen times! She even counted it! It was already a bad start.

'Accha choro isse! You tell me when are you coming back? We are eagerly waiting for you to come and then we will organize a DJ party here like Mrs Randhawa organized at our apartment base when her son returned from US after one year. I have even taken that DJ wala's number. The best part is he plays the remixes of Kishore da and Rajesh Khanna hits so that we elders can enjoy the lyrics and you youngsters can dance. I tell you he is brilliant.' She sounded so happy that my heart sank and guilt filled my being.

Suddenly, I regretted my decision. Damn!

I gathered the courage and sprang it on her.

'Mom! Actually! You see! I have got another job offer and I am going to take it,' I said nonchalantly.

'What job? I don't understand you one bit. You leave job, you pick job. What are you up to? What job is this now?' she demanded.

'It's...actually...it's a government job. I will be an instructor at a computer facility.'

God! How difficult was this going to be. Save me, please!

'Instructor? What? Last time you were an engineer. Which company is this?' How wrong I was to think that I could dodge from the woman who had me inside her womb for nine months!

Time to face the apocalypse!

'Teacher, mom! I'm going to be a teacher! I will teach computers in a kid's school in Kashmir.' I said it all at once.

There was at least two minutes' silence on the phone and then there was heavy breathing on the other side, and I suddenly heard my father's voice.

Damn!

'Kashmir??' His voice boomed.

What is this now? Do they talk to me on speaker phone? It had not even been a second since I told my mom about it.

'Dad, it is a golden opportunity for me. It will help me pursue a PhD from a foreign university! It is very difficult to get admission into these world-class foreign universities and all of them ask for some humanitarian

work on ground. So I decided to do it.' I was squeaking but congratulated my mind for this brilliant excuse.

'Riya! You do whatever you feel like but you are our only child and Kashmir is not the kind of place you should be, let alone work.' Dad was concerned.

'Dad, don't worry about my security. I have cross-checked with other agencies and they all assured me that the working environment in the area is safe. There are clashes, but they happen only between locals and security personnel, and that too, very rarely.' I hated myself as I said the words.

'Do whatever you want to! When was the last time you listened to us? It is all because your father could not control you. *Aur bigado apni laadli ko .*' It was my mom's voice booming on the phone now. Definitely speaker!

'*Mai kar raha hu na baat? Chalo nahi aap hi kar lo.*' My dad now.

This telephonic ruckus went on for one good hour but eventually I could convince them enough for them to hang up and I sank into the couch really deep with a 'Hmph' sound. It better be a good decision or else I was on the brink of stewing in regret soon, I thought.

'Mr Durrani! I hope I can trust you,' I mumbled. I messaged him to book my tickets. I would join him at the airport.

That night, I slept fitfully, some unknown fear clogging my dreams.

10. Kashmir, the Paradise

I was truly smitten by the panoramic view of the snowy Himalayan mountains and splendour of nature when I looked out from the window of my business class seat, sipping a fruit juice. Mr Durrani was seated next to me and was watching some old Hindi Dharmendra flick on his smartphone. For him, I did not exist, and frankly, I liked it.

Our flight landed at Srinagar International Airport or Sheikh ul-Alam Airport. It was very scenic. The airport terminal was designed to look like the mighty Himalayas which was the very identity of Kashmir. The sloping roof was winking in the pleasant sunshine, awaiting the seasonal snowfall to slip off. There was a single asphalt runway and the airport was filled with modern amenities.

It felt very welcoming.

We headed directly to Tral, which was around forty-two kilometers away from Srinagar by road. It took us around an hour or so to get there. That was the most scenic road drive I had ever been on. No words can describe Kashmir's natural beauty, scattered around at every nook and corner. One might need to borrow the voices of the angels themselves to describe what it's like to be in Kashmir.

The snowcapped mountains, the pristine streams, the stunning landscapes and the carpet of wildflowers across the valley seemed like a serene painting. The dense forests and clean fresh air filled me with new energy and an enthusiasm I had never felt before.

It was a good start. I smiled!

' *If there is heaven on earth! It is here! It is here!* ' These lines of the poet Firdausi floated into my mind.

When our vehicle screeched to a stop outside the huge iron gates of the school, I could see a few kids come running towards us but stopping midway. They were all staring at me intently and I felt nervous in spite of shooting friendly smiles to everyone around. Some of them looked amused and some giggled openly. After taking all the clues I could gather from the current scenario I realized that it was my *Selfie Queen* printed UCB t-shirt and distressed Calvin Klein jeans that were the culprits causing this undue attention. All the while Mr Durrani looked unaware and unworried about my existence as he completed my paperwork and talked to the officials.

Then a guy adorning a cream pathani suit and kufi skull cap approached me and requested me to follow him, instantly taking the two heavy suitcases that I had brought along with me. He ushered me towards the quaint colonial cottages at the end of the enclosed premises.

We reached a cottage called Chenab and he dumped my suitcases rather carelessly on the ground. Then he looked at me intently and it took me a while to realise that he was anticipating a tip for his services. I checked my pockets for some change and thankfully found a hundred-rupee note that I immediately handed over to him. His face lit up and he left after thanking me generously. Maybe it was the most generous tip that the fifteen-year-old boy had ever received.

The evening sun was setting and I seriously hoped to rest in the single bed in the room. The amenities were very basic: there was a table and chair in one corner of the room. There was one more door exactly opposite from the front door. I opened it and my eyes widened in awe. A balcony opened out to a lawn strewn with cedar cones. The wind rustled through the leaves and ruffled my hair. There was a boundary wall across the lawn beyond which the gigantic, snowy peaks sparkled in the evening sun. The trees laden with fruits and flowers swayed in the breeze. There were also two plastic chairs and a table in one corner of the small balcony. My gaze strayed to the serene mountains in the distance and I marvelled at their immutability. I smiled; this was going to be my coffee space.

This is paradise; I can sit here forever, breathing this crisp mountain air and listening to the trilling of these birds, I thought

Sudden thuds on the door broke my thoughts and I opened the door quite annoyed. It was Mr Durrani.

‘Sorry to bother you, Riya, but I came here to bid you goodbye and hand these documents over to you. Sign these and submit them to the main office tomorrow,’ he said.

‘Goodbye? Are you not going to stay?’ I was perplexed.

Suddenly, I realized that I did not know anyone in these alien lands.

‘No! I work and stay in Srinagar. I just came here to settle you in. It is a nice place and hopefully you should not have any problem. The people here are a bit shy, and you might like to wear some decent clothes,’ he said.

‘What do you mean by decent clothes? Jeans and tees are among the most decent clothes of the 21st century.’ I was offended.

If jeans are not decent then what would he think about my minis or halters?

‘Please don’t mind. What I mean is I hope you have a salwar kameez...if you don’t want to make people uncomfortable in your presence or draw any kind of undue attention towards you. People in Kashmir are a bit traditional and not used to seeing women in Western clothing. It is my

duty to tell you the right things. Though it is completely your wish what you want to wear,' he said in his usual robotic tone.

'Okay! I get it, but can't you leave in a day or two? Once I am a bit settled here?' I must be super desperate to be pleading for his company, I thought.

It was only some time ago that I had promised myself that even if he was the last person on this planet, I would prefer jumping off a cliff than seek his company. It was unbelievable for my standards. But the waves of loneliness and nostalgia were drowning me hard and fast. It felt like I was on an island, and the one person I knew was leaving.

'Don't worry! Take this phone, and trust me, I am just a call away. Either way, you are a big city girl, you will manage well. Also, I'm just an hour's journey from here,' he said.

He instructed me about the basic safety protocols and saved some important numbers, like that of the local police, ambulance etcetera, into the new phone which was already loaded with a local pre-paid sim. Then, he bid me goodbye.

Once he had left, I realized that Mr Durrani was a good man. Maybe he did not speak much and was a bit weird when it came to social etiquette, but he was one of those men whom you could trust. In fact, whatever little I knew of him, I could make out that he was a very efficient and dependable person. Looks are definitely deceptive. And yes, not all bureaucrats are bad; some prefer to work in silence so that they can effectively help people in need.

God bless Mr Durrani.

I hit the ugly bed in my room without bothering to fill my rumbling tummy, and astonishingly, I slept well after a long time, away from nightmares and mourning.

The next day, I was rudely awoken by a loud banging on the door. At one point, I could hear someone saying loudly '*Aapa, Aapa*' when I tried to ignore the knocking and placed a pillow over my head. Finally, I opened the door like an angry lioness. All red-eyed and fire in my heart! How dare he!

'What?' I growled.

'Aapa, I am Rafeeq. I met you yesterday. Kept all your bags here and you gave me a hundred rupees. I look after all the guests here. I've come to serve you morning tea otherwise it'll be over by the time you reach the mess. And you also have to report to the main office by 8 a.m., so I thought I'd wake you up,' he squeaked.

I looked at the digital wall clock in the room. It was 7:30 a.m. already. I stared in utter disbelief. I had slept for twelve hours straight! I snatched the humble steel cup from Rafeeq's hands, shut the door on his

face, and rushed to get ready. It did not seem like a good idea to be late on the first day.

I was very curious about the main office building that Mr Durrani had spoken about. But soon, I found out that the main office consisted of three little rooms set a little away from the kids' hostel and classrooms. The whole setup was in complete contrast to what I was used to—sky high state-of-the-art buildings and humongous edifices. But the tranquility in the air and warm salutations around were so heartening, that it was more than anything I could have asked for.

I met a rather gloomy looking man in a pathani suit with a kufi cap. He was Dr Ahmed Khan, and he immediately snatched my documents from my hands and screened them carefully for a good fifteen minutes. Then he pressed an ancient looking call bell on the table and shouted, 'Miss Susan!'

Astonished, I turned around to find a foreigner at the door. She was a short, stout, beautiful, auburn-haired white lady with soft blue eyes. She glanced at me and I smiled in return.

'Miss Susan, please show Miss Riya the classrooms and brief her about the rules here,' Mr Khan said in an authoritative tone. I jumped like a rabbit in excitement and joined Miss Susan merrily. We moved out of the room.

'Hey! Susan Stewart! Nice to meet you,' she said pleasantly.

'Riya Khanna! Nice to meet you too.' We shook hands like long-lost friends.

'So good to see you, Reeeyyaa! You are officially the second woman here, after me. The team consists of five more people, but they are all Kashmiri men. Quite conservative in their approach when it comes to interacting with women. Although they are nice people,' she said.

'Okay!' I smiled.

'This will be your workplace, and from now onwards you will be the official in charge of this computer lab.' She handed me two huge antique keys.

'And what do I do here?' I asked.

'Nothing! You just have to teach the kids visiting this computer lab. Mostly, the other teachers bring them here when they want a break. They think a computer class is leisure. But now that we have you here, we can expect some action. Also never forget to lock it properly before you leave. There are five of us in total, who play teachers, lab attendants, clerks, and every other role to run this little place. We handle each other's classes too, when someone is on leave or something,' she said chirpily.

'What else do you do here apart from looking after the kids? I mean, what do other teachers do to pass the time or hang out?' I said.

‘Hang out? Ha ha! Wake up, Reeyaa! You are in a small village, that too in Kashmir. Where are you staying, by the way?’ she enquired.

‘In a cottage called Chenab on the premises,’ I replied.

‘Oh, that is right next to mine. I will catch up with you in the evening to tell you how to survive this place and other details. Right now, I should move my arse, or else Mr Khan could appear like a genie and we’ll be in trouble. You can never predict what this guy will do,’ she smiled.

After she had left, I sat down on one of the chairs, wondering what I had gotten myself into and what for.

Was it some kind of sign that I was losing my mental balance or that I was still living in denial and seeking him? Did he even exist or I should detach myself from these memories that now seemed like a distant dream, a faded moment in eternity? Why could I not move on or had I moved on too far? What consequences were awaiting me now that I had abandoned everything that defined my identity once?

I still didn’t have answers to any of the questions I had been asking the universe ever since the Taj burnt and engulfed my existence in its flames. How would I ever know if he hadn’t lied, and that everything was just spontaneous and that there was no reason I should believe in true love? But then, why could I not be my normal self or at least something close to it?

Questions, questions and only questions with no answers to look forward to. Just my torn soul and scarred memory.

‘No! No! Why am I thinking about him? I am here in nature’s paradise. It was he who turned Mumbai into a haunted place for me and now he cannot encroach the peace of my life here as well. I need to shut it out. I don’t know him and I cannot let him do that again to me.’ I shook my head desperately.

Just then, a few students entered the room, pulling me out of my mental ruckus. And I appreciated it.

I got up at once and they did not even glance at me. It was not the kind of friendly teacher and student relationship I had been anticipating. We needed to introduce ourselves. Common, Riya, gear up! You have handled high-end business meetings and corporate conferences. These are just kids, I told myself.

‘Hello, children...err...students! I am your new computer teacher and I want all of you to introduce yourselves one by one,’ I said energetically.

There was no movement from the kids! Nothing!

But I could see a few girls who had their heads covered in hijabs giggling in one corner. This was not acceptable. There were around fifteen students and they were standing here and there forming little groups and staring at me.

‘Okay, students! Pull out those benches over there and sit down!’ I tried to infuse more power and authority into my tone, and this time, some of the kids complied, reluctantly pulling out benches and dragging them to my chair.

‘So hello! Again! I am Miss Riya Khanna and I will be your computer teacher. I’ve come from Mumbai and I want to know more about you. We will start with the last boy sitting over there. Please stand up and introduce yourself.’

He stood up shyly and said, ‘Asalam Walekum, Madam ji! I am Jawed and I live here.’ Then he sat down quickly.

‘Asalam Walekum! I am Farhana and I live here.’ She sat down too.

This pattern went on till the fifteenth child. All they did was mention their names and sit down. So unlike the kids you see in metros or other cities who are chirpy, curious and chatterboxes! Full of energy forcing you to scratch your heads through their volley of questions. These kids were quiet, shy and extremely innocent. I could see their pretty little faces emanating some kind of effervescence. The blue, brown and black eyes were not wandering here and there but mostly gazing at the floor or staring into the distance. There was so much tranquility around those ten or twelve-year-old kids.

They were all orphans and it felt as if they had embraced their sufferings with remarkable stoicism, and here I was, not being able to cope with my broken heart.

Pat their backs instantly and hug them tighter, Riya !

I did not push them any further and let them go once the class was over. Then, there came several other batches of students of different age groups who were all quiet, obedient and shy, talking softly and gazing at me nervously.

All the boys were dressed in pathani suits in neutral colours along with kufi caps. The girls were all fully covered in salwar suits with a hijab over their heads. I was the odd one out in my sleeveless suit; I pulled at my dupatta to cover my shoulders and hide my bare arms.

I needed some proper clothes...desperately.

Finally, by 3 p.m. I returned to my cottage, exhausted. That sad little cottage felt astonishingly welcoming. I had my lunch at the mess and I just sprawled on my bed for an hour or so until some serious knocks on the door disturbed my afternoon nap.

It was Susan at the door.

‘Hey there! Sleeping already?’ She did not even wait for me to invite her inside and walked right into my room.

‘Hey, Susan! Good evening to you too,’ I replied.

‘Ha ha! I just dropped by to show you the world’s most scenic view from your balcony.’ And she opened the rear door.

The red sun was sinking between the azure mountains. The vibrant shades of red and orange were spreading across the sky. The birds were returning to their nests. The long chinar, cedar and willow trees were swaying. It felt as if the whole earth was encircled by the far-off mountain crescent surrounded by departing clouds and varied shades of colours: blue, green, red, orange and purple. The mellowness of the light was overwhelming.

Soaking in the panorama of the landscape stretching before me, I realized that coming here was the best decision of my life.

I could not take my eyes off the view for a while. Then, we sat down on the plastic chairs in the balcony and Susan poured us some hot tea from a thermos flask that she had brought along with her.

‘So what is your story, Susan? Frankly, it seems unreal to see you here.’ I broke the silence between us.

‘Why? I have survived the last year here and it is quite a nice place. Except for the clashes and curfews that keep on happening and sometimes there are terrorist shoot-outs at local houses! Otherwise, everything else is quite lovely. So much peace and tranquility among these woods, you don’t find that easily elsewhere. I like this whole concept of hiding oneself amid these beautiful mountains,’ she said smilingly.

‘So you like the place. But how did you end up here and what do you mean hiding oneself?’ I asked.

My Indian genes could not help nagging her. For us courtesy means never leaving people alone and extracting all their private and personal information. Namaste!

‘Well! I was a journalist in the UK. Actually a very hotshot journalist back there at my place. I worked with the *Daily Mirror* and was sent on an assignment for a few months to do on-ground reporting from Kashmir. I met a really nice French journalist here and we made out quite a lot, which was very therapeutic in such a place, but then he was kidnapped by local terrorists all because of me.’ She paused for a second, as if drawing all her courage out.

She continued, ‘Once, I had insisted that he ditch the security we were provided by the Indian government and contact our local informer directly, which turned out to be a bad idea. The informer double-crossed us and handed us over to the terrorists. They decided to spare me because firstly they did not want to carry a female along with their all-male group—they thought I would corrupt their religious beliefs—and secondly, they wanted me to carry their message to the whole world. It created a buzz back then with no specific action taken. They beheaded him in a video which they later

posted on their website. Though the terrorists were also killed by 51 Rashtriya Rifles troops two months after the incident.'

She took a deep breath, paused and continued again.

'I was contacted by Indian Intelligence agencies, MI-6 and even by the CIA. Everyone wanted information but nobody was concerned about the healing I needed at that time or how badly I needed a shoulder to cry on. Basically there was lot of blood spilled while people kept nagging me for their benefit. It moved something inside me and I became cynical, but astonishingly Kashmir's innocence provided me the solace I was looking for. I decided to stay back here, away from the urban jungles. I don't know what but something about Kashmir clung to me badly and I could not just run away leaving this paradise on earth,' she said.

'Then I needed a place to stay and some sense of security and one local journalist friend set me up here. Since then I have been teaching students and when I need a break, I take leave for a few days and travel solo to other Indian cities, but there is no other place like Kashmir. So in spite of getting seriously depressed here, I keep coming back. Let's see how long I manage to stick to this place.' She smiled.

I was stunned. And all I had ever thought of were my own miseries.

This woman before me was the epitome of courage and strength. She did not run away, but rather, had decided to stay and fight. She laughed and travelled too. I felt stupid before her. A little embarrassment swept over me which I concealed successfully.

'I am in serious need of some suitable clothes. Where can I get that?' It was all I could utter, a little scared that she would ask me my story.

'We have flea markets twice a week and there is a nice old lady who stitches suits. In fact, she made me all these loose-fitting saawalwar kameezes but these are exactly what we need here. Whenever I go outside in these, locals don't actually stare that much,' she replied.

'Can we go to her and ask for more salwar suits for me too?'

'Sure. But we must leave now. She is just five minutes away but will close soon,' she said.

I put my sneakers on and wrapped a stole around my neck over a full sleeved t-shirt and cargo pants and Susan took out her scooty to head towards the local market.

The tiny village, nestled in the slope of the mountain, had a few scenic roads that all led to the village centre. There was a small bus stand surrounded by the bazaar which had a clutch of shops that stocked essentials for a simple life. There were roadside hawkers and peddlers selling odds and ends, from groceries to clothes to cereals. For fancier things, one had to travel to Srinagar through zigzagging roads. The thick clump of trees surrounded most of Tral's tiny little buildings and shops but the beautiful

sights of rolling slopes and the snow-clad peaks of the Himalayas were breathtaking.

Once we reached the market, everybody started calling out to us to visit their stalls. A shopkeeper who was selling cashew, walnut, kahwa, hing and kesar, which he kept under the open sky over a plastic sheet, rushed toward us to invite us to his stall. It felt so much like the rest of India in the sheer similarity of its market etiquettes by local vendors.

I smiled.

He tried to sell us the famous Kashmiri kesar which smelled exotic and was super expensive even after a huge discount, but we had no use for it so we did not buy any. The man looked kind of upset and so to appease him, I bought a packet of kahwa that I thought could easily be prepared using my electric kettle back at the room.

We finally reached the tailor who lived in a brightly painted traditional Kashmiri house with wooden doors and crooked windows. The thatched roof was low, so much so that I could literally touch the ceiling if I raised my hand. But that humble abode was pretty—the wall hangings had beautiful Kashmiri aari work—as were the wooden crafted things and papier-mâché bowls. It was amazing that someone had taken such great effort to decorate that small space.

‘Arrey, Susan beta! As-salamu alaykum, so good to see you.’ The old woman suddenly appeared like a genie.

‘Good evening, Aunty. So good to see you too.’ They hugged like two long lost friends.

‘Aunty! See who have I brought along with me? It’s Reeyaa and you’ve got to stitch her salwar suits too,’ she demanded.

‘Jarur! Jarur beta ji! But why just salwar kameez? Why not a pheran? After all you are in Kashmir. You cannot experience Kashmiriyat if you don’t wear this beautiful traditional dress. Wait, let me show you first. I made one for Susan beta too,’ she said.

She brought out a long loose jamawar pheran and forced me to try it out right over my jeans. It was fun actually. The traditional head dress, which is called ‘kasaba’ in the local language, was pinned with the help of brooches. Some chunky silver jewellery was added too and we clicked some lovely selfies with my phone.

Aunty had the perfect poses and pouts every single time and by the end of it, over cups of kahwa topped with Kashmiri almond flakes and strands of kesar, I ordered several different salwar kameezes. By the time we were done it was almost dark. We hugged her and returned to our cottages. We had our dinner at the mess and by the time I hit my bed, it was past midnight. Susan was great company and after a long time I felt at peace.

That void, that loneliness I constantly felt was blurred and the sheen and spark of our day made me smile as I closed my eyes for the day.

11. Pain Gives You Purpose

I got up on time the next day and opened the door politely for Rafeeq, for a change. In fact, I offered him a broad warm smile when he came in with his little kettle. It was going to be a beautiful day ahead. I could sense it.

The classroom buzzed with the infectious energy of young souls and their endless questions kept me hooked. They looked more relaxed than yesterday. I booted up the computers and asked them to start with Microsoft paint. I showed them the various tools and how to use them. They were astonished to know that their computers could actually paint for them. Till now, they had used them only to watch animated movies or songs.

Computer classes for them were like a library period where they did not do any work. But now, exploring the possibilities, they had a great time drawing lines, using the paint brush and then erasing the imperfections.

The boundaries between us were dissolving. I opened the windows which brought in a cold chilly breeze instantly.

The freshness reached my soul and the beauty that was laid around everywhere in nature comforted my spirits. The long-lost zeal and ardour was back in me and I forgot everything that had happened in the past. This was a new me.

The chirpy souls would not stop talking or asking questions. The quiet angels turned out to be little monkeys full of curiosity about the world outside Kashmir. Their small eyes were filled with endless dreams. Some wanted to be engineers, some doctors, and some even wanted to join the army. I was astonished by the fervour and enthusiasm those little Kashmiri kids possessed.

It was like any other place in India. Sometimes the media reports of violence and terrorism across the valley would confuse me because it had been two months there and I never faced even a teasing. The bizarre media world startled me with the pieces of news that would hint about the plague of terrorism that had engulfed the valley since long.

I would often think about the giggling kids, orphaned but with a spirit that was unbroken. Some of them were aware of their state and some denied it, while others were in fact too small to even acknowledge the fact. There were some who had never known what it feels like to have a parent, but they had found companionship among each other and the endless

activities that the school offered them. They idolized us teachers and followed our instructions earnestly. That is the beauty of young minds, they accept what comes their way. It is up to the older generation to offer them a world they truly deserve, away from hatred, politics and war.

For them we were the angels sent by Allah, for us it was them!

Life had never been this fulfilling and enriching. Each interaction with those kids would bring me closer to life. I started calling my parents every day because I realized how fortunate I was to have them. Sometimes, my heart would fill with sadness—I would wonder ‘Why them?’ But it was healing to be around the kids. Participating in their daily lives and solving their cute little problems that did not matter to anybody else was therapeutic.

Sometimes the dean, Mr Khan, would organize a trek or a picnic and that day would be a happy day for all of us. We would all stuff ourselves into a compact van, look out of the glass windows happily and await our destination. The picnic spot would mostly be at a bucolic setting in the valley. Campfires would be lit and the surrounding would be engulfed by some of the most exotic aromas of chicken and rice. The swaying trees and the gurgling rivers would seem very welcoming. The magnificent wilderness in its virgin beauty would mesmerize the senses. The overjoyed children, in their new-found freedom, would not leave a single stone unturned in the area. The barriers of civilization ceased to exist in those moments.

There was a time when I would be overjoyed to shop—embellished capes, Calvin Klein ripped jeans or Michael Kors leather tote bags. The swirling sticks of Bobbi Brown lipsticks or the smell of Chanel perfumes would lift me up. Happiness, back then, lived at the cozy corner of Starbucks or at a high end restaurant in Bandra.

How naïve I was! I never actually knew true happiness. There, in those shabby pherans, I found sterling joy radiating everywhere, while slurping chicken stew or doing absolutely nothing!

Happiness is when you realize that it is within you and not outside.

Then we would return to our humble accommodation. The exhausted kids would snooze in the van, only to be hustled back into their hostel rooms later.

Life was blissful during those days.

I could feel peace all around me in its most unadulterated form. The sunrays radiating across the mountains would fill my room with warmth on cozy Sundays when I snuggled into my pillow some more. Adrakwali chai had totally replaced the dark espresso in my life and kahwa replaced cold-drinks.

Life is really simple. We make it complicated with our desires and loathing. Nothing is ever enough for us and we keep wandering into the jungles of wanting more and instigating the karmic cycle.

Virat would still haunt me in my dreams sometimes. I could feel his warm breath and blazing eyes staring at me intently. He would hold me softly and then suddenly his machine gun would start firing, shredding me to bits and pieces, eliminating my whole existence in a second. I would get up, sweating and breathing heavily.

How is this even possible, for a person to grip your memories, pierce your soul and leave you haunted forever?

Time flew in a whoosh just like the wind and mist that disappear in the grass. It was almost six months since I had come and I was quite comfortable with the 'new me'. Mr Durrani called me a few times to ask about my well-being but never visited. He was a good man and I owed some gratitude to him for providing purpose to my lost life again.

The same purpose which had been left there in the burning corridors of the Taj!

Kashmir was burning those days over the killing of a terrorist. The Indian Army was behind hunting him down, in what was considered a revenge mission, since a young Kashmiri Army officer from the valley was abducted and murdered brutally during his vacation to his own little village. He was found in his father's apple orchards, where he grew up playing and praying to be an officer in the Indian Army. It was not a job but a quest to lead a good life and serve the nation he believed in.

He was just twenty-three.

Can the dreams of a young boy hurt somebody so much so that they plan to kill him brutally? They killed him and threw his body in the orchards which was eventually found after a search and rescue operation by the soldiers of his own paltan who swore on his blood to avenge his death. There was so much agony and grief among the locals once his dead body was back home for last rites.

A mother died and a sister lost her heart forever. A family destroyed in the quest of bringing to life their collective dream.

There had been smiles and hope and now there was nothing left except oblivion.

His body was wrapped carefully in a Kashmiri quilt famous for its warmth. After all, it was cold that day. So what if his teeth and nose were broken, and eyes punctured—the family members ensured that his body had the warmth of the warmest quilt in the region before he got wrapped in the tri colour and was buried deep in the soil he believed in, to be a legend forever.

He made the supreme sacrifice and was given the supreme honour by the state too. A wreath-laying ceremony was held on open grounds where a huge crowd gathered to pay the last homage to the son of the soil. His Commanding Officer, brothers-in-arms, his paltan and his buddies carried

his coffin. The eyes of the Rashtriya Rifles soldiers were bloodshot and the eerie quiet around was indication of an upcoming storm.

The guards performed 'Shok Shastra' and even the sky cried that day.

Such young souls never die. They are martyrs and are registered carefully in the pages of history to be presented as symbols of hopes for generations to come. The death was mourned deeply among the locals. It was taken as the death of one more Kashmiri dream. The same dream which lingers in the hearts of thousands of Kashmiri youth.

There are two sides of Kashmir. One side has a rich tradition of joining the Indian Armed forces; there are many battalions like the Jammu and Kashmir Light Infantry and Jammu and Kashmir Rifles, which comprise Jammu and Kashmiri youth, ready to protect the borders always. The young Kashmiri men and women join the armed forces and police to adorn uniforms as righteously as any other Indian to serve the mother nation. These people believe in the dream seen by their forefathers, called sovereign India. They know the pride and privilege that it takes to be an Indian citizen.

The other side believes in the ideology of Azad Kashmir. They don't believe in any government and despise people believing in Indian sovereignty. They might be right about their ideology but killing their own people for their beliefs? How is that justified when you claim to fight for your beliefs?

They waste their people over false claims and promises by governments, countries, separatists and leaders who themselves never chose the same path for their own families. Kashmir sheds tears every day over the tragedy of losing the locals, the forces, the young, the old and the loved ones. This heaven on earth has not been able to cherish its beauty and dwell in its full glory for a long time. This bride has lived the life of a widow since long. Only because of some people's greed it has lost its sons, daughters and well-wishers.

This kind of planned propaganda deters people from claiming their righteous dominance. It is a vicious circle of karma which never ends. Deaths are mourned, emotions are replaced by rage. Revenge replaces the aspirations. Young lives are turned towards violence. The dreams are no more about green pastures and fairy lands but about fire and death. Who wins? Who loses? Who is right? Who is wrong? Who gains what? They make a list of trivial questions and what matters eventually is that families are destroyed and no single side is spared from the hatred and loss.

I sighed.

My heart had grown to love the place over time. Kashmir was truly mesmerizing, if you looked at only one side and chose to ignore the other side which is dark, brutal and shocking. The classes were suspended and gates were closed all the time during the riots. All of us were instructed not

to step out of the shelter home and we did not. TV and cable connection was still there, with very limited channels, and radio proved to be a better companion in those times of seclusion.

We could make out that severe clashes of forces and locals were going on. People were pelting stones on forces and forces were retaliating with pellet guns. That was heartbreaking. Forces were equipped with weapons of mass destruction and they were free to use them. It was not wise to engage with them unarmed.

We heard that many tourists got trapped in Kashmir and took shelter here and there after the conflicts erupted suddenly. Then the imposed curfew ended all their hopes of returning from this heaven on earth soon. Tourism is the main occupation of Kashmir and generates huge revenues for the government and helps locals to earn their bread and butter comfortably. But these regular curfews and conflicts in Kashmir broke another dream of the average Kashmiri family of food in the belly and dignified living.

Maybe that is what the plan is! Of the so-called separatist leaders or enemy country. After all who bothers what happens to the common people.

It's government vs government, agenda vs agenda and country vs country where people play mere pawns!

The groceries were diminishing quickly and kids were getting cranky. There was no movement around. The air was chilly and dull. The timings of the curfews were eased after some time. The common people, mostly male members of families, would rush to the local markets in fear of not getting the daily groceries. The street markets would set up within minutes but the prices were touching the sky.

Fear instigates a profit-making attitude in many people. But the protests had gutted hundreds of shops and properties worth crores were destroyed. The administration would keep documenting the heavy losses, sending files to Srinagar and also maintaining law and order in the area. Normalcy was limping back gradually, and we could feel that the administration might lift the curfew fully anytime soon. This happened too.

Curfew was lifted...after three months!

The separatists, terrorists, government and forces all got back to their routine drills, leaving Kashmiris all alone to start from scratch again. This is life. It moves on even in the most demanding times. We are still humans carrying that powerful moving force in our hearts, known as hope!

Kashmir would never perish. It would survive. I knew that.

Daily life in Kashmir returned slowly but surely. The nooks and corners were filled with the warmth of people bonding over cups of kahwa again. The markets were smelling of kesar and cherries. The vendors were buzzing and shouting to passersby. There was a lot of negative news around in the aftermath of the riots and long curfew. But Kashmir was used to that.

It moved on. The classes started with full force with the extra pressure of completing the syllabus within the crunched time.

Winter was approaching a little sooner, I felt. The temperature was dipping every day, the breeze was freezing and shades of grey were dominating. Though it was getting colder, all this added to the mystery of Kashmir some more by enhancing its charm to the naked eye. Snowfall had not started yet and everything was still functional in Kashmir.

I was told by the locals that once the period of 'Chilai Kalan' started, it would go on through December and January and get really bad. For an outsider who loves winters, it was interesting to witness the forty days of Chilai Kalan. But the locals hated that forty-day period of Chilai Kalan as supply stops, movements of vehicles from outside is halted because of the harsh weather conditions. Everyone stays indoors, under heavy blankets. The locals call it the ugliest season, and many Kashmiris move to Jammu during this time of the year where they live in rented spaces and rooms and enjoy the hospitality that the city of temples, Jammu, has to offer.

The malls, the zoo, the markets and the urban life in Jammu would grip the Kashmiri imagination for a while and they would enjoy it, roaming enthusiastically with their families in their rather distinguished pherans around Jammu streets. Jammu would buzz with a lot more activity than the usual.

That is how Jammu and Kashmir bonds together as one state, as one people.

I was confused about Chilai Kalan, about whether I needed to move out or stay. The school would be closed during this time and the winter was going to be bone chilling. But it was only mid-October now so I didn't think too much about it. For me, Kashmir was my liberation from the world and I had not thought about leaving it yet.

I loved my kids as well. They were turning out to be smarter than I had thought.

One day little Farjana asked me, 'Madam ji, what is Mumbai like?'

I got all excited. 'Well! It is huge you see. Double decker buses, fast life, lots of tall buildings, and what not is there. It is surrounded by a sea. How many of you have seen a sea?'

Not a single hand was raised in the classroom. So I asked, 'Okay! And how many of you know what the sea is? You, Aftab, tell me.'

He said with as much excitement as a seven-year-old can manage, 'Sea is a huge water body. Just like our waterfalls but they are not waterfalls. There are huge waves in the sea which come to the shore with a lot of noise and go back quickly.'

I smiled and said, 'Wonderful, Aftab. Now we should all clap for him for this correct description of the sea.'

He blushed and rolled his eyes with pride. It warmed my heart and I said, 'You know about Marine Drive?'

The class said 'Noooo' in unison.

'It is the most beloved place in Mumbai. It is a long boulevard in South Mumbai and flanked by huge buildings on one side and huge porous rocks known as Tetrapods on the other side. Waves strike these rocks with full force and retreat soon after. People from all around the world, Mumbaikars and tourists, sit around there. You know, it looks magnificent in the night with all those flickering lights and it is also known as the Queen's Necklace.' I described it with childlike enthusiasm.

The kids looked mesmerized and then little Fatima asked, 'Then why did you leave it?'

The question hit me with an intensity I was not anticipating. I was at a loss for words.

I replied rather dimly, 'Err...Umm...because...you see I love Kashmir more!'

I finished up class soon after and took the rest of the day off. The day was a blur in my mind, and a combination of strange, fuzzy dreams about blood, gunshots, fire and Virat kept me tossing and turning throughout the night.

The pain of losing him just like that was excruciating.

He left me only to perish into bits and pieces every day. It would have been a glorious death by those firing bullets in the Taj, better than dying and quitting every day. For him, maybe I was just another victim like those he keeps meeting during his missions. Maybe it is just his routine and I meant nothing to him. He risked his life every day. It was not extraordinary that he saved me during those dark hours. Didn't I have a right to lose my heart to my saviour? Just like in all those Bollywood movies! He never showed up nor had he bothered to explain. I did not deserve that or maybe I deserved that, as losing your heart to an unknown warrior comes with consequences. It was my fault and my punishment was to suffer throughout my life.

But he said... 'I will find you'.

I closed my eyes quickly.

12. The Prime Minister's Visit

Loving someone with all your heart and losing them can have apocalyptic effects on one's soul which can never be fixed by anyone else but by the ones whom you have lost. You are never the same person again. The soul dies a bit or maybe goes away with the lost love. You see the world a little differently and you end up finding mostly dark grey shades in your once colourful life. It hurts when someone you love remains in your heart and you cannot take them into your arms. You cry, you sob, you shatter things, but nothing can bring them back. Perhaps, they were never meant to be yours.

They were there for a silly moment to teach you the lessons of love, life and pain all at once. It felt like even the Bermuda Triangle could not hide me away from my miseries, memories and pain, and Kashmir was not even that alien. Where could I have run away from my inner turmoil?

I sobbed into my pillow till daybreak, and the next day, I woke up with a fog of fever. I was burning like I had been in a sauna for hours.

Susan visited me and brought some paracetamol and antibiotics with her. Rafeeq had told her about my condition and she duly informed Mr Ahmed Khan about my fever. He asked Susan to tell me to rest till I recovered, and not bother about classes. I felt so relieved. Susan was turning out to be one very special person in my life. She was nothing like me; we both belonged to different creeds, nations and ethnicities. But our common situation and loneliness bonded us in those snowy lands which were alien yet beloved to both of us.

I smiled.

She asked, 'What is so wrong with you? What happened to your immunity? You looked fine just yesterday.'

I replied, casually suppressing my agony, 'Nothing! Maybe just a viral due to the weather change! You tell me what happened today?'

'Nothing much! But yes, the kids were asking about you and they played solitaire in your absence. I'd say you're creating some genius solitaire players here.' She giggled.

'Ha ha! Actually my idea of education is synonymous with having fun. I mean, what would you learn if you didn't enjoy it,' I explained.

'I know that, and the kids love you,' she said.

‘I know! You see...I am very passionate about this job. I love teaching these kids. I never felt like this before in my previous job,’ I said.

‘By the way, there is some big news too,’ she said.

‘What?’ I asked

‘The prime minister is visiting us next week. It was being kept under wraps due to security reasons, but the preparations have been going on for a while. He wants to connect with the locals here and spread his message of love and peace to them directly. He wants to project a secular image to the Kashmiri people and shed the outsider image, especially after so many Kashmiris voted for him in the previous election. He is also coming to our school to meet the kids.’ She was almost whispering.

‘That is great. Who told you all this?’ I asked casually as if prime ministers visited rural Kashmir all the time.

‘Mr Khan himself! He got the call from the state home minister directly from Srinagar and had been asked to keep it under wraps and not inform the media. They anticipate the media directly on the day of the visit or they might even bring their own media personnel with them.’

She left after a while and I also resigned for the day by slumping against the pillows on my bed.

I was feeling much better the next day.

As I stepped out of my room to join the classes I saw a convoy of military trucks on the dirt track connecting our shelter home to the village. I walked towards the willow and poplars near the aluminum fence of the school to get a clearer view and I saw moving military vehicles, armed soldiers, armoured cars with machine guns mounted on it and even army battle tanks.

My mouth fell open.

I mean, military convoys? Armed soldiers were not an alien sight in Kashmir but the intensity of the view I had was different. By now the entire school, hearing the loud rumbling noises of battle tanks and extraordinary military movements, had turned up on the common grounds. The trucks in the first row of the convoy screeched to a halt at the gates and with them the entire convoy halted systematically. The soldiers were moving in and one of their officers asked for the ‘in charge’.

After some sharp murmurs, Mr Khan moved from his place and stood before him claiming his authority. The officer said something to him in an inaudible tone unlike their loud and commanding voice and I could see Mr Khan nodding nervously. After a few minutes, the officer went back to his convoy and started giving instructions to his chaps.

Mr Khan wiped his profusely sweating forehead with a handkerchief and instructed us to take the kids back to the classes. We herded the students together and took them to the classrooms. The soldiers set to work fast. In a

few hours, the trucks had been unloaded and soon the shelter was turned into a military camp. Over the next few days, they built watchtowers and sandbag bunkers along the school fence. Scores of machine gun nozzles and stern-looking soldiers stared from the rectangular firing slats of the bunkers, draped with wire mesh aimed at deflecting potential grenades.

We were given new rules to follow which especially emphasized that half the school building was off limits at all times. We were also instructed to carry our identity cards with us all the time and show it to the soldiers every time we entered or left the school. The soldiers never bothered us, and we went on with our daily schedules.

The soldiers set about their task of ‘area domination’—patrolling the road passing by the school now and then. Strangely, none of it filled me with a sense of security. Being a north Indian, the word ‘army’ had always instilled confidence in me, but here, in this small village of Kashmir, it was collapsing with my insecurity or fear maybe.

The Indian Army is a very dreaded and hated term in Kashmir. Unlike tourists or other people from the rest of the country, who are mostly welcome here, the army is always considered the enemy. The setting up of a military camp in our shelter home also made us prone to guerrilla attacks. We, uneasily, expected the inevitable. It was strange to be in the shoes of a Kashmiri. The militants and the army both are considered a threat in Kashmir.

Who loses after all? A common Kashmiri!

During my stay, I had learnt some hard facts too. Kids as young as ten years old were sent to Pakistan-occupied Kashmir for arms and ammunition trainings. Some were forced to join the ongoing war by their friends or relatives, and some would just be inspired to join by themselves. Such kids would leave their families and flee their houses to join banned organizations like JKLF (Jammu and Kashmir Liberation Front) or Hizbul Mujahideen or many other terrorist organizations. These various organizations were ideological rivals. JKLF fought for an independent Kashmir whereas the HM supported the merger of Kashmir with Pakistan.

Many of the Kashmiris trained locally in orchards or meadows and were prone to regular army raids. But those who managed to cross the LOC without getting shot at by BSF or Indian Army and could also come back without getting killed were considered heroes. The families loathed every single minute of it, but they were treated with great respect if their sons returned safely to fight against the Indian Army. It also helped the young terrorists attract female adulation, but the end result led to only one fate—mourning of the death of their wards by family members. The consequences of fighting against an organized and highly equipped army were inevitable and they were to be eliminated sooner or later.

Here, the role of separatists or terrorist heads was pivotal as they were the ones who provoked generations of youth to join the so called 'jihad' while their own sons and daughters were studying abroad and becoming doctors and engineers. The Indian government also had limited options here. These separatist leaders sponsored by the enemy country spoke openly against the country they lived in but the Indian government chose to ignore them. Any strict actions against these popular leaders meant protest by the masses and also raking up of the Kashmir issue among international communities.

The government would just imprison them occasionally.

This is politics. This is the world. It demands blood and flesh. The struggle between masses and the government is always of apocalyptic proportions. Who benefited? Those leaders who turn out to be gold diggers or those governments who turn out to be tyrannical? What of the common man who is affected the most by the clashes and also by the negotiations?

The day of the prime minister's arrival was close.

However, no official statement had been issued yet. Mr Khan looked perplexed. There was grave danger looming over his head because of the military but being a government employee, he had no option.

Watching those men in uniform would also make my stomach churn sometimes. Though their camouflage combat uniforms were nothing like Virat's black overall, the presence of the army reminded me of him again and again.

The happiness that I had gathered recently, the smiles that I would flaunt and the momentary truce with the past were gone suddenly and the nightmares of blood, death and Virat were back in my life. The angelic faces of the kids was calming but I was distracted and could not put in hundred percent of my energies for those kids. I felt guilty most of the time.

Finally, the day of the prime minister's visit arrived. It was a three-day visit to Kashmir. His itinerary included various important places. He had a very charismatic personality and the media just loved clicking him. The newspapers, TV channels and social media were all buzzing with 'what he ate', 'where he visited', 'whom he met' and many things more.

His candid pictures hugging Kashmiri locals, offering chadar at Hazratbal, sharing sweets with troops or a shikara ride on Dal Lake in Srinagar were going viral. The TV channels promptly set up debate panels over the long-term result of his unexpected visit.

He gave speeches about peace and prosperity.

He looked convincing when he said the dark phases were over and now the youth of Kashmir deserved equal opportunities like any citizen of India. He promised more colleges and hospitals. Thousands of people turned up to his public events. It all looked very appealing. But there was

something odd about everything. The unusual silence in the valley! There were the usual rants by separatist leaders who appealed to the people not to attend his events, but there was no major terrorist activity or bomb blasts reported anywhere in Kashmir.

Kashmir looked deceptively peaceful and welcoming.

Tral was scheduled to be visited on the last day of his official tour and by then we were all eagerly looking forward to meeting him. The general worry was replaced by excitement. The entire school was decorated. The Indian flag was installed in the school premises and the prime minister was supposed to hoist it. The young kids looked bewildered and for them it was like a long-awaited carnival which they rarely witnessed. Many of them were seeing the Tiranga for the first time and were very happy.

The soldiers felt familiar by now. Many kids even befriended some of them and would proudly flaunt the little goodies, chips or biscuits offered to them by the security forces. One multi-layered security blanket was thrown around the day the prime minister arrived at Tral, which was also declared a no-fly zone for that day and a drone kept an aerial tab on the security. The streets were blocked and identity cards were checked at every step. More than a hundred CCTV cameras were installed across the village and we could see many unfamiliar, non-Kashmiri people lurking around in civilian clothes, which hinted at their being from the secret service.

There were sniffer dogs deployed and it felt as if that small Kashmiri village had been shut down for the day. Early on Sunday morning, the prime minister of our great nation arrived in his Air India One Mi-17 V5 helicopter. The huge rotor blades were spinning in the air and the vibrations stirred the leaves on trees. Several men were running around in their black suits, the crowd was shouting his name, the barricades were almost breaking. People from far-flung areas of Kashmir had gathered for a single glance of the man; the police, military and other security personnel looked alert.

He emerged out of his mechanical bird, smiling and waving to everyone. Several high-profile Jammu and Kashmir officials had gathered to receive him, and he shook hands with many.

Waving and applauding, he looked really generous, social and happy.

I was there along with five other children from the shelter to present him a bouquet of flowers. We were to move straight to our school along with the convoy. I had been briefed by an army major from RR just a day before regarding the arrangements and about our expected 'code of conduct'. He was the in-charge of local security in Tral.

Just as the prime minister took a few more steps I saw those black uniforms again!

Two of them jumped out behind him from the same helicopter and a few more from other helicopters were jumping out like black cats...swift,

quiet and alert. All the black cats were masked and only their eyes were visible, but I could feel his presence around.

He was one of them, I was sure of that.

I was numb for a moment and then my stomach began to churn and my heart began to beat menacingly, sweat trickled down my face and my eyes widened in shock. I clutched my stomach and almost collapsed to the ground.

The kids turned to me, hassled. ‘What happened ? What happened? Get up! Get up! The prime minister sahib is here.’

Their voices awakened me from my trance and I managed to regain my strength. The kids heaved a sigh of relief. How embarrassing though! I was supposed to look after them.

I don’t care about anyone now, I told myself. Black cats, white cats or no cats! I don’t even like cats. To hell with everyone! And even if he is here it does not bother me a bit. I hate him from the bottom of my heart. I know this and I am firm about it.

The little thought bubbles assured me of my sanity, and I repeated it to myself several times until I was signalled to greet the prime minister. The poor army JCO who was tasked to take us to him had to literally shout the instructions before I understood.

But trust me, I was absolutely normal. Okay! Fine! I might have been a little distracted.

It was a glorious moment. The kids offered him the flowers which he accepted humbly and shook hands with me. Yes, he actually shook hands with me and I could hardly control myself from jumping. Man! I had just shaken hands with the most powerful man in India. I swore that I would vote for him next time, even though I had never participated in any election before.

He patted the kids and chatted with them for a while. I was mesmerized by his magnanimous personality and then I suddenly felt as if someone was watching me intently. I looked around and could not see anyone doing so. All the NSG guys were scattered by now and some joined the prime minister’s security bubble, and it was impossible to identify them.

They all looked identical.

The prime minister moved ahead towards his convoy of bulletproof vehicles and we were hurriedly escorted into one of those vehicles by some other officials. The crowd was scattering but the chants of his name were reaching the sky.

Kashmir was so welcoming. Who knew!

The school looked like a Kashmiri bride from a distance. Glowing in its own beauty! As if it had realized its magic for the first time and now mesmerized the world with it. The building was freshly painted. The wooden

windows and ornate pillars were reflecting the fresh varnish. The snowcapped mountains were glowing in the sunlight, the chinar trees were standing tall in their golden glory, while the cold air smelt of saffron harvest. The chinar trees were changing their colours and turning a dusty shade of red before shedding their leaves. The typical Kashmiri autumn day felt more pleasant than usual.

This is the Kashmir of our dreams and it is not an illusion anymore. The good days are here. The future generations would prosper, and the bloodshed will be a thing of the past. I smiled as the Kashmir of my country leapt before me in its full glory.

The halting screech of the black Mercedes interrupted my thoughts. We stepped out of the car and saw a huge crowd gathered along with Mr Khan. He presented the prime minister a gorgeous bouquet of fresh Kashmiri flowers, which he humbly accepted only to pass it to his staff.

The prime minister was deep inside the security bubble and NSG guards with masked faces were marching, waving their guns. We were walking just a few steps behind him. I was happy in spite of all those black uniforms around me. I smiled and glanced at the Tiranga inside the school premises ready to be hoisted by the prime minister.

What a rare honour!

But suddenly there was a shift in the air. And next second, there was a loud bang. An explosion!

There was a whistle of splinters as the glass from the school windows exploded and a suffocating mix of powder and dust covered the venue. We were blown off our feet. Before I could make out what had happened, another smaller explosion went off somewhere in the school building.

And then I understood what had happened.

It was an attempt to assassinate the prime minister!!

13. That Stranger Again

Suddenly, there were people running around, howling and shouting. In a fraction of a second, gunfire went off and then maddening chaos ensued. I could see people terribly wounded by the explosion and dying shortly afterwards.

I was enveloped by smoke and ashes, but luckily I was not hurt.

Nothing was visible at that moment but I wanted to check if the prime minister was fine and I ran towards the school at once, where the explosions had happened just a moment ago. Suddenly, someone pulled me back by my arm rather gently and a million sparks flew across and a jolt passed through my entire body.

My body temperature suddenly shot up, the hair on the back of my neck stood up, my heart beat faster, the high voltage jolt turned my body into an inferno. The current resonated not just in the skin but deep inside the heart.

I could make out the person behind that touch which was one in a million—Virat.

I turned around and saw a masked face with glaring red eyes. Our eyes were locked for an intense moment. A tingling sensation swept across my soul. It shook me to the core. No! Not again! I struggled to remove myself from his grip. I wanted to go inside the school desperately now, running far away from the man behind the mask, the same man who had ruined my life every single time I met him.

I broke away from his grip, stepped back and ran a few steps, but he reached out and grabbed me again. I tried to push him away and writhed violently but that devil in black did not move an inch. He hissed and tightened his grip around my arms and dragged me away this time.

I was shouting now, 'Leave me! I said, leave me!'

But the utter chaos prevailing muffled my voice and it proved to be of no good. People were running to and fro. I yanked and jerked his arm. The grip loosened and I released myself from his grip and ran quickly back towards the school. But he reached me in a minute and held me in a strong grip, raising me above the ground and locking another arm around my neck. He pulled me up straight into his arms.

I was trapped now.

‘Leave me! Leave me!’ I was shouting, but he did not pay any heed.

His hazel eyes looked dark and fathomless, and he tightened his grip around me. Our gazes met and for a second the world was swallowed in darkness. I squirmed a little, still in his arms, and inhaled deeply. My heart was racing once again and my palms were sweaty now.

This man always had an effect on me, and I hated myself for that!

The bombs were still exploding, bullets were still firing but he was moving swiftly, making moves, taking turns now, all the while carrying me like a rubber doll. His gait was like an Olympic runner and he strode effortlessly even with all his weapons, gear and me. He found a jeep with logs of wood piled high in the back. He instantly pushed me inside the jeep, slammed the door behind me and started the engine.

As the jeep began to move, I looked around to take in the view of the place where I had spent the last several months. But I was startled by the chaotic barrage of images around: the sirens of police cars, soldiers and policemen running, ducking, firing at the terrorists, smoke rising from exploding tear gas shells, resounding echoes of their gunfire, grenade explosions and utter chaos.

It was too much to process. I became numb suddenly and blacked out.

I was awoken by a sharp jerk to my body. When I sat up, I realized that I was still in the jeep which was continuing its bumpy ride through the steep tracks of the forested area with deep valleys on both sides. The road had become less bumpy, but the turns became sharper. We swerved dangerously with each turn, again and again. Suddenly the jeep doors banged open and I was thrown to the ground, maybe ten feet, and landed with a deafening splash in a shallow stream. For a second, I just lay face down in the cold water in disbelief. The water rose up in my mouth and nose, and sputtering, I raised my head and looked around. No one in sight.

Painfully I tried to adjust my body and picked myself up and began to wade towards the bank.

I could still hear the gun fight going on, which meant I was still in the area. That very thought sent shivers down my spine. I quickened my pace to an unknown direction without knowing the coordinates. I began to cry in frustration. All I had ever wanted in life was a little peace and normalcy. A regular life away from horrible memories, not a volley of bullets, bomb blasts and people dying around me every six months.

Was I cursed or was it some kind of past life karma?

You reap what you sow. Do good and receive well! Do bad and receive worse! But what did I do to deserve this miserable life? I had never even killed an ant in my entire life, maybe some mosquitoes, but I don’t

think that qualifies as serious enough to face bullets and blasts so often. I had no answers and I cried some more.

A failed romance, a broken heart, a sinking career, a hopeless life, disappointed parents and violent adventures now and then.

No one deserves a fate like this. My parents raised me with hope and faith. They believed that I would grow up to lead a regular city life as an independent, liberated woman standing on my own feet, to marry a man with a house and car, then produce at least two grandkids for them with whom they could play and spend the rest of their lives happily ever after.

Was that too much to hope for?

I, Riya Khanna, an engineer, an ex-corporate professional, compassionate teacher and only child of my parents, was running across an unknown jungle full of dangerous animals and even more dangerous people through the brambles and the bushes to save my fucking life which I, either way, had never valued much.

But that does not mean my parents deserved to shake their heads in despair again while pointing fingers to each other for my reckless life with the idea that one of my parents could not groom me well. All those heated debates on failed parenting that started with Mom's standard *'It is all your fault, I told you to check her a bit. But no! You would not listen, now pay the price'* to Dad never actually reached a conclusion. Dad would also retaliate with how my mom failed in her motherly duties to raise a daughter like me who is never concerned about her life and future like 'Sharma ji ki beti.' My mom would have a trillion incidents on her fingertips when she had asked my dad to discipline me, but no, he never listened which eventually led to my daredevil attitude. No one could ever reach a conclusion about whose fault this was while raising me.

I was sure that if I managed to survive this one time, they would surely disown me as well, if only they could escape the heart attacks.

I stopped for a while to catch my breath when I heard footsteps behind me.

Startled and confused, I ran with full speed. I stumbled through the dense forest. The small pointy plants almost pierced my torn shoes but every time I would stop to catch hold of my breath, I could hear the footsteps growing closer. Suddenly I spotted some ruins in the distance. I headed towards them and found myself facing an old temple. I entered the temple courtyard. Reeds and wild bushes had invaded the courtyard filled with cobwebs, pigeon shit and a gloomy silence. Naked stones stared at me; a horde of pigeons fluttered around, and flew out into the dusk. I moved out to the adjacent room and came across a massive granite sculpture of Shiva. It looked ancient, more like Buddha, except for the third eye on the forehead.

There were more statues of various Gods and Goddess and their disciples. Even though the statues were damaged they exuded a regal mystery.

It was then that I heard a loud footstep nearby and I hid myself behind the gigantic Shiva statue, holding my breath and standing steadily. A few moments passed and I peeked out to find no one. Heaving a sigh of relief, I turned around and suddenly saw the devil in black, with a gun in his hand just beside me, staring at me intently. My jaw dropped, there was a knot of dread in my stomach and a shriek came out of my mouth.

I tried to run again, but this time he gripped my arms and pulled me towards him. I found myself staring into his eyes, his warm breath on my face, and suddenly my nerves tingled, like always. There was a strong current floating around in the air generating a palpable heat that was igniting ferocious intensity.

He pulled off the mask and there it was...him...my apocalypse standing right before me!

My world exploded once again.

14. Knight in Shining Armour

He was standing there, lean, angular, built like a marathon-runner, with an unrelenting gaze that bored into me like a harpoon. He exuded a sense of calm which only a man capable of hard, decisive action can have. But the glint in his hazel eyes was still mesmerizing. The broad masculine cheekbones still felt very warm and his full lips were still very inviting, but wait, was he smiling?

Really?

My eyes narrowed suddenly and instinctively, I slapped him tight across his face.

‘Ouch! Riya?’ He gasped.

‘I was thinking of kissing you. What’s the matter with you?’ The confidence in his claim was astonishing.

‘What? Pervert!’ My cheeks were red with fury.

‘How dare you even think that way?’ I was shocked by his audacity, like nothing had ever happened between us.

‘Why? What’s wrong? Haven’t you seen Bollywood movies where the long separations are ended by some long kisses between the hero and heroine?’ He sounded very sincere putting forward his stupid theory.

‘You know what, you are insane!’ I gritted my teeth. ‘How dare you? Like really? You leave me like that, make no contact and then bump into me like this and claim a kiss? Lunatic!’ My cheeks were red and my eyes were blazing.

‘What do you mean by bumping into you like this?’ That was all he had heard!

‘I mean you don’t even apologise to me. I cannot even find a speck of remorse in your eyes. You are standing tall and proud before me and then, you were chasing me like a serial killer with a gun in your hand and now you ask me what’s wrong?’ My voice was filled with anguish.

‘Madam! If you don’t realize this, then let me tell you that I just saved your life from a deadly terrorist attack where bombs and bullets were really eager to say hello to you. And this is what I get? Where is the etiquette and courtesy you learnt back in your school?’ he replied with a tinge of mockery.

‘So? Is that not your duty? Are you not in the habit of saving damsels in distress only to extract advantages later?’ I said sarcastically.

‘Okay! Speaking of advantages, what kind of advantages do you mean exactly?’ he said and grinned mischievously.

I was distressed, infuriated, and yet the bastard before me was making me smile. I mean, just a few days before I was battling hard to forget my past and look at this narcissistic annoying man who was still trying to prove his point.

It was frustrating!

‘I always thought you’d be a shitbag but now I realize that you are just a pathetic male chauvinist who thinks women are objects of pleasure and should be used without terms and conditions applied. Your hypocrisy does not allow you to fulfil the promises you make to a woman and you feel free to walk out of relationships or circumstances anytime you wish. Why oblige a woman over some lovey-dovey stuff when you can just fulfil your desires? Right?’ I asked.

‘This hurts!’ he said slowly.

‘What were you expecting? Flower beds, when one day you suddenly decide to drop before me out of the blue? There is a coward hidden beneath your black uniform holding sophisticated weapons, basically. This time too, you did not have any intentions to face me or confront me. It was just your call of duty that you had to unmask your real self before me,’ I said.

‘No! That is not true. I love you,’ he said calmly.

‘Drop it!! I warn you. Okay? How dare you say it again? Love? What do you know about love? I struggled hard for my sanity repeating this same sentence over and over again, which you used in the Taj. Life would have been really easy for me if we would have just met and you never said it to me. But you did and I believed you. That was my fault and you ruined my life.’ Tears coursed down my cheeks like molten lava and I swallowed the lump in my throat.

‘I know. I am sorry but I had no option before me. Trust me on this but I always loved you and I don’t remember a single day when you did not cross my mind,’ he said softly.

‘Oh! Please! Just shut up! When was the last time you had any option? Keep your crap to yourself!’ I shouted.

I turned away and head for the exit. It was getting difficult for me each passing second and I didn’t want to break down in his presence. I did not want to give him the pleasure of seeing me in shambles. I hated him from the bottom of my heart, and he needed to know that. I took off running but before I could even go a few steps he caught up with me and grabbed my hand.

‘Whoa! Where are you going?’ he said.

‘Leave me! Leave my hand. I will go wherever I wish.’ I tried to pull my hand free.

‘Can’t you see it is dark outside and if you are suffering from some kind of memory loss then let me remind you that you are still standing in one of the most dreaded parts of Kashmir,’ he said.

‘I don’t care and it’s better to die than to be with you here. Leave me!’ I said.

‘Are you an idiot? I understand our differences yet I am your protector now and you cannot go anywhere until I tell you so. There are not only terrorists here, but also a forest full of wild animals. You should know that,’ he said.

‘I said leave me!’ I gritted my teeth and punched him on his shoulder.

‘Riya! Stop behaving like a kid. We are in enemy territory and it is not safe here,’ he said while I tried hard to get free of his grip.

I was grappling with him like a wild cat and was astonished with the sheer force that I could muster. Nevertheless, he was just ducking his head casually. He lost his cool for a moment and pushed me toward the stone wall behind me and bent both my hands behind my back only to trap them with his hands. Our eyes were locked for a moment before I turned my face to one side grudgingly.

I wouldn’t turn and face him, so he took a step around me and leaned down to put his face in my line of sight. His warm breath was lingering on my face and tingling my neck. The electric sparks surging out of our bodies were so obvious and the air felt too heavy to breathe in. There was this irrepressible tug, the curious magnetic pull drawing me towards him with a ferocious intensity. It was almost beyond the realm of my own self-control.

I shut my eyes as quickly as I could and clenched my fists.

‘I accept whatever you say, and I deserve your hatred. I always knew in my heart that I had lost you forever and I don’t blame you for that. No woman would ever love a man who abandoned her like that. You have all the right to hate me and I promise once I take you to a safe zone you can shoot me with my own Glock pistol, and I won’t complain. But now please listen to me. We are in Kashmir, that too in a forest where if animals don’t kill us, a terrorist definitely will. And our best chances are if we stay right here till I contact my pack and ask for reinforcements. Till then we need to hide. Do you understand?’ he pleaded.

Out of his long speech, only two words ‘*Shoot me*’ caught my attention and the very thought pierced my heart like a dagger.

No! I didn’t mean that. Yes! I hated him, but no! I would die too. I nodded absentmindedly.

He released me from his grip gently. I rubbed my wrists vigorously. He looked apologetic but did not say anything. A few moments passed, we

stood there at the same spot, juggling hard with our inner turmoil and confusions. I had waited a long time for this moment. I had prepared a million speeches in my head to convey my anger and emotions whenever we would meet. But right there, amongst the ancient stone statues in those ruins with the sheer silence of the falling dusk and darkness engulfing us slowly with no one around for miles, I was at a loss for words.

I had imagined this moment many times in my head. A volcanic eruption was already bubbling inside me. The antagonistic forces of love and hate, longing and pain, heartbreak and promises were ripping me apart. For a single moment, I wanted to feel like the universe was not crushing me, my heart was not about to explode.

I was just about to kiss him and tell him not to leave again but you see you cannot seek what was never meant to be yours and you can't hold on to something that you never had.

My eyes were teary, shadowed heavily by our past together. I was trying hard not to succumb and to ignore him but it was tough. It is amazing how fast someone can become a stranger. He had been like a part of my soul until now but something was missing and the old rhythm was long gone. Yet, a part of me believed that somehow he would lay his hands on my soul like a whisper and find the places which were broken, only to heal them with his gentle touch. The faith and resilience in me was astonishing. After loving him and dying daily, I still had so much hope left in my broken heart for this unfathomable, difficult love.

Isn't it something? That I couldn't hate him completely? Damn!

You know the most painful thing in this world is losing yourself in the process of loving someone too much, only to lose them too and forget how alive you were before them.

All love is betrayal, in that it destroys life. The loveless man is best armed for survival!

In that awkward moment, our eyes met again but I turned my face away. He leaned in and asked, 'What?'

I took in a deep breath, let it out slowly and said, 'Nothing! Just thinking about how someone can cause you so much pain!'

He was silenced for a moment and then said, 'Riya! I loved you from the very first moment I saw you walking amongst those paintings in Delhi. I never felt like that before. It was love at first sight. But I always knew my limitations and never intended to cross your path. But destiny always plays games with us. When you are with me, I cannot concentrate on things. I have no control over myself. Compared to you, everything feels trite and unfulfilling in my pale life! Nothing and no one comes close to making me feel the way I do with you every single time.' He paused for a moment.

‘I don’t know how to make you believe in this thing, but I am lost and trapped in my memories. I find bliss in the longing which I could never possess. I am a stranger to love but I am certainly lost in the beauty, drowning in the desire, so much so that when I close my eyes, I find you and when I open them, I miss you. It hurts sometimes and I try hard to shake away your existence in my heart but I can’t seem to do so,’ he said.

‘You think you will say these fancy words and I will believe you... again?’ I grimaced.

‘Never for a second! But do you think a man like me who carries his life on his sleeves, fully aware of the uncertainties that the next second can bring, would ever intend to love a girl like you? I am not your boy next door and I don’t enjoy the luxury of playing with words. I have little time for everything. I am a man of my word, I am helpless when I say it,’ he said adamantly.

‘What do you mean a girl like me?’ I narrowed my eyes.

‘Really, Riya? Everything about us is just about you. Right? Okay you want to know, I will tell you today.’ He paused for a moment and inhaled deeply.

‘A girl like you means a girl who is meant to be loved. A girl so full of life that she has the power to brighten up a valley of death and can melt a killer’s heart. A girl whose eyes speak more than her lips. A girl who looks angelic when she smiles. A girl who likes to grow her own wings and fly high in the sky so that nobody can touch her. A girl who still believes in fairy tales and wonderlands. A girl whose gaze can never leave your memories. A girl with whom you enjoy only one option of falling in love and never coming out of that feeling,’ he said earnestly.

‘Do you think it was an option for me? No! I was never meant to love you. But I do!’

I was breathing heavily. I closed my eyes and let those tears course down my cheeks. I could not take this any longer.

This man was unreal. I would not fall for this again.

‘Really? And what did you do? Left me like that and did not even bother with an explanation? I deserved that much. I lost track of time waiting for you endlessly until I believed that you were never coming back to me. And one day you turn up like this to tell me how much you have suffered? No, Captain Virat! No! You cannot play the victim here,’ I said with sheer disgust in my voice.

‘No! I don’t mean that...I...’ He was cut off mid-sentence by the sudden beep on his sophisticated radio communication set.

‘Alpha to Tiger! Alpha to Tiger! Connect!’ Some mechanic static voices were crackling out of it.

‘Tiger to Alpha! Tiger to Alpha! Connected! Go Ahead!’ Virat responded in military style.

‘Please confirm your coordinates. All units stand by!’ the voice on the other side commanded.

‘GPS shows 33.934 degrees north, 75.113 degree east at an ancient ruin along with a package. Over!’ Virat responded again.

‘Copy that! Twenty Sierra on move! Standby there!’ The command meant for him to wait until the rescue team arrived.

‘Wilco!’ Virat would comply.

‘Transmission complete! Over and out!’ said the voice at the other end.

‘Roger that! Over and out!’ Virat immediately switched off the radio set once the transmission was over.

I was dumbfounded. I mean, it was not astonishing to watch him communicate over a radio set but I certainly got goosebumps all over considering how he was listening to me patiently just a few moments before, like a boy next door, when in reality he was not. He was certainly not a regular guy, how could have I ever expected anything regular from him? Maybe commitments and promises were not his cup of tea!

I was supposed to hate him but instead I was fascinated by him all over again. This was really disgusting. I was backstabbing all the feminists out there. The self-dignity inside me was literally shaking its head in despair while I keep putting her in such compromising positions again and again.

How is this even possible, I wondered. Who is this man overpowering me each and every time? Why do I give up? I should be hating him truly, deeply and madly.

But was it really my fault? Wanting and loving him came naturally to me. It was beyond the realm of my consciousness. One glance at him and my heart would kneel down before his supreme manliness which exuded power and authority all the time. My heart, my mind, my soul refused to move forward and gripped me with an intense craving for him. It made me weak and numb. But do we really have control over how we feel for somebody? Can we stop ourselves from falling for someone even if we know he’s just not right and only means trouble? Do we really control our feelings before falling for a person and govern our minds to make choices?

Besides, there is something about men in uniform.

Once you fall for a man in uniform, you would never ever like any other man. He kind of looked sexy with his knee caps, adjusting his devices, checking his weapons, wiping his knife and looking for a place to hang them over his pitch black uniform on belts and specially designed pockets.

I was ashamed of myself. It was hopeless; accept it, Riya, I thought. Die!

Dusk had now turned into night. Suddenly nothing was visible except for what I could make out in the full moon night. The full moon and clear sky reminded me of all those legendary Bollywood romance movies where love blossoms between two unknown people (always a male and a female) who meet each other at such a spot in a forest on a glittering full moon night against some inevitable constraints while the full moon bestows all the ardour upon them through its romantic rays generating some real passion between the two.

And yes, a thunderstorm and sudden torrential rains would always pave the path further, for all kinds of possibilities ranging from a passionate smooch to everything possible behind two flowers or two pigeons mating on screen.

There is a reason why generations love *Dilwale Dulhania le Jayenge*, *Aashiqui 2*, *Raja Hindustani* and *Shree 420*. How can you forget Kajol dancing while Shah Rukh runs behind her crazily? Or Shraddha Kapoor and Aditya Roy Kapoor under the jacket? Aamir smooching Karisma, or Raj Kapoor singing *Pyar hua, iqrar hua* to Nargis?

Torrential rains instigate a million different romantic possibilities. Monsoon, after all, is our official season for love. TV channels cannot get over repeating these vivid romantic movies over and over again, along with *Suryavansham* of course for no particular reason.

I heaved a loud sigh!

‘What happened?’ he asked.

‘Nothing!’ I replied sharply.

Suddenly I felt thirsty. The last time I had eaten anything was in the morning and it had been twelve straight hours without water as well; the thought itself made me extremely thirsty. I licked my lips but I had already reached the point of dehydration by then. I started licking my lips and shaking my head in despair.

Alarmed by my condition he said, ‘What happened?’

I stared at him in frustration and said, ‘Virat, I am thirsty.’

He took out a pouch from his pocket and asked me to drink. I grabbed it greedily and finished it at one go.

‘Hey! This is how you drink water? You were supposed to take only a few sips and save it for future use.’ He was visibly annoyed.

‘How was I supposed to know? I was extremely thirsty. I could have died,’ I defended myself.

‘No one dies like this. You die without water only after three days and three weeks without food. But if you train well you can in fact go comfortably eight to ten days without water too. And you drank it all like that!’ he retaliated.

‘Oh God! Virat you should understand I am not your “comrade in arms” but a common person. We drink as much water as we want when we feel thirsty.’ I mimicked his pedantic voice.

‘I should have waited before giving you the water. Now I will have to go look for water in the dark.’ He looked exasperated.

‘What do you mean? Are you thinking of fetching water now?’ I was shocked.

‘Yes, madam! Right now! It is eight in the evening and I can easily look around and come back here in an hour or two. I need to go, but you stay here. It is not safe for you to come with me,’ he said.

I felt really exasperated and wished I had taken basic survival classes in school or at least watched *Bear Grylls: Extreme Survival* on Discovery channel where he shows you how to deal with life-and-death situations by sheer quick thinking, feats of endurance, basic survival techniques or sometimes just by pure luck. That way I could have realized the importance of water in such situations, if not anything else.

‘I am not staying here in this wretched place alone at this hour. I am coming with you,’ I said.

‘No! I am not taking you with me. Not only will you slow me down but also it is much safer here. The jungle is not just full of wild animals and boars but also crawling with insects and poisonous snakes. Nope! No chance! Stay here lady!’ he said adamantly.

‘I will die of a heart attack here. It is pretty scary. Please take me with you. Please.’ I fluttered my eyelashes.

‘Look, Riya, it is not safe out there. Hopefully water should be nearby. Kashmir is full of mountain streams. I will be back soon,’ he tried to persuade me.

‘Hopefully?? And how do you plan to find your way in the dark?’ I asked.

‘I have night vision devices and GPS, madam. At NSG we are provided the best weapons and devices and I am also trained to deal with extreme situations. Don’t worry about me,’ he said earnestly.

‘GPS? Does it really work here? In this jungle? What kind of GPS do you guys have? I have no faith in all this. Please, please take me along with you, I promise I won’t be any trouble. Please Virat! Please!’

Survival is really tough. He was supposed to plead before me but instead I was doing all the begging. Sigh!

‘But you won’t bug me with your questions anymore. We have to be quiet or it could be dangerous. Okay?’

‘Pukka! God promise. See I am mute already,’ I chirped.

‘Okay, follow me and always keep your eye on me. You will follow my instructions no matter what I say. Don’t even think of your stupid heroics

for a second. You will do as I say. Is that clear?' he commanded.

'Okay!' I said, as if I had an option.

He wrapped his right hand firmly around his Heckler and Koch MP5 submachine gun and with his left hand he produced a night vision device that resembled 3D goggles. He fixed it over his eyes.

Then, he signalled for me to move.

15. When the Stars Speak

We moved out of the ruins, only to find an area of thick undergrowth sloping steeply into dense forests of rhododendron, chinar, spruce, birch and juniper. The forest was buzzing with sounds and the drowsy hum of insects. I was trotting along with him, trying to keep up with his fast pace. He picked his way carefully through the forest and we soon encountered the higher rocky reaches of the mountain which told me that we were no longer in the plains. I could see some caves in the distance and massive boulders.

‘Do you hear that?’ he said. ‘I guess there is a stream around here.’

I nodded. Frankly, I did not hear anything except jungle sounds.

‘There it is! We can go back much sooner than I anticipated,’ he said happily, and produced a very tiny torch from his belt and lit it.

Suddenly a burst of gunfire came our way.

Virat jumped to a cover position taking me along with him behind a boulder, which provided excellent cover. He immediately returned fire, following the direction of gunfire. There was a return of gunfire from the other side, bullets ricocheted off the boulders with deadly unpredictability. Then a couple of grenades flew in, bursting dangerously close, sending splinters flying. The militants were hiding in a cave up in the mountains, using it as a complex cover, surrounded by rocks and trees and at a tricky elevation. The forest sounds were replaced by the sounds of gunfire which continued for several minutes.

I crouched down and cowered behind him, with my hands over my ears, which were ringing because of the firing. The burst of gunfire died down after some time. Virat settled down near me and started reloading his gun with lightning speed. Meanwhile, the firing from the other side resumed.

He said, ‘Riya! Don’t worry! I think it is just two of them. I will take care of it. You are safe, don’t worry.’

‘I know I will be safe. That is not what I am worried about,’ I replied meekly.

‘Then?’ All the while counting his grenades.

‘I am worried about our fate together. Are we destined to meet in such circumstances? Last time it happened, you abandoned me just like that, are you going to repeat that?’

Tears were rolling down my cheeks.

‘If ever I loved anyone after my mother and motherland, then it is you. You provide meaning to the life inside me. Meeting you is the best thing that has ever happened to me. But there are things which are not in my hands. I cannot promise you things or a future.’ He took his position once again.

He was met with a hail of bullets which he dodged perfectly. Sensing their exact location, Virat began lobbing grenades toward the cave. There were huge explosions and one of the terrorists got injured and rolled down. Virat shot him down instantly. He kept firing in short bursts in the direction of the remaining militant. Surprisingly, I was not afraid anymore. I had had enough of these bomb blasts and deadly terrorists firing bullets at me. Death did not scare now.

Life is a beautiful deception bound by only one truth—death!

In fact, they are two sides of one coin and you never know which side will turn up before you. They are two ends of one thread and the fear of death is followed by the fear for life; actually, watching Virat taught me the biggest lesson of my life ever—those who live their lives fully are prepared to die anytime. For them death is just a part of life as simple as life is, they are equals and equally welcome, what matters to these ferocious souls is the call of duty.

What matters the most between life and death is *happiness* .

And happiness is a very personal thing, this one emotion is not uniform for everyone and the purpose of this life is to find the source of your own happiness and give your best to achieve it only to die meaningfully. There are things in life we wish never happened but have to accept, things we don't want to know but have to learn and people we cannot live without but have to let go. This is life, and death is inevitable.

Why scared? In fact lucky are the men who die a glorious death!

They say your entire life flashes before you when you are about to die, but a life-threatening situation also has the potential of leading you towards self-actualization. I stole a glance at Virat again. He looked sharp, calm and focused. Not an ounce of misery on his glowing face.

Firing bullets with complete professionalism. I smiled.

This is what he must have been doing all this time while I stopped my life, mourning over the separation. But was that my fault? Was that easy? I did not know, but I surely had no remorse left in my heart. I was destined to be a part of something extraordinary and I should be proud of myself. Dwelling over misery would not do. It was a silent promise I made to myself.

After all, falling for a commando comes with repercussions!

Queen Elizabeth had said, ‘ If you love an army officer, raise your glass and if an army officer loves you then raise your head and walk like a

queen.’ The pride of being with a lion is regal, not everybody gets to experience it. The men serving my motherland, standing fearlessly before enemy and death and dealing with it daily, cannot be expected to fulfil the promises of domestic life. You learn to embrace life and value every second of it with or without him. Once you fall for a man in uniform, how can you expect a normal love life?

The pain, separation, heartbreak, agony and afflictions are as much part of the love story of a man in uniform as much as love, bliss, jubilation, euphoria and contentment. And that is what balances the extraordinary romance between the knight in shining armour and a fair maiden.

Virat kept firing until the other militant died. The firing stopped and I tried to get up from my cowering position, but he immediately pulled me back and said, ‘What are you doing?’

‘Getting up! Now that there is no more threat,’ I said.

‘And how do you know that?’ His eyes widened in astonishment at my sheer stupidity.

‘Look! I am not trained like you.’ I felt offended.

‘We wait here for some time before we move. Okay?’ he said.

‘Okay!’ I nodded.

I curled down on that hard and cold rock, unable to sit anymore on my sore bum while he continued to be in his alert ambush position. Gazing at the stars up in the clear sky made me feel that everything was as normal as it ever was. I giggled a bit. Surprised, he asked, ‘What happened?’

‘Stars!’ I replied. ‘Don’t they look beautiful? Magnificent, in fact! Aren’t they?’ I asked.

He stared up briefly and said, ‘Yes! They are.’

‘You know! When I was a little girl, I would think that stars were made up of all the dead people in this world including my grandparents. I would often go to my roof at night and gaze at the stars for hours. When I grew up to be a teen, my fascination for the sparkling stars did not die and I would gaze at them relentlessly, trying to figure out what to do with my life. It brought me a lot of solace. Then, when I achieved everything I had set out to, the stars went away, creating space for people, noises and the pandemonium of urban life,’ I said, almost as if speaking to myself.

‘You know what I did with the stars?’ he said. ‘I would always look for my favourite constellations in the sky, only to create hundreds of stories of kings, queens and wars through them. I always felt as if they could hear my stories. Sometimes, I would close my eyes to make a wish if ever I saw a falling star. I would be very happy as if I had touched that star myself,’ he said.

‘And what would you wish?’ I asked.

‘I wanted to be the king of this world back then.’ He laughed.

‘That you are! Your wish was fulfilled.’ I giggled.

‘What did you want?’ he asked.

‘I wanted to be a painter, then a mommy, then a sailor, then a teacher, then a nurse before settling for engineering, which seemed like the best available option to me at that time,’ I replied.

‘A mommy?’

‘Yes, I was five, maybe six and I was hugely fascinated by my mom. I wanted to be like her, dress like her and tend to babies the way she would tend to me. I wanted to do everything she would do. I literally believed that being a mommy was a job.’ I giggled some more.

‘Let me know if you ever try to fulfil your childhood dream, maybe I could be of some help.’ He winked.

‘You! Pervert! You know what, you are an arse. Shut up!’ I slapped him coyly on his cheeks.

Suddenly there was a downpour, and the night plunged into a sudden chill.

‘Oh shit! Virat, do something! Should we seek shelter? Should we move?’ I asked desperately.

‘No! This is the best case scenario for a sniper who might be waiting for a moment just like this. Stay low and quiet. I will tell you when we have to move,’ he said.

‘But it’s getting cold.’ I was shivering by then.

He pulled me towards him and wrapped his arms around me, trying to cover me as much as he could beneath him. I tried to pull away.

‘What the *fuck* ? What are you doing?’ I groaned, coming out of his grip.

‘Come here! It is strictly professional. You will feel warmer.’ At first, he held his arms out away from his huge, masculine body. Then slowly, awkwardly, he wrapped his arms around me once again and patted my shoulders.

There! The resilience inside me surrendered.

The rebel was long gone, and I dissolved into deep hiccupping sobs, my head was nestled against his chest, tears wetting his already soggy uniform and my arms wrapped in a death grip around his waist. There had been a void inside me for the past few months, like a black hole which absorbs everything inside it and anything that passes by, sucking it up silently, and escape is literally forbidden around it.

I had become like that, pain, grief, anger, anguish, desolation and everything else was sucked up inside my heart silently. But do you know what happens when a black hole explodes? It fills up the sky with an explosion never experienced before, creating new universes, making space for new lives.

There was no stopping me now, everything inside me was coming out as tears.

That black hole inside me was shrinking in size with each passing second. My sobs started to slow, and in a few moments I regained my calm, and reason returned to me fully. Suddenly, I was aware of Virat tightening his grip around my shoulders and how I was huddled against him. Embarrassment washed over me. I shrunk some more, unable to move.

As if unmoved by my condition, struggling with his own demons, he said, ‘You know, Riya! What I hate most?’

And answered himself, ‘The dew!’

‘I have been to missions in deep jungles, sometimes on snowy mountains too, and although we are trained to fight urban warfare in cities, jungles and mountains also come as a part of the mission sometimes. You actually never can predict what threatens the security of your city and where you might stumble upon danger. I don’t know why but all the terrorists have a knack for dark, gloomy and difficult places,’ he said as if talking to himself.

‘The helicopter would always drop us a few miles before our target destination, mostly in deep forests or sometimes even in the water. Sometimes even slithering is not an option so we just dive down with the help of our parachutes or just jump straight into the ice cold chilly waters of oceans or rivers. They hide themselves well. We always go out as a pack, never alone. Our brother’s back is more important to us than our own. And, that assures our survival.’ He paused for a moment.

‘We lay traps, hold our positions and stay perfectly still for hours and hours. Initially, the body will protest out of agony and pain but then it accepts it. Night falls and it gets colder but still you find it okay while waiting patiently for the prey to run out of patience and just do something, anything. But after two in the night the dew starts.’ He inhaled deeply.

‘You don’t wear your plastic gear because it will make sounds. So you have no option but to be still while the dew seeps in and gets into everything. It goes into your bones slowly. And still you have to sit there, getting colder and colder. You cannot even sneeze. I truly, deeply and madly hate dew.’

I did not know what to say to that, so I just nodded.

I asked him slowly, ‘Where were you gone, Virat? You said you would find me.’

‘Riya! I don’t know how to tell you this and I hate to tell you this but there were nights when I cried for hours remembering you, only because I wanted to see you one more time, but I could not even do that,’ he said.

‘Why? Do you even realize what I have gone through? After all that happened between us in the Taj, I thought we were meant to be together

forever but you did not even call me once! Did I not deserve a simple explanation, even when you were planning to leave me like that?' I demanded.

'Riya! After the attacks, there was a lot of briefing and meetings where we were called as a team to record our statements, it took us almost a month. When the public rage and international murmurs died down, we were tasked with a complete wipe out of the sleeper cell which acted as the local terrorist thread in the city. The intensity of the attack was not possible without the extensive reach of local sleeper cells.' He paused for a moment.

'You might be aware that it was not just the Taj but the entire city that was targeted. You would have also heard about a terrorist caught during the Taj attacks. There was a reason he was kept alive. He provided us with a lot of information that helped us nab many other people involved. From renowned politicians, to bureaucrats, to a movie star to a tea stall vendor, they were all monitored and wiped out silently as and when required.' He inhaled deeply.

'It was Operation Revenge which was fulfilled very quietly, away from the lenses of international communities. We did many things and raided many people including foreign diplomats, which is not even allowed by Indian laws, but we did everything we needed to safeguard the city. The Mumbai sleeper cell was so deep-rooted that it took us months to locate and wipe it out from our economic capital. The ministry of home affairs had to even approve a new regional hub in Mumbai after realizing the reach of the local sleeper cells. There is a reason that no attack has happened until now. Everybody is on our radar all the time,' he said.

I snuggled deeper into his arms and he tightened his grip in response.

'So? Does that mean you could not even contact me, how do you justify that?' I asked.

'How do you think I could contact you when I was not even sure of the next minute? I was on a deadly mission, but I knew you were fine. Sometimes I would sit in the coffee house across your office just to steal that one glance of you. But I did not want to put you at risk anymore or wait for me when I was not aware of my own future,' he said.

'What? All this while you were there in Mumbai?' I was shocked.

'Yes, I was, but I was almost like a ghost in the city while on mission. But yes, when the desolation would kick in, I would hang around your office or peep into your apartment through my telescope, I so wanted to come and hold you tight when you would stare out of your window for hours,' he said.

'What? What? It means all this while you were aware of my mental state and still did not bother to show up. How come it is fair that you were

watching me all the time while I was not even aware of your existence.’ I pulled myself away from his embrace, shaking in shock.

‘Haven’t you heard of this legendary saying—everything is fair in love and war?’ he said jokingly.

‘Lame! What happened next?’ I asked.

‘Once, the mission was accomplished, I went to your flat with a bunch of red roses to meet you but it was locked and none of your neighbours knew where you had gone. I even went to your office and enquired about you, but they didn’t know your current location. I could have tried to find you if I was not recommended for an Advanced Weaponry Training course in Israel soon after.’ He gazed down once his eyes met my burning eyes.

‘I got a window period of a few days to prepare and I roamed around like crazy, even went to Nariman Point. The black waves looked like they were mocking me. I thought I had lost you forever. I regretted not contacting you then,’ he said slowly.

‘Then I left for Israel. The hectic schedule and extensive training kept me busy enough and I was glad for it. By the end of the day I would be so tired that I would fall asleep as soon as I stepped inside my room. That kept my mind away from you. Two weeks ago, when I came back to the country, I was asked to report back to my headquarters in New Delhi, where my seniors put me in charge of the prime minister’s security shell.’ He paused for a moment.

‘This was his first tour after I joined, and I saw you the very moment I stepped out of the helicopter. Only God knows how much strength it took for me not to run to you and embrace you. My uniform kept me bound to my duty and I tried to ignore you but then the terrorists attacked suddenly, and I saw you trying to get yourself killed again which is not going to be possible as long as I am alive,’ he said.

‘Don’t say it like that! What happened to the prime minister?’ I asked.

‘He escaped the bomb exclusively targeted at him by a second. It is all about that one second which decides who wins, who loses. A human shield was formed immediately and he was safely escorted to a bulletproof armoured vehicle. The vehicle headed straight to the helicopter and then he was sent back to New Delhi safely,’ he said.

‘So, you were basically running behind the damsel in distress, leaving the prime minister? This is what you do?’ I mocked him.

‘Madam! Don’t keep any illusions inside your head. We are always prepared for the worst and our roles are predefined. In fact our motto is “Sarvatra Sarvottama Suraksa”—we are the best. When it happened, everyone did what they were supposed to do, including me. My role is to

attack and neutralize the threat. That I did, and when I saw that you were in distress, it was also part of my duty to protect you,' he said, mimicking my tone.

'Okay! So, if it does not fall under your job purview, you will not save me? Right?' I rolled my eyes.

'Oh! No, no! I don't mean that.' He defended himself.

'Leave! You just accepted the truth by yourself.' I fluttered my eyelashes.

'I could kill a hundred terrorists at one go but cracking this girl code is beyond my capacities. You did not notice the thousand good things I mentioned, but one stray statement and you misquote it superbly. Is it some kind of secret code of conduct or cult thing among you girls?' he asked innocently.

'What? I misquoted? You just said it yourself.' I was offended.

'God! Your eyes! You are mysterious,' he said, as if unmoved by my remarks.

'What do you mean?' I rolled my eyes.

'You want to know? Well, you are all about mystery, adventure and risk. Your heart is full of wild things and this drives me crazy for you. In fact, you are not a regular girl. You are special,' he said earnestly.

'No! I don't think so. I hate adventures, in fact,' I defended myself.

'It is only because you are full of it. You see, adventure is one of your basic elements. The more I try to know you, the more I fall for you. You are a blend of all things intriguing—the fearlessness, the zeal and the spark. You don't seek anyone's validation and that is what liberates you. That is what makes you very interesting. Almost like a rare species. Why do you think I am so hooked?' He smiled warmly.

'I never knew that about me. I always thought everybody hated my guts.' It was strange to listen to all these things from him.

'Yes! They do, because you are not conventional or stereotypical. You are a rebel and they are not. They hate not being you. See how wonderfully you adapted yourself here to these alien lands, away from your people and everything else that defined your life once. It came so naturally to you.'

I realized he was right. The resilience in me emerges out of that deep craving to explore things my way. I could not keep up with my job, my colleagues hated my guts, nobody could keep up a friendship with me, I ran away from everything and my parents were always worried about me. It explained my tendency to find misery, only because it was so not me. This also explained my deep craving for Virat and why I could never let him go.

He completed me! He was my better half!

I was suddenly very happy.

Sometimes it takes a second to attain nirvana. The day you start seeing yourself through your own eyes and not someone else's, it sets you free forever. The day you realize that you need to do things because they matter to you and not someone else, you become a liberated person. Self-realization teaches you to hold on to your beliefs firmly till you reach your goal.

Suddenly that deep frustration and sheer hatred I had inculcated inside me for so long was replaced by the pure joy of discovering the 'true me'. I was special!

16. Jungle Love

The sadness deep inside me was gone in a second. I may not be that great, but I certainly was special. I had tried hard to fit into society, please everyone, but I could not, because I was never meant to please anyone but myself. I made my own choices. I was a free person. My eyes were glowing like hundred-watt bulbs and all the grief and pain inside me melted away. Being with your soulmate is therapeutic and it heals your deepest wounds. Virat had the same alluring effect on me.

‘Thank you.’

‘Why? I mean it, you are wild, reckless and anything but helpless. I am dreaded by the most dangerous men and here you control me like a puppy. Because you see, I am a shadow myself. Sharing myself is amongst the most uncomfortable things for me. But with you, it comes naturally. Your spirits match my demons perfectly,’ he said with dreamy eyes.

The earth beneath me turned into a raging inferno and consumed me at once.

I pulled him towards me by his neck and touched my cheeks against his. We kissed like Armageddon was heading straight to us and this would be our last night. The explosive passion and pain hidden deep inside our souls erupted into that one kiss. We kissed for several long minutes, before he pushed me away, breathing heavily.

His eyes were apologizing, and he said, ‘No! Not again. I cannot.’

But it meant nothing to me, I pulled him close to me again and started kissing his neck, biting his nose, ears, teasing him and tracing his face with my lips. He stepped back a little and clenched his fists. My senses were long gone and the longing inside me was surfacing again and again. I put my arms around his waist and pulled him towards my bosom, tilting my head backwards.

There! The boundaries were shattered and he lost his senses too. His torrid kisses trailed down my flesh deliberately.

He was scared, scared to love me and lose me again.

He knew what it was like to carry around a love so heavy. He knew what it was like to love and be lost forever, never to meet again.

Lovemaking lets you know things about a man which you would never know ordinarily, and I could make out that he was terrified. He did not

want to lose me. The thrill of being wanted was so exhilarating that it wiped out all sense and reason as I wrapped him tightly in my arms before pushing him to the barren rocks beneath. Emotions streaked inside me like lightning and I kissed him deeply. He held me close, feeling my softness, imprinting my lines on him. Centuries must have passed since he had last held me, and his body was heating up in spite of the cold that surrounded us in that Kashmiri forest. The rain had stopped but I was not cold. His breath felt fiery like a dragon's against my naked skin and I was hot as hell.

He said, 'I loved you, and will always love you. There is no tomorrow for me and you are my eternity.'

There was a tenderness to his lovemaking. I could not believe the way he made me feel every time. There was no urgency but worship. The admiration of my whole self was so visible by the manner he loved me, truly, deeply and madly. I did not know if other people felt like this. The maddening vibes, the grinding rhythm, the fiery breath, the touch and feel of our flesh, the moaning of our souls, the craving for some more and the celebration of our love—all of it came together in one moment.

He was not my other half, with us there were no halves, no quarters, no parts at all. There was only a whole. Together, we were one unit, one entity, one intensely burning flame that burst into being whenever we came together, one single form of energy packed densely as if the bonding between us was forever.

He shuddered over me and rested his head gently on my shoulder. With the sweat soaked curls falling on his forehead, his closed eyes and the curves around his lips, he looked devastatingly handsome. I ruffled his hair gently and kissed him on his forehead. There was so much love in the air. The jungle sounds had changed, they felt rhythmic, welcoming and familiar. We stared into each other's eyes for some time before he broke the silence.

'I think we should stay here. Dawn will soon break and I will connect with my pack again and give them the new coordinates,' he said.

I nodded and sat there silently for some time only to drift off to sleep encroached in that closed space among those boulders. Soon, dawn broke and I could see a whole new spectrum of light and feel a whole new set of aspirations bubbling inside me, and the enthusiasm in my body was astonishing. I could feel the wholeness again. There was contentment and peace in my head. Something I had been seeking for ages.

There was something between me and Virat.

Some would say it was chemistry but if you looked deep inside the chemistry then there was a mingling of energies creating a spectrum of happy colours, giggling and laughing, lifting our moods suddenly. The laughter came easily, the happiness radiated on the skin, and life was bliss.

If that is what you mean by chemistry, then yes we had a great chemistry. There was a reason I had not been able to move on.

We were two complementaries of one soul and we loved each other, beyond time and space!

17. Behind Enemy Lines

I woke up to bright sunlight shining through the trees. The jungle was filled with the sounds of birds chirping. Suddenly, the previous night flashed before my eyes and my cheeks turned red.

‘Hope Her Highness slept well on her cozy bed and here is your tea.’ I could sense Virat smiling behind his words.

‘Shut up!’ I stared at him with fake anger.

‘That hurts! I was expecting some poetry and a hearty smile first thing in the morning after working the whole night,’ he said, his face carrying a naughty expression.

‘Shut up! Stop being a jerk and now move, bring me some tea, preferably coffee.’ I yawned and stretched my arms, folding my hands behind my head as if I were on a chaise lounge.

‘Anything else, Your Highness? Toast? Doughnuts or juice?’ He pretended to be a waiter.

‘Well, toast will do just fine,’ I replied sweetly.

‘Hello? Where are you? Last night we had a close escape from death, and we are sitting here in this jungle with no one around for miles. My team has not reached yet so I have to be on guard and you are behaving as if you are on a luxury vacation?’ he replied.

‘Then stop being a jerk yourself. Okay? What do you mean by working through the night?’ I mimicked him.

‘Ahhh! You pervert! Dirty mind! I meant I did not sleep the entire night because I was guarding you while you slept like a baby elephant,’ he teased.

‘Shut up! I know what you mean? Don’t lie.’ My cheeks were red again.

‘Oh that! If you are insisting so much then I have even decided the names of our kids too. We will have two kids—one boy, just like me, and one girl just like you. We will name our boy Rahul and our girl Tina. We will have two dogs and one cat too. Sweet! Isn’t it?’ His eyes gleamed, and there was a broad smile over his face all the while.

‘Really? Are you not planning to keep pigs and horses along with some hens around? And of course the farm, where you will work and I will

come bring you roti daal packed in a tiffin box, clad in a ghagra-choli?’ I replied sternly.

‘Exactly! This is what I was thinking. See, we are now reciprocating each other’s thoughts,’ he said excitedly.

‘Shut up! Okay? Shut up!’ I said, raising my pitch. ‘I don’t know how to cook. Okay? I need a fully furnished house in an urban location with a gym and swimming pool nearby. There will be two full-time maids at our house and kids will be planned for after six–seven years of our marriage, and by the way nobody uses names like Rahul and Tina anymore. This is so Nineties. Come out of your clichés. We will name them Aarav and Mannat. Okay?’ It was as if I was debating over a life or death situation.

He came closer to me and pulled me towards him. He buried his hands in my hair, stroked it a little, kissed my forehead and said, ‘Okay!’

I was stunned. The warmth of his touch and the security of his presence in my life was priceless. I rested my head against his chest and asked, ‘Virat, this is not a dream, no?’

‘No! Of course not!’ he replied.

‘You will not leave me this time, no?’ I asked feebly.

‘No! Riya, no! I cannot imagine my life without you. Please don’t say that,’ and he wrapped his arms more tightly around me.

Right then, his radio set crackled with voices, ‘Sierra to Tiger! Sierra to Tiger! Connect!’

‘Tiger to Sierra! Tiger to Sierra! Connected! Go ahead!’ he replied.

‘We crossed the ruins a long time back and are seeing some huge rocks around us. Confirm!’ The voice on the other side said.

He removed himself from the embrace and replied, ‘Tiger holding the fort! Over!’

‘We are closing in! Be alert! Over!’ the voice said.

‘Over and out!’ he replied and switched off the set before hanging it back on his belt.

‘Please get up! My rescue team will be here in two minutes. I am so relieved,’ he said brightly.

I was relieved too but a little sad. I was beginning to enjoy our jungle romance. I could totally relate with Adam and Eve and the mistakes they made creating humankind eventually. Maybe we could have created a whole new world again. I was totally cool about living the rest of my life under the thatched roof of a hut constructed by Virat, cooking food on a wood fire made after rubbing two stones for an hour.

It was so *Blue Lagoon*- ish. *Sigh* !

I could hear loud footsteps and two NSG commandos wearing pherans approached us out of nowhere. They were waving semi-automatic

machine guns in their hands and exuded the same kind of deadliness as Virat in spite of being disguised as locals.

Dark and dreaded!

I slid behind Virat, suddenly conscious of my vulnerability.

‘Captain Virat! So good to see you! We have been asked to conduct a friendly extraction of you along with the package as soon as possible. The hostile environment does not permit a helicopter to land here and we have to cover around two miles back to Indian borders on feet,’ one of the commandos conveyed the official order in a very professional manner.

‘What? Indian borders?’ He looked shocked.

‘Yes, sir! We are in Pakistan-occupied Kashmir. The ruins were the last Indian grounds just before the LOC and you have somehow entered PoK. The senior command is worried about your safety and we have been ordered to bring you back at any cost,’ the other commando said.

‘I thought the GPS showed coordinates to Indian terrain. How did you guys reach us then?’ he asked.

‘These are occupied lands with no international recognition so maybe their de facto status created the confusion with the coordinates. This mission is beyond standard search and rescue operations and we were asked to rescue you behind the enemy lines. Headquarters had to invoke several new protocols for initiating this rescue mission. The para commandos posted around the area were ordered to carry out a joint operation with us and provide complete support for your extraction,’ he said.

‘Oh! Too much trouble especially when we are with the lady.’ He turned towards me.

‘How about the weapons?’ He turned around again and asked him.

‘Weapons are no issues. We’ve got enough time to gear up, in fact paras are carrying two weapon totes with them along with a rocket launcher.’ He smiled.

‘What? Why the hell did you carry a holy fucking launcher with you?’ He looked startled.

‘The paras carried it being our local guides and we could not intervene much. They keep on crossing this side of the LOC and said you never know when you need to shred the bastards into pieces.’ This time he let out a laugh.

‘Okay! Looks like you have got everything covered here. By the way Vaibhav meet Riya!’ He gestured towards me.

‘Hello ma’am! Nice to meet you. Wait! You said Riya, sir? The Riya from the Taj? The same one whose photo you carry in your wallet?’ His eyes were wide.

I turned red and gazed downwards. It was all getting so embarrassing. Shit! These deadly looking guys know all about our little

romance and what not.

‘Yes!’ he replied briefly and then turned towards me and said, ‘Hey Riya! Meet Captain Vaibhav, he is junior to me but we did our NSG training together.’

‘Hi!’ I said rather awkwardly.

‘Hey ma’am! I must say sir is super lucky to keep on meeting such pretty faces all the time while chasing terrorists. And here I am so short on luck that I get to protect old or bald men all the time, sometimes with huge paunches. Not that they are not important but I never got to save a pretty girl during any of my operations. Ha ha!’ He looked so excited stating all this while I was wondering how many more pretty faces Virat had met.

‘Pretty faces all the times? If I may ask, how many more such faces have crossed paths with Virat.’ I rolled my eyes.

All that vulnerability was long gone and the possessive girlfriend was back again.

‘Oye! Shut it! Okay! Riya, he is just kidding. Don’t mind. And you, Vaibhav ji, don’t forget we are in PoK. In fact, last night I had an encounter with two militants there.’ He gestured towards the caves above.

A shiver ran down my spine remembering last night’s events and I was quiet once again.

‘That looks like a kind of watch tower arrangement there. It means we are close to some terror launch pads in the area and we must hurry. As soon as their fellow friend detects it they will surely come down here,’ Vaibhav said seriously.

‘Yes! Let’s move! Where are the para guys?’ he said.

‘They are keeping a watch on these rocks and waiting for our signal to move,’ Vaibhav replied.

Virat picked up his semi-automatic MP5 submachine gun again. He checked the magazine and then signalled for us to move. This time we moved in a formation.

I was walking almost in a semicircle surrounded by all three men with their MP5 submachine guns aimed at an unknown enemy. Virat was behind me and the other two NSG guys were on my left and right. This kind of security attention made me nervous but I managed to climb down the rocks somehow, fumbling sometimes.

The emptiness you feel over the barren mountains and the echoing feeling of your insignificance is dramatically changed once you come back to the plains; lush greenery not only feels welcoming but also allows you to be a part of it. That is how I felt once we reached the bottom. Surprisingly I was not scared anymore. The nervousness was replaced by astonishment.

I saw at least six men come out of the bushes once we reached the pre-decided spot and all of them were in pathani suits and pherans, perfect

local disguises, except Virat who was in black overalls. They were carrying Tavor TAR-21 assault rifles unlike the semi-automatic MP5 submachine guns of the NSG commandos. Two of them carried weapons tote bags.

I guessed the weapon preference depended very much upon the kind of training they received. They exchanged salutes together which is equivalent to civilian pleasantries like good morning or good afternoon and even qualifies for a good night among faujis.

‘My magazines are almost over. Do you have some full pellets for MP5?’ Virat asked.

‘Yes, Captain, I do.’ One of the para commandos searched his pheran pockets casually and produced some magazines pellets.

Everybody checked their weapons again while discussing their next course of action. Right at that moment we heard some loud voices that sounded like an argument. It was coming from above the rocks, where we had been. Everybody lurched back and crawled to the bushes to hide themselves while Virat hooked his arms around me and pulled me down along with him. A startled little shriek escaped my mouth but Virat swung around and placed his hand over my mouth and gestured towards the bushes.

While he made his way towards it swiftly, I managed to follow him, scratching my hands and legs badly. Crawling is not as easy as it looks when faujis do it with complete ease and panache.

It hurts.

A few men were climbing down the rocks, crossing the boulders where we sheltered for the night. In such situations seconds count, between life and death. Those fiddly seconds which seem so small and insignificant decide the winners and the losers. Sometimes the cost of losing that one second could mean death.

I knew this, because I had witnessed it before.

I could see a few men wearing fake army uniforms and a few in flowing grey pherans stepping down the grass at the foot of the rocks. Then they ambled over, talking to each other and swinging their Kalashnikov assault rifles as if they were umbrellas. They strode across to the bushes where we were hiding, and I could see them more clearly now.

There were six of them, a few of them had beards, probably in their thirties. The others were clean-shaven and looked extremely young, maybe in their teens. Their thick woolen pherans, kufi caps and fair complexion made them look like typical Kashmiris but their accent was certainly different. The army uniforms looked like cheap imitations of Indian Army combat uniforms which they had teamed up with sports shoes instead of combat boots.

Their gait was aggressive and tense. The elder one pushed one of the teens aggressively, waving his Kalashnikov on his face and shouted some

instructions in Urdu. The teens fanatically started looking around and suddenly one of them bent down to look at the bushes.

Then, right then, the commandos, including Virat, opened fire, spraying the militants with bullets, shredding their bodies and sending blood and bone flying everywhere. They did not even have a chance to use their Kalashnikovs. The protesting whimpers in my mouth emerged as a scream when a shredded hand fell near me. And then silence engulfed the scene of carnage, the hiss from the rifles giving way once again to the sounds of the jungle and the wind blowing across it. I was sobbing hard now and at one point, running away crossed my mind, except, I could not, in my transfixed state.

The pool of blood, bones, tissues, disintegrated body parts, eyes bulging out of their eye sockets or the disintegrated bodies did not make any impact on the commandos, they did not even flinch. They waited for a few more minutes and then came out of their position only to poke around the dead bodies with their rifles, also checking their wallets, mobile phones from bloodied pockets, while the others reloaded their rifles.

It was a brutal and disgusting sight.

Even if they were enemies, how could they disrespect the dead? Was this what one meant when they said—‘everything is fair in love and war’? But who defined these primal rules and can we really judge the ethics of fighters or armies?

Especially when the instincts to survive overpower the morals of conscience?

Virat bent down and offered me his hand, but I was too disoriented by the sudden turn of events and could not muster any courage to take his hand. The bushes suddenly felt like a safe haven.

Hell was right before my eyes.

I closed my eyes to escape the horrible sights and felt him pulling me out. I somehow cooperated with him before I puked. All of them turned towards me and Virat. I was shivering and burning. Virat, suddenly conscious of the other men’s presence, strode towards me and hugged me. My eyes were closed but I could sense the smirks and muffled laughs. I pushed him away, wiped my tears and said slowly, ‘I am okay.’

Instinctively he shot the others a stern look. He intensified his gaze, raised his eyebrows, and a wild grin broke upon his face. They all had a collective laugh while a trace of a smile played on my lips.

‘Okay! I get it but don’t forget we are still behind enemy lines and we should leave this area as soon as possible. Connect me to the headquarters now,’ Virat said.

Vaibhav brought out a mobile phone from one of his many pockets and Virat said, ‘No! No mobile phones! Destroy the chips and keep it back

in your pockets. They can detect our location and feeds. We will communicate only through secure lines. And please make it quick, it is only a matter of time before all hell will break loose here. We need to leave immediately.'

They established contact with headquarters and briefed them about the latest development. New instructions were issued regarding our escape routes and it was confirmed that once we cross the LOC, we would be received by the second rescue team right at the fences. All we had to do was to cover two miles of enemy ground which might possibly be filled with Pakistan's infamous terror launch pads. In case of hostile conditions, they were asked to destroy all evidence of them belonging to the Indian side and neutralize the package— *which would be me dead with terms and conditions applied.*

Life! As we know it!

We began a brisk walk across the rocky summit and descended into a forest. Soon, we were back struggling with thick bushes, stubborn shrubs, tall trees with huge canopies which did not even allow sunrays to pass through and created an aura of eternal darkness and evil. How astonishing, the same Himalayan moist temperate forests felt pleasant back home in India but here, behind enemy lines, everything felt scary and alien.

My heart was palpitating with unknown fear and I tried my best to keep up with the swift pace of the commandos. I even murmured the *Hanuman Chalisa* . 'Please Sankat mochan Hanuman ji, just help me this one time and I promise I will offer you one kg of laddus and visit your temple every Tuesday. Just this one time!'

My life truly sucked!

18. Surgical Strikes

Soon I was breathing heavily with the strenuous activity and I fell down!

One of the commandos walking ahead of me held me in a quick reflex and that invited blazing wrath from Virat. He looked on jealously and did not make any moves for a while and watched me accepting generous help by the para in pheran, almost grudgingly. It's stupid, men think they hide their emotions well, but one push reveals everything. No wonder they believe in solving critical issues and misunderstandings with punches and kicks. Fools!

Virat suddenly knelt down in a deliberate attempt to avoid any eye contact with me. He carefully pulled out a telescope from one of his pockets and held it to his left eye and pointed it towards the opposite side of the jungle ahead of us. And suddenly, through the dappled woods, everyone saw it. There were many barracks several meters from where we were standing.

‘Something is not right here. Everybody hide,’ Virat mumbled.

‘What happened?’ Vaibhav asked.

‘I am seeing a well-organized formation of houses in the woods, looks like a colony. Farmers in this area cannot afford to have such accommodations,’ Virat mumbled again, deeply engrossed in his thoughts.

Suddenly everybody, except me, said simultaneously, ‘Training camps! PoK terrorist training camps!’

Their eyes met and immediately everyone got down on their knees, gripping their TAR-21 assault rifles and MP5 submachine guns into ambush position. Virat squinted through his telescope again and said, ‘I can see several men in pherans. Some are moving around with their rifles on their backs. There is also a group of men sitting together, perhaps playing carom or something. I can also feel a lot of movement inside the houses which are well-maintained barracks, unlike the thatched huts that should be there. There are several wooden crates piled over each other, which might possibly contain weapons. I also see several CCTV cameras installed and dish TV antennas on the rooftops. Such an advanced facility cannot belong to a rogue terrorist organization so it must be Pakistani military. Could they be BATs?’

‘Bats? You mean bats that fly in the sky?’ I regretted saying it immediately.

‘Pakistan Border Action Team!’ The same para who held me earlier replied rather softly. His name was Aakash. I smiled back at him while glancing towards Virat from the corner of my eyes.

‘Did she ask you?’ Virat growled.

‘Do you have any problem?’ Aakash replied sternly; I swear he even flexed his biceps.

My encounters with men have seriously left me doubting the whole gender, I thought. Do they follow some secret code of conduct of brotherhood and whosoever breaks it is an outcast among peers? I have seen men bonding over mugs of beer and football matches, right when you think of some uniform code of conduct, a girl would enter the scene and that brotherhood would disappear. Swords would be drawn within seconds but the next second could be filled with puddles of tears over their mutual heartbreaks.

Whoever talked about female mystery should have researched deep into men’s world really!

‘It’s definitely a very mixed crowd out there. Some of them look really young, some rugged, flaunting beards, while some do look like Special Forces or at least military men. It might be a military-sponsored advanced training camp indoctrinating young men to be terrorists.’ One of the paras broke that weird atmosphere of love and loathing, bringing us back to the harsh realities of saving our asses first and then dealing with personal dynamics.

‘Now the question arises, should we try to sneak out quietly or use all our training here?’ Vaibhav asked.

‘I am the senior-most here and our mission finishes as soon as we cross the LOC. Plus, we have her and we have been ordered to keep a low profile. We cannot jeopardize the secrecy of our Indian identities. It will be a big blow to Indian diplomacy in the UN. Pakistan will leave no stone unturned to prove that we entered their soil and risked the precious lives of its innocent citizens.’ The para almost smirked with the last sentence.

His name was Major Tushar.

‘But we cannot turn our backs from the gathering of these terrorists who are gearing up to infiltrate our own borders and eventually target Jammu and Kashmir, or maybe even the metros, with an aim to damage our sovereignty and kill our countrymen,’ Virat argued in a rather mellow tone.

‘True! But our orders were to extract both of you and cross the borders silently without jeopardizing our identities,’ Major Tushar replied calmly.

‘Okay! But how do you plan to do that because I can see no other way around this. We cannot return to the old route and the only correct route

as shown by GPS crosses their paths.’ Virat gestured towards the training camps.

Major Tushar narrowed his eyes and thought deeply. He exhaled and said slowly, ‘Brother, my blood is boiling too and had it not been for this girl, my rifle would have fired bullets by now irrespective of the fact that we stand no chances of survival here. Tell me what to do?’

The air was completely still. No wind was blowing. I felt them torn between saving my life versus protecting our great nation. No, I am not a coward and the lives of hundreds and thousands of my countrymen mattered more than mine. Who knows what havoc those deadly terrorists would cause? How could these patriots even think about me for a second?

There was only one answer to this situation—fight and hope to win!

‘No!’ I growled, breaking the silence which had paralyzed everyone.

‘I know nothing about military ethics and tactics, but I have survived forty-eight hours in these woods full of deadly creatures and even deadlier people. Your job is to protect the nation and there should be no second thought about it.’ I could feel the firmness in my voice and their complete attention on me.

‘Take your chances,’ I said again after a brief pause.

They took a second to decide their next course of action and Major Tushar said, ‘Alright then! Let’s gear up, being the gentlemen that we are, we cannot disappoint a lady, even if that means she may get killed.’ He let out a soft laugh.

‘I really don’t see any other way out here, so to complete this mission, we have to fight our way through it. But in all circumstances, we have to keep our identities secret and we have the orders of destroying everything in case of failure. That means while we will fight till our last breath, you will be shot down by us if you plan to flee the scene only to be found by the enemy sooner or later, to be raped, tortured and murdered brutally as a matter of fact.’ Major Tushar showed absolutely no emotion while saying all these things.

‘And you, Virat, you will shoot her if the mission fails,’ said Major Tushar.

‘What?’ Virat was shocked.

‘Yes! Just so you don’t plan to rescue her or do anything stupid if somebody else tries to take her out. Take it as an order from the Officer in Command here,’ Major Tushar growled.

‘But...I...no!’ Virat was shaken.

‘That is an order, Commando. Do you get it?’ Major Tushar growled again.

‘I...’ Virat was still, eyes transfixed.

‘Do you get it, Commando! It is an order and you are bound by your uniform. Do you get it?’ Major Tushar snarled.

‘Aye! Aye! Sir, I get it, I will do it,’ Virat said in a robotic tone without even glancing at me.

Where were all those loving promises now? Did I even exist here, in the dialogue between these two, bound by uniform and sworn by blood?

Sigh! My life and me!

We actually deserve an end like this, I thought. My life, for constantly pushing me towards the worst pit of miseries and I for never really cherishing it. We were in a constant ‘love and hate relationship’ together. But every cloud has a silver lining and I saw a very steamy story bubbling up here. Don’t you? The lady love of a warrior killed by his own sword (gun here) while fighting evil. And humanity would be forever indebted for my sacrifices and my story would be told to the coming generations, schools would include it into their curriculums and my parents would feel proud of me, if they survived the heart attacks on hearing the news.

How is this even possible for a single child of any parent to give a million scenarios triggering possible heart attacks? I was hopeless.

These men, I thought—they are treating me so harshly and Virat, he is deliberately dodging any sort of eye contact with me. He is the same man who promised me a love lasting an eternity, just sometime back. Why do I even trust him again and again? You cannot trust a soldier, for them the promises they made to their motherland weigh more than any other promise in the world. Falling for them is fine but fall at your own risk; no matter what, they will always choose their nation over you. If you have the guts to accept his love for the nation and are ready to settle for second place, then only think of moving ahead.

I seriously need to meet a psychiatrist to break this pattern that I keep repeating. It’s disgusting really, in fact I am the biggest disgrace to womanhood. I risk everything including my dignity and pride for this badass who can never control his own life, and you cannot even hate him truly for doing his duties.

I should stop crying now and wipe my tears. Nobody cares!

‘We have five minutes to take positions. Who has the rocket launcher? Load the beast up. You three, take your positions behind those towering scrubs. Vaibhav and Virat, behind those boulders along with the rocket launcher and yes, take this girl with you too. The four of us will divide into two pairs and launch an attack from both sides, then move ahead clearing everything that missed the rocket launchers. Everybody behind us must provide us the cover of fire whenever possible, though your aim is to neutralize the enemy first,’ Major Tushar briefed the team.

‘Can I lead from the front too? I am very good with rifles,’ Virat offered.

‘Captain, I know NSG commandos have magnificent target strike rates but entering enemy jungles and assaulting these moles is basically a para job. Also, we need the best expertise with these machines and the best team with the launcher! They are our best hope. I am banking on the havoc and smoke this beast can create. It will provide the best possible support to our surgical strikes.’ Major Tushar smiled for the first time.

‘Also, you need to be very agile with the M4 launcher to clear the obstacles and neutralize the enemy. Aim first at the barracks and ammos; once it’s destroyed and we’ve smoked them out, fire at your will. The same goes for everyone. We aim for a swift all-clear strike. Aim quickly, terminate and move! And yes, we don’t leave our friends behind. It’s all or none!’ Major Tushar issued the final orders.

Then he asked, ‘How’s the josh?’

‘High, sir!’ they all replied in unison. He asked it two more times and they replied in the same way. The air was still but charged. Everybody was stunned for a moment. There was adrenaline running inside us, ushering us toward the apocalypse.

All or none!

Everybody took their position. Virat pulled out the rocket launcher, loaded up a rocket and placed another at his feet, ready for a second load-up. While I cowered behind the boulder beside him, just like always. They all looked at each other and nodded with an appreciation in their eyes for each other, for their comrades and brothers-in-arms who had their backs in the time of need. The emotions surrounding us showed an acute awareness of the shadow of death.

Virat broke the silence, ‘Okay! Let’s do it.’

The commandos lowered their TAR-21 rifles at eye level and waited. Virat took aim towards the barracks, and fired the launcher. The rocket made a whistling sound and smashed into the first barrack’s walls.

The explosive impact shook the earth and a cloud of smoke engulfed the ear-tearing blasts. It echoed across the forest and the commandos opened fire, sending a hail of bullets towards the shocked enemies. There was an explosion, followed by a swirl of dust as the barrack collapsed, leaving behind rubble with some terrorists trapped inside. The lead team stepped out of their positions and inched forward towards the smoke, dust, and broken buildings. The second and third rockets destroyed the rest of the barracks completely. There broke out a horrendous fire, thick smoke, flames and intense heat in the surrounding jungle. It was impossible to see in that dark jungle but it proved to be a boon for the commandos outnumbered by militants everywhere.

The volley of bullets was shot mercilessly while the unprepared militants were not able to differentiate between their own and the enemy in that acute darkness caused by dust and smoke while the commandos had their protective goggles on their eyes. That made it easy for the commandos to move swiftly, spread around and kill militants even at point blank range. The years of training and the expertise of a few commandos was overpowering the young recruits and their ustads. There were a few militants who were firing back but their bullets had a tough time finding the fistful of enemies... prepared and lethal.

It was a tactical win of Major Tushar and his team of India's biggest badass killers.

Soon a panicky environment was created on the militants' side as they were too shocked and wretched to respond properly. Their communication devices lay destroyed among the debris and only a few were able to place distress calls to their friends and relatives instead of asking for reinforcements. There was a series of explosions in the area when a grenade probably hit their ammunitions depot. Those explosions ripped out everything there, the weapons, vehicles, bikes, cycles, cables, steel, stones, glass and also humans. It annihilated almost everyone from the enemy side.

There was nothing left except falling rocks and burning trees, causing a forest fire engulfing the rest of the living quickly. There was blood, bones and bodies flying in the air amidst those gigantic flames. I was numb and simply following the code of war, following the winning side, ignoring the cries and shouts of the injured and not even stopping to glance at the dead.

After all, they would have done the same to us. Maybe worse. Right?

There is something about violence, you never get used to it. The repeated sights of annihilations and visions of the slain leave a scar on your soul each time, only deeper. You will never be the same person again. No wonder the killers and warriors understand each other so well and constantly hunt for each other, to kill or be killed.

It was all very blurry. I could feel the running footsteps around me and Virat holding my hand and running quickly ahead in the jungle. I could see the launcher fixed on Virat's back, yet it did not lessen his speed. Sometimes some of the commandos would turn back, ducking the incoming bullets and return a volley of bullets, only to run relentlessly soon after. We did not know which of our friends died or survived but we were running to save our own lives. In such situations humanity surrenders before survival.

Vision blurs and primordial instincts are evoked. This is human. The talk of world prosperity and peace is all fake, our limits end at the basic instincts of survival of the fittest. That is one ultimate truth.

We were crossing a vast swathe of green forests towards the Line of Control with visions of white mountains shining in the sun-dappled day emerging more prominently with every footstep. I was not sure but it felt like squads of armies were chasing us and would reach us any minute. But there was no time to stop, breathe or ponder over the next course of careful action.

We finally reached the valley where a fence divided the two enemy nations by the Line of Control. We needed to cross that fence to reach our safe haven, our own nation. But the incoming volley of bullets suddenly felt very heavy, now that we were in the open. Some of the bullets hit several commandos, now that their backs were towards the enemy side and it seemed our fate was sealed and nothing could save us now. It was one true test of our fates.

Suddenly, I saw at least twenty men in maroon berets and black uniforms appearing on the Indian side. And almost instantly the sniper rounds flew from the Indian side as well. Several tear bombs exploded, providing us with the perfect cover. It filled us with new energy and we sprinted again, sometimes ducking, sometimes pushing each other and pulling out injured friends from grievous danger.

Firing was going on from both sides and until we crossed it, we were meat.

All this time, Virat was always around me, firing but never losing sight of me. Grabbing my hands, sometimes pushing and pulling me, he was my guiding light, my saviour. The Indian para commandos and NSG commandos were firing relentlessly. There erupted a small-scale battle but clearly the well-prepared Indian side was dominating the scene and it was only a matter of minutes before all the enemy would be sent to their hours.

Our marathon for survival halted and finally we were on home territory.

Suddenly, I could breathe and the high adrenaline rush was gone. Our pack and I fell to the ground, military personnel in comforting olive greens rushed towards us. A helicopter hovered high in the sky, and then, I passed out.

19. Love Always Finds a Way

I opened my eyes to find a nurse fixing an IV in my arm.

‘Ouch,’ I gasped.

My eyes were wide open but I was in acute shock. The nurse started patting me on my back, then offered me a glass of water and narrated everything. All of us were airlifted to the Military Base Hospital located in the Badami Baag area in Srinagar. We were unconscious, bleeding, and three commandos were grievously injured. They were immediately admitted to the ICU and were still being operated on.

Miraculously, none of us was dead.

I was stable but had opened my eyes only after two days. The other commandos were admitted to different wards. It took me a while to process the information and I slowly pulled myself up to a sitting position. My head hurt and my limbs felt sore. There were numerous stitches all over my body. Though the pain was dulled by the drugs, it felt as if there was tons of weight over my shoulders.

I closed my eyes and slept instantly. My body and mind were still in acute shock.

I got up again in the middle of the night and it took me a minute to understand what had happened a couple of days back. I sat up at once. Something was missing around me, something very important, something important for my survival... Then, suddenly, I realized what it was... Virat!

Where was he? Why was he not here with me? Did he leave me again?

No! I would die this time. Was he dead? No! He was with me all the time. Then, where was he? I had to find him.

The IVs were no longer attached to me and I instantly ran out of my ward into the hospital corridor. Everything was hazy and blurred but I had to find Virat. I noticed the clock on the wall and it was way past midnight; everybody would be sleeping.

Where was he? This could not happen to me again! I wandered around like a mad woman through the various corridors and departments, hid myself whenever I would see a hospital attendant and then I located the ICU. I sneaked in, my heart pounding in fear, glanced into a few rooms and then I found him.

He was sleeping with IVs attached to his hand and his left leg was bandaged. And that made me happy. I heaved a sigh of relief. Thank God! He was alive!

I opened the door and stood beside his bed, staring at his face like I was seeing it for the first time. I could not stop myself from ruffling his hair and suddenly he opened his eyes.

He smiled and said, 'I was just dreaming about you.'

'What was it about?' I asked.

'We were having coffee at Starbucks in Mumbai,' he said earnestly.

'What low standards! I would've much preferred if we had met on a Goan beach, if not an exotic European location.' I raised my eyebrows, held my head high and said it like a queen.

'Considering how we meet every time, I would still rate it better.' His smile broadened. We looked at our tattered appearances, stared into each other's eyes and then laughed like crazy people for a long time. I sat beside him, then leaned against him, closed my eyes and held him firmly in my arms. He closed his eyes too and rested his head on my shoulders.

An eternal satisfaction, an unspoken promise, quiet reassurance lingered in the air like perfume.

'I don't think a hospital is the right place to say it but, Virat, I love you and don't you dare think about leaving me again or I will shoot you myself,' I said firmly.

He laughed. 'Now you are talking like a commando's girlfriend.' He sat back up and hugged me with whatever strength he had.

'Riya, I am not good with words, but I was seventeen when I was selected for the Indian Army. I have done nothing except train my mind and body to defend my nation in every manner possible. It did not leave me much scope for romance or even heartbreak. You are the first one who has taken residence in my heart and that too from the very first moment I saw you.' He paused for a second.

'I really don't know what love is but I do know one thing—that I worship you. Even a scratch on your body, a tear in your eyes, a speck of sadness on your face makes me mad and I pick up my gun instantly. I am sorry but this is what I know. I want to go to my office, do my job and come back to you every single day just to have that tea that I imagine you will make for me.

'I want to cook breakfast and serve it to you in bed every single day. I want to carry your bags when you go shopping and then I want to come back home, cook food with you and then sleep beside you in your arms every night. I don't have any alternate version of my life if I don't see myself fighting. I am a very simple man and you are the best thing that has

ever happened in my life. This is what I feel about you and dream about us. If you can categorize it as love then yes, I love you too,' he said earnestly.

I was speechless and tears started rolling down my cheeks.

I sobbed and then we slept together only to face nasty stares from the nurse the next morning. But Virat looked much better. I kissed his head and left for my ward. It only took a couple of days for all formalities to be completed and we were released from the hospital.

Virat joined the Presidential Staff and I was back in Delhi. My parents were glad and I realized there is nothing like home. Even Gupta aunty looked sweet.

The fourth innings of our unconventional romance was thankfully without any adventure and we took our sweet little time to date and explore each other. We did not leave a cafe, restaurant or discotheque in the city unexplored. We sipped coffees, ate street food, indulged in shopping, watched first day first show movies and did every single clichéd thing that couples are supposed to do.

And that included lots of lovemaking too, at his place of course, though I still rate lovemaking amidst fire and in the jungle, better.

We continued to date for a year and also visited Tral during the summer. The school was rebuilt and provided with full-time special security and grants, now that the prime minister was taking a personal interest. It had become a model school, always visited by dignitaries. It also resulted in increased media attention and increased income for the locals.

I took along many gifts for the kids, Susan, Mr Khan and everybody else who embraced me when I needed them the most. The kids were thrilled to see me.

Virat had the option of staying at one of his guest houses there but Mr Khan offered us the very same cottage where I had spent a lot of time being miserable. The single bed actually broke when Virat tried to accommodate himself on it, taking me down with him. We laughed for a very long time. We explored Kashmir a little more and decided to come back every year.

This heaven on Earth would always be special for us.

When my so-called frequent 'official visits' became too much for my parents, they began to ask me if I had found a man. I told them about Virat. The exceptionally suave (when he wished to be) and well settled boy stole my parents' hearts instantly, and soon after Virat presented me to his parents in full sanskari mode. I touched their feet and his mother hugged me real tight. For them, I was a miracle who would fulfil their long-held wish of seeing their son married and having grandkids.

I did not mind, because this was my ultimate plan, but of course only in the future.

Our parents fixed a lunch date and finalized plans before we could change our minds. There was one thing common between both our parents which was that their only children had never listened to them, and now that we were settled, they could finally heave a sigh of relief. After our big fat Indian wedding, where people danced till they dropped, we left for a month-long honeymoon to San Salvador Island where we spent all our time snorkelling, scuba diving, fishing, eating and making love.

Yes, my life had been more than adventurous (okay disastrous actually), but finally, it seemed like I would enjoy an everlasting 'happily ever after'.

Epilogue

Loving a soldier comes with consequences!

No doubt, loving a soldier is a crazy adventure, but there is nothing like your love being reciprocated by a soldier. Fairy tales come alive and legends are created. There is a reason why the knight in shining armour is the ultimate romantic fantasy. In fairy tales, it is always the guy who comes to rescue the girl. But there are times when they too need to be rescued and that is something fairy tales don't tell you. These valiant heroes, bound by their chivalrous deeds, take their time to open their hearts, but when they do, there is no turning back.

But yes, such extraordinary love stories are bound to fall apart too.

There is pain, agony, fury, rage and never-ending separations which can tear you to pieces. That is why only women who are courageous continue their vows with their soldiers.

This woman will never give up. This woman knows the worth of her words and believes in her relationship. This woman never needs to be saved. This woman is one true fighter. This woman was not born strong but made strong. This woman can sculpt her life to be her man's hero and is always there to pick him up again and again.

And in the end, only three things matter!

How much you loved,

How gently you lived,

And how gracefully you let go of the things that are not meant for you.

And, I will ask you as they do in the Indian Army:

DO YOU HAVE IT IN YOU?