

YOUR DESTINATION HAS ARRIVED

An unbelievable story
you would love to believe



BARRY CHEEMA



YOU
DESTINY
HAPPY
ARRIVE

An unbelievably
you would love

YOUR DESTINATION HAS ARRIVED

An unbelievable story
you would love to believe

BARRY CHEEMA



INDIA • SINGAPORE • MALAYSIA



Notion Press

Old No. 38, New No. 6
McNichols Road, Chetpet
Chennai - 600 031

First Published by Notion Press 2019
Copyright © Barry Cheema 2019
All Rights Reserved.

eISBN 978-1-68466-680-5

This book has been published with all efforts taken to make the material error-free after the consent of the author. However, the author and the publisher do not assume and hereby disclaim any liability to any party for any loss, damage, or disruption caused by errors or omissions, whether such errors or omissions result from negligence, accident, or any other cause.

No part of this book may be used, reproduced in any manner whatsoever without written permission from the author, except in the case of brief quotations embodied in critical articles and reviews.

I dedicate this novel to my little angel, Pari, and my wife, Diya.

**“We can see a thousand miracles around us every day.
What is more supernatural than an egg yolk turning
into a chicken?”**

– S. Parkes Cadman

*Dar pe dastak hui, aye-dil, zara khol ankhei.n.
Chal ke khud ayi hai manzil, zara khol ankhei.n.*

(O my heart! Open your eyes, don't ignore.
Your destination is knocking on your door.)

– Barry Cheema



JOIN CHANNELS



[HTTPS://T.ME/BOOKSHOUSE1](https://t.me/bookshouse1)

[HTTPS://T.ME/BOOKSKHAZANA](https://t.me/bookskhazana)

[HTTPS://T.ME/GUJARATIBOOKZ](https://t.me/gujaratibookz)

[HTTPS://T.ME/MARATHIBOOKZ](https://t.me/marathibookz)

Contents

- [1. A Ray of Hope](#)
- [2. A Dog's Life](#)
- [3. A Date with the Almighty](#)
- [4. Bruno Gets a Human Body](#)
- [5. First Day at College](#)
- [6. Falling Back](#)
- [7. Some Forgotten Words](#)
- [8. Ask the Google Guru](#)
- [9. Back to Café](#)

- [10. Incredible India](#)
- [11. A Journey to Rishikesh](#)
- [12. Satya Ashram](#)
- [13. Another Guest in India](#)
- [14. First Day at the Ashram](#)
- [15. Price for Revenge and Peace](#)
- [16. A New Friend](#)
- [17. The Big Day](#)
- [18. The Holy Court](#)
- [19. The Escape](#)
- [20. Pinky Singh and His World](#)
- [21. An Unusual Celebration](#)

- [22. The Mysterious Box Opens](#)
 - [23. The Shape of Creativity](#)
 - [24. The Science behind Meditation](#)
 - [25. His Master's Voice](#)
 - [26. Real Flowers](#)
 - [27. Passive Meditation](#)
 - [28. The Lotus and the Rose](#)
 - [29. Somebody's Voice Is Calling Your Name](#)
 - [30. Kumar Goes Missing](#)
 - [31. Mini-Heaven Celebrates](#)
 - [32. She Accepts](#)
 - [33. Karma](#)
 - [34. The Secret of His Wisdom](#)
 - [35. Kumar's Story](#)
 - [36. Kumar Goes Back](#)
 - [37. Master of Contradictions](#)
 - [38. The Purpose of Life](#)
 - [39. A Call from the Past](#)
 - [40. Spirituality and War](#)
 - [41. Only Two Sunrises Left](#)
 - [42. Last Night Together](#)
 - [43. Goodbye Heaven](#)
 - [44. In Hell](#)
 - [45. Another Date with Almighty](#)
 - [46. Back to Dog Life](#)
 - [47. His Third Meeting with God](#)
 - [48. Gill Farms Jubilates](#)
 - [49. The Last Lesson](#)
- [*Note from the Author*](#)
- [*Acknowledgments*](#)

CHAPTER ONE



A Ray of Hope

Utterly disappointed and visibly lost, Bruno sat on the stairs of a plaza on a busy street in New York. It was a pleasant, sunny October afternoon and the whole street was filled with unending euphoria. Music from a nearby Hard Rock Café added to the fervor of the youthful crowd. A street dancer, wearing a Halloween sweatshirt, displayed his hip-hop dance moves to an electrifying applause while a few tourists tried to capture the vivacity of this enchanting city on their handycams. Dozens of screens dazzled with various visuals and a group of alluring, young girls laughed loudly nearby.

But all these enticing attractions didn't win even a single glance from Bruno. With his head hung in dismay and his hands between his legs, he stayed frozen, totally disconnected from his surroundings. It seemed that an intricate web of thoughts and emotions had entangled and overcame him severely .

Suddenly, a close friend, Megan, happened to be passing by and spotted him. Sensing a crisis, she excused herself from her friend and occupied the space next to Bruno. She had heard a lot about how Bruno's behavior had suddenly changed and become weird. But she never had the chance to meet him as he had stopped answering her calls. Unfortunately, like all the other attractions on that fascinating street, Megan couldn't engage Bruno's attention. After numerous failed

attempts to make him speak, Megan finally held his arm and pulled him to a nearby café where they could comfortably sit and talk.

“You have to tell me what’s going on inside your head. I will be able to help only then.” After sitting at a corner table in the café, Megan resumed her attempts to persuade Bruno to speak his mind. He remained silent, stuck in his torment.

“Are you listening? For God’s sake, talk to me!” Megan squeezed Bruno’s hand across the table and tried to console him.

“It’s nothing...” Eventually, Bruno broke his silence and stole a glance at Megan with lackluster eyes. He gathered some of his senses and uttered a few words in a hoarse voice. “I’m okay. It’s just a headache.” He heaved a deep sigh and held his head like he had just woken from a deep sleep.

While Bruno and Megan talked, an old man sitting at the next table stirred his tea with a metal spoon. The sound pierced Bruno’s ears. It felt like it resonated violently and grew with each rotation. Finally, when the sound perforated his deepest brain cell, Bruno lost it. Flaring anger took root in him. Driven by aggression, he leaped out of his seat and grabbed the old man’s collar .

“You moron!” Bruno huffed with a scowling face. “How much will you stir just one spoon of sugar!” he growled in anger.

“Let go of him!” Megan screamed, utterly shocked by Bruno’s behavior. “What the hell is wrong with you!” She tried to intervene by tugging on his arm. “For God’s sake, let him go!” she cried but her words fell on deaf ears.

Bruno’s ferocious, red face, enraged eyes and vice-like grip would have scared anybody. But not this old man. Seeing the old man calmly stare back at him, with a smile on his face, aggravated Bruno.

“Are you deaf?” Bruno tightened his grip, giving the old man a nasty jolt.

“No, I’m not, son,” replied the old man. He was polite even in this uncomfortable position.

"Aren't you afraid?" scowled Bruno.

"There is nothing to be afraid of."

Bruno realized he was losing this non-existent battle. "Oh! So are you angry?" He made one more attempt to provoke the old man.

"There's nothing to be angry about either." The old man looked unflappable.

Bruno flinched. His hands automatically slackened in indignity and guilt. He realized that, once again, he had been overpowered by the subconscious of his newly attained human body. He fumbled with his words in an attempt to apologize.

"That's okay, son." The old man gently patted Bruno's shoulder. "There is nothing to apologize about either."

As Bruno hung his head in shame, the bold letters on the cover of a book on the old man's table caught his eye. *I Am Your Last Hope!*

"W-what book is this?" Bruno asked in a faltered yet curious voice.

"Ohhh... it's a good book by a phenomenal personality." The old man gently picked up the book. "You can keep it. I don't need it anymore." He gave it to Bruno like he was gifting it to a small child.

As the book slid into Bruno's hands, his body felt a celestial vibe rush through it. The book had some mysterious magnetism to it and Bruno couldn't take his eyes off it. His gaze was fixed on the book. Without saying a word, Bruno returned to his seat. Megan followed him.

"God! So whatever I heard about you was right." Dumbfounded and terribly embarrassed by Bruno's actions, she placed a hand over her forehead and whispered, "I don't understand what has gone wrong with you. You were not like this."

Indifferent to the shock and embarrassment Megan was struggling with, Bruno began eagerly turning the pages of the book.

"Okay," she sighed. "I think you seriously need a break. Listen, a friend has invited me to her sister's wedding in India. Why don't you come along? You will feel good with the change of scene. Are you listening?"

Megan did her best to persuade Bruno, who was still searching for something in the book. Suddenly, the desperate turning of the pages and his rapid eye movement stopped. A dim ray of hope and relief dawned on his face as his eyes came across an address on the last page of the book.

“Are you listening?” Megan hit the table. “I am talking to you!” Her voice brought Bruno back to the café.

“Yes, of course.” Bruno looked up at Megan with a gleam of trust in his eyes. “Let’s go to India.”

Bruno threw the book on the table, leaned back, stretched, splayed his legs and put his hands behind his head. This gesture announced that Bruno’s fighting spirit had returned. A deep and prolonged exhale confirmed that he still had hope and was going to resume his search.



In the past month, a lot of unusual and unbelievable things had happened in Bruno’s life. They were things he had never anticipated, not even in his dreams. He took a moment to look back on the events and reflect. He recalled how, a month ago, he had been in a dog’s body and had not been bestowed human life yet. He could still remember that special day in his life as a dog when he had been honored for his contributions and outstanding services to the police force. The whole award ceremony played in his mind as he closed his eyes.



The auditorium was filled with the sound of roaring applause. A huge crowd had gathered to attend the special award function. A German Shepherd walked elegantly down the center aisle, led by an officer holding his leash. The children in the auditorium could not contain their excitement and were overwhelmed to see a beautiful dog walking in such a disciplined way with his master. His impressive height, ideal weight, rich and shiny coat and sparkling eyes made him the apple of every eye. He looked impressive in his red, official police jacket. When they reached the stage, Mr. Douglas, the mayor of New York City, got on

his right knee and put a medal around the dog's neck. The robust police officer stood at attention, holding his head high in honor.

This dog is Bruno. Yes, before he was granted a human life, Bruno was a K9 or a police dog. The American police officer with him was Russell, his partner. Bruno was being honored for displaying the highest standards of ethical and diligent service on many occasions, especially a few months prior when he had sniffed out a bomb and saved the lives of many innocent people. It looked as though the medal was being put on Bruno's neck but was being received by Russell.

After the formal completion of the award ceremony, people started congratulating Russell for being a good master. He was proud of his K9 partner. Children and the ladies took selfies with Bruno and wished they had a buddy like him. Bruno was the star of the event.

CHAPTER TWO



A Dog's Life

It was early morning. Russell lay snoring in bed while Bruno sat on the carpeted floor. His ears were up and his eyes were glued on his sleeping master.

Russell's girlfriend, Nina, had left him several months ago because of his arrogance and aggression. But Russell didn't repent this loss as he had Bruno. After his numerous failed relationships, Russell had decided that a dog was way better than humans. Russell did not need friends or family as Bruno filled those empty spaces. He loved Bruno more than anything in the world.

"CLANG! CLANG! CLANG!" Suddenly, the alarm clock went off.

The sound served as a signal for Bruno. After getting this official approval, he jumped on the bed and started licking Russell excitedly. It showed how impatiently he had been waiting for the alarm to go off. Being woken from his cozy slumber was not pleasing to Russell but seeing his buddy compensated for it .

"Hey! Bruno!" His eyes were still partially closed and his voice hoarse. He tried to make Bruno lie down with him and attempted to hug him like a pillow. But Bruno was in no mood to settle down and ensured Russell left his warm bed. Within minutes, both the fitness freaks had geared up and headed out for running. Russell, though 45 years old, had a tall, beefy and masculine body and never missed his workouts.

After a good hour, they returned and Russell made breakfast as Bruno fetched him the newspaper. Once breakfast was ready, they sat together at the dining table to enjoy their meal.

During all this, Russell kept up a continuous, unending and one-sided conversation with Bruno. This was a contrast to his reserved and frosty nature. He never doubted whether Bruno understood him. To him, all of the dog's gestures, such as wagging his tail, cocking his head while staring innocently, his long tongue hanging from his drooling mouth and even his growling, were appropriate responses. The bonding and bromance between these comrades were phenomenal.

The pair got ready for the office. Before leaving, Russell brushed Bruno as if he was combing his own hair.



After a short drive, they arrived at the police station where they both worked. Russell opened the door for Bruno, like a gentleman would help a lady out of his expensive car. Bruno graciously jumped out of the car and Russell's eyes twinkled in pride and honor. They started walking gracefully toward the office. Loud hip-hop music with a booming bass was playing in a car parked nearby; it was like the background score for a scene, in a Hollywood action flick, where the two heroes make an entrance.

As they entered the police station, everybody got up and gave them a welcome suited for heroes. Russell responded very casually as he had grown used to the praise and applause. He continued being arrogant and didn't even care to smile back in gratitude.

"Hey, Russell! Captain wants to see you!" an officer informed him.

Russell showed no urgency to meet the captain and continued to receive his colleagues well wishes in his signature arrogant way. After a while, he decided not to make the captain wait any longer and went to his cabin with Bruno. Despite the fact that Russell didn't show any urgency to meet him, Captain Charles was overwhelmed to see them.

"Here come my heroes!" he exclaimed with joy. He got up to greet them and shook hands with Russell.

Bruno moved to the corner and sat down obediently.

Charles threw a muffin to him. "Muffin for the scene stealer. The savior. Our hero." The dog caught it in his powerful jaws and ate it. "Russell, I must say you are really lucky to have such a great companion," he said as he sat back down and offered Russell some cookies. "Well... ahem..." Charles placed his elbows on the table and threaded his fingers together. "Now tell me, why did you hit that man yesterday?" he asked in a low and courteous tone.

"Who? That fat, dark Indian?" Russell chewed his cookie with a little aggression. "That filthy immigrant is dependent on my country for his bread and butter and was laughing at Bruno's new hooded jumpsuit. He couldn't see his florescent sports shoes, which he wore with his so-called business suit that was probably terribly tailored in some Indian village."

"Jesus! Russell, when will you learn to ignore and forgive the people around you?" asked Charles gently, bowing his head. "How long can I cover up your mistakes?"

Suddenly, Russell gestured an 'OK' with his hand, a symbol of white supremacy, while munching on his cookies.

This was pretty outrageous to Captain Charles. Russell was not taking him seriously. "Listen, Russell," he said sternly, "you need to mend your ways. I know the day Nina left you for an Asian, you..."

"Sorry, captain," Russell cut him off rudely. "I don't want to talk about this..."

Russell's girlfriend had left him because of his stubborn and arrogant behavior. The worst part was that she had left him for a Chinese man.

"Russell, mark my words. One day, because of this attitude, you will hurt yourself. You may go now."

With no remorse of behaving so disrespectfully with his senior, Russell, in his signature arrogant manner, walked out with Bruno.



An hour later, Russell and Bruno were on their routine patrol. Russell drove while Bruno sat beside him in the passenger seat, as usual. Since Russell was back with Bruno, he was a completely different person. His face was relaxed and his never-ending conversation with Bruno was taking place. "Hey buddy, this time you didn't behave well at the spa. Get it straight. Unmannerly barking after seeing a female dog is not okay at all. You have to control yourself."

Bruno listened very carefully to Russell, just like a child would listen to a father's inspiring lecture and grow determined to change his life. But suddenly, his determination waned when he saw a female dog on the street. He started barking, his front paws hanging out of the car's window.

"Hey! Stop that!" Russell yelled, creases forming on his forehead. "For God's sake, when will you learn to behave? Oh, it's no use lecturing you."

Seeing the disappointment on Russell's face, Bruno pulled his paws inside and sat in a disciplined manner, looking at Russell guiltily. This brought a little contentment to Russell's face.

"Good boy! And let me tell you, she was not your type!"

Bruno whined in protest.

"Oh come on, trust me! She will break your heart. I have more experience than you with them." Russell clicked his tongue. "I mean women." He giggled sheepishly. "So I know what's good for you and what's not." Russell had tried his best to make him understand.

"WOOF! WOOF!" Bruno's whining instantly turned into barking as his protest turned into a revolt.

"Hey! Don't raise your voice!" Russell showed him his index finger. "This is disrespectful. I am not trying to be bossy. Okay, we will talk about this later. Let's go and get some coffee first!" Russell ended the conversation to prevent the argument from escalating. The pair got out and went inside a café.

The café was big and had a library. It was quite crowded. Bruno walked in a very disciplined manner; each step was in sync with Russell. As they moved forward and joined the queue, Russell noticed Bruno behaving unusually. He showed signs of restlessness and moved into attack position while glaring and growling at a boy whose face was not clearly visible. He was wearing a hoodie and sunglasses.

The suspect walked toward the second door of the café with his head down and his hands in his jacket's pockets. Suddenly, Bruno started barking ferociously and uncontrollably. He tried lunging at the boy. Russell controlled him with difficulty but was sure something was wrong since Bruno didn't normally behave like that.

"Hey, you! Freeze!" Russell shouted at the suspect, pulling on the leash with his both hands.

The boy flinched. By now, he was aware that he was under suspicion. Abruptly, in sheer panic, he pulled a pistol out of his jacket and fired at Russell. In an attempt to dodge the bullet and save himself, Russell dropped to the floor and Bruno's leash slipped out of his hands. The crowd scattered to find safety. Some lay on the floor, covering their heads with their arms and hands.

Bruno shot after his target like a bullet and pounced. But unfortunately, the suspect slipped out the door. Bruno slammed into the glass. He bounced back with unruffled rage, resting his front paws on the door's glass. He growled ferociously, revealing his savage teeth. The suspect stood there, shocked at how close the dog had gotten. Had the glass not been there, he would have been torn apart by this raging canine. He regained his senses and ran into the crowd on the busy street.

Bruno wasted no time and began his search by sniffing everywhere. His urgency indicated he knew they were in a dangerous situation and he soon zeroed in on an unattended bag lying in a corner, under a chair. He started barking at it and Russell concluded that the bag must have been placed there by the suspect and could have a bomb in it.

"WHOSE BAG IS THIS? WHOSE BAG IS THIS?" When Russell didn't get an answer, he immediately started evacuating the café.

With the doors of the café open and Russell busy evacuating everybody, Bruno finally got the chance to resume his hunt and chase the suspect. Doing this was his duty but this time there was something more. This time it was personal; after all, the suspect dared to shoot at his master. This was the reason he didn't care to wait for Russell's command.

Using his precise sense of smell and speed, Bruno reached the bridge where the suspect was running, panicked. Since there was no glass door in between them, Bruno pounced like a lion, forcing him to fall to the ground. He locked his jaws on the suspect's right arm. The suspect's legs trembled and fidgeted, like that of a drowning man, in an attempt to free himself. He struggled, not knowing that it was almost impossible to free yourself from the vice-like grip of a German Shepherd, especially when you shot at his master. After struggling for some time, the suspect eventually succeeded in pulling the gun, with his left hand, from his right jacket pocket .

BOOM!

With this loud gunshot, the struggle stopped instantly. Bruno lay in a pool of blood, his body convulsing. There was still some time left in his dying eyes. He yearned to see his buddy, Russell, for one last time. It was heart-wrenching.

The panting suspect freed himself, stood up in fright and staggered away. Thanks to his injured arm, panic and disorientation, he failed to realize that he had stumbled onto the middle of the road, where vehicles were moving at breakneck speed. Before he could comprehend the situation, a screeching sound was heard and... *BANG!* He was hit head-on by a speeding vehicle. The impact was so strong that the suspect went flying into the air and fell into the adjacent river.



By now, the café had been fully evacuated except for a small crying child, who had been left unattended. Russell took him into his arms and ran outside. That's when the bomb in the bag went off.

As Russell was not far enough from the café, he was thrown into the air. He protected the child's head and body from the impact of the fall by covering him with his arms. The whole environment was filled with the pungent smell of burning plastic and flying ash. The café, which was as embellished as a newly-wed Indian bride a few moments ago, was now ablaze with flames shooting into the sky. A monster-like evil, dark and haunting cloud of black smoke, and restless birds, flying to and fro in a panic, filled the sky .

Gravely injured and groaning in pain, Russell took a moment to look at this scenario of death and destruction. As he fell unconscious, the scene faded out with visuals of destruction, the noise of police car sirens, screams and panic all around.

Due to Bruno and Russell's intelligent effort, there were no casualties... except for Bruno.

CHAPTER THREE



A Date with the Almighty

A mysterious entity lay on the seashore. He opened his eyes to the picturesque view of a beautiful beach and the soothing sound of the waves as they faded in and out. The bright blue sea stretched away to the distant horizon. The palm trees swayed with elegance in the breeze. Ripples of crystal clear sea water touched the gleaming sand of the beach as delicately as a butterfly touches a flower. The crisp smell of the sand wafted across the seashore. This was surely the calmest and most beautiful beach that had ever existed.

The mesmerizing panorama was interrupted by two corpses lying in the distance. He started moving toward them in a panic, with his eyes focused on the bodies. As he drew closer, he saw one was the suspect who had placed the bomb in the café and the other was Bruno.

“Hi!” a sharp but soothing voice spoke from behind him, scaring him.

Flinching, he turned to see a little girl of maybe 11. She just stood and smiled silently. Her beautiful white frock went down to her knees and her angelic eyes, mesmerizing smile and silky, untied but well-combed long hair looked like they were from another world.

“How are you doing, Bruno?” When the girl said this, he looked down immediately and realized he had a human body. Two open palms are brought to eye level and he focused on each to confirm.

“Relax, Bruno;” She blinked her sparkling green eyes at him. “You are in the body of the terrorist that killed 30 innocent Americans three months ago and tried to kill another 55 a day ago. Thanks to you, Bruno, they were saved.” Her eyes gleamed with affection as she cocked her head.

Bruno instantly started touching his body and realized that the little girl was right. But before he could say anything, his gaze fell on another girl in white. She looked like the first girl’s twin except she had multiple arms and a musical instrument in each hand. She was playing slow and soothing music on a violin while standing on the seashore. The waves were coming and returning after kissing the soles of her white shoes.

“Who is she? Why does she look exactly like you? And who are you?” asked Bruno with curiosity and a little nervousness.

“Well, she is the Angel of Music. Wherever I go, she follows. We can’t exist without each other.” As the girl talked, her pearly-white teeth peeped through her strawberry lips. “And regarding your second question... well... I’m God, the Almighty.”

All at once, there was a loud noise from the string quartet played by the Angel of Music, clearly expressing Bruno’s current state of mind. His mouth fell open, his jaw dropped and his eyes became the size of footballs.

“What?” Wide-eyed, she tucked her hair behind her ear elegantly and delicately. “You can’t expect Morgan Freeman to be God every time,” she said after seeing Bruno endlessly gaping at her.

“But you—you are a kid and—and a girl too!” Bruno faltered.

“Well, why not?” She smiled. “Kids are innocent, spontaneous, joyous, dynamic, celebrate life and are creative.” As the girl delivered her answer, the short, high-pitched notes of a flute combined with an accordion changed rapidly with each word. The scene looked like a Hollywood musical.

“Don’t you think kids are closer to being God than an old man who has forgotten the very meaning of life?” Her innocent hand gestures

were enchanting. "And a female has more understanding of life than a man because she is more sensitive, gentle, caring and compassionate." The music changed to a woodwind instrument and a violin with some chimes in the backdrop. "She also has more empathy, tolerance, nurturing and deference than a man. A female never lives with her mind but always through her heart, unlike a man."

Before Bruno could absorb all that she had showered on him, the Godly Girl held his arm and started walking, taking him along with her. "Come, I have something for you." The touch of her soft hands felt like the wings of a butterfly on his skin. She smelled like fresh flowers.

After walking for a while, Bruno saw a table covered with a red cloth and two chairs with red roses in the shape of a heart around it. There was a covered bowl in the middle of the table .

"What is this all about?" Bruno lifted his arms in confusion.

"Please, come sit. I will tell you everything." She blinked her sparkling green eyes at him again.

As Bruno sat in the chair, he turned to look at the Angel playing the harp and violin at a slow tempo, in time with the waves of the ocean. The Godly Girl gracefully took her seat after Bruno.

"Today, you have a date with me, the Almighty. And let me tell you, you deserve this." She smiled coyly while Bruno gaped at her. "And yes," she instantly uncovered the bowl and revealed the special thing, "this is chocolate." An angelic smile blossomed on her strawberry lips. "As a dog, your master would never give it to you since it could be lethal for you. But now you can have it. Try it. It's amazing."

The Godly Girl graciously offered the chocolates to Bruno, who, with a little hesitation, picked up a small piece, unwrapped it and started eating it. With the very first bite, Bruno was mesmerized by the splendid taste of the chocolate. The harp played a slow and soothing melody.

"Humans have so many privileges, don't they?" asked the Godly Girl as she enjoyed staring at Bruno, placing her chin on her palm.

"HmMMMM!" Bruno nodded, busy enjoying his chocolate with his eyes closed.

"Do you want to have all the others as well?"

Immediately, Bruno opened his eyes and nodded eagerly in sheer innocence. While nodding, his tongue continued to float in the ocean of chocolate. His hand spontaneously crept toward chocolates .

"Well, then." She leaned back on her chair. "Okay, I'll give you this human body. No more of a dog's life." Drums rolled loudly and stopped abruptly with a snare and the strum of an electric guitar.

"Really? Is this true?" asked Bruno, exhilarated. He had been about to take a bite but now his hand was frozen mid-air and his eyes twinkled.

"Yes, of course, dear, but you have to fulfill one small condition." The Godly Girl emphasized the word 'small' by holding her right thumb and index finger close together.

"What condition?" Bruno shrugged with a creased forehead.

The Godly Girl stood up and moved a little closer to the waves. "You have to find the purpose of human life!" she replied, staring at her nail polish delightfully.

This dissolved all the seriousness on Bruno's face. With an abrupt smile, he resumed eating the chocolate.

"Well, I thought you would give me a difficult condition to fulfill." He got up and stood next to the Godly Girl. "Well, that's not difficult for me. You know it was said in our police department that there is nothing in this whole world that Bruno can't find. I have a 100% result. From drugs to notorious criminals to kidnapped kids, nothing could escape me. I am well trained." As Bruno took another bite of chocolate, the Godly Girl stared at him silently.

"Yes, indeed you are. But there is a small problem," said the Godly Girl in a low voice.

"What?" Bruno was busy licking his fingers .

"You know that the soul is eternal." She turned back toward the sea. "It has no future and no past but a body and a mind have their own past. Hassan's subconscious may create problems for you and obstruct you!"

"Well, I am thinking of something else." He finished, licking his fingers. "Even if I fulfill your condition, what's the use of being in a terrorist's body?" A smug smile established his overconfidence. "I mean he has his own identity. Sooner or later, the police and other terrorists will hunt me down." He shrugged, pursing his lips that were covered with a thin layer of chocolate.

"Ah, I forgot you were a police dog so you know all the details. Good question, Bruno, let me check." The Godly Girl pulled out a nano-sized diary from her pink purse and started searching. "Let it be." She abruptly closed the diary and put it back into her purse. "Well, let's go to my conference room."

"Your conference room?" asked Bruno in amazement.

"Can't I have one? Come on; let's go." She motioned him to turn around.

As they turned, Bruno was stunned to see a door on the beach. He wondered where the solitary door came from all of a sudden. As they reached the door, he tried to pull the door outward but it didn't open.

"Wait, Bruno." The Godly Girl gently put her hand on Bruno's shoulder. "Remember, in heaven all doors open inward."

Bruno applied gentle force on the door, making it open inward. As they passed through the door, Bruno found himself in a conference room with a long, conventional table and a projector screen. Bruno was made to sit on a chair where the boss generally sat. The Godly Girl snapped her fingers, the light went off and a visual started playing on the screen.

"This is Akram. Akram is a plumber in New York, America and is married to Jennifer, an American. Together, they had a son called Hassan, the terrorist who shot you and in whose body you happen to be right now."

Bruno peered at the screen to have a detailed look at all the characters.

“Akram wished to have the perfect wife. There was no problem with this wish except that Jennifer wanted the perfect husband too. So disaster was certain. Their love couldn’t bear the burden of their unrealistic and mammoth expectations and finally, it died after being crushed under this weight. Now, in their relationship, the vacuum of the vacant space, which was once filled with love and trust, was filled with grumbling, complaining, criticism and nagging. Let’s come to Hassan.”

The Godly Girl sat next to Bruno and put both her elbows on the table while trying to adjust herself in the chair, just as kids do. As she looked up at the screen, the visuals changed.

“Hassan was quite sensitive as a child; he was shy and introverted. His nature and the atmosphere he grew up in proved to be a lethal combination. As a result, he lost confidence and started feeling worthless. He lost the ability to interact with others, especially his school mates and never retaliated even when they bullied him. He grew up, went to high school and then to college but he remained the same. He never made friends. He started liking a girl in college and finally, one day, gathered the courage to approach her. But the result was quite distressing.” The Godly Girl raised her brows as she adjusted her hairband of white pearls.

“The girl turned him down and humiliated him. She asked Hassan not to shoot her if she turned him down and immediately started cackling with laughter. After this, Hassan became the victim of everybody’s cruel jokes. Everyone started tagging him with things like ‘The incomplete story of a jihadi’ or ‘The Allah of losers’, etc. Hassan was crushed from all sides but he still tried hard to keep calm. His silence was like the calm before the storm.”

As Bruno grew more and more involved in the story, the visuals on the screen changed further.

“Then one day he met ‘Abu Jwahiri’—an American citizen and a millionaire who had been infected by extremist Jihadist ideology.” Bruno

saw the visual of an old Muslim man, with a long beard and no mustache, dressed in a business suit.

“In Hassan, he found the perfect soil to sow the seeds of hatred and animosity against all other religions except Islam. He made use of Hassan’s repressed emotions and energy by diverting it toward Jihad—the holy war in the name of God. After a few weeks of hypnotic brainwashing, Hassan finally agreed to give away his life in the name of Jihad and further, started getting secret training for this. After a few months of rigorous training at Abu Jwahiri’s countryside ranch, Hassan was ready for his first attack. He planted a bomb two months ago in Manhattan, which claimed 30 innocent American lives. The whole incident was masterminded by Abu Jwahiri.” The Godly Girl gulped as kids generally do after speaking continuously .

“Now talking about the recent one, well this was his second attack which had a target of at least 40 to 50 innocent lives. Abu Jwahiri promised Hassan that the more non-Islamic people he killed, the higher his chances of getting a place in heaven. Abu Jwahiri had given him imaginary ideas about heaven by making him believe that heaven was different from the evil world. He lured him with the false notion that all good and Islamic people, like Hassan, can enter heaven and he would get the love and respect of not one but countless girls there.”

She sighed and held her head, looking completely fed up. “Ahhh... these jihadis keep coming to our door with this hope. You have no idea how my immigration department has to deal with them.”

“Immigration department?” With Bruno’s question, the lights were turned on. They both got up and started to walk out.

“Yes, you heard right,” she hissed. “Jihadi priests sometimes even give them authority letters with a confirmed reservation in heaven, which they consider a confirmed entry to heaven. These priests tell them to use this letter when entering heaven. The ignorant jihadis argue for a long time and we have a really hard time convincing them that these letters hold no validity here. I feel sorry for them.”

As they reached the door, Bruno pulled it inward and held it open for her; the Godly Girl made a gesture of appreciation by raising her eyebrows and smiling with a nod. She was happy that Bruno remembered what she had told him .

“Then you send them to hell?” Bruno resumed their heavenly discussion as they went back to the open beach.

“Oh Bruno, a terrorist doesn’t need a separate hell to suffer. He already lives in hell. A feeling of hatred is hell and a feeling of love is heaven. A terrorist gives up all the beautiful things in life like laughing, dancing, singing and loving just for his mission. And remember, missing heaven is no different than being in hell. If you are not in heaven, then you are definitely in hell.” They started walking toward the table.

“A terrorist misses all that is heaven-like or Godly in this world, which is love. Love is the only string that connects both the worlds—the worldly and the otherworldly. Something which is of this world and is still available in that world is love. The person who misses this misses everything. And when you lose the capability to laugh, sing, dance and love, you create your own personal hell.” They took their respective seats.

“This man, Hassan, his life was no less than any hell but I must commend you. It was just because of your presence of mind and alertness that this lethal attack was averted and many innocent lives, including kids, were saved. Now, let me come to the point.”

Listening to this profound knowledge in her child-like voice and with her innocent gestures was no less than being in heaven.

“Hassan has no police records! Nobody will even think of suspecting him. The only people who know about his terrorist activity are Abu Jwahiri and his accomplice, Usman, who trained Hassan. According to my records... mmmmm... let me check.” She pulled out her nano-sized diary in a hurry. “Yes, they are both destined to die very soon. After that, Hassan will be a common, innocent American citizen.”

She finished her dialog with a smile; her eyes sparkled like two stars. Bruno, who had been absorbed and involved in this informative talk, finally came out of his trance with a sigh.

“Well, that’s good. Then we have no problem.” It seemed as if these human complexities of life had consumed enough of Bruno’s time. He didn’t like staying away from his chocolate for so long. He went back to his indulgence. Instantly, a question popped up in his mind.

“But if there’s any chance... what if I fail?” asked Bruno while chewing.

It seemed like the Godly Girl had been waiting for this question for some time. She moved forward a little bit. “Well then, Bruno, I am sorry to say that,” her twinkling eyes widened as if she was going to say something serious, “you will have to return to your dog life.”

The brightness in Bruno’s face immediately disappeared behind clouds of despair and despondency. This melted the Godly Girl’s heart. Her eyes filled with compassion and she squeezed Bruno’s hand across the table.

“Oh Bruno, please don’t misunderstand me. It’s not like I would snatch it from you like you don’t deserve it but try to understand. Fulfilling the condition is a separate issue. But if Hassan’s subconscious or unconscious mind overpowers you, then it will become unbearable for you. And let me tell you, the consequences could be extremely hazardous. ”

Bruno felt a little uneasy. He retracted his hand hurriedly. “Can I have one more piece of chocolate please?” He scratched his neck with his fingers as dogs do.

“Ah, sure please.” The Godly Girl hurriedly picked up the chocolate and offered it to Bruno.

As Bruno started eating it, his uneasiness lessened. The Godly Girl, resting her chin on her palm, stared at Bruno with eyes filled with immense love.

“How much time do I have?” Bruno asked with a little difficulty as his tongue was busy.

“Ninety sunrises! But please note that during this period you are not immortal.” She tapped her fingers on the table.

“That means I could die on the very first day? So I don’t get a fair chance to fulfill your condition.” Bruno glared at the Godly Girl.

“You have a fair chance as I would love to see you succeed.” She moved forward and wiped the thin layer of chocolate settled around Bruno’s lips. “But try to understand. In the human world, immortality doesn’t exist. It’s practically impossible. How you complete your task in the given time would depend on your choice and actions.”

Bruno seemed lost in his thoughts. The Godly Girl cut through to him as he drowned in his thoughts by offering him one more piece of chocolate.

“Okay, fair enough!” Waking up from his thoughts, Bruno resumed his indulgence.

“All the best Bruno.” Eyes filled with immense love, the Godly Girl glanced at him one last time. “And remember, from today you are Hassan.” She got up and rested her hands on Bruno’s shoulders from behind. “In the end, I must say it was the best date I ever had.” She bent and kissed Bruno on the cheek. “Thank you, Bruno!”

Her mesmerizing, heartfelt gesture and the divine taste of chocolate made Bruno close his eyes and he found himself floating in an ocean of bliss.

CHAPTER FOUR



Bruno Gets a Human Body

Bruno woke up on a bench with the noise of traffic penetrating his ears. Dazzling, bright sunlight made it difficult for him to open his eyes. His desperation to explore his surroundings was impeded by his blurred vision. His pupils took time to adjust to the bright daylight. His eyes closed reflexively and his right hand automatically came up to cover and protect them. For the time being, he enjoyed the sounds of people talking around him and the birds and traffic. They were not as loud as they used to be when he was a dog. The divine taste of chocolate was still with him. His tongue was still active in his mouth, ready to have some more. Instinctively, he touched his shoulders as he could still feel the touch of the Godly Girl.

As his vision settled, he was amazed to see a new and more colorful world. With his human eyes, he could see many new colors that he never could as a dog. He started touching his body, starting with his face before moving to his hair and arms. It felt great. He rubbed his neck and was more than happy to find it free of a leash and collar .

Balancing his body on his two feet, he cautiously walked to a car parked on the road and looked eagerly into its side mirror. He was excited to see a boy's face. Hassan was a handsome, tall, athletically-built, 22-year-old boy. His dark brown, curly hair and his stubble made him look quite alluring. He is more than happy to find that he was good looking.

He started walking along the road. It felt great walking on two legs, especially with comfortable shoes. Now, there would be no more burning paws while walking on the blazing road on a hot summer afternoon. He continued walking with gusto for a few meters.

Suddenly, he saw a fast food restaurant and realized that he was very hungry. He started fumbling through his pockets impatiently and smiled to find a few dollars.

Bruno entered the restaurant and approached the counter to place his order.

“Hi!” Bruno realized he could speak just as he uttered his first word. He could not hold himself back from starting a chat with the guy at the billing counter. He thought of how easy it was for humans to express their feelings and convey their thoughts. After a while, when the patience of the people waiting in the queue started dropping, he had to end his chit-chat and place his order. It was none other than a big bucket of chicken legs.

As his meal appeared at the serving counter, Bruno pounced on the bucket and started eating hungrily. A girl, who had been watching Bruno since he entered the restaurant, burst into a loud guffaw. Bruno noticed her laughing uncontrollably. Instead of getting offended and leaving, like Hassan used to do, he smiled back.

He realized that he was not a dog anymore. He wiped his mouth and quickly flicked the crumbs off his clothes. Still eating, but in a more civilized way, he picked up his bucket and went toward the girl’s table.

The girl was none other than Megan. Megan was a slender, pleasant and gorgeous girl. She had curly, brown hair and had a tiny dimple on each cheek when she smiled. This alluring combination was a joy to behold.

“Hi, I bought too much chicken. Can I sit here and you could help me finish it?”

The girl was quite intrigued by Bruno’s innocent eyes and effortless smile. She saw purity in his whole being. “Sorry, I can’t help you... but you

can sit here." Megan continued sipping her coke.

Without any hesitation or being self-conscious, Bruno immediately took the seat. "Nice bracelet," Bruno complimented Megan.

"Thanks! Nice tattoo." Megan returned the compliment while pointing at his knuckles. Bruno peered at the back of his hand to see an Islamic tattoo.

"Oh, yes! Tattoo!" giggled Bruno, trying to hide his ignorance. As he was desperate to use his newly attained speaking skill, soon after introducing themselves, they quickly became friends and started a tete-a-tete.

"Are you always so quick to approach a girl?" asked Megan, laughing uncontrollably at what Bruno said .

"Of course, provided I don't have a leash on my neck." Bruno was about to take another bite of his chicken leg when he realized he had made a mistake. "Um, by leash I mean..." Bruno faltered as he spoke. "... A tie, like when I was in school and wore a tie... I-I didn't like to do it..." Bruno tried to cover up as Megan stared at him. Suddenly, her cell phone started beeping. It was a reminder for her piano class.

"Do you have any better jokes?" She smiled, picking up her bag from an adjacent chair.

"Yes! Numerous. Allow me to, please?" Bruno replied, with his mouth full of chicken.

"No no, please," Megan chuckled. "Not now! I'm getting late. Maybe some other time!" She found Bruno very endearing. Before leaving, she shared her contact details with him and asked him to call her.

Once Megan left and Bruno was completely stuffed, he remembered that he had a new home now. He could not contain his excitement at the thought of meeting his new parents. Again, he desperately searched his pockets. His college ID, with his complete residential address, brought a smile to his face.



Within no time, he was standing at the front door of his house, knocking on and ringing the doorbell repeatedly. When no one answered, he broke in through a window and went haywire inside the house. Unfortunately, he didn't find anyone. Suddenly, he found a washroom door locked from the inside .

"MOM! DAD! ARE YOU THERE?" In desperation, he started banging on the door and shouting.

Suddenly, a grumpy and grouchy feminine voice answered. "For God's sake, stop shouting, Hassan! What the hell is wrong with you?"

It was Hassan's mother's voice. She was lying in the bathtub, puffing on a thin, dark and brown cigarette. Hearing a lady's voice he assumed was his mother's, Bruno was electrified with fresh elation.

"Mom, come out, please! I want to see you." He leaned against the door and knocked more eagerly. But Bruno's endearing eagerness was worthless to his mom.

"I am in the bathtub! I'm not wearing anything and you want to see me?" The grouchy tone turned into yelling, "YOU WANT TO SEE YOUR MOM NAKED?"

Bruno flinched away as if there was a sudden flow of electric current in the door. He was speechless for a moment. "No, I-I didn't mean that. S-Sorry," he faltered.

Failing to understand his mom's behavior, he moved away. But this bizarre incidence did not kill his enthusiasm. Instantly, he started searching for his room. He climbed upstairs and found the room that was supposed to be Hassan's. He was eager to see his new room but as he entered, something strange happened.

His zeal and zest were sucked away by the messy room. He felt as if he had entered hell. A certain kind of rotting smell, like the smell of death, made breathing difficult. He covered his nose with his arm. Posters and drawings of death, violence, tragedy and suffering made the room look like a harrowing abyss. It was becoming difficult for Bruno to stand there,

even if for a minute longer. It seemed as if this room would suck him into a black hole.

He immediately opened the curtains and windows and started cleaning the room. He removed all the posters and drawings, gradually putting the place in order.

Suddenly, he heard a car stop outside. As he peeped out of the window, he saw his dad, Akram, getting out of his car. He recognized him immediately because God had shown him pictures. His lost zeal and zest shot back up, just like a sleeping dog who becomes charged-up after seeing his master come home. He zipped down the stairs, toward the door.

Akram moved toward the door lethargically, lost in his thoughts. He was about to knock when it opened abruptly.

“DAD!” Bruno shouted at him with extreme enthusiasm and excitement. Akram had never expected this kind of behavior from any member of his family so he was terribly shocked. Due to this shock, he lost his balance. He managed to grab hold of the wall and save himself from falling. Bruno was equally confounded to see his dad holding his chest while panting heavily and gaping at him with eyes on the verge of falling out.

“Oh damn! You almost gave me a heart attack.” Akram gathered his senses and regained his balance. “Get out of my way! You need to go to a mental asylum.” He pushed Bruno aside and made his way inside the house.

Bruno was dumbfounded and stood gaping at Akram’s behavior. Once Akram went in, both husband and wife found an easy topic to start a squabble. Bruno wondered why humans were so stupid. A dog hankers for only one thing in his life—the presence of his family members. But humans don’t value these moments when they have them and waste their lives fighting over pointless things.

Disheartened, he left the house and started walking. He began exploring his new world and observed everything very closely. He cherished his freedom to go anywhere, at any time and do whatever he

felt like. He spent his whole day interacting with strangers and watching birds fly. In the evening, he came across a Hard Rock Café and went in. He was thrilled to see the inside for the first time. Bruno went to the bartender and asked what he had.

“They don’t serve milk, Mr. Hassan.” Two boys sitting at the bar started laughing uproariously. These boys were his classmates, Justin and Mark. The word ‘Hassan’ coming from the two boys who were his age was enough to raise Bruno’s curiosity.

“Hey, do you guys know me?” Bruno asked, exhilarated. “You must be my college mates!”

Bruno’s inquisitive query was not well-received by the inhospitable boys. Busy sipping their cocktails, they ignored him and gave him frosty looks.

“Wow! What a colorful drink!” Bruno bent his knees, craned his neck and brought his face close to Justin’s glass. It was so close that his nose was on the verge of touching it. “I have never seen these colors before! I want to taste this colorful liquid!” His eyes twinkled with a wide grin on his face. Their drinks were enticingly colorful.

“These are cocktails,” mumbled Justin coldly, pulling his glass away .

“Can you buy me this drink?” Bruno stood bolt upright. “I will pay you back tomorrow at college.” He had asked for the little favor as he had exhausted all his money during the day.

“No way!” Justin continued sipping his drink.

And then Bruno did something they never expected Hassan to do. Bruno stepped closer and held Justin’s hand in a friendly way. “Come on, from today onwards we are best buddies! Please, for me?” Justin flinched. To get out of the situation, Justin agreed to pay for his drink.

After offering this colorful liquid to his taste buds, Bruno got high on just two drinks and started dancing. Justin and Mark were surprised by his transformation; they were enjoying it. They couldn’t stop themselves from making friends with him and having a riotous time with their new friend, Hassan.

CHAPTER FIVE



First Day at College

The next morning, Bruno experienced something unusual. He woke up from a strange dream where he was drowning in an ocean of thick, black water. He was gradually and silently swallowed by the ocean. He was astounded as he had never had a dream like that when he was a dog. As he got out of bed, he felt lethargic and dizzy. But he pulled himself out of it and went for a run. In no time, he started to feel better.

After running for an hour, he returned home and took a cold shower. It put him back in gear. He got ready and went downstairs to have a rich breakfast. But he was disappointed to see the breakfast his mother had prepared for him. He recalled how Russell used to prepare omelets and decided to give it a try. He immediately took four eggs, turned on the burner and tried his luck. At last, the omelet was ready. It was not as good as Russell's but it wasn't bad either. He ate it with two glasses of milk and headed to college.



Bruno's enthusiasm and excitement knew no boundaries as today was his big day—his first day in college. In high spirits, he entered the college. He was dazzled by this wonderful place, throbbing with vivacity, dynamism and vigor. "Wow! I love this place," he chirped, his eyes dilated with exhilaration. He greeted everybody with gusto and twinkling eyes.

But the intellectual acuity of every student failed; they couldn't understand what on earth had happened to Hassan.

Moving further, he entered the corridor and saw Justin and Mark. Bruno waved at them but to his surprise, they turned a blind eye to him. This didn't deter him from approaching them.

"Hey, buddies!" said Bruno dramatically, with a swinging intonation in his voice and a wide grin on his face.

"We are not your buddies!" mumbled the embarrassed Justin, seeing him stand so close to them.

"You don't even remember?" he gasped innocently. "That's because you had too much of that colorful drink last night. You know, you guys lent me a few dollars last night..." Bruno sounded like a very responsible and caring friend.

"We don't want that money. You keep it but please, for God's sake, leave us alone," mumbled Mark, looking at him from the corner of his eye.

Justin and Mark's embarrassment escalated with every passing moment as they had become the object of everybody's attention. They started moving away but Bruno was in no mood to stop chasing his new buddies .

"No, I don't leave my friends wanting for money." Bruno shook his head like a child. "No, no, I will stay with you the whole day and return your money... mmm... someday!"

Mark and Justin wished the ground would swallow them up. To save their reputation, they had no option but to literally start running. Finally, they hid in a corner. Bruno was dumbfounded and didn't understand their behavior. But in spite of such a big rejection, Bruno did not lose hope. He did not stop trying to make friends. An air of avidity and affability exuded uninterruptedly from him, 24/7. This continued for a few days until his pure and loving nature started winning everybody's hearts.

Yes, gradually everybody's opinions started changing. It was time to lay aside all prejudices. His college mates found that he was a wonderful person worth making friends with. They were not only mesmerized by his amiability but also his enthusiasm and affectionate nature that had become an inspiration to few.

By now, Bruno had made quite good friends. But still, sometimes, he couldn't avoid the judgmental behavior and bullying of a few students.



It was a Saturday evening and Bruno had a date planned with Megan. After watching a movie, they felt like partying. They went to a nightclub and were spotted by some stunned college mates. Their intellectual acuity was again put to the test by this new mystery. How had he got a girl like Megan? A few people from the same college, who were still judgmental about him, finally had to disabuse themselves of all the prejudices that night. Bruno was an undisputed winner in everybody's eyes and had a rocking evening with Megan and his friends.



But the next morning, Bruno woke to a crisis. He woke up with a nightmare again. But this time, it was worse. He saw himself drowning in an ocean of thick, black water but this time, he was surrounded by sharks. The ferocious jaws of the evil sharks and the thundering sound of the enormous ocean would have shaken the heart of the bravest person. Bruno noticed that despite his persistent effort, he couldn't scream; it was like he had lost his voice.

To make it worse, Bruno's lethargy and dizziness were accompanied by unexplained anxiety and anger. All this was beyond his understanding. To counter this, he had to run harder but he still couldn't overcome it completely. Today, his energy did not touch the level it used to earlier.

CHAPTER SIX



Falling Back

Bruno's life had changed. Over the days, things grew worse. It became more and more difficult for Bruno as his condition deteriorated.

One day, when he got up, his body couldn't spare the energy to go running. For the first time, he experienced something called depression. Burdened with dullness and lethargy, he simply took a hot bath and didn't even eat breakfast. But that wasn't all. Something worse was waiting for Bruno at college.

He reached college and was passing by an isolated corner when a gang of bullies, headed by Randy, pounced on him and pushed him against a wall. Bruno couldn't move since the goons pinned both his arms.

"Hey, what's wrong with you guys?" He was shocked and tried to shout at them.

Randy had a wiry frame and lean muscles. He had tattoos all over his body and predatory eyes filled with aggression and lust. He grabbed Bruno's neck and brought his face close .

"You bloody son of Osama, you loser," growled Randy. "How dare you make friends with a gorgeous girl like Megan!"

Randy's rugged hands, lined with prominent blue veins, squeezed Bruno's neck. The stench of cigarettes traveled through his stained and

broken teeth, making it difficult for Bruno to breathe.

“Leave me alone!” Bruno, who was already choking, started to panic more when Randy pulled a blade from his pocket. His eyes grew wide in fright as the sharp blade moved closer to his face.

“The next time I see you with her, I will draw Afghanistan’s map on your face with this blade,” growled Randy.

Before Bruno could choke to death, Randy released his grip. Bruno gasped for breath to stop himself from collapsing. But the vulturous gang was not done yet. Before leaving, they pushed him to the floor and kicked him repeatedly and mercilessly. Bruno put his head against his knees to protect his vital organs. Once they were done, they jeered at him and left. Gravely shattered, Bruno tried to get up. His body leaned against the wall.

After a while, he recovered and went back to his room. He shut the windows, closed the curtains and stayed in the dark room for the rest of the day.



The next day, Bruno decided not to let this take control of him and tried to kick-start his day with the same enthusiasm he used to have. He pulled on his socks and went for a long and rigorous run. After that, he did a few push-ups and had a cold shower before he felt somewhat better. But it was not for long. A dense fog of unprovoked anger started to engulf him again. He couldn’t understand where this anger was coming from.

When Bruno arrived at college, he surprised everybody again. But this time, it wasn’t in a pleasant way. His acquaintances from college, who had become good friends with him, couldn’t understand what had happened. Their cheerful, affectionate and warm-hearted friend looked very frosty and sluggish. It was like their close friend had fallen back into the abyss from which he had gloriously arisen.

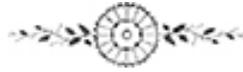
He didn’t talk to anybody and sat alone in the college cafeteria, the place he used to love the most. Today, things had changed. Now even the noise of students talking to each other tormented him.

Suddenly, he saw Randy enter the canteen with his gang and occupy a table. Their rowdy laughter and unruly behavior made his blood boil. The previous day's events started playing in the back of his mind like a movie. It seemed like he would explode, thanks to the expanding fury and anger inside him. His eyes became red, his jaw clenched and a strange madness took over his mind.

Bruno shot out of his seat and pounced on Randy. Before anybody could understand what was happening, Randy was lying on the floor and Bruno sat on his chest. He mercilessly hurled punches at Randy at such a speed that it was impossible for Randy to ward off his blows. Apprehensive of what might happen to them, Randy's gang members ran away, terrified. Everybody was traumatized by the gut-wrenching and brutal scene in front of their eyes. Bruno did not seem to be in the mood to stop. Randy kept screaming like a pig and pleading for help.

At last, before it was too late, Bruno's friends gathered their courage and stepped in to control him. After great effort and a long struggle, they brought him under control, leaving the howling Randy in intense pain.

CHAPTER SEVEN



Some Forgotten Words

This incidence jolted the college management and they had to suspend Bruno. After that, things grew worse for Bruno. As he now had nothing to do, his anxiety and depression escalated and he had more ghastly nightmares almost every night.

Bruno's whole life had turned upside down. Things like the chirping of birds in the morning, the moon in the night and his favorite music, which used to make him immensely cheerful, started to perturb him. This unexplained sadness, anxiety, anger and loneliness ate him up gradually. He felt completely helpless as he did not understand what was happening to him.

Suddenly, some forgotten words resonated in Bruno's ears. *The soul is eternal but the body and mind have their own past. If you don't purify it, then slowly, it will take over you.* It came as a ray of hope that pierced the dense fog of confusion and helplessness. Bruno finally understood what the Godly Girl meant. In no time, the whole enigma and mystery was unveiled .

'Oh, yes! Hassan's subconscious mind is gradually overpowering me.' Bruno mused, holding his forehead.

Now one thing was crystal clear. If Bruno didn't do anything soon, he might end up doing the same thing Hassan had done. He clenched his

fists and vowed not to let this happen. He would not let this precious human life slip through his fingers.



After losing 12 precious sunrises, Bruno was certain about what he had to achieve. But how to achieve it was still a matter of concern.

The next day, Bruno was completely lost in his thoughts while traveling on a bus. He thought about how, in the excitement of getting a human life, he had completely forgotten that he had a condition to fulfill. After plenty of introspection, he finally concluded that before finding the purpose of life, he had to calm his mind first.

Suddenly, an elderly church priest wearing a white robe and carrying a Bible in his hand sat next to him. He looked calm and composed.

“Have you read this holy book?” Bruno was so impressed by his persona that he couldn’t hold himself back from starting a conversation with him. The priest slowly turned his head to look at Bruno with a calm smile on his face.

“Yes, of course, my son,” replied the priest, politely.

This gave Bruno the confidence to ask him something else. “Then tell me, how can one calm their mind? ”

The priest returned to looking straight ahead. “Our past sins never let our minds calm down. You have to get rid of your past sins first.”

Bruno felt as if he had hit the nail on the head by asking the right question to the right person. The priest’s answer was very relevant to his problem.

“Yes, you’re right, Father. But how?” In excitement, Bruno turned his body toward the priest and sat facing him.

“Once the lord forgives your sins, then they are no more. You are free from them. But to be forgiven, you have to confess them,” he replied with an unshakable belief in his eyes.

Their conversation couldn't go any further as the priest had to get down at his stop. But before leaving, the priest gave Bruno his Bible.

"Read it thoroughly. It will help you a lot. And remember, once you are illuminated with his divine light, don't forget to spread that light to others. That's the ultimate purpose of life." The priest left.

Bruno couldn't believe his luck. On the very first attempt, he had found the way to his destination. He found a way to calm his mind and the purpose of life. He never thought it would be that easy.

As the Bible slipped into Bruno's hands, he felt the power of the holy book. That night, he couldn't sleep at all. After spending his whole night reading it, he felt quite relieved.

The next morning, he got ready to visit a church for confession. His desperation and eagerness were quite visible through his body language. He had got back the zeal he had lost slightly. Within no time, he found himself standing inside a church. Its serene atmosphere was quite calming. As he looked up at the glorious statue of Jesus, it carved a magnificent impression on his heart. Not wasting any further time, he got into the confession box.

"Trusting God's grace and mercy, confess your sins sincerely and truthfully. You can start your confession now," said the calm voice of an unseen person.

"My past is a burden on my head. I think I have sinned a lot."

Bruno uttered a few words but to his surprise, he couldn't say anything further. He was stunned to find himself disoriented. He pushed himself a little further but whatever he said was vague, hazy and inadequate. The reason was quite obvious. He had limited and superficial information on Hassan's life. Whatever he confessed didn't come from his heart as he couldn't relate to it. Also, it didn't sound practical to Bruno to confess something that was a crime of crimes—a terrorist attack.

"Go on, my son. Say it from your heart," said the patient priest.

"Father, I am such a big sinner that I can't even confess my sins," sighed Bruno and he finally gave up.

"But son, without a confession you can't be forgiven. Go on." However, the priest's concerned appeal couldn't cut through Bruno's silence. He could see the dark clouds of misery returning to him.

"Father, what do you do when you have unexplained anger, anxiety, fear and sorrow?" he asked flatly though he was disappointed and demoralized.

"I pray to God and ask for help. "

"Then it's of no use." Bruno scoffed at his destiny in distress.

"Why, my son?" asked the startled priest.

"Because in my case, God himself gave all this to me."

The priest perceived this unfortunate truth as Bruno's ignorance. A hidden desperation and restlessness to eliminate such ignorance were visible in the priest's voice.

"No! That can't be true, my son!" he rebutted promptly. "He is the forgiver. He saves us from all evils. He is the creator."

This discourse escalated Bruno's anxiety and he was left with no choice but to leave the confession box immediately. The priest grew more concerned upon seeing him leave so abruptly.

"Hey son, don't leave like this. Otherwise, your sins will never be forgiven! Son, come back!" But his concerned call didn't have any impact on Bruno and he continued walking. He left the church in distress.

CHAPTER EIGHT



Ask the Google Guru

Even after his first failed attempt to calm his mind, Bruno was not demoralized and was in no mood to give up. This time, he decided to ask Google Guru. *How to calm your mind.* As Bruno typed these words in the search engine, he found numerous answers but shortlisted only two—one was yoga and the other reiki.

He zeroed in on a famous yoga center and went to it straight away.



As Bruno entered the yoga center, he saw an American—Acharya John Anand—sitting on a dais, guiding his students through complicated yoga positions.

“Hold your breath. 1-2-3 and let go. Relax.” John, while giving his students instructions, signaled for Bruno to wait. When the class was over, John gestured for him to come over .

“Namaste,” Acharya John greeted him and joined his hands together. “Yes, what can I do for you?” he asked in a calm and serene voice.

“Can I control and calm my subconscious mind with yoga?” Bruno got to the point quickly.

“Of course!” Acharya John smiled. “Yoga is all about purifying your mind, body and soul. Your whole being becomes fresh and pure as if it’s

new. But you also have to change your lifestyle. Your food habits, your sleep timings and your thoughts. From today, no more negative thoughts, only positive thoughts. No alcohol or no non-vegetarian food either. A little bit of helping the needy will surely help you.”

Bruno wondered if there was anything else on the list! But he nodded as he had no other choice and had to give it a try.

A determined Bruno started yoga the very next day. But with such a hyper and unsettled mind, it was like yoga was a mountain that Bruno had to climb. But he still gave it his best. He decided it was better to suffer from doing yoga than to suffer without doing it. After more than a week of dedicated yoga sessions and a completely changed lifestyle, he felt a little better.



“So you have been doing yoga for quite some time?” enquired Acharya John one day. “Tell me, how are you feeling?”

“It feels like a lot of stress has been removed from my body. It has become quite active and flexible. It feels good to some extent.” Bruno looked slightly satisfied .

“And what about your mind?” John stared at him with smug eyes, as if he had the power to transform the whole world.

“It still troubles me,” sighed Bruno, shaking his head. “It’s filled with negative and aggressive thoughts.” A hint of disappointment reflected in Bruno’s voice.

“Don’t worry. From tomorrow, we will start hot yoga.” Acharya John waved his hand boastfully. Bruno had little hope in yoga now but he agreed to give it one last try.

The next day, after the hot yoga session, Bruno sat facing Acharya John, drenched in sweat.

“Open your eyes. How do you feel now?” Acharya John asked Bruno, expecting a delightful experience.

“Well, I don’t know,” Bruno replied in low spirits.

"You will feel good, have patience." Acharya John gave a blessing gesture. "Actually, your problem is that you are thinking about yourself too much and in a negative manner. Be positive and start thinking about others. Become a reason for others' happiness and your sadness will disappear. God sent us to this world with a purpose. Do some noble deeds. Remember, only good karma can burn bad karma. This is the only way to attain peace."

These few words were quite an inspiration to Bruno. After leaving the yoga center, Bruno eagerly looked for an opportunity to help somebody. Finally, he saw a middle-aged, blind man standing on the roadside. He quickly concluded that the blind man needed help. Enthusiastically, he ran to the man to lend him a helping hand.

"Sir, may I help you?" asked Bruno, panting.

"Get away from me, you creep! Leave me alone!" The man shook his head in exasperation.

Bruno did not expect this rude and impudent response. "Sir," Bruno put his hand on the blind man's shoulder, "I was just trying to help you..." he tried to explain. Though Bruno found his behavior strange and unfair, he was determined to be helpful that day.

"The last time a guy tried to help me, he stole my wallet!" The blind man shrugged Bruno's hand off his shoulder. "Get the hell out of here, you thief!" he yelled, hitting the road with his stick.

This was enough to break Bruno's goal to be nice and helpful that day. A sudden fury and anger peeped out from behind his smiling and polite face. He decided to give the blind man a piece of his mind.

"I think you seriously need some help." Bruno clenched his teeth in anger. He picked up the man in his arms and started crossing the road. The man was thin and short so it wasn't a challenge for a strong man like Bruno to carry him. Terribly shocked, the blind man tried to resist. But all his screaming and yelling were nothing compared to Bruno's aggression. After dropping the man like a bag of garbage on the other side of the road, Bruno didn't even look at him and started toward his destination.

“You idiot! I was not crossing the road. My bus was arriving on that side. I had just crossed the road with much difficulty. You have put me where I was 20 minutes ago!” The blind man shouted at Bruno as he lay by the side of the road, in distress and annoyance. But Bruno couldn’t hear as he had walked far away.



After closing the yoga chapter, it was reiki’s turn. He made an appointment with an eminent reiki therapist—Lisa. Lisa was a good looking, 45-year-old lady. Her mannerisms demonstrated her perfection in her field. There was a certain choreography to her body movements.

“How does it work?” This was the first question Bruno asked her.

“Reiki is the transfer of the highest healing energy from one being to another,” replied Lisa in a deep, husky voice. Her hands and eyebrows moved in rhythm. “The therapist transfers this magical energy to your body. It can heal your body, relieve your pain, cure your disease and purify your mind and body. It can even burn away your past karma.”

Bruno stared at her with eyes filled with hope.

“So are you ready?” she smiled, her cheeks fully stretched out like a rubber band.

“Yes, I am.” Bruno nodded. After getting a firm and determined reply, Lisa politely guided Bruno to the therapy room with softer lighting. She gently made him lie down on the therapy bed and close his eyes. After setting everything up, she started artistically moving her hands over Bruno’s body without touching it. Through this, she was supposed to transfer her healing energy into his body.

With time, Bruno started to relax and finally slipped into a deep sleep. As he was asleep, it was expected that he would have an unpleasant dream. But this time, his nightmare was the deadliest of all.

He saw himself stuck up to his chest in a muddy swamp, surrounded by a few crocodiles and thousands of snakes. His whole body was unable to move due to the thick mud. Suddenly, ravenous crocodiles scooted toward him with their predatory jaws wide open. A few creepy, hissing

snakes had already started crawling up his neck from behind. He tried to free his hands from the thick mud but he couldn't. He tried to scream by collecting all his energy but that didn't happen. His whole body was paralyzed. Suddenly, Bruno woke up with blood-curdling screams. He sat up, gasping for air.

His blazing eyes and his raging growls were enough to scare Lisa. Screaming even louder than Bruno, she lost her balance and fell to the floor. Waking up from the nightmare and seeing a lady huddled in the corner, screaming louder than him scared Bruno even more.

An exchange of screams started between the two and it became difficult to make out who was scaring whom. It looked like they were playing a game of *'who can scream higher and louder'*. Bruno had strong vocals but couldn't win this specific game as his opponent was a lady. After a glorious victory, still panicked, she escaped the haunted room, crawling on her hands and knees.

As soon as she was out of the room, she got back on her feet and picked up her phone. With shaking hands, she tried to call 911. Bruno regained his senses and tried to understand what terrible blunder he had made. He came out and tried to pacify her hurriedly.

"I'm s-so sorry that I-I scared you," he faltered. "Please calm down. I am actually very stressed these days." After seeing him plead so sincerely, Lisa stopped dialing.

"It's ooo-kkk-" Her voice shook. "Could you please leave? I'm sorry. I'm not well," gasped Lisa as she breathed hard and held her forehead.

Bruno decided to give her some space to settle down and started moving toward the exit. But after a few steps, he suddenly stopped. When she saw him turning around, Lisa's panic returned. With wide eyes and trembling hands, she picked up a paperweight.

"Sorry, I forgot to pay you," he said.

Lisa sighed and dropped the paperweight on the floor.

"I d-don't want any money from you." Lisa's face reddened and creases formed on her forehead. "Y-you please just go! Pleaseease!" She

was losing it now.

The moment Bruno left, she locked the door and collapsed on the couch, breathing deeply. It wasn't apparent if the session had changed anything inside Bruno or not but it was evident that this session had made a substantial impact on Lisa.



Defeated and disappointed, he returned home and collapsed on his couch like a crushed warrior. After a while, he turned on his TV and came across a commercial where an American dressed as Indian sadhu was promoting a product. It was a small Indian jug (*lauta*) full of holy water from the Ganga. The sadhu was promoting the holy water like it was a cosmetic cream in a funny and dramatic tone.

"Now you can burn all your past karma just by sitting at home. This is the holy Ganga *jal* that we imported from India. It can purify your mind and body in one single bath. Yes! Just one single bath. Order it online and have a pure and clean soul in 10 seconds. If you order now, you get a month of Netflix absolutely free. Don't wait, guys! Grab the offer!"

Though Bruno didn't have much hope in this, he decided to give it a try as there was not much effort or time needed. After paying the extra charges, he had it delivered to his door the very next day. He immediately took it to the bathroom and poured it over his head while playing a live *Ganga darshan* on his mobile.

In anticipation of a miracle, he left the house and started walking. But all his expectations fell flat as nothing happened. He was where he had been before. He reached a busy street and sat down on the stairs of a plaza, distressed and disappointed.

CHAPTER NINE



Back to Café

“Hey, Hassan! Wake up!” In the present, Megan called his name. “Let’s go. I am getting late for my aerobics class.” She picked up her purse.

Suddenly, Bruno woke up from the flashback of all that had happened in the past month. He looked around. The old man was gone. He got up and, after stretching a bit, walked out of the café with Megan.

After bidding goodbye to Megan, his mind started constructing a plan for his upcoming journey. While walking back home, he thought that he had a clear objective—a visit to Satya Ashram in Rishikesh, India, to meet Satya Maharishi, whose book the old man had just gifted him. He didn’t know why but Bruno could feel in his bones that this man, Satya Maharishi, could pull him out of his intricate problem. He zeroed in on two crucial things that he needed to achieve his target. One was a passport and the other was money.



Bruno began his preparations for India right away. He came home to search for his passport, looking excited and curious. His father sat in the living room, reading the newspaper.

“Dad, do I have a passport?” Bruno casually asked.

But his father, Akram, did not take this question casually. Two suspicious, penetrating eyes surfaced from behind the newspaper. Those

eyes gave Bruno a glimpse of the same harrowing abyss he used to see in his dreams.

“Yes, of course, but why are you asking? You know you have it,” muttered Akram with a frosty look. Bruno was flooded with a strange cocktail of emotions, which included fright, nervousness and, yes, a little joy, thanks to the news that he had a passport.

“Ahh... the pressure of my studies! I—I just forgot!” giggled Bruno, trying to conceal his inner turmoil.

Akram was completely ruffled. “Pressure of studies?” He shot up from his seat in anger and so did his voice. “When did a loser like you start taking your studies so seriously?” yelled Akram, a vein pulsed in his forehead. His father’s reddened face and a fierce gaze left Bruno speechless.

“You know what? You are an unending liability! YOU MORON! ARE YOU TAKING DRUGS? ANSWER ME!” Akram’s thunderous voice gave a tremor of fear in Bruno’s legs.

Bruno tried hard but he couldn’t say anything as he had lost his voice. Not only his tongue but his whole body was momentarily paralyzed. Bruno shivered and sweat trickled down his neck as his dad moved toward him and started sniffing him like Bruno used to sniff criminals when he was a dog .

Each passing moment felt like a decade. Suddenly, Bruno’s mom’s voice rang out. It came as a savior, telling Akram that his mobile was ringing in the bedroom. Still glaring at Bruno with a scowling face, Akram left and Bruno’s momentary paralysis ended. To prevent himself from falling, he instantly held onto a chair for support with one hand while the other held his right knee. He gasped for breath. After a while, he calmed down, went to his room and decided to find the passport himself as there was no other option.



The next day, when his father went to work and his mom to the grocery store, Bruno started searching for his passport. At last, he found it in his

parent's room. One task was over.

The other thing he needed was money. Yes, he needed a substantial amount of money. After all, he was traveling from one country to another. The first thing that came to his mind was to steal it? But soon he realized that he could not attain peace with money gained through ill means.

He remembered that when he was a dog, he saved the life of a millionaire's son from kidnappers. As a reward, he was given USD 2,000, which was received by Russell. But this memory proved to be of little worth as he could not approach Russell and ask for his money. Russell would never understand or trust him and if, by any chance, he recognized Hassan's face, then his 90 sunrises would be reduced to just a few and he had already used some. Finally, he was left with no option but to break into his old house and get his money when Russell was on duty.



He left for his old house. Yes, he still remembered the way. As he got closer, his faded memories were revived. Every small thing, like the street lights, the park, the grocery store, the cars parked on the road, a dog barking in the neighborhood, triggered a dozen memories in the back of his mind. As he reached the door, the smell of this house made him nostalgic about the good old days. He stood pinned against the locked door with a palpable sense of loss.

Bruno knew the house so well that it was not difficult for him to get in. Once he broke in and looked around, he was overcome by several emotions. He stood in the middle of the house with a flurry of memories cascading around him. Tears filled his eyes when he saw his food bowl, toys, bed and the table where he used to sit and eat with Russell. He found the jacket Russell used to wear while taking Bruno on their morning walk and cried inconsolably while holding it and lying on the floor.

One question bothered him: Was it really worth putting in so much effort for a human life? He was much happier with a dog's life.

In all this, he had completely forgotten why he was there. As soon as his cyclone of emotions had passed, he got up, wiped his tears and started searching for money. Unfortunately, he could not find a substantial amount.

After inquiring with the neighbors, he found out that Russell was in the hospital. He had been discharged but had developed an infection after his surgery for the injuries he sustained to his knee and shoulder during the blast. He had been re-admitted to the hospital. There was nobody to take care of him as he had never developed good relationships with anyone except Bruno.



Once he heard this, Bruno grew so worried that he forgot about the problems linked to meeting Russell. He also forgot the Godly Girl's words: During these 90 sunrises, he was not immortal and how long he lived depended on his choices. Ignoring all of this, he rushed to the hospital and was soon standing outside Russell's room, staring at the door. Finally, he knocked and went inside.

Russell lay in his bed with a cast on his shoulder, arm and knee. He could see burn marks on Russell's neck. Hearing the door open, Russell turned his head to look at his visitor.

As they both looked at each other, a huge tornado of emotions rose inside Bruno yet his face remained blank. Bruno thought about how this meeting was so different from his previous ones when he was a dog. He used to jump on his master, lick his face and run around even if they met after a short time. Now, he was seeing Russell after weeks and they just gave each other a distant stare.

"Hi, sir." Bruno broke the silence with a formal smile.

"Who are you?" asked Russell, his expression was cold and his eyes suspicious.

"My name is Hassan!" Bruno blinked in excess to hide his moist eyes. "Actually, you don't remember but you once saved my father's life. Sorry to hear about your injuries." He swallowed a lump in his throat,

controlling his emotions. Russell ignored Bruno and resumed watching TV.

Russell was already quite unsocial but the loss of Bruno had shaken him terribly and made him more so. Soaked in his pleasant memories, Bruno continued to stare at Russell, cocking his head. 'Hey, buddy! Why are you so sad! Look, here I am!' For a moment, his mouth twisted and his heart ached to say it all to Russell but he held back. Bruno knew Russell was very impulsive. Before listening to Bruno's story, he would pump all his bullets into Bruno's head.

A doctor came in and asked Bruno to give them some privacy as he was about to give Russell some medication. With a heavy heart, Bruno got up and said goodbye to Russell. His eyes fell on Russell's wallet, which lay on the table. It had a credit card in it. As the others were busy, he stole the credit card and left.

Once he left the hospital, he visited a travel agent and got his ticket to India booked. He withdrew some cash from an ATM as well. All this wasn't difficult for Bruno as he knew Russell's PIN. Not only did he know his credit card pin but he also knew his email, Facebook and Twitter passwords, thanks to Russell's day long, unending and repetitive conversations.



Russell was discharged from the hospital soon after. With a grim look on his face, deep sadness took root in him. He couldn't gather the courage to go back to his house since every single thing reminded him of Bruno. But he had no other option.

When Russell entered, he could tell that his house had been broken into but he didn't take it seriously as nothing had been stolen. After a while, he visited a grocery store and took out his wallet; he found his credit card was missing. He went home and switched on his mobile, which he hadn't turned on since the blast. An SMS confirmed that his credit card had been stolen and used twice. He immediately called his office and gave them all the details so that they could look into it.



The next day, Russell joined work and went back to his office. Since the blast, he had been on leave. He was promoted and was welcomed like a hero but this time, Bruno was not with him. It was tough for him. He thought of leaving the office but wherever he went—his house, the route to the house and the park—reminded him of his buddy.

As Russell walked to his new cabin, he got a call from the cyber division. “Sir, your credit card has been used to book plane tickets and withdraw cash.”

“Okay! I want all the details!” ordered Russell. After disconnecting the call, he started connecting the dots. His suspicion turned to the mysterious person that came to meet him when he was in the hospital.

“That swine was suspicious from the very first moment. He said I had saved his dad’s life once. Oh, come on! I saved a Mohammedan life and still don’t remember it? Impossible,” mumbled Russell to himself.

He immediately headed to the hospital and was lucky enough to get a clear picture of the suspect from the CCTV footage. It felt like Russell had seen this person before. He stared at the picture for a long time. Suddenly, he realized that the person in the picture and the suspect who placed the bomb in the café looked quite similar. But this could just be his assumption. He called his subordinate to enquire about the terrorist’s dead body, which they had been searching for and hadn’t found yet.

“What about the body? Did you find it?” Russell asked his subordinate on the phone.

“No, sir! Even after multiple arduous attempts, we couldn’t find it.”

The reply strengthened Russell’s doubts. The vague cloud of confusion started forming a clearer image.

Russell came back to the office, scanned the CCTV picture and started photoshopping it. After doctoring the picture to add big dark sunglasses and a hoodie, exactly as the suspect had worn on the day of the blast, Russell couldn’t believe his eyes.

“What the heck!” He mumbled in amazement. “They look exactly like each other.”

This startling revelation was not complete yet. Russell got another shock. His gaze fell on something unusual on the suspect’s knuckles. On zooming in on the picture, he found it was an Islamic tattoo. Like other things, this looked familiar too. As he stared at the tattoo, his consciousness was struck by a thunderbolt that shot forth from the dense clouds of his memory.

On that fateful day, he saw the same tattoo on the suspect’s knuckles when the latter raised it to shoot at him. It had happened so fast that Russell didn’t remember it till now. The mystery was solved! The person in the CCTV footage and the terrorist who placed the bomb on that day were one person .

Russell boiled with rage when he realized that the terrorist who killed his dear Bruno was still alive. On the verge of exploding with fury, he punched his office table hard and growled. He cursed himself for not recognizing the terrorist the day he came to his hospital room; he could have killed that swine then and there.

He called the cyber division, “Please stop all further investigation. I have found my card. Just do one thing. Please tell me for which travel agent my card was used.”

After disconnecting the call, Russell got a message. Captain Charles was calling him. Trying to keep his temper in check, he entered the captain’s cabin. Charles welcomed him back, condoled with him regarding Bruno and congratulated him on his promotion. As Charles discussed the untraced terrorist’s body, Russell stayed normal and didn’t reveal that he had almost cracked the case.

The reason was quite clear. Russell never accepted defeat and never forgave or forgot. He didn’t want the person who killed Bruno to just be arrested and sent to jail. He wanted to be the first to torture him mercilessly and then finally kill him with his bare hands. He wanted to see him die in front of him as he begged for his life. After coming out of

the Captain Charles' cabin, he instantly headed to the travel agent's office to get the suspect's details.

CHAPTER TEN



Incredible India

Bruno and Megan reached the airport and collected their boarding passes. The very thought of visiting India for the first time had delighted Megan. However, Bruno was still caught up in his thoughts.

After a security check, Bruno's eyes fell on a Labrador sniffer doing his routine work at the airport. A smile crept onto his face. Bruno thought of how blessed he was that at least he was not on a leash. He held Megan's hand and thanked her for taking him along with her to India; the country that had become a ray of hope in the sheer darkness of his adversity. Bruno's gesture brought solace to Megan, who had been dying to see a smile on his face.

As the plane took off, Bruno held the arms of his seat as his nerves took over. But as he looked out of the window, his nervousness turned into cheerfulness. He was amazed to see the world from above and wanted to put his head out of the window. Megan saw him trying to open the airplane window and was highly amused and relieved to see the old Hassan coming back.



Russell arrived at the travel agent but he was too late. The plane carrying Bruno and Megan had just taken off. Since Russell didn't have any substantial evidence, it was futile to call the airport authorities and ground the plane. But Russell was in no mood to let this go.

'Okay! If that creep wants to die in India, let me fulfill his last wish. Even I don't want to spill his filthy blood on the pure soil of my country, America.' Russell was determined to chase his enemy anywhere, even to Mars, should the need arise.

The very same day, Russell applied for leave on the grounds of clinical depression and started preparing to go to India.



After a long 22-hour journey, Bruno and Megan finally landed at the international airport in Amritsar, India. When they left the airport, a new and entirely different world opened up to them. They were amazed by everything around them, mainly, the people, their way of dressing, talking, etc. Megan shared a wondrous glance with Bruno. As they moved a little further, they were startled by a group of men darting toward them.

"Hello, ma'am! Hello, sir!" They then proceeded to accost them. "Welcome to India. Where you want to go?" they chorused.

The super-excited cab drivers pushed each other while trying to corner Megan and Bruno. Bruno took it as their warm hospitality and kind concern for their guests.

Suddenly, a man in his mid-40s pushed through the crowd and made way for Bruno and Megan. This man was Laddi, Mr. Gill's driver. Mr. Gill had two daughters, Raman Kaur and Simran Kaur. Simran was studying in New York with Megan and was the one who had invited her to India for her sister's wedding.

Laddi took their luggage, introduced himself and escorted them to his MUV, which was parked a short distance away. As they started moving, some taxi drivers chased them. Bruno felt guilty for being so cold with them and not interacting properly. After walking for a while, they saw a girl standing near the car, bouncing on her feet and eagerly waving at them.

"That's Simran!" Megan told Bruno in delight.

As they got closer, Simran came running over to give them a warm hug. She was so enchanted to have them in her country that her happiness knew no bounds. She kept talking cheerily on their way to Mr. Gill's farmhouse. When Simran's excitement abated and she was quiet for a moment, Bruno recalled his main purpose for coming to India.

"Megan..." Bruno cleared his throat. "Where are we heading to?"

Megan stole a glance at Simran. She looked a bit embarrassed by Bruno's question.

"We're here to attend the wedding." Megan grinned sheepishly at Simran to hide her awkwardness .

"Well, I think," Bruno gulped. "I need to go to Rishikesh. I need to see Satya Maharishi." His mouth was dry while he pleaded.

"But we're here to attend the wedding!" whispered Megan in exasperation. She turned to look at Bruno who was sitting in the back seat of the MUV.

"Yes, we are. But try to understand that this is important." Bruno was left red-faced by her scowling face and glaring eyes.

"There is no need to go to Rishikesh..." The escalating fight was put to an end when Simran cut in. "Satya Maharishi is here in Amritsar for two days. You can meet him here only." She turned to smile at Bruno.

In the blink of an eye, Simran had solved the whole problem and diffused all tension. Bruno was glad to hear this. This coincidence reinforced Bruno's belief that it was destiny and was a message of confirmation that something positive would happen.



After a while, their car entered a big farmhouse that was spread over a few acres. 'Gill Farms' was written on the gate in big, bold lettering with a 3D image of a lion's head in solid brass. Mr. Gill was a rich landlord who lived there with his family and his two younger brothers and their respective families. After passing a lush green lawn, their car stopped at the main building. On the left, Mr. Gill, along with his whole family, was

waiting to welcome them. On the right, near the fountain, was a statue of Maharaja Ranjit Singh (a legendary Sikh emperor) holding a sword while riding a horse. It looked majestic. The farm was decorated like a Christmas tree with festoons, flowers and hanging lanterns. The cascading wedding lights promised a lustrous show in the evening.

As Bruno and Megan got out of the car, a lady came forward with a *thali* filled with red powder, flower petals and small diyas. The lady moved the *thali* in front of Bruno's face in a circular motion and then put some of the red color on his forehead with her little finger. Then she showered petals on him. The same was done for Megan.

"In India, we treat our guests like Gods. This is a gesture to welcome you. It conveys that they are pleased to have you here," whispered Simran with a gesture of joined hands and a bowed head. Bruno and Megan were glad and honored to receive this welcome. Bruno was touched by how affectionate and large-hearted these people were.

After the welcoming ceremony, Bruno and Megan were escorted to a big drawing room filled with all the members of the family. Bruno and Megan were made to sit like a king and queen while the others stood around courteously, smiling and giggling or simply staring at them. This extraordinarily special treatment made Megan and Bruno uncomfortable but they knew it was just out of love.

As they were served welcome drinks, Mr. Gill started introducing all the members of his big Punjabi family one by one. As Mr. Gill did this, Bruno wondered if he would be able to remember all of their names! As soon as a family member was introduced and his name said out loud, there was an expression of immense delight on his face as if he was being honored with an Oscar. Bruno was amazed to discover such pure and loving people in the modern world .

"And now, I am going to introduce the most lovely and adorable member of our family." Eyes glinting with immense love, Mr. Gill gesticulated toward a little girl around six or seven years old. She sat in a wheelchair and held a teddy bear in her arms. "This is Sparrow!"

completed Mr. Gill. Sparrow was Mr. Gill's niece, his younger brother's daughter. Eyes filled with innocence and purity, she stared at Bruno.

"Why she is in a wheelchair?" asked Bruno empathetically.

"She has bone cancer," Simran Kaur, who was standing behind him, leaned forward to whisper in Bruno's ears.

"I hope she will be okay soon?" Bruno asked curiously, expecting a 'yes' in response.

"It's last-stage cancer. She is with us for a maximum of two to three months."

Bruno's heart sank. While revealing this sad truth, Simran looked normal. But a deep pain and suffering could be felt in her voice and eyes. Bruno could not hold himself back. He walked toward Sparrow. He kneeled down. "Sparrow, you know what? You are the most beautiful girl I have ever seen." He gave her a rose he had been given at the welcome ceremony.

"All boys are the same. You say the same thing whenever you see a beautiful girl!" replied Sparrow innocently and in a weak voice.

Bruno was stunned to hear this from such a young girl. The men started laughing while a few ladies shed a few tears.

"If you are not just saying it, then in front of my parents, promise you will marry me when I grow up!" She hugged her teddy tighter .

Bruno never knew that he was going to have such a tough opponent. Visibly disoriented, he tried to handle the situation.

"Will you marry me when you grow up?" Bruno proposed while holding Sparrow's hand.

"My God! You boys are so impatient!" Her hands flew to her mouth in amazement. "This is our first meeting. At least give me some time to think." She rested her elbows on the arms of the wheelchair, fists squeezing her cheeks.

Bruno finally conceded defeat with a blush and a smile while the others laughed.



As the introduction ceremony was over and a big task was completed, it was time to show Bruno and Megan the most beloved part of the house in any Punjabi family—the dining area.

Bruno's eyes grew wide when he saw a long dining table laid with sumptuous food for lunch. This was what Bruno needed at the time as he was starving. After taking their respective seats, it was 'bon appétit' time for Bruno and Megan.

With the very first bite, the North Indian cuisine magically captivated their senses, especially Bruno's. Dishes of chicken, mutton and fish enriched with homemade ghee and butter along with aromatic home-ground spices tantalized Bruno's taste buds. Things like chapatti, butter naan and pulao were the icings on the cake .

After tasting a few dishes, Megan gave up because of her limited appetite. But it wasn't the same in Bruno's case. After all, he had a dog's appetite and was never satisfied. Bruno ate like it was his last meal.

Before he could get through the main course, he was delighted to see the next round of the feast—the dessert. It included rasgulla, gulab jamun and, last but not least, homemade jalebis that turned him back into a dog. The Gill family were honored and glad to see their guest enjoy the food so wholeheartedly.

After eating heartily, the only thing Bruno could do was sleep. He slept till evening until he was woken by the sound of a *dhol* —a Punjabi drum without which no celebration is complete. He came out of his room to see family members and guests dancing to the beat of the *dhol* while a few ladies sang folk songs.

After a while, the river of hard liquor flowed and every male relative was seen floating, swimming and drowning in it. A constant flow of snacks of chicken and fish came out of the tandoor. This was the norm in Punjab when a wedding was around the corner. Every day was a feast and celebration.

“Oh, Hassan, so you woke up!” Mr. Gill whooped on seeing Bruno. “Come have a drink!” He took Bruno to the bar and made two drinks. “Cheers!” He graciously offered one to Bruno.

“Mr. Gill, what is the purpose of life?”

Mr. Gill’s right hand was about to close the gap between his lips and the glass full of whiskey but stopped abruptly .

“Sorry, for the irrelevant question.” Seeing Mr. Gill’s wide-eyed perplexity, Bruno grew embarrassed. “I know it’s a tough question.”

“No, it’s not.” Mr. Gill grinned. “Here, even a kid knows the answer to this question.” Before Bruno’s excitement soared too high, Mr. Gill completed his sentence. “Eat, drink,” his voice grew louder with each word, “and be MERRY!” Mr. Gill’s statement ended with a loud cheer and whooping laughter. He held his glass of whiskey high.

Losing no further time, Mr. Gill downed the whole drink. “YEEEEAAHHHH!” His face grimaced as the drink was bitter and strong. He rubbed his chest to ease the burning sensation of the spirit. Suddenly, his eyes fell on Bruno’s glass, which was still filled with whiskey. He didn’t look pleased. “Hey, come on! Finish it, man! When in Punjab, drink like a Punjabi!” Mr. Gill muttered, frowning at Bruno.

To save himself from the building peer pressure, Bruno had to do as Mr. Gill said. He gulped the bitter liquid in one go. His face contorted and his tongue hung out as he coughed. The drink was too hard for a beginner like Bruno. It gave him a real, solid kick. This brought a glorious smile to Mr. Gill’s face while he patted Bruno’s back like a warrior pats a fellow warrior’s back.

After one more drink, Bruno couldn’t resist the smell of chicken and fish being grilled in the tandoor. Punjabi snacks, like tandoori chicken, Amritsari fish, kalmi kabab, etc., that came his way, he gobbled. Delicious snacks and the overflowing liquor made Bruno forget his problems completely. Seeing him enjoying himself so much made Megan quite happy. She was ecstatic to see that bringing Bruno to India was a great idea .

But after a while, Bruno realized he had eaten too much. The booze made the condition a little worse. He was taken to his room where, after a few rounds of vomiting, he dozed off. In Punjabi celebrations, this was a routine scene.



The next morning, Bruno woke from another terrible nightmare. It seemed like his woes had returned after a short vacation. For him, the celebration was over.

After getting ready, he asked Simran Kaur where Satya Maharishi was staying so that he could visit him. As Bruno was new to the city, Simran ordered her driver, Laddi, to take care of him.

After a 30-minute drive, they reached a venue with a large, open ground, decorated with flowers and tents. It was where Satya Maharishi was about to hold a morning discourse. The sound of devotional songs in his name could be heard in the distance. As Bruno entered the venue, he was amazed to see thousands of devotees, soaked in sanctity and piety, already gathered. Some were dancing, singing, moving their body in time to the music while others were sitting silently, in deep meditation.

The vibe of positivity in the atmosphere was very infectious. Bruno felt one with them all. He looked for a seat and could only find it at the back of the venue as it was already jam-packed.

After waiting for 40 minutes, Satya Maharishi came onstage. Bruno saw a chubby man of medium height with a clean-shaven head and face. He wore an orange dhoti and kurta and walked on stage with his hands joined together. Immediately, the whole gathering was electrified with spiritual fervor. The enthusiasm of his devotees could put a rock star to shame. This was the magic of Satya Maharishi.

Finally, he sat on his special throne-like seat. Bruno could not see his face very clearly because of the distance but could feel his aura. "Hari Om." The enigma of tranquility and calmness of his voice was so hypnotic that Bruno couldn't make out when or how his eyes spontaneously closed. He started floating in the stream of divine discourse though he

could not understand the language. After spreading divinity to his devotees through his pure and pious discourse for almost an hour, Satya Maharishi was revered by melodious devotional songs that his disciples sung.

After they finished, Satya Maharishi waved at his devoted crowd while throwing flowers at them. Bruno stood up with his hands joined. A blossoming smile on his face confirmed his certainty that he had found the right man to take him to the other shore.

As Satya Maharishi had left, Bruno returned to his car and asked the driver to take him to where Maharishi was staying. After a 20-minute drive, Laddi stopped the car outside a big bungalow. Bruno walked eagerly to a gate that was hardly visible because of the crowd. After monitoring the situation for a while, he saw a young volunteer standing inside the gate, saying something.

“Our beloved Maharishi ji is resting now as he will be leaving for Rishikesh tomorrow. So I request all the beloved disciples and devotees to go home and rest. Hari Om!”

Bruno swiftly made his way through the crowd and approached the volunteer. “Hey, I need to meet Satya Maharishi personally. It’s an emergency.” Bruno said in a low voice.

“I’m sorry, brother.” The volunteer smiled pleasantly. “This won’t be possible. Everybody here needs to meet Maharishi ji...” Disappointed by volunteer’s reply Bruno made one more appeal. “Please, sir...” But before Bruno could try to persuade him, the volunteer left, politely waving his hand in denial. Bruno kept shouting, raising his voice above that of the crowd but it was all in vain.



Bruno returned to the farmhouse and saw Sparrow in her wheelchair, watching the butterflies. He moved toward her.

“Hi!” Seeing Bruno coming toward her, Sparrow smiled.

“Hi,” replied Bruno, in low spirits.

“What happened? Didn’t you meet Satya Maharishi?” concern lined her forehead.

Bruno shook his head with a downcast gaze.

“But why did you need him in the first place? Like you can tell me... maybe I could help you.” Those innocent eyes gazing at Bruno brought his lost smile back to his face. He kneeled to come to her eye level.

“My problem is I have a very short life left,” sighed Bruno.

“So do I.” Her quick reply stunned Bruno. “Yes, I know that I am not going to be alive after two months. But still, I am not worried.” She shrugged her narrow shoulders.

Despite her family’s effort to conceal this merciless reality from her, she knew it all. But her words had put fresh life in Bruno. He felt charged-up and had completely forgotten his frustration.

“Don’t you think we should get married immediately as we don’t have much time?” asked Bruno with an impish smile.

“I know you are very desperate but unlike you, I have to choose between you and many others. So give me some time.” She folded her little arms and nodded innocently.

Bruno once again conceded defeat followed by a mild chuckle.

After getting an energy boost from Sparrow, Bruno prepared for Mr. Gill’s daughter’s engagement ceremony, which was scheduled that evening at the farmhouse. Again, he ate like a dog and drank like a Punjabi. He tried his best to drown his all problems in the homemade liquor. He spent another gala evening with Mr. Gill and his family.



The next morning, with new hope, Bruno returned to where Satya Maharishi was staying. It was the same scene again. A big crowd waited impatiently for just a glimpse of their Guru. Suddenly, Bruno observed some movement and saw Satya Maharishi leaving for Rishikesh. He was surrounded by tight security. Bruno shouted and tried to get closer but it

was impossible. Bruno stood, heartbroken, staring at the long caravan of cars in which Satya Maharishi left.

“Don’t worry, son.” An elderly man, standing next to him patted his shoulder. “He will call you himself when the time is right.”

“That’s the problem. I don’t have time,” muttered Bruno.

As he went back to the car, he was embarrassed and avoided making eye contact with Laddi.



After returning to Gill Farms, Bruno felt like the time had come to have a serious talk with Megan.

“Please don’t start this again! Next weekend is the wedding. Can’t you wait for a few more days?” hissed Megan.

“Please Megan, try to understand. I don’t have time!”

“You know what? You are so self-obsessed. You just think about yourself. Go wherever you want. It will be good for me.” Annoyed and upset, Megan left.

Bruno realized that Megan was hurt. But there was no use pacifying her as she wouldn’t understand. He felt sorry for her and left her alone. He informed Mr. Gill, who further instructed Laddi to take him to Rishikesh.

CHAPTER ELEVEN



A Journey to Rishikesh

Bruno was set to leave for Rishikesh. All the family members had gathered to see him off with the same affection in their eyes, wishing Bruno would stay longer. He thought about how loving these people were. He said goodbye to everybody personally, squeezing their hands. He thanked them for their love and care. Then came Sparrow's turn. He got down on his knees.

"So you are leaving me? You're all the same!" Hugging her teddy and sitting in her wheelchair, Sparrow gazed innocently at Bruno.

"I am sorry. You deserve somebody better." Bruno said with downcast eyes and a desolate face.

"Don't be sad." Sparrow placed her little hands under Bruno's chin and lifted his face. "I have something for you." Sparrow pulled out a bundle of papers that looked like American dollars from her pink bag and put it in Bruno's left hand.

"These are a few dollars. It's all I have. It will save you in difficult times." Filled with curiosity, Bruno looked at the bundle closely. They were not real dollars but were toy currency.

This gesture of innocence and pure love brought tears to Bruno's eyes. Seeing his tears, she hugged him tight. As Bruno hugged her back,

something happened in him. He found it was therapeutic. He wondered if it was all he needed in life.

“It was a pleasure to have you here,” Mr. Gill said in his usual tough voice as Bruno shook hands with him. Bruno had nothing to say as he was overwhelmed with emotion. He just smiled back and got into the car’s backseat.

He eagerly rolled down the window, which clearly expressed his pain of being parted from this family. The car moved and they all waved goodbye. His hand kept waving till his eyes could no longer see them. He closed his eyes and propped his head against the back of his seat. He couldn’t raise his head or open his eyes for some time as he was emotionally drained.



When Bruno and Laddi had gone a few miles from Gill Farms, Bruno asked him something with his eyes closed. “Laddi, can I ask you something?”

“Sure, sir,” Laddi replied.

Bruno opened his eyes. “What is the purpose of life?” He raised his head to look at Laddi.

“Well, I am not as educated as you are sir but,” Laddi looked at Bruno through the rear-view mirror, “according to me, it is to get married, have kids, love your family and serve your parents. Only this could be the purpose of life.”

Bruno wasn’t very satisfied with Laddi’s answer but he didn’t expect more than this from him.

Suddenly, their car started jerking and came to a halt. Laddi got down, opened the bonnet and started looking for the problem. Bruno followed him.

As they looked at the engine, an old white ambassador car came to a screeching halt in front of them, drawing their attention. The driver’s door opened and a turbaned Sikh man in his late ‘30s got out of the car.

He had an athletic build, above average height (5'10") with a natural, uncut bushy beard. He wore a white Punjabi kurta-pajama. From the wide grin on his face, he seemed to have stopped especially for them.

"What happened, sir?" asked the Sikh man in a rustic Punjabi accent. "Problem with the car?" Upon seeing a foreigner, the Sikh man started a conversation in English. Laddi took it as a challenge and rolled up his sleeves to prove that he was no less.

"It's okay. We will manage. Thank you!" replied Laddi in a thick accent.

To Bruno, it seemed to be a normal conversation. But if a North Indian had seen two sober Punjabi cab drivers trying to communicate in English, with their hardcore Punjabi accents, he would have died laughing.

"What's wrong, Laddi?" enquired Bruno curiously.

"Can't say, sir," replied Laddi pulling his head out from under the car's bonnet. "Maybe the coolant leaked and the engine is overheated."

"Damn!" Bruno hit the car roof in frustration.

As Bruno fumed over his bad luck, the Sikh man stared at him from the corner of his eye with his arms folded.

"Which country, sir?" The Sikh man tried to start a conversation but was ignored.

Despite being treated like an unwanted guest by both Bruno and Laddi, the Sikh man kept poking his nose into their matters. A glint of mystery and mischief in his eyes and his overall personality stopped Bruno and Laddi from breaking the ice with him.

"I think we need to get it checked," sighed Laddi, wiping his hands with a shabby cloth.

"Come on, Laddi! I have to reach Rishikesh today," grumbled Bruno.

"Don't worry, sir. You are in India." The Sikh man raised his hand in assurance. "People are very helpful here. I will take you." He gesticulated toward his car with an overly friendly grin.

"No thanks, we will manage!" Laddi waved his hand in denial.

"Oh, *paji!* Try to understand. Fixing the coolant pump will take time; this boy will get late."

Due to the Sikh man's persistent and over-friendly behavior, Laddi's patience ended. He switched back to his mother tongue, Punjabi, which was apt to handle such a situation. Laddi pulled up his sleeves to shoo this unwanted guest away.

"It's okay, Laddi," Bruno intervened. "I will go with him."

"But you don't understand, sir. You can't trust a stranger in India." Laddi tried to persuade Bruno in a private conversation while the Sikh man tried to listen while casting furtive glances at them.

"It doesn't matter to me." He took his bag out of the car. "Thanks. Give my regards to Mr. Gill." Bruno shook hands with Laddi in farewell.

As Bruno got into the car and settled into the backseat, the toy money Sparrow gave him fell out of his pocket. The Sikh man, who was holding the car door for him and was already scanning each and every thing that Bruno was carrying and wearing, noticed this. He picked it up and stared at it.

"So you love playing Money Money!" The Sikh man sputtered a quick laugh. Bruno was not amused by his one-liner and impolitely took it from his hands. The Sikh man got into the driver's seat to start their journey.

"By the way, I am Pinky Singh." The Sikh man introduced himself as the car started moving. Though Bruno showed no interest in him or his feminine name, Pinky Singh decided to share the reason behind it.

He told Bruno how after having two sons, his mother desired a girl child. In sheer anticipation, she even nicknamed her unborn child 'Pinky'. Though all her hopes sunk after her delivery, she continued calling her third son 'Pinky'.

Though Bruno paid no attention to Pinky Singh's story, it didn't deter him from being overly friendly. Besides his uninvited and unending chit-chat, another thing that was quite annoying was his driving !

Pinky Singh drove like a typical North Indian cab driver. Close shaves, overtaking on the wrong side, applying emergency brakes and taking abrupt, sharp turns. Yes, his driving had all the essential elements of a rowdy Punjabi driver. To Pinky Singh, it was routine driving but as Bruno was not used to it, he became a bit restless.

"I would appreciate it if you drove a bit more slowly and smoothly," said Bruno politely. "I don't mind it but I have a headache!"

"No problem, sir!" replied Pinky Singh. Making a conscious effort, he started driving decently.

"Thanks," appreciated Bruno, smiling. Suddenly, he noticed something written in Punjabi on the top of the car's windscreen. "What's written over there? What does it mean?" asked Bruno casually.

"*GADDI MITRA DI SWARGAAN DA JHOOTAA* .It means that riding this car can give you a glimpse of heaven," replied Pinky Singh, raising an eyebrow in pride.

Now, it was Bruno's turn to snigger. To him, this wasn't less than a joke as the car was very old, uncomfortable and noisy. The suspension of the car protested loudly with continuous squeaking. It was quite annoying. Bruno's side window could not open as the window crank handle was missing. The seats had worn rather threadbare. The car was junk.

The journey continued. Pinky Singh drove decently but not for long. Soon, he was back in Punjabi driving mode. Bruno thought it was no use lecturing him.

"You visiting India for any special reason, sir?" Before Bruno could respond to yet another random question, Pinky Singh started overtaking a truck on a very steep turn. They were so close that Bruno could see all the detailing of the truck's huge tires. Thanks to their bad luck, a cow suddenly appeared out of nowhere. Pinky Singh was left with no option but to steer the car off the road while applying the emergency brake. Finally, engulfed in a huge cloud of dust, the car came to a halt. Pinky Singh giggled foolishly, with slight pride, as he had successfully averted a lethal crash.

“YOU KNOW WHAT?” shouted Bruno, “I am here to find the ‘purpose of life’ and attain some peace of mind.” His face reddened. “But the problem is that an illiterate and idiotic man like you can’t understand this!” He forgot all courtesy and civility. “Now, instead of enquiring about me, could you please concentrate on your driving. This is how you drive?” Bruno scowled at Pinky Singh spitefully.

Pinky Singh absorbed all his fury quietly. As he tried to restart his car, Bruno felt guilty for using such harsh words. “I am sorry. Actually, I was upset.”

“It’s okay, sir.” A wide grin parted his lips. “I can understand; it happens.” He looked utterly unaffected by Bruno’s rude behavior. As the car started, they got back on the road and resumed their journey.

“So you are searching for the purpose of life?” Pinky Singh tried to dissolve the tension by starting a fresh conversation. “Well, sir! I can’t tell you what the purpose of life is but you know what? Many people became religious just by sitting in the backseat of my car. Immediately, they start chanting God’s name.”

“How?” asked a curious Bruno .

Pinky Singh took a sharp turn, forcing Bruno to hold the armrest to balance himself.

“Because of my special driving skills!” He roared with laughter. The sharp turn was not only risky but was a notch higher this time. He continued braying with laughter. Bruno realized that it was impossible to set this man right.

“So that’s why you wrote that line on your windscreen.” As Bruno frowned in irritation, Pinky Singh’s hee-haws grew wilder and louder. At last, Bruno closed his eyes and preferred to sleep than be annoyed by this crazy person again and again.



After a few hours’ drive, Bruno woke with a start when the cab stopped. It was 8 pm. “Where are we?” He yawned.

"We are midway, sir. This is a very good dhaba with finger-licking good food. Please come, sir; you must be hungry."

Bruno stretched his arms as he lethargically got out of the cab. He hung his bag on his shoulder and started walking toward the washrooms.

"Sir, don't take the trouble to carry this bag with you. You can leave it in the car," said Pinky Singh while he cleaned the windscreen. His eyes were glued to Bruno's bag.

"It's okay. It's not heavy." Bruno replied flatly as he glanced at Pinky Singh from the corner of his eye. After using the restroom, he started looking for a seat. As it was completely jam-packed outside, Bruno went inside and occupied an isolated corner table. Instantly, a 13 to 14-year-old boy appeared and threw a steel plate in front of him after wiping it with a cloth. The sound of the falling plate jarred Bruno's ears. The boy said something in his language, which Bruno couldn't understand.

Suddenly, an Indian girl in her early 20s came running over. She tapped the boy's shoulder with a pleasant smile and motioned him to leave.

"Hi, sir. My name is Sachi and I will be taking your order." Sachi did her best to make herself look presentable. Sachi was fair, of medium height, beautiful and bubbling with tremendous energy. She had a happy air around her and looked stunning in her bright Patiala suit. "So tell me, sir, what would you like to have?" It seemed like she was excited to see a foreigner in her dhaba.

"Can I have the menu, please?" asked Bruno lethargically.

"Awww... sir, the printed menu is old fashioned. We have a voice menu. Allow me." She pulled herself upright. "Sir, we have... ahem!" She cleared her throat. "Aloo paratha, gobi paratha, muli paratha, gajjar paratha, paneer paratha, methi paratha, aloo puri, chole puri, Amritsari kulcha, bread pakora, bread omelet, shahi paneer, dal makhni..." She flawlessly gushed the menu.

This latest upgrade in the menu presenting system was, in fact, an old practice in Indian restaurants. But it took Bruno by great surprise. With wide eyes, he observed her zest and zeal.

“Sir, where are you from?”

“Hmmm?” This question brought Bruno back to his senses as he had been lost staring at her .

“Sir, which country?” she accentuated, leaning forward.

“Hmm? Yes, America, New York,” sighed Bruno.

“Ahhh, my dream country.” Her eyes glittered. “I wish to open a restaurant there. But my dad doesn’t allow. Many times I tried to run away but failed.”

Bruno listened keenly with a dumbfounded face. This kind of behavior was far beyond his expectation.

“Where are you heading?” Once again Sachi abruptly changed the topic.

“Hmmm? To Rishikesh to meet Satya Maharishi.”

The jollity and purity in Sachi’s eyes mesmerized Bruno so much that he didn’t shy from sharing his plans with her. “But it’s really hard to meet him,” added Sachi with a weary expression.

“Ya, I know...” sighed Bruno.

Suddenly, she became aware of her surroundings. “You know what...” She turned in all directions and leaned forward to whisper in a conspiratorial way. “I can take you directly to his room and then you can meet him.”

“Really?” Bruno’s eyes widened in excitement. “Is it possible?”

“Yes, you do one thing. Just wait for me in the car and keep the engine running. I will be there in five minutes.” Sachi tried to act normally.

“But...” Bruno was perplexed since a young girl he had met 10 minutes ago was asking him to do strange things.

“Come on, sir. We don’t have much time!” gushed Sachi.

Disoriented, Bruno did as she said. He moved toward Pinky Singh who was humming a song while waiting for his order.

“Come, we need to move.” Immediately, Bruno started walking toward the car.

“What? Sir, I am hungry. At least allow me to have a glass of lassi,” protested Pinky Singh loudly.

“I don’t like this place. We will have food somewhere else.” Bruno said indifferently. He didn’t turn around and continued walking.

They got back in the car and waited. “Sir, what we are waiting for now? If we can’t have dinner here, then what’s the point in staying here?” protested Pinky Singh who was quite hungry.

Suddenly, a noise was heard. Bruno turned to see Sachi running toward them while her father followed her, screaming at her to stop.

“START THE CAR! START THE CAR!” Sachi waved in urgency. She held a bag in her other hand and put her best effort into running as fast as she could.

“START THE CAR! COME ON!” Bruno copied and repeated the command with the same urgency.

Pinky Singh hadn’t anticipated this. He immediately became alert and cranked the engine. Sachi came running and dove into the front seat, next to the driver.

“COME ON MOVE IT! FASTER! FASTER!” yelled Sachi.

Pinky Singh pressed the gas pedal and the car accelerated away. Pinky Singh looked quite relaxed as if he was used to such situations .

“We did it! Yes!” whooped Sachi while panting.

Seeing them getting away, Sachi’s father, a tall, fat man, picked up a brick and hurled it at the car. The brick hit the rear windscreen, smashing it completely. The explosive sound of shattering glass and the falling pieces shocked Bruno but he was doubly shocked to see Pinky Singh was

unflappable and continue to drive calmly. As the car picked up speed, Sachi's dad gave up chasing and stood there panting.

He could not read the number of the car as his eyesight was weak and it was dark. He tried to get the help of a boy standing there, watching all this. He moved closer and gave him Rs.100 to read the license number for him. The boy took the money, put it in his pocket and vanished into the nearby bushes. But before vanishing, he performed his duty and informed Sachi's dad that he couldn't read as he was illiterate. Sachi's dad yelled in anger for the loss of Sachi and the Rs.100.



After another two-hour drive, Pinky Singh made a sudden halt outside a busy dhaba on the highway.

"Why did you stop?" Sachi objected.

"Because I am a human being and need food to survive." Pinky Singh smiled sarcastically. "So we are making a stop here, okay?"

Sachi nodded falteringly while Bruno didn't respond. They all got down. Alert and wary, Sachi looked in all possible directions and started moving toward the washroom. Meanwhile, Bruno took a seat inside the dhaba and looked at the menu. After a while, Sachi came and sat next to Bruno, peeping into the menu.

"Where is he going?" Sachi peered at something strange happening on the road.

"Who?" asked Bruno flatly, still looking at the menu.

"Pinky Singh!" It was a prompt reply.

Bruno flinched as he heard this name and looked outside to find Pinky Singh speeding away in his car. Instinctively, he scrambled to his feet and darted out the door. He started chasing the car maniacally but he couldn't run as fast as the machine. Pinky Singh had sped away, leaving Bruno panting and choking in the dense cloud of dust and car fumes.

"Don't worry!" panted Sachi after catching up with Bruno. "We will get another taxi. These kinds of incidents are quite common in India."

“Another taxi?” yelled Bruno after losing it all. “BUT WHO HAS THE MONEY FOR THAT? My passport, money and everything was in the bag in the car. Everything is gone; now, how we will reach Rishikesh?”

Seeing Bruno scream insanely, Sachi started rubbing his back. “Don’t worry; calm down!”

Bruno continued mumbling in panic and anger. Gradually, Sachi’s touch therapy calmed him down. He sat down on a highway milestone, holding his head in distress.

Suddenly, Sachi peered at something on the other side of the road. “You just stay here; I will be back in a moment.” It seemed Sachi had found a way out .

With a scowl and a flushed face, Bruno looked up to see Sachi approaching a truck driver. After a short conversation, the driver nodded and pointed toward his truck. Sachi joined her hands together courteously as if expressing her gratitude. Immediately, she waved at Bruno. “COME, THIS MAN WILL DROP US AT OUR DESTINATION!” she shouted at the top of her voice. Bruno was now weary and moved toward the truck. He and Sachi got into the back as the front was occupied by the driver and his two assistants. They sat in crouched positions on grain bags and waited for the truck to move. The sky was visible through an open roof.

Eventually, the truck started moving. Sachi sighed in relief but Bruno was still pissed off. “What?” Bruno glared at Sachi as she had been continuously staring at him.

“Don’t worry.” Sachi smiled pleasantly. “Have faith in God. He will help you.” She rubbed his back.

“Huh!” Bruno jerked his head. “Trust me; God is not gonna help me with this!” He mumbled.

“If you don’t mind, can I ask you something? Like... why are you Americans so crazy about spirituality, Moksha, etc.?” Sachi asked directly but sensitively.

“Don’t know... maybe we need it more.” Bruno sighed, squeezing his forehead. “Aren’t you crazy about it?” Bruno started calming down while conversing with Sachi.

“Yes, I am also crazy... but for American Moksha,” replied Sachi in her signature high spirits.

“Now what the hell is this American Moksha?” asked an already irked Bruno .

“To me, going to America is no less than attaining Moksha.” Her eyes gleamed with delight. “It’s my dream country.” She threw her head back as she looked up at the stars.

“What’s so special about America?” Bruno made a contorted expression. “People are more miserable there.” His nose wrinkled at the absurdity of her perception.

“Yes, perhaps. But at least women have freedom there.” Sachi asserted with wide eyes. “My mom died of cancer a few years ago.” Her gaze was downcast and a sudden, palpable sense of loss was on her face. “She was an excellent singer and wanted to do something in that field but my dad and grandparents were against it.”

“But why?” asked Bruno. It sounded quite unusual to him.

“Because it’s taboo in our town for a woman to leave the house and work. That too, to sing songs. It is not acceptable at all.”

Bruno could sense some hidden and repressed resentment in her voice.

“My mom was an angel. Just like a beautiful bird locked in a cage with a deep desire to fly in the open sky. Every day, I used to see her suffocating in our big, luxurious house. But she never let it have any effect on me. She loved me more than anything in this world and never expressed her pain in front of me. But I could easily see the pain in her eyes...” Sachi swallowed the lump in her throat and became silent for a while. This time, it was Bruno who stared at her. He could feel her pain.

“ARE YOU MARRIED?” Sachi was back in her default, bubbly mode. She yelled in excitement, making Bruno flinch. It seemed like she had a striking idea .

“What?” Bruno’s eyes were on the verge of falling out.

“Tell me... are you married?” she asked, unable to contain her excitement.

“Nooo, I’m nooot...” Bruno faltered in bafflement.

“Will you marry me? You marry me, take me to your country and then you can divorce me. But please take me away from here.” Again, Sachi spoke in one breath.

“Seriously? You must be kidding...” giggled Bruno uncomfortably.

“No! I am not. America is the land of opportunity. In India, a woman has no life. Please take me to America please... please!”

Sachi’s desperate efforts had started getting on Bruno’s nerves. He couldn’t control himself for long.

“PLEASE DON’T DO THIS... STOP IT!” This outburst put Sachi back in her senses and her babbling stopped at once.

Her face turned scarlet and Sachi realized what a gaffe she had made. Bruno is equally uneasy after shouting at her. The awkward silence was killing them both. They exchanged sheepish glances. At last, Bruno tried to ease the uncomfortable situation by starting a new conversation.

“Well! How do you know Satya Maharishi?” Bruno asked politely with a formal smile.

“Last year...” Still flushing, Sachi started to answer in a low and controlled voice. “...when he visited our town, he stayed at Mr. Mann’s house. He’s the richest person in our town. My dad was catering there and I was appointed specially to cook for Maharishi ji. As Maharishi ji had his meal, he was so delighted that he personally called me and thanked me. That was a moment of great honor for my whole family and me.” Her eyes twinkled.

“That’s really great. But don’t you think one year is a long time. Will he still remember you?” Bruno peered in doubt.

“He might not remember me.” Sachi fished out a ring from her bag. “But he can’t forget this.” She presented it to Bruno. It looked antique and precious. “That day, he gave me this ring and asked me to show it at the gate of the ashram whenever I wished to meet him. He assured me that I would be taken directly into his personal hut.”

Bruno took the dazzling ring in his hand. It happened to be his master pass to meet Satya Maharishi. Eyes twinkling with reassurance and relief, he looked back at Sachi. She winked and they both celebrated with a chuckle. While returning the ring to Sachi, he resumed the conversation but now in a happy mood. “He is a famous man, isn’t he?” With a smile, Bruno waited for a positive and more elaborate answer.

“Yes, he is.” She smiled back. “He has a following of billions all over the world. From his childhood, he had an inclination toward spirituality. At the age 16, he renounced his family and home and went to the Himalayas and became a disciple of Maharishi Vyas Roop, who was a great saint. Millions of people long for just one glimpse of him but he chooses few lucky ones and makes them his disciples. I have heard that the chosen ones attain the highest. It’s said that he had a realization regarding both worlds and his cognizance has the power to answer all your questions.”

Sachi’s reply had dissolved his day of frustration. His face radiated with optimism. He was relieved that he was close to his destination. Trust glittered in his eyes that with the grace of Satya Maharishi, he would attain peace and the purpose of life.

Soon, they both fell asleep. The driver had given them a blanket. They shared it to protect themselves from the cold breeze. Sachi propped her head on Bruno’s shoulder while they slept.

After driving for some time, the truck halted abruptly, waking them up. Bruno rubbed his face and looked around. It was early morning. The driver said something to Sachi from the small window that was like a hole in the truck.

“Come we have to get down here,” said Sachi, tying her hair up.

As they got down, Sachi once again thanked the truck driver and he left. She told Bruno that the ashram was not far. They had to walk there as they didn't have money for an autorickshaw.

CHAPTER TWELVE



Satya Ashram

After walking for 25 minutes, they reached the main gate of the ashram at dawn. Bruno was mesmerized by the magnificent appearance of the ashram. The rays of the rising sun fell on a board, which read 'SATYA ASHRAM'. It looked like a symbol of new hope to Bruno.

As it was an ashram and they couldn't stop anybody from entering, Bruno and Sachi entered with ease. After walking for about 200 meters, there was a front desk office beyond which nobody was allowed to enter. Just to the left was a huge hall where Satya Maharishi conducted a Satsang twice a month and devotees got a chance to see him from a distance. Next to the hall were huge dormitories where thousands of devotees stayed and ate for free. At the front desk, it was the same scene. A large number of people had gathered there just to get a glimpse of Satya Maharishi but the volunteers were moving them toward the dormitories. Sachi moved forward and tried to have a word with him. But the volunteer didn't listen to them and asked them to wait in the dormitory as his senior would come around 8 am .

Tired and hungry, they went to the dormitory where hundreds of people were already either lying down or meditating. Suddenly, a volunteer came and informed Sachi that this dormitory was only for men so she had to go to the adjoining dormitory for women. Sachi told him that they were just there for a short amount of time and they would leave very soon.

As she was trying to pacify him, another volunteer, who happened to be more senior, arrived and firmly asked them to follow the rules. Immediately, Sachi showed him the ring, which the volunteer immediately recognized. Leaving them there, he returned after 15 minutes and courteously took them inside the main ashram. Bruno looked delighted to see their plan working.



Bruno and Sachi went inside the ashram. After passing the front desk, there was another gate with a lot of security. Once they passed that gate, it looked like they had entered an entirely different world. It was awesome. It started with beautiful and natural-looking water bodies, like those found in the mountains. The sound of the falling water was calming. As they moved further, they saw a big garden with breathtaking landscaping. Exotic and fragrant flowers, beautiful trees (some loaded with fruits), chirping birds and a small river gave it a heavenly look.

After passing that garden, on their left, they saw a big meditation hall. Behind that was a built area with huts. As they moved further, after crossing a small wooden gate, they couldn't believe their eyes. It was a well-maintained natural jungle where beautiful creatures like peacocks, deer, cats, rabbits, etc., were roaming about fearlessly. Along with these heavenly creatures, there was a breath-taking landscape and flowing streams. It wouldn't be a mistake to call it 'heaven on earth'. And in between, they saw a small hut.

A sudden, courteous and cautious change in the volunteer's body confirmed Satya Maharishi's physical presence inside the hut. Bruno felt his heart pounding inside his chest. Mixed feelings of relief and anxiety wrestled inside his heart. The man, whom Bruno was dying to meet, the one for whom Bruno had traveled there for, the one who was his only and last hope, was sitting across the door.



Bruno and Sachi entered the hut and saw a man of medium height, with a clean-shaven head and face, wearing a saffron dhoti and kurta, sitting

on his throne-cum-chair and gazing at the ring Sachi gave his volunteer.

Yes, it was Satya Maharishi. He looked at them with a glorious smile and eyes that were so striking and penetrating. His skin glowed like that of a teenager. Even in his early 50s, he looked much younger. His aura was so gracious and mesmerizing that even an emperor could fall short and look petty in front of him.

Bruno had eyes only for Satya Maharishi. Sachi elbowed him in the ribs. He looked back at Sachi; she gestured for him to do the needful. During their journey, Sachi had taught him the formal and courteous way to greet a spiritual master. Bruno moved forward and bowed in front of Satya Maharishi from a distance. Sachi followed him .

“Welcome, Sachi, how are you?” a hypnotic voice enchanted Bruno and Sachi’s ears.

Sachi, who was still on her knees, looked up in astonishment. “It’s amazing that you still remember my name, Maharishi ji!” she replied in a controlled, courteous and humble tone.

“The divine taste of your food is still on my tongue...” Satya Maharishi closed his eyes for a moment. “Tell me, what do you desire?” asked Satya Maharishi gloriously.

“This is Hassan. He came from America just to meet you...”

Satya Maharishi focused his gaze on Bruno’s forehead. Bruno closed his eyes as if he was looking directly into the dazzling sun. Satya Maharishi got up and moved gradually, with majestic grandeur, toward Bruno. His gaze was still fixed on his forehead.

“Well, you have suffered a lot, my child.” Satya Maharishi put his hand on Bruno’s shoulder.

Bruno, who was shivering in nervousness, couldn’t look into Satya Maharishi’s eyes. He nodded in affirmation. Satya Maharishi went back to his throne.

“Hmm... Sachi, when can I have food cooked by you again?” The smile returned to Satya Maharishi’s face as he sat back on his throne.

“Tonight, Maharishi ji,” Sachi smiled, overwhelmed with joy. Satya Maharishi’s gesture was an official signature on their stay at the Satya Ashram. As Bruno and Sachi celebrated this priceless, divine invitation, Satya Maharishi gestured for Bruno to come closer .

“Are you ready to say goodbye to all your misery and suffering?” Satya Maharishi whispered, patting Bruno’s shoulder with his hand.

Bruno was so overwhelmed with gratitude and contentment that his eyes became moist. To express himself, he touched Satya Maharishi’s feet and held them for a while. As Bruno’s tears fell on Satya Maharishi’s feet, he pulled Bruno up. He asked the volunteer to guide them toward their respective huts, where they would be staying, behind the meditation hall.

Bruno and Sachi were shown their respective huts. After occupying their huts, they were taken to the kitchen, where they were served some food. Before taking his first bite, Bruno held Sachi’s hand and thanked her for making all this possible for him.

After spending their whole day in the peace and tranquility of the ashram, in the evening Bruno got the message that he had to be in the garden area the next day at 6:00 am.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN



Another Guest in India

At Amritsar International Airport, an American Airlines flight landed with a name on its passenger list—Russell. Yes, Russell had reached India. He had traveled far to settle his score with his archenemy.

As he came out of the airport, he felt sick seeing so many Indians together. This was the same Russell who couldn't stand a single Indian in his country, America. Now, fate had brought him to their country. He felt like cursing himself for doing this but at the same time, he realized that his revenge was prior to him.

Soon, he was surrounded by a bunch of cab drivers. But they didn't know who they were dealing with this time. Russell pushed one cab driver, who swept away two more with him. The group scattered like birds hearing a gunshot. While escaping, one of them shouted, "Angry white rabbit!" The people standing nearby started laughing. Russell ignored this and moved on.



Russell checked into a hotel in the heart of the city and began planning his strategy. All he had was a photograph of the suspect taken from CCTV footage. On the basis of this petty evidence, he had to search for his target, who could be anywhere in India. It was like looking for a needle in a haystack.

In the evening, Russell started exploring nearby areas. He entered a market area known as 'Hall Gate'. This overly-crowded place was one of the oldest central areas in Amritsar. While walking through, Russell had mixed feelings. On the one hand, he was disgusted by the Indians around him and on the other hand, he was amazed to see the ancient nature of the city. He found small shops loaded with colorful and bright clothes, juttis (special designer shoes), bags, etc., that were very eye-catching. The smell of freshly-prepared Amritsari kulchas was enticing him for an indulgence.

"Hi, sir!" A suspicious man with a limp approached him. "You from *umreeka* (America)?"

Russell ignored him and continued walking.

"Sir, I have all you want... drugs... girls. Tell me what you want?" He tried hard to communicate in his broken English.

Russell stopped immediately. "A gun!"

"A gun? No problem, come with me." It seemed that the mysterious person could provide anything under the sun. The hobbling guy took Russell into the interiors of the area. The road went on, becoming narrower and narrower. Ultimately, a place arrived, which was so narrow that even two bicycles would find it difficult to cross. The man stopped outside a house .

"Sir, I give you gun... but 75,000 for gun... half now... half after gun..."

"It's too much..." Russell waved his hand in denial.

"Okay, sir... anything for you... 60,000." The guy tried his best to better the deal.

"No way." Russel shook his head.

"Okay sir, last price... 50,000. Give 25 now." The mysterious guy grinned like he could sell anything.

Eyes filled with pride for bargaining so well, Russell took Rs. 25,000 from his pocket and gave it to the man. The man took the money and

entered the house while Russell stayed there.

Russell waited for 20 minutes but the man didn't return. He became quite restless and was left with no option but to barge into the house.

Russell entered through the door, which looked more like a back door. The backyard looked like a filthy dumping area with lots of used injections, empty bottles and houseflies all around. Russell covered his face with a hanky and continued walking. Russell saw a room with a filthy door. To avoid touching it, he kicked the door open with no idea what was waiting for him on the other side of the door.

Russell was shocked at what he saw inside the room. The mysterious guy, along with a few other men, was on his knees with his hands cuffed. It was a police raid and all the officials were busy searching every corner of the room. Suddenly, all movement stopped as everybody's focus was diverted to the American standing at the door .

"SHIT!" This one word came out of Russell's mouth, piercing the pin-drop silence. Sensing the danger, immediately Russell lunged toward the back door but was rounded up by Punjab police officers.

"Hey! Careful! I am a police officer!" shouted Russell, trying to free himself from two officers who were holding his arms tightly.

The officer in charge Inspector Swarn Singh, a turbaned young Sikh man in his late 20s, came closer slowly. "Oh, but when did we start recruiting English men to our force?" He grinned wickedly.

"I am an American police officer!" yelled Russell, still struggling to free himself.

"Okay, but this case doesn't fall in your jurisdiction, sir." Swarn sniggered. "You have come quite far." As Swarn Singh cracked this one-liner, all the officers burst into laughter. "Let's go to the police station and check what kind of cop you are."

Russell was taken to the police station with the other petty criminals. He cursed himself for making such a foolish mistake. After reaching the police station, he was made to sit separately from other criminals. Swarn,

who was going through all the belongings that police had confiscated from Russell, called him to his desk.

“Now, tell me, were you selling drugs?” asked Swarn leaning against the desk, going through Russell’s phone.

“Do I look like a drug peddler?” Russell huffed like a rhino with a scowl. “You stupid...” he growled .

“Oye!” yelled Swarn, “This is not your America, Mr. White Rabbit.” He stood bolt upright. “I think you are not well-acquainted with Punjab police.” He glared at Russell.

“Hey careful, you don’t know this but my brother is a senior at the embassy.” Russell softened once he understood his weak stand.

“Oh, then you are finished.” Swarn grinned, leaning against the desk. “Because I have a personal grudge with them. They rejected my brother’s visa thrice.”

“Oh God, let me talk to your seniors.”

“He will come tomorrow morning.” Swarn had started searching Russell’s wallet by now. “Till then you enjoy our hospitality,” he replied indifferently.

Suddenly, Swarn came across Hassan’s picture in Russell’s wallet.

“Hey, this is Hassan, isn’t it?” Swarn peered at the CCTV picture. “Are you related to him?”

Russell observed a subtle change in Swarn’s attitude toward him with a glint of concern in his eyes. Not wanting to let this golden opportunity slip through of his fingers, Russell said something he would have never said otherwise.

“Well, y–yes...” Russell fumbled, avoiding eye contact. “Actually, he is my nephew and escaped from home. So I am here to take him back. But how do you know him?”

“Oh, I met him at my Fufaji’s farmhouse, Mr. Gill.” Swarn smiled pleasantly.

“What? What is this F–Fufaji?” stammered Russell.

“Fufaji is dad’s sister’s husband,” replied Swarn. His whole attitude and body language had changed. “Don’t worry, sir. I’ll take you there. Don’t worry about this case. I will handle it.” He winked.

In less than a minute, this unfortunate situation had become fortunate for Russell. He was amazed to see such a drastic change in his personality. That too, for a person who was supposed to be his father’s sister’s husband’s friend’s uncle. Russell kept wondering what kind of people these were.



Swarn took Russell to Gill Farmhouse. In the meantime, Russell had a plan. As soon he saw the suspect he would snatch Swarn’s gun and shoot the suspect in the leg and let him suffer in pain for some time. Then finally, he would shoot him in the head.

When they reached, Russell found the farmhouse swinging with wedding celebrations. It was evening and the endless decorative lights looked like stars spread across a celestial garden. The fragrance of the garnishing flowers spread all over the property was mesmerizing. After having such hellish experience over the past three hours, all this came as a pleasant surprise to Russell.

Swarn guided Russell to the backyard where Mr. Gill was supposed to be. Russell’s eyes kept wandering desperately, looking for his prey.

“Fufaji!” Swarn reverently called Mr. Gill.

As Mr. Gill turned back toward them, Swarn touched Mr. Gill’s feet. Mr. Gill patted Swarn’s back to bless him. Swarn introduced Russell to Mr. Gill and narrated the whole incident.

“Hassan is a very nice boy,” said Mr. Gill. “He was here for my daughter’s engagement. I insisted he stay till her wedding but he said he was in a hurry.”

Russell cursed his bad luck as he had again missed his target so close. But he was happy that he had a lead now.

“God is great!” Mr. Gill whooped spreading his arms. “He sent you in place of Hassan.” With one hand holding a chicken leg piece, and the other hand, yes, of course, a glass of whiskey. “Come have a drink and you know...”

“No thanks...” Russell cut in abruptly and rudely. “Actually, I am in a hurry. So could you please tell me where he is now?”

As Mr. Gill frowned at Russell in astonishment and offense, Swarn whispered in his ears. “Fufaji, I have been observing him for quite some time. I think he doesn’t like Indians.”

Mr. Gill looked back at Swarn’s face with cheeky eyes, chewing on his chicken.

“Why are you so worried, Mr. Russell?” Wrapping his arm around Russell’s neck, like a very close friend, he forced Russell to walk along with him. “I know where he is and, trust me, he is doing a good job. Next weekend is my daughter’s wedding. Till then, just give us a chance to show our hospitality.” He stopped to look into Russell’s eyes with a grin. “Then my driver will take you to Hassan. ”

“Please sir, don’t take the trouble...” Russell understood the situation a little better and became polite and courteous. “I don’t want to bother you and your family...”

“TROUBLE?” Mr. Gill roared in laughter “We are Punjabis.” He again spread his arms wide open. “And our real pleasure is being troubled. It’s good if the guest accepts our service willingly. Otherwise, we know other ways as well.” Suddenly, Mr. Gill’s laughing face grew intense.

Russell stared into Mr. Gill’s eyes, with a glint of helplessness on his face. Both Mr. Gill and Swarn burst into roaring laughter. The laughter was a symbol of their dominance and large-heartedness. Russell realized that he was left with no option but to accept their hospitality.

Swarn showed him his room. As his luggage was left in the hotel room, he was given some traditional Punjabi clothes. Russell refused to wear them and didn’t come out of his room, not even for dinner.

CHAPTER FOURTEEN



First Day at the Ashram

It was 6:00 in the morning at Satya Ashram. Wearing an immaculate white ensemble and with shaved heads, a batch of 30-35 shortlisted, fortunate disciples were sitting, facing Satya Maharishi. Bruno was one of them. Satya Maharishi, with his eyes closed, was in deep meditation. They all gazed at him, eagerly waiting for him to open his eyes.

Today was a big day for Bruno. Once again, he filled his heart with gratitude for Sachi and anticipated that from now onwards, his suffering would be over as he was in his Guru's harbor.

"Life is a long, unending search." Satya Maharishi opened his eyes. "Somebody is searching for peace of mind, somebody Moksha, somebody for the purpose of life..." Suddenly, Satya Maharishi stared at Bruno. His penetrating gaze and words held Bruno spellbound. He was overwhelmed with devotion to find his Guru could read his mind and heart.

"This unending search ends at the feet of a Guru, Master." Satya Maharishi continued delivering this much-awaited and anticipated discourse. "Only a true master can take you there because he knows the path well. By worshiping and trusting your Guru, you are not doing him any favors but are making way for the possibility of faith and devotion in you, without which you can't know the unknown. So the first thing is to dissolve yourself in your Guru. I know it's challenging to have faith and

trust. Your mind doesn't let you do this because it's been infected by petty, worldly desires, lust and false ego. There is a dire need to disinfect your mind and remember that the cure is hidden in the disease itself. Yes, when, instead of petty, worldly desires and false ego, your thoughts start flowing toward your Guru, the purification starts. Your mind automatically starts attaining peace. Remember, your Guru is the door."

It seemed as if the powerful and convincing words of Satya Maharishi in his enchanting voice kept uprooting the reservations the disciples had come with. A look of new belief was visible on everybody's face.

"Desire and ego are the dirt of the soul. Just like while washing your clothes, it has to go through hardship. Similarly, your body and mind have to go through hardship while washing the dirt of ego and desire from your soul. We call it *Tapsya*. Yes, it's not easy. But don't forget. Spirituality is not as cheap as salt. It's costly and you have to earn it."

Satya Maharishi got up with his hands folded behind him. He walked with an air of nonchalance among the disciples. "So from today onwards, you all will follow a strict regime. No food or water after sunset and before sunrise. Only these white clothes that you are wearing. No contact with the outside world. No evil and immoral thoughts. Whenever you think you are being overpowered by negative thoughts move your attention toward your Guru. Speak as little as you can. Don't forget, without the right means, you can't attain the right ends."

With plenty of determination, Bruno and all the others were ready to follow the noble path that their Guru had shown them. Bruno was gradually falling in love with the gracious and blissful smile on Satya Maharishi's face. He felt fortunate to be so close to his master, where millions were dying just to have a glimpse of him.

After this welcome-introductory discourse, Satya Maharishi took them on an inner trip.

"Okay... now close your eyes. Take a deep breath. In... and out... in... and out. Put all your focus on your breath. With every breath, your mind is filled with positive thoughts. See, it's happening. And with every

breath, out all your negative thoughts from your body. See, it's happening."

The captivating voice of Satya Maharishi gradually kept growing calmer and calmer.

"Let your mind relax... relax... relax... let it relax... Now there are no negative thoughts. Only pure consciousness.... Feel the peace.... Relax... just relax."

Just listening to his voice made Bruno's mind settle and he found himself floating in an ocean of tranquility. The whole day was spent doing various kind of meditations with short breaks. In the evening, before sunset, they were served dinner. It happened to be simple food. After that, they had an hour-long Satsang.

CHAPTER FIFTEEN



Price for Revenge and Peace

The next morning, Russell woke up to hunger-pangs as he had skipped dinner. For his own sake, he set his ego aside and came out of his room still wearing his old clothes. As he entered the dining area, he saw a dining table fully occupied by family members.

Seeing him, a few youngsters instantly got up and offered him their seats. Russell was amazed to see such respect for a guest. Mr. Gill greeted him by waving at him as if he was his school friend. But Russell remained frosty. The seat adjacent to Mr. Gill was emptied especially for Russell. He took it unwillingly.

“Hey, why didn’t you come out for dinner last night? We were waiting for you.” He said as he put a mountain of homemade butter in the middle of his extra-large paratha.

“Actually... I was tired. I had a severe headache,” replied a still frosty Russell .

“Oh, headache! Don’t worry. My mother is an expert in that; she will give you a head massage.” Mr. Gill said in his signature roaring voice.

“No, thank you... sir. I don’t want to bother you anymore,” replied Russell, taking his first bite of paratha.

“Hey, listen.” Suddenly, Mr. Gill clasped Russell’s arm with a frown on his face. “Never say the words ‘No, thank you’ again. It’s offensive,” he

whispered. Russell had stopped chewing by now and was a little nervous.

“Replace it with BRING IT ON!” Suddenly, the intense frown on Mr. Gill’s face turned into a wide grin that stretched to his eyes. Russell sighed and resumed his chewing.

Immediately, a young lady pushed two more big parathas on Russell’s plate. He was about to say no when Mr. Gill grunted with a frown. Russell was tough but was nothing in front of Mr. Gill. Mr. Gill’s roaring voice, sturdy and tall body and tiger-like white beard, with a twisted mustache, were enough to silence anyone.

As Russell quietly resumed eating his meal, a smile came back to Mr. Gill’s face. After the parathas and bread pakoras, Russell had another tough target—a big glass of buttermilk.



After breakfast, a stuffed Russell was taken to grandmom’s room. ‘Head massage! And that too, from an old, Indian lady!’ For Russell, it was uncomfortable and embarrassing. If any of his colleagues saw him in this compromising position, Russell would die of shame .

As grandma started moving her fingers on his head, she mumbled something in Punjabi. Suddenly, she said something and hit on Russell’s head with her hand in a friendly way. This was highly amusing for everyone except Russell, who was flushing and fuming. He had no option but to stay quiet. He wondered what else he would have to bear for the sake of his revenge.

But to his surprise, after the massage, he felt quite relaxed. Russell had been quite stressed for the past few days. The massage came as a stress buster. He found his mood elevated and felt energetic.



In the evening, there were routine celebrations that happened before the wedding. In his heart, Russell was fascinated by all that was happening around him. However, he suppressed his feelings so that he didn’t deviate from his ambition.



At Satya Ashram, Bruno had put his all energies together to follow the regime with absolute sincerity and dedication. His belief in his Guru had soared so high that whatever his Guru said was the last word for him. His whole day was scheduled with various meditations like vipassana, concentrating on chakras, chanting, etc., discourses and Satsang at the end of the day.

He was busy with his schedule and didn't have the chance to meet Sachi. In the evening, while having food, Bruno, by chance, walked into Sachi .

"Hi! Nice haircut." Sachi gesticulated to his shaved head. Her light-hearted banter was amusing to Bruno. "So how was your day?" she asked in her signature high-spirited mood.

"Satisfying... I'm feeling so good. Thank you so much." Bruno smiled, making a grateful acknowledgment.

"So if your purpose is solved, will you take me to America?" Sachi cocked her head playfully with a grin.

"Yes, I'll try my best," chuckled Bruno with a nod.

In this lighter moment, Bruno saw something phenomenal in Sachi's eyes. For the first time, he observed Sachi closely. Her brown eyes were gorgeous, especially when they gazed at him in adoration. Her fluttering eyelids tickled his inert feelings. A coy smile blossomed through her rose-petal-like lips as she pushed her fringe out of her eyes. She blushed and lowered her gaze. She looked up to see him still looking at her. She lowered her eyes again and blushed even deeper.

Bruno could hear a romantic, Spanish guitar being played at a slow and soothing tempo. It appeared as if the Angel of Music was just nearby. All this gave him an intoxicating effect. He observed a special feeling toward Sachi budding inside his heart.

Suddenly, their intimate conversation was disrupted by a volunteer, who informed Bruno that Satya Maharishi had called him. He

immediately walked toward the main terrace from where Maharishi was watching them.

“Yes, Maharishi ji?” he asked courteously, his eyes filled with reverence

“Your mind is your biggest enemy. It will always pull you backward.” Satya Maharishi turned toward Bruno. “Spirituality is a war between your evil mind and you. Don’t let your mind win at any cost.”

A visibly confused Bruno tried to understand what Satya Maharishi was attempting to convey. He was stunned by what he heard next.

“Stay away from Sachi.”

Bruno didn’t know how to react. “But why Maharishi ji?” he asked hesitantly.

“Because in our country there is an old saying: Women are a door to hell.” Satya Maharishi patted Bruno’s shoulder.

“What does it mean?” asked Bruno with wide eyes, in a curious but courteous tone.

“It means you can’t afford distraction at this point, my son.” Satya Maharishi smiled. “You won’t get this chance again in your lifetime. And she could be a big distraction for you. It’s time to show how much trust you have in your Guru.”

With a ‘bless you’ gesture, instantly Satya Maharishi walked away, leaving Bruno mystified and baffled. But he agreed with one thing; it was time to prove how much faith he had in his Guru. He felt guilty for doubting his master and questioning him.

Bruno buried all his feelings for Sachi in a deep, dark corner of his heart and started ignoring her. Sachi, who by now had already started humming the melody of love for Bruno and thought he had the same feelings for her, couldn’t understand his sudden change in behavior. After being continuously ignored by Bruno, Sachi concluded that he didn’t need her anymore as his purpose had been served.

She was heartbroken as her saga of love had ended even before it could begin. She cursed herself for having an unrealistic dream. Though her heart was filled with sadness and disappointment, she never allowed it to be visible on her face. She was appointed as a personal cook to Satya Maharishi; she ignored everything by keeping herself busy with her work.



At Mr. Gill's farmhouse, Russell had tried all his devious tricks on various members of the Gill family, along with Megan, but nobody uttered a single word about Hassan's whereabouts, as per Mr. Gill's strict instructions. Russell decided to give Mann-kee one last try.

Mankeerat Gill, Mann-kee, was Mr. Gill's nephew and an aspiring Punjabi pop singer. As Mankeerat was a traditional name, he nicknamed himself Mann-kee to make it sound trendy. Interestingly, it sounded like 'monkey' when one said it in a flow. Russell hoped that this time, he would succeed as Mann-kee was empty-headed.

When he went into Man-kee's room, he was gawking at some Punjabi popstar's poster as he considered him his mentor. Mann-kee was wearing white sneakers, white shorts and an oversized white sweatshirt. His chest was buried under heavy chains and his hand had more rings than fingers. His reptile-like haircut and weirdly-shaped beard made him look more like a comic-character than an artist. His whole room was filled with funny popstar's posters, a keyboard, a laptop, speakers and CDs.

"Hey, buddy!" Russell raised his hand for a high five.

"Hey, bro! What's up?" Man-kee responded with a high five and spoke like a rapper, in a Canadian accent.

"Listen, buddy." Russell sat next to him. "I was thinking that you are such a promising artist. Why don't you come with me to America?" It was the first time Russell was so friendly with someone other than Bruno.

"Really!" Man-kee gave a one-sided grin. "But my dream country is Canada."

“Oh, come on!” Russell knocked at his chest with the dorsum of his hand, in a friendly manner. “You know, I personally know Justin Bieber. I can organize a performance with him. I hope you are a good performer?”

By asking about his performance, Russell had made a big mistake. He was going to regret it for days to come. This unintentional and casual question ignited endless song and dance performances from Man-kee. He instantly pressed the spacebar on his laptop after which a spectrum of lights started flashing onscreen. The amplified speakers started pounding with heavy bass music, which he claimed to have recorded himself.

Man-kee’s name became his descriptor as he started jumping like a monkey in time to the beats. It looked like his body had suffered a sudden deformation. The worst part came when he started singing. His sharp and nasal vocals were so discordant and unmusical that Russell couldn’t make out the real composition of the song. He felt fortunate that he was not able to understand the language. Otherwise, the torture would have doubled.

Man-kee was in no mood to slow down and went on and on like a wind-up toy. Despite this absolute crap, Russell kept nodding in appreciation and approval, in the hopes of getting details about Hassan. After tormenting Russell for more than an hour, Man-kee took a break. Heavily sweating and panting, he took a sip from his water bottle like a rock star.

“How was that?” With a prize-winning smile on his face, Man-kee raised his eyebrows.

“Superb!” Russell furrowed his lips to suppress his anger. “Never seen anything like this before... okay...” Russell moved a little forward to speak in a low voice. “Listen, bro; I need your help.”

“Anything for you, bro... just say it once...” Man-kee grinned crookedly.

“I have heard that you are very close to Mr. Gill and that he loves you a lot.”

“That’s true, bro. He doesn’t have a son so he treats me like his own. He shares every secret with me.”

“Exactly!” Russell shook with excitement. “Listen, bro; I urgently need to know where Hassan is right now. See I have tried to ask the others but nobody is helping me. I hope my bro will not disappoint me?” he asked in a desperate, husky voice.

After gazing at Russell for a while, Man-kee took another sip of water. With a funny grin on his face, he fist-bumped Russell in affirmation. Instantly, he closed his eyes and started focusing like he was Einstein. Russell stared at his face in desperation.

“It starts with R.” Man-kee opened his eyes “Hmm... Rajkot? No, no... Rae Bareli? No, Rampur? Riga?”

“Riga is in Europe...” Russell was boiling like a volcano when he cut in, in a rude but low voice.

“Oh yes,” giggled Man-kee. “Not Riga, Rajasthan? No, no...”

Now it was becoming more and more difficult for Russell to control his outburst.

“Stop making wild guesses and tell me his exact location,” growled Russell, punching the table.

“Hey, chill, bro! Relax,” preached Man-kee. “Actually, I am so absorbed in my music that I forget all other petty things,” he boasted. “Hmm... it was Ranchi. No, no, sorry, I don’t know...”

Russell couldn’t control himself anymore and blew up like a volcano of rage and fury. He flew out of his seat and held Man-kee by his neck.

“For the past one and a half hour, in the name of music, you have been braying like a donkey. I tolerated all the shit you hurled just in the hope that you would provide me with Hassan’s details. And now you say you don’t know? You think it’s funny?”

Russell’s outburst was so intense that the Gill family members came running as they heard his growls and Man-kee’s screaming. They tried their best to free Man-kee but couldn’t as Russell’s grip was very strong.

Ultimately, Mr. Gill arrived and in no time, Russell was overpowered and pushed into a corner. The thrust of Mr. Gill's push was so forceful that Russell lost his balance and fell. With his fierce eyes and finger pointed at Russell, Mr. Gill walked unhurriedly toward Russell. Overwhelmed with embarrassment and subjugation, Russell understood very well who the boss here was.

"You are lucky that you are my guest. Otherwise..." Mr. Gill was quite furious but his family values stopped him from going further.

He left without completing his dialog as his actions had done the job. This incident proved how Mr. Gill was the perfect balance of power and forbearance, which Russell lacked. All the members left. Russell was left alone, overwhelmed with guilt. But he was amazed by one thing. Even after such a heinous and bizarre act, he was not thrown out of the house and the family members were not as rude as they could have been. He decided to apologize for what he had done.

This was the second miracle that had happened in one day. Russell had first shown so much affability with Man-kee and now he was going to apologize to an Indian.

He instantly moved toward Mr. Gill, who was standing on the lawn.

"I am extremely sorry, Mr. Gill, for whatever happened today." Russell started to apologize. "I promise this won't be repeated." He glanced at him sheepishly.

Mr. Gill patted Russell's shoulder after seeing the sincerity in his eyes. This gesture showed that Mr. Gill had forgiven him but his face was still cold. As Mr. Gill started walking, Russell walked along with great humility

.

"I don't know what happened to me. His performance just made me nuts."

Mr. Gill halted abruptly and stared at him.

"I'm sorry again," hissed Russell. "I don't know what's happening to me..." Russell realized he had made another mistake by uttering

something inappropriate. "Is there anything I can do for you? I would be happy to."

Hearing this, Mr. Gill's signature playfulness sparkled in his eyes. "You said you were in the police and you had a trained dog. Who trained the dog?"

Russell was excited that Mr. Gill broke his silence. He gave a prompt reply, boasting a little. "I did. That too, in a very short time. I am good at it."

Immediately, an impish smile flashed on Mr. Gill's face. Observing the cheekiness in his eyes, Russell sensed that he had again fallen into another trap. He cursed himself for being so stupid.

"Okay, so you asked if you could do anything for me? Well, my answer is 'sure!'"

Immediately, Mr. Gill called Kalu, his servant and asked him to bring their new guest. Kalu followed his order and soon was seen approaching with a dirty, stray Indi-dog who looked quite rowdy.

"From where did you get this filth?" asked Russell, his eyes dilating and his lips curling in disgust.

"Another nephew of mine, Surjeet, rescued him last night from a nearby area. He is a big dog lover. So let's come to the point." Mr. Gill turned toward Russell. "You have to train this dog before my daughter's wedding. If you succeed in doing so, I will forget what you did to Man-kee and provide you with the details of Hassan's whereabouts."

"But there is very little time and he seems to be very rustic and unmannerly," protested the restless Russell.

"You said you are very good at that."

"Yes, but he is filthy and disgusting..." He wrinkled his nose in revulsion.

"Then clean him," Mr. Gill replied promptly. "Kalu will help you." He folded his hands behind his back.

As Russell stood there in disgust and distress, Mr. Gill came closer and patted his shoulder. "You said you could do anything," he reminded him in a low voice.

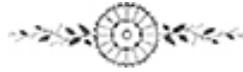
As Russell nodded helplessly, Mr. Gill walked away, smirking.

Russell eyed Kalu and then the dog. "What's his name?"

"Name? *Badey sahib* (Mr. Gill) named him 'Obama'" Kalu answered in broken English. He had a smile on his dark-skinned face that showed his big, luminous, white teeth. As Russell was a big fan and follower of Barack Obama, this was quite offensive to him. Russell felt like breaking those oversized teeth but held himself back as he didn't want another scandal in just one day.

Russell had decided that whenever he went back to America, he would also adopt a dirty, stray dog and name him 'Gill'. After all, Russell had a potential of going to any extent for settling a score.

CHAPTER SIXTEEN



A New Friend

At the Satya Ashram, Bruno had been sharing his hut with another group member, Kumar Girish. He was a young man in his early 30s and was of short stature. He was chubby and had a bulbous nose. He had a fair complexion like a Caucasian. His manner was cold, indifferent and snobby toward everything around him. When he talked, his voice sounded a bit feminine. In the beginning, Bruno didn't interact much with him as his focus was on his meditation. But by and by, they both became good friends.

One day, while having food in the kitchen, Kumar started a conversation. "What are you doing here? I mean you are so young... kids your age don't even believe in God."

"Trust me, nobody can believe in God more than me," mumbled Bruno, putting a spoonful of rice into his mouth.

"It sounds like you just met him." Kumar chuckled, chewing his food.

"Yes, you guessed it right." Bruno glanced at him .

"So it was useless. God also didn't have a solution for your problems; that's why you are here," snorted Kumar.

Bruno was still eating like he was not listening to him. But Kumar wanted to have some more fun.

“Okay, tell me how did God look?”

“Like a little girl.”

“Oh yes, I trust you because only a girl can be Godly. Once they turn into women, they are just the opposite.”

Kumar started laughing uncontrollably with his hands covered in dal and rice. Everybody stared at him as his behavior wasn't in accordance with the environment. Bruno was not amused at all.

He had observed, on many occasions, that Kumar had been hiding deep despair behind his humiliating jokes and forced laughter. But whenever he asked Kumar about his past life, he dodged the question as he was not comfortable talking about it.

One night, at midnight, Bruno woke up to see that Kumar was not in his bed. After searching for him for a while, he found him sitting in the garden.

“Are you okay?” asked Bruno, rubbing his eyes and yawning.

“Insomnia,” replied Kumar flatly as he pulled out a cigarette. He had been hiding it by his side. He took a long drag.

“But why the hell are you smoking?” Instantly, Bruno's narrow eyes became wide. “You know it's strictly prohibited here. If you are caught, you may be thrown out.” Wary, he looked in all directions .

But Kumar remained indifferent. He took another deep puff. Bruno relaxed too.

“Kumar, I always feel that you are hiding something from me. It is something about your past.” Bruno expressed his concern but as usual, Kumar dodged the question.



The next day before meditation, they were all sitting silently, waiting for Satya Maharishi. Suddenly, Kumar yawned loudly. Richard, one of their batch mates from London, looked at him hatefully. Richard was the most dedicated and well-disciplined disciple, which was why Satya Maharishi

loved him the most. Kumar apologized in a non-serious and snobbish way. But Richard still glared as he wanted Kumar to suffer in hell.

“Better ask for leave. Go to the hut and get some sleep. You hardly slept two hours last night,” whispered Bruno.

“No need. I will do it while meditating.”

After a few minutes, Satya Maharishi came and took them to the flower garden. He told everybody to sit, facing a flower in the garden and asked them to close their eyes.

“Now open your eyes. Whatever flower is in front of you, keep looking at it... Look deeply... feel it... Forget everything... just the flower... Don't allow any negative thoughts into your mind... Keep looking.”

It was Kumar's bad luck as today's meditation was to be done with open eyes. But he passed one hour. After an hour, they all moved back into the meditation hall .

“Today, we will do an important meditation. I will teach you how, as a spirit, you can leave your body temporarily and enter it again.”

This created a lot of anticipation among Satya Maharishi's disciples, including Bruno. They all lay down with their closed eyes and listened consciously.

“And now tie your soul with a rope and let it leave your body. Don't forget to tie it. Otherwise, you won't be able to come back.”

The meditation continued. Kumar enjoyed a nice hour of napping. After meditation, Satya Maharishi asked everybody to share their experience. As usual, Richard was the first one to share.

“And then I saw Christ but the face was yours, Master. It moved me to tears. At one point, I wondered how I would go back into my body and then the rope started pulling me back as I started reciting your name.” Richard gave a dramatic, Oscar-winning performance. Bruno and Kumar shared a glance and wondered why Richard always had these exceptional experiences.

After the session, Kumar accidentally bumped into Richard.

“Hey be careful, man! Can’t you see?” Richard warned Kumar insolently.

As Richard was taller and stronger than Kumar, the latter decided to stay quiet.

“Don’t worry,” Kumar spoke up as Richard left. “The next time we do this meditation, I will cut his rope. Then I will see how he comes back.” He started laughing loudly. Bruno smiled casually and moved on.



More than a week had passed and Bruno had earnestly done everything Satya Maharishi told him to do. But with the passing days, the little peace he had attained was converted into his old emotional and psychological distress. He could see clouds of despair and despondency stretching across the horizon of his destiny. He tried his best to meditate and control his mind but it was all in vain. Each time he tried to do so, it became more and more difficult for him to meditate. Finally, when he found himself standing in the same spot that he had left, he gathered the courage to have a word with Satya Maharishi about it.

“Good thoughts are the mark of a saint and bad thoughts of a demon.” Satya Maharishi was delivering a discourse in the garden. “Your life is useless until you have purified your mind and body. So in two days is Mahayagya (Yajna). Mahayagya is not just the burning of some kitchen ingredients in the fire but is for the purification of your mind, soul and surroundings as well. It’s purely scientific and spiritual as well. Perform it with full devotion. Hari Om.”

After the discourse, as Satya Maharishi was feeding his pet animals near his hut, Bruno gathered some courage and approached him.

“Maharishi ji, it’s not working.” Quite reluctantly, he started the conversation.

“What’s not working?” mumbled Satya Maharishi politely, still busy feeding his animals .

“The meditation. Each time I sit and try to meditate, my anxiety escalates. It’s as if thousands of thoughts and a volcano of emotions are

waiting to bust inside me. The more I try, the more I fail. I can't bear this. Please help me."

"Our Rishis did Tapsya for years; they never bothered about their aching bodies or suffering minds." He kneeled down to cuddle a deer. "They never gave up and ran away and that's why we call them Rishi—one who has conquered himself, one who is enlightened. It's your choice what you make out of yourself." Satya Maharishi stood up and glanced at Bruno, who looked gravely shattered.

"Your ego is creating the whole problem." Satya Maharishi tapped Bruno's shoulder to motivate him. "Leave your ego and surrender yourself completely. Dissolve yourself in your Guru."

But this wasn't any help to Bruno as he had been listening to all this for quite some time. He hung his head in distress. Finally, Satya Maharishi took a piece of paper and started secretly writing something on it.

"Okay, in this piece of paper, I am writing a magical mantra, which you are not supposed to share with anybody. Whenever things seem to be getting out of control, think of me and start repeating this mantra." Satya Maharishi folded the paper and delicately pushed it into Bruno's pocket.

Now, this was something Bruno was looking for. Suddenly, a glint of hope sparkled in Bruno's eyes. He touched Satya Maharishi's feet and instantly moved toward his hut to try the mantra. He started repeating the mantra. Slowly, his mind started becoming inactive and ultimately, he slipped into a deep sleep. During his sleep, he had a dream that he was dissolving into his Guru. He saw all his problems being solved and felt immense peace.



The next morning, when he woke up, he felt great as he had a sound sleep and a pleasant dream after a long time. Bruno felt as if he had got a magic stick. Bruno started using it as a tranquilizer for his hyperactive mind. But Bruno's misfortune was not willing to give up chasing him.

Again, this also worked but only for a short period. Slowly, the mantra lost its power as Bruno's mind got used to it. On the one hand, he would recite the mantra and on the other hand, simultaneously all the negative thoughts and emotions continued bombarding his mind. This was making his condition worse.

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN



The Big Day

Then came the big day. It was much-awaited and anticipated by all three, Russell, Mr. Gill and Bruno. It was a Sunday. But not just any other Sunday as it was Mahayagya at the ashram and Mr. Gill's daughter's marriage at the Gill Farmhouse. This Mahayagya was important for Bruno as it was supposed to be his last hope. If it failed, then Bruno would bury his dream of living a human life forever.

On the other hand, Russell was quite relieved that today he would get the fruit of all that he had to swallow resentfully for almost two weeks. After attending Mr. Gill's daughter's wedding, he would have complete information about the suspect's whereabouts and he won't be far from his claws.

But being with the Gill family, for almost two weeks, had changed Russell's opinion about Indians. To him, Indians were no longer poor, filthy and inferior. On the contrary, he found them to be large-hearted, pure and cheerful. He had started looking up at them with respect now. This was the reason he actively participated in and enjoyed the wedding.



At Satya Ashram, Mahayagya has begun. All the disciples of the special batch were sitting in the front row, close to the fire. Satya Maharishi was leading the ceremony. Everybody was in spotless, pure, white clothes. One sadhu, who was sitting next to Satya Maharishi, was chanting

mantras in his sharp ear-piercing voice, breathlessly. All the disciples, especially Richard, were engrossed in this Mahayagya in sheer devotion.

Bruno had participated in this Mahayagya earnestly and had been performing all the rituals with undisputed dedication. But by and by, his focus started failing. Loud chants, smoke, and the heat of the fire burning in the Hawan Kund and above all this, his skyrocketing inner anxiety, made every moment unbearable for him.

Bruno, however, restrained himself and decided to be patient until the Mahayagya ends. But the situation got so grave that his body started quivering. Finally, he had no option but to get up and start moving. But as he darted out, he was stopped by a volunteer.

“Where are you going, Hassan? You’re not supposed to leave the yagya in between. It’s a bad omen,” said Sumekhshu. He was a close aide to Satya Maharishi and oversaw the care of Mahayagya.

“Please let me go. I can’t stand this. It’s not working.” Bruno’s body shook with anxiety .

“What do you mean? It’s Mahayagya, not a gadget that’s not working. Please go back and take your seat.” Sumekhshu said politely.

By now Satya Maharishi had become aware of this but continued performing the ceremony quietly. Even after repeated requests when Sumekhshu didn’t move out of his way, Bruno flew into a rage, hit him in the face and ran away. Sumekhshu held his bleeding nose in pain, while a few other volunteers came to his help. Satya Maharishi continued his Mahayagya quietly.



Mr. Gill’s daughter’s wedding had concluded. It was evening and all the ceremonies were over. Russell searched for Mr. Gill and, at last, found him on the rooftop, standing alone. Mr. Gill was staring in the direction of the wedding car that had left, carrying his daughter, embellished with flowers. Russell moved forward to greet Mr. Gill, who looked sorrowful after bidding farewell to his adorable daughter. This is for the first time Russell saw Mr. Gill so low.

"It was a very nice wedding. I know you are missing your daughter," said Russell, showing a little empathy.

"Yes, I am," replied Mr. Gill. His gaze was fixed in the direction it was in before. "She grew up very fast." A palpable sense of loss was visible in his eyes.

Promptly, Mr. Gill shed his despair with a sigh, followed by a smile. He looked up to Russell. "So... you must be happy that you are free now. "

"Yes, I am but..." It seemed as if the words were stuck in Russell's throat. "I will miss this place and—and all of you guys." His words faltered as he spoke. "I have never felt like this before." His cheeks flushed.

Mr. Gill smiled and instantly fished out a paper from his pocket. "Though you didn't train Obama completely, I will give you what you want." He passed it on to Russell as he found him worthy of this reward.

"You can't say that." Russell clinched the paper in his fist and brought it to eye level, still looking into Mr. Gill's eyes. "Obama has learned to sit, fetch toys and jump to commands very well. The only problem is he often mixes up all these commands." They both roared with a sudden spurt of laughter and high-fived; they followed it with a tight hug.

Finally, Russell bid farewell to all the members of the Gill family and thanked them for their love and care. He wished he had a family like this. With a heavy heart, he left for Rishikesh.

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN



The Holy Court

At Satya Ashram, in Satya Maharishi's personal hut, a holy court had been set up where Bruno was the sinner, Sumekshu the plaintiff, a few volunteers were members of the jury and Satya Maharishi was God. They all stared endlessly at Bruno while trying to push guilt into his eyes.

"What happened is really unfortunate." Promptly, Satya Maharishi got up from his throne-cum-chair and ambled around Bruno in a circle. "You insulted our culture and religion. You know, in old times, demons used to disrupt and destroy the yagyas of Maharishis. You tried to do the same."

"I didn't mean to do so," replied Bruno in low spirits and with a downcast gaze.

Satya Maharishi halted abruptly and glared at Bruno. "Why are you guys so intolerant for our culture and religion, Hassan?" He emphasized the word 'Hassan'.

For the first time, Bruno felt hatred in Satya Maharishi's voice .

"Millions of people in this country are dying to meet me. I put you in my special meditation batch but you didn't value it."

Bruno had nothing to say. He maintained his silence.

"Okay, fair enough. I can't keep you. You have to leave my ashram before tomorrow morning."

Bruno was so downhearted that he left without paying respect to Satya Maharishi and touching his feet. After the dismissal of these holy court proceedings, Bruno was shattered and had nowhere to go. Suddenly, he remembered Sachi. Disappointed and distressed, his feet unconsciously took him toward her hut.

Sachi was painting something on the canvas in her hut. Seeing him coming, a feeling of delight arose on one hand and annoyance, on the other hand. They started wrestling with her heart. In these two weeks, they had glanced at each other from a distance and had walked into each other many times. But Bruno had always disregarded her. The pendulum of her heart kept oscillating between love and humiliation. But at last, her pure heart chose love over humiliation.

“Hey, Hassan!” She tried to hide her pain behind her smile.

“What are you painting?” Bruno slumped down, exhausted, on her bed.

“It’s Lord Shiva’s Shiv-Ling. Whenever I look at a Shiv-Ling, it gives me enormous peace. What do you say?” She tried hard not to let that smile on her face fade away.

“I don’t know.” Bruno heaved a deep sigh. “To me, nowadays, everything is annoying, distressing and tormenting.”

Sachi instantly left her brush and colors and put her hand on Bruno’s back.

“What happened? I thought you had attained peace here.” She sat down beside Bruno.

“I think I can’t attain peace anywhere.” Sachi never saw Bruno so wretched and grief-stricken. “Sachi, I think I have done a lot of damage to this ashram’s reputation. Could you please apologize to Maharishi ji on my behalf?” Suddenly, Bruno observed Sachi becoming uncomfortable. She quietly looked away. “Are you okay, Sachi?” Bruno found her behavior unusual.

“He doesn’t deserve your apology, Hassan,” said Sachi resentfully.

Sachi's response was enough to ignite a spark of suspicion inside Bruno's mind. After Bruno's persistent queries, Sachi had no option but to reveal what she had been hiding from everybody for many days.

"Many times, I noticed that Satya Maharishi was trying to touch me inappropriately." She gulped. "First, I thought it was my own misconception. But one day, Satya Maharishi called me and started asking about my feelings for you. When I asked about his intentions, he said that I am a beautiful girl who needed to be kept like a princess. I became uncomfortable and tried to leave but he got a hold of me and tried to molest me. When I screamed he let me go and threatened me with dire consequences if I told anyone about the incident."

Bruno couldn't believe his ears. This revelation stunned him for a moment. "Why didn't you tell me this?" yelled Bruno, concern lining his forehead .

"Just because of you. That day, you told me that for the first time, you had attained peace of mind. I didn't want it to be snatched away from you."

Filled with affection, Bruno held her hand. "Oh, Sachi!" Tears poured from his eyes. "You endured all this just for me." Overwhelmed with gratitude, he kissed Sachi's hand. He felt greatly indebted to her.

With moist eyes, Sachi nodded like a child and they hugged each other with an intense passion. The hug was so therapeutic that Bruno felt like it could solve all his problems.

"Come, we will not stay here anymore," said Bruno as he ran a quick hand over his and Sachi's eyes. Bruno held her hand as they walked out.

"But before leaving." He stopped abruptly. "I have to settle a score with that hypocrite," said Bruno.

"No!" Sachi flinched instantly and blocked his way. "You don't know him. He is a vicious man. Very dangerous."

"Oh really? Is he more dangerous than my unexplained anger and depression?" Bruno gently freed his arms from Sachi's tight grip. "He touched you, Sachi. I can't let it go."

The fearlessness in Bruno's eyes left Sachi speechless. Instinctively, she felt that Bruno could handle the situation quite easily.

"Now, listen to me carefully." Bruno held Sachi's shoulders and said in a low voice, "Every day, a truck full of vegetables and fruits enters the ashram in the morning and evening and leaves in an hour. It must have arrived by now in the back of the kitchen and will be leaving in 20 minutes. You go and hide in the back of the kitchen and wait for me. I will be there before the truck leaves."

Sachi did as Bruno said. She went, hid in the backyard and waited for him.

Bruno went to Satya Maharishi's hut. All the time, whenever Satya Maharishi was in his hut, one volunteer was always present at the door. This time, it was Kumar. Though Kumar was in the special batch, he had been at the ashram for quite some time. So many times he was given some official duties. Bruno delivered the fake information to Kumar that he had been called to the Satsang Hall by a senior volunteer. He assured Kumar that he would stay here and take care of things until he returned. As usual, trusting Bruno, Kumar went to the Satsang Hall. Bruno saw his passage was clear and went inside.

"What are you doing here? Nobody stopped you outside?" Seeing Bruno coming in without permission, Satya Maharishi became a little suspicious.

"Nobody can stop me from meeting my beloved Guru."

Bruno moved closer and bowed. Satya Maharishi held his head high with an arrogant sneer on his face. He thought Bruno was about to fall to his knees and ask for forgiveness. But Bruno had something else for Satya Maharishi. With a sudden spurt, he stuffed Satya Maharishi's mouth with a piece of cloth and pushed him on the floor. Simultaneously, Bruno tied his hands at his back.

Bruno did all this at such lightning speed that before Satya Maharishi could understand anything, he found himself lying on the floor, bound and gagged, on his stomach .

Bringing Satya Maharishi into Viparita Shalabhasana (superman yoga pose), Bruno pulled out a curtain rod and tested its strength by beating it slightly against his palm.

“So my dear respected and reverent Guruji, you said that when one’s soul becomes impure, it has to be washed like we wash our clothes. Now, I am going to wash you in the same way. Thoroughly and that too in Indian style. So are you ready?”

His eyes dilated to the size of pumpkins, Satya Maharishi started struggling to free himself, like a fish out of water.

“HOW DARE YOU TOUCH SACHI!” Bruno beat his buttocks with the curtain rod like an Indian washerman beats clothes on the floor while washing them. “How dare you put your dirty hands on her body! HOW DARE YOU?” Bruno kept yelling and beating Satya Maharishi, who screeched and whined through his gagged mouth. Bruno would have continued doing this for longer if Kumar had not arrived then.

“SHIT!” gasped Kumar, shaken by this harrowing scene. “Hassan, have you gone mad? What are you doing?” he yelled.

Satya Maharishi screeched through his gag and looked at Kumar for help. Bruno, who had stopped momentarily on seeing Kumar, resumed his beating.

“He is a devil! He tried to molest Sachi, Kumar. He touched her!”

Kumar lunged toward Bruno and grabbed him from behind, as tightly as he could, before it was too late. It wasn’t easy for Kumar to control Bruno but he had to. Otherwise, he would have killed Satya Maharishi. While doing so, both Bruno and Kumar lost their balance and tumbled to the floor. Both lay on the floor, gravely exhausted and panting heavily. Satya Maharishi’s violent screeching had turned to moaning. After a while, Bruno gradually sat upright, realizing he had been overpowered by Hassan’s subconscious again. But this time, he didn’t regret it.

“You need to get out of here.” Kumar propped his elbow on the floor in an attempt to stand up. “They will kill you if they come to know about this,” he said in a voice that shook.

“You are helping me. They won’t spare you.” Bruno flicked dust from his clothes as he stood up.

“Don’t worry about me. Just go!”

Bruno recalled Sachi was waiting for him in the kitchen area. In his fit of rage, he had forgotten about her. He immediately ran to her. But before leaving, he withdrew his arm to maximum leverage and gave Satya Maharishi one last blow on the face.

CHAPTER NINETEEN



The Escape

Sachi waited impatiently while hiding behind a big container in the kitchen. Each passing moment became difficult for her. Eventually, as she saw Bruno coming, she heaved a deep sigh and popped out.

“Are you okay? I was so scared.”

Before Bruno could respond, they heard the noise of a truck engine starting.

“Hey, come! We have no time!”

Holding Sachi’s hand, Bruno took her behind the truck. Before it started moving, they climbed in and hid under the empty vegetable bags. As the truck reached the security check barrier, a guard peeped inside the back of the truck and shone his torch inside, completely unaware of two people hiding behind the empty bags. It brought chills to Sachi’s spine.

After getting through the security check, the truck touched the main highway. Bruno removed the bags from above them so that they could breathe. It was a close shave. Had they been caught by the security guard, nobody would have ever known where Sachi and Bruno had vanished to forever. Sachi, who was still in a panic, hugged Bruno tightly. Her fear was obvious as she had come to know some ugly and horrific ashram secrets.



After a half hour drive, the truck stopped outside the gate of a big godown. The driver started blowing the horn. As a guard of the godown came, took a look at the driver, had a small chat with him and started opening the gate, Bruno and Sachi had enough time to jump out of the truck and run toward the main highway. Soon, they were on the main highway. Panting, they hugged each other to rejoice their successful escape. But this joy couldn't last for long.

As they are about to cross the highway, they were intercepted by a police jeep. A cop stepped out of the jeep. Before Bruno and Sachi could see his face, they were blinded by a dazzling torchlight.

“Okay, so Ms. Sachi there you are! We finally found you!”

They opened their eyes to see a rustic cop with untidy hair and uniform. His eyes were overflowing with filth. He matched Sachi's face with a photograph on his mobile phone. At first, his focus was only to match Sachi's face with the picture. Then he looked at her body with his grimy eyes, making her uncomfortable.

“We have been searching for you so long. Time to go home now.” The cop gave them a wolfish grin .

Sachi's heart sank. She had been traced by her dad and would be separated from Bruno now. Bruno was handcuffed and a separate jeep arrived with two lady cops who were supposed to take Sachi home. She struggled hard, pleading with the cops not to separate her from Bruno but her pleading and tears did not affect them. “HASSAN! HASSAN!” she cried while catching her breath between sobs. Bruno's heart wrenched. But with cuffed hands, he couldn't do anything except silently watch all this. When Sachi left, Bruno was taken to the nearby police station.

For Bruno, it was the end of his world. He had tried everything possible to attain peace but had failed. He had no clue about the 'purpose of life' and above all, Sachi was gone. Rather than a reward, this human life appeared more like a curse to him. He had started thinking about quitting earlier as it was so difficult for him to bear the remainder of his human life.



After reaching the police station, he was put in a cell. He found Kumar sitting there. When he saw him come in, Kumar's lips twisted into something like a smile.

"Hope they didn't harm you?" asked Bruno, clasping his wrists.

"They had already done enough harm to me with all that boring meditations and prolonged satsangs. Now we will have fun with that guy."

Suddenly, Bruno became aware of the flute he had heard from the very moment he entered the police station. He casually turned to see where Kumar had pointed. He saw a person sitting in a dark corner by the window, playing the flute. Bruno became curious and started walking toward him. As he moved closer and closer, and finally saw that the person's face looked quite familiar.

Wait a minute! It was Pinky Singh, the cab driver who conned him and robbed all his belongings two weeks prior. Bruno had no reason to stay calm now. Even before the identification process was complete, Pinky Singh's neck was already in Bruno's hands.

"You crook! You're all alike, tarred with the same brush! You stole all my money and the passport that was in my bag," growled Bruno, wrapping his hands around Pinky Singh's neck.

"I didn't cheat you." Pinky Singh's voice choked. "It's with me. Listen to me." His eyeballs dilated and his face contorted as he pleaded with Bruno.

But Bruno was in no mood to let him go. The surging rage inside him was becoming lethal and Pinky Singh started choking. Once again, Kumar had to control Bruno in the same way he did a few hours ago. After falling, Bruno returned to his senses and Pinky Singh started breathing again. All three lay on the floor.

"Hey!" Pinky Singh leaned on his elbow, still panting with his tongue hanging out. "Take it easy! Who keeps all his money in one place in his

bag?" The rhythmic movements of his chest suggested he was still trying to recover.

Kumar got up and gave him water from the pot inside the cell. Pinky Singh guzzled the whole glass .

"Oh, God!" Pinky Singh ran a quick hand over his wet lips and beard. "You almost killed me." By now, Pinky Singh had returned to normal. Kumar started rubbing his back. Bruno glanced at him with slight guilt in his eyes.

"When you guys went inside the dhaba that night, I got a call on my phone." Pinky Singh stood up, rubbing his red neck with visible finger marks. "It was Gurinder Kaur, my beloved girlfriend. We were in love for quite some time but there was a problem. She was the daughter of a wealthy and powerful landlord and on top of that, ten years younger than me. She informed me that she had come to know that her parents were about to forcibly marry her to an NRI the very next day. They had been planning all this secretly and didn't let Gurinder Kaur know so that she didn't protest." Pinky Singh sat down and adjusted his twisted turban.

"Hearing all this and finding her inconsolable on the phone, I had no option but to instantly leave and rescue her. I had no time to inform you and thought, like last time, you would have carried your bag with you. After rescuing Gurinder Kaur, we came here to Rishikesh, assuming that her dad wouldn't be able to trace us there. But we were wrong. They traced her through her well-connected family. Gurinder Kaur's father had me arrested and I have been here since then. The cops are still deciding what false case they should pin on me."

Bruno and Kumar heard his side of the story but the mistrust was obvious.

"Huh! Bravo! What a nice story!" mocked Bruno.

"No, it's true. I am not lying." Pinky Singh objected innocently. "She was an angel. The most beautiful girl in this whole world. Together, we were like hummingbirds." He gazed at the skylight unseeingly as he was carried away by a pleasant feeling.

"Really?" Bruno took a glass out of the water pot. "Even if it's true then what an amazing couple you both make together. The male bird with a bushy beard is named Pinky and the female bird, the beautiful, angelic damsel, is named Gurinder. Amazing!"

As Bruno sneered at him with a frosty face while drinking his glass of water, Pinky Singh's lips parted to show a wide, foolish grin, revealing white teeth peeping through his dense, black beard.

"So where is she now?" Kumar showed some curiosity.

"The very next day, she was forcibly married to that NRI. By now, she will be in Canada with her husband."

"And you are sitting here simply blowing this bloody bamboo..." Bruno peered at him with suspicion, gulping the last sip of water.

"I think Gurinder Kaur and me were not destined to be together..." Pinky Singh furrowed his lips.

"Seriously?" Bruno twirled his hand in sarcasm. "And you don't even have any sadness on your face? You should be delivering motivational speeches on how to move on after heartbreak."

"That was funny." Pinky Singh chuckled at Bruno's wild imagination. "But let me tell you. The day I got arrested, I was sad. But then I thought about when Gurinder Kaur was not in my life. Then also I was happy. She came for a short period, like a dream, and passed. I am where I was before."

Bruno and Kumar stared at him in great disbelief. They wondered what kind of strange person this was. But Bruno's troubles were comparatively bigger so they guzzled all his attention. Realizing the mess he was in, Bruno started behaving like a lunatic.

"What nonsense! Time is running out; I don't want to be converted into a dog in this jail..."

Kumar and Pinky Singh tried to understand what Bruno was babbling about. Suddenly, Bruno bounced toward the prison bars, holding two bars tightly while trying to sneak his face through the bars.

"AT LEAST LET ME GO TO MY COUNTRY. THERE IS NO LIFE FOR HUMANS IN THIS COUNTRY! WHAT ABOUT A DOG?" Bruno screamed at the cops as loud as he could.

Apprehensive about Bruno's insane behavior, Pinky Singh moved toward him and spoke hesitantly. "Well, I don't know what you are talking about but if it's that important, then I can get you out of here."

"How? Who will bail us out?" Bruno mumbled flatly, standing in the same position, holding the prison bars with his face in between them.

"Mahatma Gandhi!" replied Pinky Singh.

With hopeful eyes, Bruno came out of his position and gazed at him.

"What nonsense! He is dead," said Kumar.

Bruno put his face back between the prison bars, considering it another misfortune that the person who could have bailed him out had died.

"Yes, he is. But he will always be alive in our hearts and, of course, in our wallets." Pinky Singh smirked and Bruno and Kumar stared at him.

On enquiring how much money Bruno had in the bag, which he left in his car, he instantly called a cop. He told him that if he let them go, he would get a gift that was hidden in his car.

The cop, drooling with greed, immediately unlocked them and took Pinky Singh to his impounded car. Bruno and Kumar followed. After reaching the car, the cop pulled the car keys from his pocket, unlocked the car and put them back in his pocket. After getting a go-ahead from the cop, Pinky Singh popped into his car. He pulled out Bruno's bag, which he had hidden secretly when he had become aware of it after leaving Bruno and Sachi midway on that night.

As Pinky Singh opened the bag, he found some clothes, a passport and the toy currency Sparrow had given him. No money was found in the bag.

Before the cop lost his patience, Bruno asked Pinky Singh to check the outer pocket. They were all smiles after the confirmation of the presence

of some money. Before Pinky Singh could count that money, the cop snatched it from his hand and counted it himself.

"This is just 25,000." The cop gave Pinky Singh an impudent stare as the counting had ended too early.

"How much do you want, sir?" asked Pinky Singh, trying to be friendly with him.

"30,000!" replied the cop bluntly.

"Come on, sir. You can give us a little discount!" Pinky Singh grinned .

"30,000 each," replied the cop flatly.

Their jaws dropped and their eyeballs were on the verge of falling out.

"I want 90,000 because the charges against all three of you are serious. Plus 10k for our service charge. In total, that's 100,000."

"What service charge?" Kumar yelled in resentment. "Don't try to fool us!" He tried to assert his rights in front of the cop.

But this was not well-received by the cop. Pinky Singh, who was miming 'shush' at Kumar by putting a finger to his own mouth, saw that Kumar was going to face the music.

"Hey, you!" The cop held Kumar by the collar and gave him a nice jolt. "You guys used our property, drank our water and ate our food; the service tax is for that. Come on; we gave you good service!"

"Yeah, sir." Pinky Singh cleared his throat. "We know but we only have this much..." He giggled while freeing Kumar, who was swaying like a doll in the cop's hands.

After freeing Kumar, Pinky Singh made one more attempt to convince that cop. But all was in vain. Disheartened, they gawked at each other foolishly as the cop shook his head in an indifferent and impudent way.

"What about the dollars?" asked the cop roguishly. "He is an American. He must have some..."

For Bruno, it was a worthless question from a greedy cop since he knew he had no dollars. But for Pinky Singh, it was a ray of hope. Suddenly, he was electrified with a sudden rush of adrenaline .

“DOLLARS! Yes, we have some.” gushed Pinky Singh and instantly fished out the toy money Sparrow had given Bruno. He dramatically started counting them and before even completing the task, he said, “Ah, you keep it all! It must be much more than 100,000...” He handed the entire bundle to the cop.

The same statement brought a greedy grin to the cop’s face and shock to Bruno’s face simultaneously.

“I always had a dream that one day I would see American dollars.” The cop’s eyes twinkled with pride.

“Congratulations!” Pinky Singh showed empathy in a courteous voice. “Today is your lucky day.”

“But why are these so light?” The cop peered at the fake money.

This question brought forth a feeling of being caught in Bruno. Pinky Singh started coughing to evade the question. Suddenly, the cop was called by his senior officer. He left without even showing a little courtesy and informing the three that he would be back in a short time. As the cop is gone, Bruno becomes angry at his outrageous bluff.

“Are you mad?” whispered Bruno, annoyed. “He is dumb but his senior officer would be quite aware of the toy currency. They will throw us back in the cell.”

“Who’s gonna wait for him?” With his eyes, Pinky Singh gesticulated at Bruno and Kumar to get into the car.

The idea of escaping from a police station made Kumar’s blood run cold .

“But the car keys are in that cop’s pocket,” whispered Bruno.

“My car starts with my touch!” replied Pinky Singh. “You Americans won’t understand. It’s the latest.” He moved silently toward the driver’s seat.

Astounded and wary, Bruno and Kumar followed him, darting their eyes in all directions. Pinky Singh took a five paisa coin (a square-shaped coin that was used a long time ago in India) out of the glove box, inserted it in the ignition and, very artistically, twisted his wrist. The engine started with the very first crank, bringing jubilation to their faces. Pinky Singh twisted his mustache. Hearing the car engine start, the cop came running out in panic. Now was the time for Pinky Singh to show off his special driving skills. In the blink of an eye, the car reversed, turned and was seen speeding toward the main gate.

“Hey stop, you crooks!” yelled the cop. “This is toy money and my kids don’t like the business game. It’s of no use to me!” With his swaying potbelly, the cop ran as fast as he could and tried his best to catch them.

Another cop at the main gate was alerted by the screaming cop but fortunately, he was busy squabbling with his wife on his cell phone. By the time he was aware of the situation, the car had successfully crossed the crucial point.



All three whooped in jubilation of their glorious victory. But their celebration was disrupted as they saw a man standing in the middle of the road, pointing a gun at them. Bruno’s narrowed eyes gazed at this mysterious entity. They grew big abruptly in shock as he realized it was none other than Russell.

“DON’T STOP! KEEP MOVING! HE WILL KILL US!” screamed Bruno repeatedly stroking Pinky Singh’s shoulder in a panic.

Seeing the car coming toward him without any intention of stopping, Russell pulled the trigger. BOOM!

The bullet pierced the windscreen but missed the occupants of the car since they ducked. Russell’s fearless and predatory face showed signs of apprehension as the car was still racing toward him. Instinctively, he scrambled away from the road to save himself from being crushed under the wheels and fell into a ditch, hurting his leg badly. Due to the car’s fast speed, the partly broken windscreen, the absence of streetlights and a

sudden sharp turn, Pinky Singh couldn't prevent his car from crashing into a tree.

The collision rattled all three gravely, leaving them with spinning heads and blurry vision. But before they were caught by the cops or hunted by Russell, Pinky Singh ignored his dizziness and acted promptly. The engine was restarted and the car reversed instantly.

Still gravely panicked, Kumar and Bruno felt fortunate to have a driver like Pinky Singh with them. He was unflappable and his reflexes stayed good even in this hellish situation. In no time, Pinky Singh had the car running at top speed. Kumar and Bruno heaved deep sighs of relief.

The car was in terrible condition after the crash. Both the windscreens were gone. The rear had been smashed by Sachi's dad during her escape and the front by a bullet and the tree crash. They were all freezing due to the chilly air falling on their faces.

"Good, now we have proper cross ventilation." Pinky Singh shivered with a frozen face and wide eyes.

"Now, who the hell was he?" Kumar's teeth chattered due to the chill.

"It's a long story," Bruno mumbled with his shoulders slumped against the wind.

By now, Russell had crawled out of the ditch with his leg injured. In great pain and discomfort, he stood up to find that the car had sped away.



Moving further back in the story, Russell had reached the Satya Ashram after getting more information on Hassan from Mr. Gill. But instead of Hassan, what Russell came across was a bizarre scandal that had jolted the whole ashram and the neighboring area. After knowing about his arrest, he reached the police station. He waited outside for him with a gun that he bought with the help of Swarn from Amritsar. He was sure that Hassan, being a deadly terrorist, wouldn't be sitting in prison, twiddling his thumbs; he would definitely try to escape. He considered it

to be Hassan's good luck that he survived his attack. But he was sure that his target wouldn't be lucky the next time.



After driving for about an hour, Bruno started showing new signs of deterioration. They were quite severe. This time, his anxiety soared to a new level where his hands started shivering and his tongue babbled something uncontrollably. It seemed as if his brain would explode due to the pressure gradually building up within.

"STOP THE CAR. STOP THE CAR!" screamed Bruno.

Sensing a crisis, Pinky Singh took the car off the road and stopped it behind dense bushes. Bruno popped out of the car, stumbling, squirming and babbling like a lunatic.

"What happened, Hassan? Are you okay?" shouted Kumar while stepping out of the car.

Trying to crush his temples between both his hands, Bruno moaned with a grimace. "Forty-five sunrises are gone. No money, nowhere to go and time is running out." Suddenly, Bruno turned toward Kumar and Pinky Singh and exploded as loudly as he could "I DON'T WANT TO BE CONVERTED BACK INTO A DOG."

Yelling from the bottom of his belly, Bruno rested on his knees and panted heavily. After feeling somewhat normal, he stood up and dragged his feet toward Pinky Singh and Kumar.

"Okay, so this is my story," sighed Bruno. He started narrating his story. Empathetically, Kumar and Pinky Singh were all ears until the final word of the story.

After listening to this stranger-than-fiction truth, a gravely stunned Kumar kept gaping at Bruno. Kumar's expression was expected but Bruno saw Pinky Singh looking very normal, calm and unaffected by his strange story. He started losing it again. It appeared to Bruno that Pinky Singh was not taking him seriously .

"I know you guys won't believe but it's true!" yelled Bruno, holding Kumar's collar. "THIS IS TRUE. I AM GOING TO BE DOG AGAIN. YES, A DOG. WOOF WOOF!" babbled Bruno, clenching Kumar's collar tighter.

Before the situation got out of control, Pinky Singh twirled Bruno toward him and slapped him tightly across his face. It brought Bruno back to his senses and his body vibrated like a big, old church bell after being rung. During this whole act, nowhere did it appear that Pinky Singh was unaware of his action. The sublime composure and certainty in his eyes clearly established that he knew what he was doing. Interestingly, his slap was not violent at all and had zero aggression. But it had been so powerful that it had shaken Bruno's consciousness to its very roots.

"Calm down. Why wouldn't we believe you?" Pinky Singh assured Bruno politely. "There is nothing unbelievable about this story."

With a certain grandeur and poise in his eyes, he walked like a king to the front of the car. He artistically adjusted his turban with both hands, just like a king does with his crown. Bruno was stunned to see such trust and credence in Pinky Singh's eyes even after hearing his unbelievable story. He was equally amazed to observe Pinky Singh's freshly-revealed persona, which he hid behind his crazy and loony actions.

With a hand still glued to the very cheek Pinky Singh had slapped and with his ears still ringing, Bruno gaped at him as he inspected the damage his car had suffered. But even the severe damage, like the broken front bumper, a smashed headlight, both the windscreens gone and badly distorted bonnet, could not bring a slight feeling of remorse to Pinky Singh's face .

"Come, let's go!" Pinky Singh brushed away the broken glass lying on the front seat of the car.

"Where?" mumbled Bruno with his hand still glued to his cheek.

"To the most beautiful place in the world. Come!" Pinky Singh grinned pleasantly and hospitably.

Without even a single thought, Bruno walked toward the front door of the car. It seemed like Bruno was acting like a robot who obeyed his master without having any of his own reservations. Seeing this, Kumar ran after Bruno.

“Wait a minute! What the hell is happening?” He promptly tugged Bruno’s arm and whispered in his ears, “First, this illiterate cab driver slapped you and now he will tell us where to go and where not to? Oh, come on! We don’t even know him properly.”

“I have nowhere to go. I am completely fed up and tired,” sighed Bruno and hung his head. “It doesn’t matter who he is and where he is taking me...” Completely disregarding Kumar’s statement, Bruno occupied the front seat. However, Kumar also thought about the fact that he too had nowhere to go. He dropped his shoulders with a sigh and involuntarily slipped into the car’s backseat.



The car was back on the highway. Kumar had dozed off, with his legs sprawled in all directions across the back seat. Pinky Singh enjoyed driving his car after a long time while humming a Punjabi folk tune .

“What was in that slap?” Bruno, who hadn’t come out of his shock, promptly asked.

“Pinky Singh’s shock therapy,” replied Pinky Singh in between all his humming. “Puts you back in your senses in seconds! And it has no severe side effects, except for a slight pain in the jaw, head and... and sometimes in the neck.” Pinky Singh promoted his therapy efficiently with his signature grin.

“How are you so happy, even in the worst times? What’s your secret?” Bruno looked curious.

“There is no secret. The only thing is that happiness is of the utmost concern to me; everything comes afterward.” He continued humming while tapping his fingers rhythmically on the steering wheel.

“But how can somebody be happy in such a mess?”

“Life is a problem because you can’t accept it. Once you accept it, the same mess magically turns into harmony.” Pinky Singh glanced at Bruno from the corner of his eye, elegantly raising an eyebrow.

“Perhaps you are right. Enough!” Bruno heaved a deep sigh. “Now, no more bullshit about peace of mind, meditation and purpose of life. Whatever time is left, I want to spend like you.”

Bruno threw his head back, ready to doze off. Pinky Singh continued enjoying his driving while he hummed his favorite song.

CHAPTER TWENTY



Pinky Singh and His World

Bruno and Kumar's sleep was disrupted with a sudden halt of their car. Bruno raised his head and rubbed his eyes to look around. "Here we are!" With narrowed eyes, he saw Pinky Singh smiling at him. He peered at the analog clock on the car's dashboard. It was nine in the morning.

Bruno and Kumar sluggishly got out of the car. After a tight stretch and wide yawn, with blurry and blinking eyes, Bruno found himself on the big lawn of an Indian rural house. To his left was a building area with an open kitchen and a few rooms. On the right side was a long shed with two to three pottery wheels and a few bags lying about. In the lawn, he could see a hand pump adjoining a common bathroom. Right at the end was a beautiful garden with a lot of vegetables and fruit trees. And on the top of the building, in the center, was written 'MINI-HEAVEN'.

"So guys, this is my heaven and I call it Mini-Heaven." Pinky Singh sighed in delight. "This is the most beautiful place on earth and I love being here!" With his hands on his waist, Pinky Singh gazed at his property with twinkling eyes.

But this place happened to be much below Bruno's and Kumar's expectations. The building had worn out walls with bricks peeping through the cracked cement. The shed was in no better condition as its tin-roof could fly off with the wind at any time. The hand pump was rusty. The roof-less bathroom had a metal sheet door. It was just for namesake

as it didn't have a latch. Dirt had already started gathering on their slippers, flying from the earthy floor.

They didn't find anything heavenly in this so-called Mini-Heaven. Bruno preferred to stay silent but Kumar had been holding it for quite long.

"I think you need to get your eyesight checked." Kumar wrinkled his nose in displeasure. "It's just a normal house. What's so damn heavenly about it?"

"You will come to know soon," replied Pinky Singh with uncontrolled glee.

"Where does this walkway go?" asked Bruno as he saw a walkway between the building and garden, going into the back.

"Straight to the Island of Angels!" As Pinky Singh grinned, Kumar looked at him, irked. Before Kumar could get mad at him again, Pinky Singh quickly took them to show them their room.

An old lock in an olden door opened and they entered the room to see a simple, typical Punjabi village room. It had an old fashioned wooden bed of at least 50 years (it squeaked every time you moved), an old, heavy ceiling fan with distorted blades (it appeared as if it would fall anytime), a big metal drum in which people would keep grains in olden times and a floor without tiles (just cement). The room had no attached bathroom. The bathroom in the lawn was the only bathroom for everybody.

"So, guys, you can live here for as long as you can..." Pinky Singh nodded hospitably. "The only problem is that I don't have any domestic help here. So we need to do all the work ourselves."

"OH! But I was expecting seven-star facilities." Kumar's voice was dripping with sarcasm.

"You are so funny." Pinky Singh laughed. "Well, why don't you rest for some time?" All three agreed on giving their aching, stiff bodies and weary minds some rest as they had had a long night.



After sleeping for a few hours, Bruno woke up to find it was afternoon. He moved out, leaving Kumar still sleeping in the bed. As he came out of his room, he saw Pinky Singh preparing lunch. Filled with child-like gusto and liveliness, Pinky Singh was singing and doing the kitchen work. The kitchen was more like an outdoors open bar. It was connected to a room that stored vegetables and kitchen ingredients. It had a shed to cook in open and concrete stools on the other side of the serving counter.

“Good morning. So you slept well?” Pinky Singh smiled as his eyes fell on Bruno .

“Why is everything so easy for you?” Bruno sat on the stool, resting his arms on the serving counter. “The most difficult thing for humans is to be happy. It came so easily to you. Why?”

“Because I am not seeking it.” Pinky Singh tapped two eggs onto the frying pan.

“But how can you achieve something without going for it? I mean, how could you find happiness when you are not going for it?” Bruno shrugged while furrowing his eyebrows.

“I don’t find happiness; happiness finds me.” Pinky Singh twisted the omelet in the frying pan.

“Ah, it’s the same thing.”

“No, it’s not. Happiness is in search of you and you are also in search of happiness. When happiness is here, you are somewhere else and when you are here, happiness is somewhere else. You both go round and round and never meet.” As Pinky Singh served the omelet, Bruno looked wide-eyed at him.

“So what has to be done?” Bruno asked curiously.

“Have you ever listened to your inner GPS?”

“What? Now, what the hell is this inner GPS?” Bruno looked uneasy and confused.

"The GPS of an inner world, your inner voice, which is always right. It never says *You have arrived at your destination* . Rather, it says *your destination has arrived* ." Pinky Singh grinned and wiped his hands with his apron.

Seeing Bruno gazing with a puzzled frown, Pinky Singh decided not to jumble up Bruno's brain anymore .

"Okay! I'll make it simple for you." Placing his elbows on the serving counter, he said, "You can't make happiness stop because that's beyond your control. So ultimately, you have to stop. And by stopping, I mean, stop running after happiness. Sit and relax. Soon, happiness will find you." Pinky Singh gestured for Bruno to start eating.

Since he failed to crack the riddle, Bruno sighed and shook his head. He picked up a fork and knife and started eating. Soon, Kumar also joined Bruno for the meal.



After having their lunch, Pinky Singh led them to a mysterious path—the walkway between the building and garden that went into the back. Bruno and Kumar were back in their normal clothes. He got his bag back from the car. But Kumar had to borrow some clothes from Bruno. He looked funny in the clothes that didn't fit.

As they walked down the path and entered the backyard, they could see it went into a dense forest. Pinky Singh took pride in guiding them into a different world, which was quiet and serene.

As they moved a little further, they were mesmerized by the enchanting beauty of the area. This Goddess of the forest looked pure, virginal and untouched by humans. They could not hear a single noise from the machine world. The only thing they could hear was the delightful orchestration of various chirping birds and a few insects, blending into a soulful harmony. Various kinds of wildflowers gave an enthralling visual appeal to this green wood. The smell of earth and wood wafted through the breeze .

Pinky Singh, who was leading them, walked like a king would through his province.

“Can I ask you something?” Kumar started a conversation with Bruno. “On that day, the way you were beating Satya Maharishi for touching Sachi, I thought you were in love with her.” Kumar took a deep breath as he had been walking for a while. “But now, I feel you are not bothered about her. Since last night, you haven’t talked about her once.”

“Love is not enough. What future does she have with me?” Bruno continued walking, his gaze fixed on the walkway. “Even if we reunite today, soon, I will be turned back into a dog. Then what will she do? Spend her life with a dog?” Bruno glanced at Kumar from the corner of his eye. “I won’t be able to take her to America either. So wherever she is, whatever condition she is in, it’s still better.”

“But don’t you miss her?”

“Soon I will be missing a lot of things! It’s no use discussing these things now.” Bruno promptly sped up to match Pinky Singh, leaving Kumar behind.



After walking for 15 minutes, their forest path opened up to a beautiful lake. The calm lake was as beautiful as a picture; it was surrounded by the same forest. They see a big, Shikara-type boat tied to a tree on the banks. The unmoving boat looked calm like it was in deep meditation. This again looked untouched by any human.

Pinky Singh spun toward Bruno and Kumar and opened his arms, as this was a gesture to say, ‘Welcome to my world’. Soon, they settled down to start enjoying the splendid and spectacular view of this mirror-like water body. A flock of white, quacking ducks had engaged Kumar’s gaze. He enjoyed watching them glide effortlessly on the silent lake. After a while, as Kumar instinctively turned to Pinky Singh to enquire about the little creatures, he was astounded to see something unanticipated. He saw Pinky Singh sitting with his eyes closed, taking a deep breath with a smile on his face.

"Are you trying to meditate?" asked the stunned Kumar.

"Why should I try when I can?" replied Pinky Singh with his eyes still closed and a calm smile.

"So you are doing it." Kumar corrected his question.

"Meditation is a spontaneous process. It happens on its own. You don't even need to do it." Pinky Singh opened his eyes with a deep breath.

These spontaneous answers were enough to offend Kumar and tickle his ego.

"Oh really, then could you please share your secret with us ignorant people who have been putting all their energy into trying to meditate?" scoffed Kumar in a dramatic tone.

"Why not just close your eyes and sit in a comfortable posture?" Pinky Singh confidently took charge.

Kumar nodded at Bruno and they both closed their eyes and sat in comfortable positions to find out what kind of Mystic this cab driver was. Promptly, they heard him say something in a calm and serene voice. "Now let all the yucky, negative and immoral thoughts into your mind."

"So this is your shitty secret?" Kumar cut in as he had found the loose ball he had been waiting for desperately. He was all set to hit it past the boundary. "Do you know that meditation promotes healthy, good and positive thoughts and is not about turning your head into a garbage bin? Meditation is quite different from changing a flat tire."

"Yes, of course it is.... But try to understand..." Totally unperturbed by his spiteful behavior, Pinky Singh responded confidently. "Suppose your mind is like a room with two big windows for cross ventilation. You keep these windows closed 24/7 so that immoral, dirty and negative thoughts, in the form of dust, don't enter. As a result, your mind has no fresh air or oxygen. It is suffocated and dirty because the dust starts accumulating in closed rooms. You can't clean it because to clean a room, you have to open the windows first. And then you expect your mind to have positive and moral thoughts?" He raised his eyebrows.

“Well, that’s impossible. To have positive and moral thoughts, your mind needs to be healthy and clean. And to do that, you have to open the windows of your mind first. Yes, of course, in the beginning, it will be unbearable for you to let it happen. Just like when you open the windows of a closed room after a long time, you see a lot of dust fly in. But remember that dust is not brought by fresh air. It’s the dust you have accumulated for years by keeping the windows closed.” He brought his palms together to make it looked like a closed window.

“The same is with your mind. You are haunted by negative thoughts because you are repressing them. Once you allow them to pass, they won’t trouble you anymore. Once you have opened the windows and started cleaning your room, slowly, through continuous cleaning, the dust will be blown away by the wind. There will also be sufficient oxygen in the room. Once your mind is healthy, clean and fresh, so will your thoughts.”

As Pinky Singh finished, he started feeling a little uneasy because of the goggling and gaping faces of Bruno and Kumar.

“Who told you this bogus theory?” suddenly, Kumar spoke out. “And you think we will be part of your stupid experiment like this?”

Filled with scorn, Kumar got up and started walking back to the property. Bruno is hesitant to say anything.

“Mmm, I don’t know what to say but...” Bruno wondered how to frame his words. “... I am tired of all this. I’m sorry...” Bruno got up and followed Kumar.

Pinky Singh didn’t understand why Bruno was so apologetic as he wasn’t preaching anything. Least bothered and with an unruffled smile, he closed his eyes and enjoyed sitting in silence.



In the evening, after taking another nap, Kumar and Bruno came out of their room and saw Pinky Singh smelling a big jar. He tasted the red liquid inside the jar with a spoon. His tongue moved around his lips and

his head bobbed in contentment. Kumar, filled with suspicion and curiosity, went over to find out what he was up to.

“What are you doing?” Kumar yawned while rubbing his eyes .

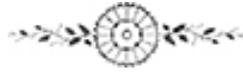
“Oh, you guys are awake. Well, I had to prepare red wine some time ago. I’m just checking if it’s okay. I was thinking of utilizing it for tonight’s special occasion.” Pinky Singh looked quite serene and composed. His voice, eyes and body had a certain depth. It was in contradiction to his ardent and vigorous nature.

“I can’t believe you know how to prepare red wine! I have heard you people generally make moonshine,” said Kumar casually.

“And what occasion is today?” asked Bruno.

“I will let you know late in the evening,” said Pinky Singh as he started bottling up the red liquid.

CHAPTER TWENTY ONE



An Unusual Celebration

In the evening, they gathered by the lake and made arrangements for tables, a carpet and a music system. To beat the chill, they made a bonfire as well. The sounds of the crackling firewood, the various night creatures, like owl and insects, and the lustrous lake and prismatic sky were acquisitively mesmerizing. Finally, they sat down to enjoy the heavenly feast. Pinky Singh poured wine into their glasses and gestured for Bruno and Kumar to taste it.

“Mmm!” Kumar was delighted.

“That’s really good! How did you make it and that too at home?” asked an amazed Bruno.

“It’s nothing! All you need is grapes, yeast and sugar!”

As Bruno observed him closely, he could feel a pinch of sadness in Pinky Singh’s profound silence and composure.

“Now, tell us the occasion,” asked Bruno.

“This evening, I came to know that my mom died in the morning.”

This shocking news blew Bruno away and Kumar choked on his wine. Pinky Singh was again surrounded up by four gaping eyes.

“Are you mad? Who celebrates somebody’s death like this?” Kumar stood up annoyed. “And that too, of one’s own mother? Did you hate her

so much?"

"No, I loved her immensely," Pinky Singh sighed with a calm smile.

"Then why the hell are you doing this?" yelled Kumar.

"Sit down!"

Seeing the composure on Pinky Singh's face, Kumar's aggression faded.

"My mother was a wonderful lady," continued Pinky Singh with deep love in his eyes. "She was always happy with whatever life gave her. I never saw her grumbling and complaining. She was always full of love and compassion; her whole life was a celebration. Then why should her death be a sad event?"

"But still, she was your mother and she died?" asked Bruno empathetically, in a low voice.

"We have a very wrong concept about death!" With a smile, Pinky Singh got up and walked toward the bonfire. "Death is not something against life. It's a completion of your life circle." He stopped and turned back toward them. "You came into this beautiful world, lived, loved and laughed. You did your job very well and when it was completed, there was nothing to cry about. Remember, when you have lived your life in totality, in a rich way, you won't regret it when dying. "

"Oh God, another shitty theory." Kumar furrowed his lips in contempt. "I think he is already drunk. Why are we lagging behind?" He raised his glass to Bruno. "Let's get drunk too! Cheers!" Kumar downed the whole glass of wine and pushed his empty glass toward Pinky Singh, asking for some more.

Unaffected by his sneer, Pinky Singh refilled Kumar's glass, which didn't survive for long. Soon, Kumar was visibly drunk. To push the death celebration forward, Pinky Singh played some trance music and started swaying to it. Visibly drunk, Kumar joined him while Bruno stayed glued to the carpet. After a joyous dance, Pinky Singh and Kumar settled down. Pinky Singh eyed Bruno, who was still in low spirits. To cheer him up, Pinky Singh cracked a hardcore, off-color joke. But it fell short in front of

Bruno's stubborn sadness. Kumar was dying laughing but Bruno couldn't even spare a smile.

"You told me that you want to be happy." Pinky Singh took a sip of his wine. "Why aren't you laughing then?"

"I can't." Bruno broke his silence. "From the moment you slapped me, I promised myself that the only thing I would care about is being happy. But the more I try, the more I fail. Anger, anxiety, sadness, fear. I feel everything except happiness. I think I am going insane. I feel like screaming and yelling all the time." Bruno glanced at Pinky Singh with lackluster eyes. "Is being a human so difficult?" The happy atmosphere immediately grew serious.

"If you are failing, again and again, that means you are on the wrong track." Eyes filled with compassion, Pinky Singh answered his question. "For example, you want to stop your vehicle. But instead of pressing the brake, you step on the gas. Then an accident is bound to happen."

"Don't tell me that you are going to give us driving lessons right now!" Kumar tried to break-off their conversation but Pinky Singh's answer had already triggered an escalating curiosity in Bruno, which he couldn't hold back.

"I didn't get you..." said a curious Bruno.

"It's not rocket science. It's simple. When you feel like screaming, why don't you scream to your heart's content? Come on; do it now." Pinky Singh motioned Bruno to stand up and show them what he had.

"Come on, Hassan. Do it like this." Kumar stood up and started screaming, beating his chest like Tarzan. Despite his best effort, Kumar's performance went unnoticed as something tremendously significant was being conversed.

"Now? But how can I? Without any reason?" Visibly confounded, Bruno was clueless about what to do.

"Oh, so you need a reason?" Pinky Singh gulped his last sip of wine. "Come with me and bring your friend as well." He stood up, furlled the carpet, took the glasses and started walking toward Mini-Heaven.

The curious Bruno instantly pulled Kumar up, making him stand by placing his hands under his armpits.

“Hey, where are you guys taking me? Don’t ruin my evening!” Kumar protested lethargically as Bruno tugged him.

On reaching the building, Pinky Singh led Bruno and Kumar into the basement and entered a storeroom. After searching for a while, Pinky Singh fished out a box covered in a thick layer of dust. It was buried under piles of other things. After dusting the box, it turned out to be beautifully decorated and wooden.

“My God, this place sucks,” grumbled Kumar as he coughed. “At least give me some more wine so that I can bear it.”

“This is your reason.” Pinky Singh held the box in his hands and lifted it into the air like it was holy nectar.

“What’s in this box?” asked Bruno, burning with curiosity. “I don’t understand!”

“Don’t worry, you will. See you tomorrow at 5:45 am.”

Pinky Singh took the box and went to his room to sleep. Bruno was still curious and tugged on Kumar as he moved toward his room.

“I told you he is a mysterious man. He practiced black magic and will turn us into chickens. Then he will eat us.” Kumar mumbled in an inebriated state while Bruno guessed what could be in the mysterious box.

CHAPTER TWENTY TWO



The Mysterious Box Opens

The next morning, Bruno and Kumar were sitting on the lawn at 5:45 am sharp, waiting for Pinky Singh. Kumar was in no mood to come but Bruno had convinced him.

Eventually, the door to Pinky Singh's room opened with a creak. Bruno flinched and stood up eagerly. Pinky Singh was seen coming out of his room with the mysterious box and a cassette player. He greeted them with a pleasant smile and motioned for them to follow him into the forest. After ten minutes, they reached a leveled, empty space, carpeted with smooth grass and surrounded by tall trees on all sides, forming a canopy.

"What are we going to do here?" asked the panting Kumar.

"Meditate..." This single word burst the mystery bubble immediately. Bruno regretted his anticipation.

"What did you say? Meditation!" Craning his neck, Kumar glared at Pinky Singh from the corner of his eyes. He put his hands on his waist, still panting. "Look, somebody is trying to be another Satya Maharishi here." Drawling with sarcasm, he glanced at Bruno and then back at Pinky Singh. "Hey listen, man." He moved closer, showing Pinky Singh his index finger. "I have been doing all this shit for quite a long time."

“But we are trying a different one,” said an unruffled Pinky Singh, setting up the cassette player.

“Oh really? Well, what’s so different about this?” scoffed Kumar.

“We call the meditation techniques you tried at Satya Ashram passive meditation techniques. They were for the men who existed a thousand years ago. That time, a man’s center of existence was the heart, not the mind. But today’s man is entirely different. He is born in an artificial world and lives and dies in that world. Ambition, more work in less time, cutthroat competition and unrealistic goals have made his brain persistently restless and overactive. For such a mind, the old, passive meditation techniques won’t work. You need some new techniques. Something that is active, not passive.”

“But why do we need meditation to be happy in the first place?” Bruno twisted his face, like a child grumbling.

“If you want your house to look beautiful, glowing and fragrant, then you have to clean it thoroughly.”

By now, the cassette player was all set.

“Okay.” Pinky Singh joined his hands with a clap. “So should I explain the technique before we start? Hmm?” Immediately, Pinky Singh closed his eyes, tightened his fists and slightly bent his knees, making his body firm like a warrior. “Okay, now look carefully.”

And bang on, he started breathing vigorously, fast and chaotically. His act was so powerful that the sound of his breathing pierced Bruno’s ears. As Pinky Singh tugged on his elbows, hitting his ribs, he threw all his breath out just like a machine gun throwing bullets. His whole body throbbed and participated in the act.

“You have to breathe like this for ten minutes.” Pinky Singh stopped promptly. “This will melt your frozen and repressed emotions and they will come out. You have to help them come out by simply allowing them.”

After finishing, Pinky Singh observed that, again, four gaping eyes surrounded him.

“Look at this man.” Kumar broke his silence, looking at Bruno. He gesticulated toward Pinky Singh. “I spent my whole life learning how to control emotions and trying to behave like a sane and sensible man and now, he wants us to put all that down the drain. Kudos!”

“If you are really sane and sensible then why try to behave like that?” Pinky Singh cocked his head slightly, with a gentle closed-lip smile.

“And by doing this shit, we are surely going to be sane?” By now, Kumar’s tone had become quite insolent. “Hmm?” He threw a spiteful look at Pinky Singh.

“Yes, of course,” replied the unruffled Pinky Singh, casting an unflinching eye on Kumar. “Try it and you will feel the difference. So after that,” he continued explaining the meditation, “for another ten minutes, scream, shout, jump and bring your aggression out. You are allowed to do anything without harming yourself and anybody else. After that— ”

“This looks stupid,” Bruno cut in.

Till now, Bruno had shown a lot of patience and trust in Pinky Singh, even going against Kumar’s warnings. But now, it was too much for him. He was embarrassed that he had shown so much trust in such a man.

“What’s so stupid about this?” Pinky Singh asked casually, folding his arms.

“I mean,” Bruno sneered, “shouting and screaming at imaginary objects just to vent your anger. It looks childish.”

“It’s okay, Hassan. You don’t have to blow up a whole building to vent your anger.”

This statement went, like an arrow, through Bruno’s heart. Pinky Singh had been calling him Bruno from the moment he heard his story. This was the first time he called him Hassan. Bruno realized that Hassan had almost taken over him and that there was very little Bruno left. Who knows, maybe before the 90th sunrise, he would also blow up a building and kill innocents as Hassan had done. Bruno got this straight and had nothing more to ask or say.

“Trust me, it will make you more sane, fresh and unburdened, just like a child. And tell me, why not give it a try? What are you going to lose anyways?” Pinky Singh shrugged, opening his arms.

However, Bruno and Kumar agreed with one of Pinky Singh’s points. What did they have to lose after all?

They had tried everything else so why not try this as well. The sublime confidence and conviction in Pinky Singh’s eyes made them nod in affirmation. Finally, Pinky Singh opened the mysterious box. Inside was a cassette without a title. It looked more like a copy.

“Okay, now I am playing a tape.” Pinky Singh loaded the cassette player. “You will hear a voice. Just listen and do as it says. And remember, this meditation only works when you make it a question of life and death. Put in 100% of your effort.”

“What tape is this and whose voice is it?” asked Bruno.

“You don’t worry about that; you just follow the voice.” Pinky Singh winked with an impish smile. It seemed like he was not going to spill the beans right now.

At last, Pinky Singh put his finger on the play button and pressed it gently. As the cassette started playing, a calm yet assertive, dynamic and impressive voice spoke. “Remembering God sitting inside me, I pledge that I put all my energy in today’s meditation. I will put in all my energy!” the voice accentuated. “Now, close your eyes. Your inner God will take care of you. Make your body loosen up. We are going to start with chaotic breathing.”

The music started and the show began. The thundering sound of bongos was enough to spark the energy required for the meditation.

“Start breathing. Faster... deeper...” The voice became firm. “Throw it out... Faster... Put in your 100%. Don’t stop; put everything at stake.”

The voice had the same zeal and zest that a commander had while standing at the front, motivating his fellow soldiers to fight till their last breath. The voice was so powerful that just listening to it started sending electrifying energy through their bodies. In no time, the wizardry of the

voice took over Bruno and Kumar and they were totally engrossed in the act. Hassan's strong body and repressed aggression turned out to be a blessing in disguise as it gave Bruno the upper hand. Kumar was also trying his best but his body wasn't as athletic or strong as Bruno's. So he had to put in a lot of effort. This continued for ten minutes. After that, the music stopped with a bang and different music started.

"Stop the breathing and let go of your emotions," the voice stated loud and clear.

After such chaotic and aggressive breathing, Bruno, whose emotions were already bubbling up, exploded like a live volcano after getting the go-ahead signal. The chaotic breathing melted all his frozen emotions which were now flooding out. Bruno was yelling, screaming, jumping and punching the air while Kumar was silently shivering. This continued for another ten minutes until the voice asked them to stop. Bruno was so carried away with the process that he couldn't stop initially. But the voice repeated the words 'calm down' for a while and gradually, Bruno came to a halt.

This meditation continued for another 40 minutes. The second step was followed by a third step, which included jumping on your toes with your hands up and shouting 'HOO, HOO, HOO' with force from the core of your navel. The aim was to awaken the dormant energy inside the navel and work against gravity to push it upwards and stimulate the production of bio-electricity. This step was so strenuous that it put Hassan's vigorous body and his hard terrorist training to the test. Drenched in sweat and gravely tired, he failed to complete this round whereas Kumar gave up in just two to three minutes .

This step was followed by a fourth step that involved silently standing like a statue. It included the passive observance of whatever was going on in the mind and body. It went on for 15 minutes. And finally, with the last step, cheerful music was played so that one could swing to it for another 15 minutes.

When the hour of meditation ended, Bruno and Kumar were so drained of all energy that they collapsed on the smooth grass. They

rested there for some time.

“Open your eyes slowly and gradually.” Pinky Singh’s calm and serene voice brought them back to the world. They got up and sat in Sukhasana. Both were in no mood to open their eyes and wished to stay like that for some more time. Finally, they gradually opened their eyes. “Remain in this silence for some time and take some rest. Better take a nap and then we will meet in the kitchen at 9:00 am.”

Pinky Singh, holding the magic box and the cassette player, walked back to the building. Bruno and Kumar looked confounded by this spiritual explosion inside them. Failing to find the words to express themselves, they silently went to their room and took a nap.



At 9:00 am, they got up and found themselves gravely hungry. They moved toward the kitchen and were delighted to see Pinky Singh joyously preparing breakfast. He knew that they were starving so he immediately served them some eggs, bread and hot milk. After eating like horses, there was contentment on their faces .

“So how are my warriors feeling now?” Pinky Singh asked as he wiped his hands on his apron.

Suddenly, the whole Mini-Heaven started resonating with Bruno’s roaring belly laughter. Kumar gazed at him, fearing Bruno might have developed some psychological complication after doing so much insane meditation.

“The jo-joke you told yes-terday was fuc-ng hilar-ious,” Bruno couldn’t speak clearly because of his mad laughter.

His laughter became so uncontrollable that Bruno had to stand up and shake a bit to release all his energy. Pinky Singh watched all this with an impish smile. Kumar was still dumbfounded as he had never seen Bruno like this before. After channelizing his energy completely, Bruno settled down.

“And Kumar, you?” Pinky Singh slurped his tea.

"I don't know," Kumar replied reluctantly. "Immediately, after meditation, it was good. But now, it's strange. I am feeling more anger."

It appeared like the word 'good' had a struggle while coming out of Kumar's mouth.

"That is because your frozen emotions have started melting now." Pinky Singh combed his beard with his fingers. "Keep doing it for some more days. You will feel the difference. Good at least something is happening."

Immediately, Kumar lit a cigarette and started smoking. Bruno glanced at him sheepishly and gestured for him to blow it out. "Are you going to ask me to stop drinking and smoking while we meditate?" asked Kumar .

Pinky Singh glanced at him casually. It seemed like Kumar wouldn't accept any terms and conditions if he had to meditate. "No! You just meditate. It will drop by itself. But you have to choose a separate area. You can't smoke here with non-smokers."

Kumar took it as a fair deal and immediately put it out. Pinky Singh nodded in appreciation.

"One thing more." Pinky Singh put his empty cup in the sink. "After meditation, you will get a lot of energy. You have to stop it from draining."

"But how?" asked Bruno.

"Work meditation."

Pinky Singh started clearing the serving counter. "Picture any work and start doing it while being fully absorbed in it. Put in your 100% and that job will become your work meditation. Cleaning the house, gardening, helping me in the kitchen or you could try pottery with me."

"Oh, great! Somebody is giving us jobs." As usual, Kumar's murmuring was ignored by Pinky Singh and Bruno.

"You do pottery also?" asked Bruno curiously.

"Yes." Pinky Singh removed his apron as he had finished with the kitchen work. "It's my side business. But now, my cab is badly damaged and I don't have enough money to repair it. So I'll have to depend on this pottery. Come; let's have some fun." Pinky Singh gestured for them to follow him as he moved to the shed area.

Kumar was not interested but seeing Bruno show a keen interest in this, he was left with no option but to follow them.

CHAPTER TWENTY THREE



The Shape of Creativity

When Bruno and Kumar went into the shed, they saw two to three pottery wheels and a lot of bags, which were supposed to be filled with pottery material.

“But where are the pots?” asked Bruno.

“Sorry, we are completely sold out.” Pinky Singh smiled. “Actually, my pots are in demand. Sree Ram, a trader from Delhi, collects them from me and sells them in high-end showrooms in big cities at a very high price. He sells them under my brand name: THE PINK POTTER.”

“Okay, so is this another bluff?” snorted Kumar.

“No, it’s not,” replied Pinky Singh.

“Oh, really? So if you are a brand, how come nobody knows?” Kumar became a little restless.

“Because I don’t want them to know.” Pinky Singh flashed a broad grin as he started opening bags of raw clay, china clay and grog .

“But you could be famous!” Bruno looked genuinely concerned.

“I have a happy and peaceful life.” Pinky Singh mixed the material with water. “Unnecessary fame could disturb it.”

“And what about money? Does the man pay you well?” Kumar’s eyes sparkled as he asked about the profit factor.

“Very good.” Pinky Singh nodded, washing his hands. “So good that if I worked hard, I could be rich.”

“Then why don’t you do that?” Kumar was quite restless by now.

Pinky Singh smiled as he had anticipated this question. “I only work according to my needs.” He wiped his wet hands with a cloth. “And you know what? If I started doing pottery 365 days a year just for more money, then they would be ordinary pots. My pots are special and are in high demand because I don’t work like a donkey.”

“Okay, but what if somebody tries faking your brand to meet the market’s increasing demand?” Kumar raised his voice.

“Many have tried before but it doesn’t work.”

“But why?” Curiosity gleamed in Bruno’s eyes.

“Because it’s impossible to fake my art.” Pinky Singh cocked his brow as he twisted his mustache.

This was really impressive but Kumar and Bruno were wondering what magic a cab driver had in his hands that people were so crazy about it and nobody was able to fake it. After a lot of talking, it was time for some real action .

Pinky Singh opened a tightly sealed bag of prepared clay as the clay he had prepared that day couldn’t be used instantly. He sat down in front of the wheel, like a devotee in a temple does when he is about to offer his prayers. With the help of a stick, he kick-started the wheel’s rotation. With great finesse, he picked up the clay material and threw it in the center of the wheel. His throw was a perfect blend of force and delicacy. He started shaping the clay with his artistic fingers. The movement of his fingers and hands are so subtle and proficient that his whole body, including his shoulders, elbows, neck and even his eyes, were deeply involved in it.

His profound breathing and his throbbing body were similar to that of a lover hugging his beloved with great passion. Bruno was amazed to watch this incredible scene. He had never seen anybody so absorbed in routine work. Even Satya Maharishi, while doing yagya, yoga or

meditation, didn't even have a fraction of the passion that Pinky Singh relished. He was stunned to realize how an ordinary thing like pottery could also be done with so much avidity.

Through the flair of Pinky Singh's fingers, the pot kept evolving into various, interesting shapes. But an acute confusion gripped Bruno and Kumar as the pot acquired its final shape. To them, on the one hand, the pot looked bizarre and was at the limit of being incomprehensible. But on the other hand, the same pot had a strange, fascinating magnetism to it. It appeared as if earthiness and elegance were rubbing their shoulders together. The pot was ordinarily life-like and exquisitely poetic.

For a while, Bruno and Kumar couldn't decide what part to choose. Ultimately, Kumar chose the former .

"Is it done?" Kumar asked as his folded arms opened in contempt.

Pinky Singh got up and washed his hands. After finishing his task, his face radiated with content and eyes with sublime serenity as if he had come out of deep meditation.

"Yes, it's ready," Pinky Singh replied in a calm and serene voice.

"So you were fooling around."

"Why do you say that?"

"Really? Then tell me what's so special about this." Kumar gestured at the pot disrespectfully. "I don't understand why people are paying so much for this kind of stuff; even I can make something like this."

"Of course you can." Pinky Singh left with a gentle smile as he wanted to stay with this tranquility for some time.

When Pinky Singh had gone, Kumar tried his hand at pottery. Bruno realized that Kumar's observation was precise and that he was a quick learner. After just watching once, he had somehow prepared a pot like thing and kept improvising after repeated attempts. Bruno joined him too but even after numerous attempts, they couldn't make a good pot.

"It's my first day," Kumar tried to explain when Pinky Singh returned to see their handiwork. "After some practice, I will do it."

"I am sure you will." Pinky Singh tapped Kumar's shoulder in encouragement.



Now, every day after meditation and breakfast, one thing was done earnestly for hours—pottery. Both Bruno and Kumar spent equal time on it. Bruno was in no hurry to achieve perfection whereas, Kumar worked so hard that he mastered the art in just four days and finally made a practical pot. He painted it and secretly placed it among the other pots. Kumar knew that Sree Ram was going to visit them the next day and he wanted to have an unbiased opinion of his handiwork.



The next day, when Sree Ram came, he touched Pinky Singh's feet like a disciple. Kumar found Sree Ram's gesture awkward as he appeared to be at least ten years older than Pinky Singh. Sree Ram looked like a calm, soft-spoken and slim man who talked very little. It seemed like this man had never smiled but his eyes had a different kind of quietness and contentment.

After having his tea, Sree Ram went to have a look at the pots. Kumar followed him while Pinky Singh prepared the meal. As he glanced at the pots, his gaze locked on a specific one. Kumar's eyes gleamed with pride as his crafted pot had caught Sree Ram's attention.

"Isn't it beautiful?" asked Kumar, presuming Sree Ram had finally found a real pot that was technically more correct than the pots Pinky Singh was making.

"This is good," replied Sree Ram calmly. "But not authentic. You made it if I am not wrong."

Immediately, all the delight rushed out of Kumar like air out of a balloon. With his shattered hopes scattered all around him and leftover residue of humiliation inside him, he nodded.

"Tell me why you said it's not authentic."

“Because you made it with your mind, not heart,” Sree Ram replied as Kumar gawked at him, overwhelmed with embarrassment. “Yes, it is more proportionate and, technically,” Sree Ram twisted his wrist to have a 180-degree look at the pot, “it is better than the others. But it has no life. Don’t worry; one day, you will make one.” Seeing the humiliation and disappointment in Kumar’s eyes, Sree Ram tried to empathize with him.

“No, I won’t.” Kumar snatched that pot from Sree Ram in anger. “Because I don’t need to!” He left.

CHAPTER TWENTY FOUR



The Science behind Meditation

Kumar and Bruno continued doing morning meditation. At last, they had found something that showed some effect. A week later, during breakfast, Pinky Singh found it was the right time to ask them what changes they were observing inside themselves. This question was pleasant for Bruno but was tough for Kumar as he couldn't openly admit what magical power this meditation possessed.

"Yes, it's good." Some hesitation, some uneasiness and two to three words were all Kumar could spare.

But on the contrary, Bruno, overwhelmed with enthusiasm and gratitude, had a lot to say. "From the first day I started doing this meditation, I have been sleeping like a baby and haven't had any nightmares. This meditation is magical. It's so powerful and penetrating." Bruno looked much saner when he talked. "I feel very light, relieved, peaceful and quite energetic. How can screaming, shouting and acting like a mad person do this? I mean, how! How can all this bring so much change?" It was difficult for Bruno to put his feelings into words.

As Bruno expressed himself, Kumar stole a glance at him from the corner of his eye. It was as if he had the same question but couldn't ask it openly. Pinky Singh simply smiled and took them to the woods for a stroll.

"It's called catharsis." Pinky Singh resumed his conversation as he walked with his hands behind his back. Bruno and Kumar walked along with their focus on Pinky Singh.

"Catharsis?" asked Bruno curiously.

"Yes, catharsis! To understand catharsis, you first have to understand the science behind it." Pinky Singh looked at the beautiful wildflowers. "In everyday life, we come across many situations where we can't express ourselves. For example, you have a boss and you hate him; bosses are quite often hated." Pinky Singh bared his teeth in a grin. "And you feel like yelling at him or simply punching him in the face. But can you afford to do it?" He glanced at Kumar and Bruno. "No! On the contrary, you smile and even falsely praise him. Or suppose you fight with a man on the street but you fail to express yourself fully because he is stronger than you. Or when you're at home, you don't yell at your parents or spouse when they irritate you because you don't want to hurt them. Expressing yourself is taboo in our society and is sometimes impractical." Pinky Singh pursed his lips and raised his brows. They continued strolling in the woods.

"But you can't stop these emotions from appearing because they are natural. This is how God has created you. In fact, without emotions, you would be like a rock. Dumb, dead and non-living. So humans have created a way out. Repression."

It seemed like this word created quite a lot of curiosity in Bruno and Kumar.

"Yes, repression." Pinky Singh nodded with intense eyes. "Repression is hiding your feelings and showing just the opposite outside. It's very economical, safe and sounds practical. So when your boss is rude and angry at you, you simply listen, showing him how well-mannered and sophisticated you are. And the very next day, when the wound of his rude behavior and your insult is still in you, you greet him with a smile. This could happen with your spouse, parents, teachers, etc. It is called repression. Till here, it's okay but there is a catch." He stopped to stare

into their eyes, indicating grave danger. Bruno and Kumar also stopped and waited for him to speak further.

“As this is unnatural, you need a lot of energy to do it. For example, a fish flows naturally with the currents and enjoys swimming. But if it has to go against the current, it will require continuous effort and stress. So repression is like going against the current. It’s a continuous struggle that tires you out because all your energy is busy controlling your emotions.” He smiled and they resumed strolling.

“It drains you of your liveliness, further leading to fatigue, anxiety and depression. Your mind’s capabilities are compromised, resulting in confusion and indecisiveness. Haven’t you noticed that when you are full of energy and enthusiasm, there is no confusion, anxiety, depression or indecisiveness? Repression eats up all your enthusiasm, zest, zeal and youthful energy.” Suddenly, Pinky Singh stopped for a moment to look up at a dead tree .

“That’s why youngsters go to clubs, get drunk and start jumping, screaming, dancing and doing all that crazy stuff. In a way, they are trying to release all the repressed energy in them. It’s their way out. Otherwise, they would surely go mad. But this just gives momentary relief because you are not doing it with understanding. That’s why you need alcohol or, sometimes, drugs to do it. Without alcohol, you can’t even think of doing it. But in meditation, you use your breath instead of alcohol. Why breath?” It seemed like Pinky Singh had peeped into Bruno and Kumar’s hearts and uttered what they were about to ask.

“Because to repress particular emotions, you need to control your breath. Man has created different patterns of breathing, other than the natural one, through which he can hold back his emotions. Whenever you are angry and you are not expressing it, there are certain changes in your body. But the biggest one is in your breath. Your breathing becomes short, shallow and fast. You can’t control your emotions without controlling your breath. All this happens at a subconscious level.”

Bruno nodded with a sigh as he finally knew the significance of chaotic breathing in the first round of morning meditation.

“So the first thing we do in meditation is attack your old pattern of breathing and try to break it. That’s why it’s chaotic and fast, unlike the other controlled breathing techniques that you tried earlier. Once the pattern is broken, all the emotions are free. They come out automatically in the form of catharsis and immediately, you feel relief.” Pinky Singh looked up to a flock of birds flying above their heads. “You feel the sudden surge in your energy. All the energy that was used to control your emotions is now free and is available in abundance. You can use it for laughing, dancing, painting, loving and for your daily work, which will now be more productive and creative. Whatever you do, you will enjoy. This is because you now do it with gusto. You are alive again.” Pinky Singh finished with a bright smile.

Bruno and Kumar were so absorbed in what Pinky Singh was saying that they failed to realize they had reached the lake and that the ducks had gathered around them.

“How long do we have to do it?” Bruno was still a little curious.

“Until your reservoir of repressed emotions is empty and your breathing pattern becomes natural,” replied Pinky Singh. He settled into a crouched position on a rock by the lake.

“But you are missing an important point.” Kumar, who had been silent for quite some time, broke his silence as he had found a loophole. “If our breathing pattern becomes normal and natural, then we are losing the art of controlling our emotions. It could be dangerous.”

It seemed that Kumar’s intention of defeating Pinky Singh’s logic was in no mood to die.

“First of all, any art that makes you unnatural and miserable is not worth remembering. Better let it go.” Pinky Singh took out some grains from his pocket and started feeding the ducks. “Secondly, you said it could be dangerous. Have you seen a dam?” Pinky Singh looked up at Kumar. “A dam releases its water in small quantities so that it remains at a safe level. What if the dam didn’t do that and kept storing the water? Surely, one day the level would go up to an alarming stage and it will have to release the water in one go. And you know very well what the

result will be. Now you can say it's dangerous." Pinky Singh flicked the leftover grains from his hand and stood up to look Kumar in the eye.

"If a person keeps expressing his anger as small kids do, he is never dangerous. Have you seen small kids? They fight, get angry, cry and are smiling the very next moment just because they are expressing it in this manner. But adults store it all up and one day, you hear that a person killed his WhatsApp group admin because he removed him from the group. Or a person shot another person for wrongly overtaking him. Do you think about how one could do all this for just a small reason? Well, let me tell you the reason is lying somewhere else." Pinky Singh tapped Kumar's chest with his index finger.

"The reason is the 'over-accumulation' of your emotions. Road rage or removing a person from a WhatsApp group was just a trigger for all the emotions to blow up. Or take the example of a terrorist." He glanced at Bruno, who was listening to him earnestly, for a long moment. "His emotions are also accumulated and suddenly, one day, he blows up a building and kills 100 people. For a person, who has been disciplined and quiet throughout his life and has never killed even an ant, to suddenly kill hundreds of innocent people, including kids, what happened? Actually, all his anger had come out in one shot." Pinky Singh turned to the lake and inhaled and exhaled. He placed his hands on his waist.

"Okay, but you can't shout at your boss or a person stronger than you," Kumar added, standing beside him and gazing at Pinky Singh.

"Of course you can't." Pinky Singh turned toward Kumar. "But this meditation will develop this skill in you: You will find a middle path. Another thing, if you are bubbling with this energy, then these situations will rarely happen because you are doing your work more productively. Your smile is authentic. You are positive. You will be bullied or shouted at rarely. And even if it happens, it won't be stressful for you. This meditation will make you smart enough to handle the situation in a moderate and balanced way."

After this, neither Bruno nor Kumar could mention anymore 'if' or 'but' questions. They enjoyed sitting there silently for some time. Then

went back to pottery a good minute later.

CHAPTER TWENTY FIVE



His Master's Voice

The next day after pottery, as they were all cleaning their hands, Bruno, who was bubbling with energy, couldn't stop himself from asking a question. "Whose voice is on the tape?"

"Actually, even I don't know," Pinky Singh replied casually as he cleaned his hands.

While Bruno looked shocked, Kumar's eyes gleamed with confidence.

"Oh boy!" A wide, wicked grin parted Kumar's lips as he was back in business. "That's why I was wondering how a person like you could possess such a precious and powerful tool," he sneered. "I mean, this meditation is simply amazing. After wasting many months with Satya Maharishi, I thought it was impossible to calm my mind. But in just a few sessions of this meditation, I started to see the impossible become possible." Delighted he had found a weak point, Kumar unknowingly praised the meditation from the bottom of his heart .

"Now tell me, from where did you steal it?" Kumar came closer and gazed fearlessly into Pinky Singh's eyes.

"No, it's not like that." Pinky Singh spurted a quick laugh at Kumar's childish gesture. "To answer this question, I have to take you ten years back in my life to when I was a young man. One day, I had gone for a long drive toward the Kasauli hills in Himachal. The hills looked glorious and

the weather was awesome. But suddenly, it started raining heavily and the hilly roads became difficult to navigate. Suddenly, I heard the loud noise of a car crash. When I stopped my vehicle, I saw a car had fallen off the mountain into the valley. I climbed down when the car went up in flames and was disappointed that there was no chance of survival for the occupants of the car."

Kumar and Bruno were engrossed in the gripping narration of this thrilling story.

"But suddenly, my glance fell on a thin, aged lady stuck in the branch of a tree. I reached her, took her in my arms and climbed the mountain back to my car." Pinky Singh twisted his mustache and lowered the tension. "I took her to a nearby hospital and she regained consciousness after a few hours. It was a miraculous escape as she didn't suffer any serious injuries. She thanked me, in a foreign language, for saving her life. I didn't understand but I think it was Italian. Then she fished out this tape from her cargo shorts' pocket and gave it to me. From her gestures, I realized it was a gift of gratitude." Pinky Singh started toward the kitchen as it was time for a cup of tea. Bruno and Kumar followed, eager to know what had happened next.

"When I came home, I played it, started following it and discovered that it was the most precious gift I could have ever received in my lifetime. It was such a treasure that even if heaven were given to me, it would be nothing in front of this."

"Hmmm... but who keeps such a precious gift in the storeroom, buried under dust?" scoffed Kumar as he sat on the stool at the serving counter.

"The whole purpose of the medicine is to cure you. Once its purpose is served, you stop taking it and forget about it." Pinky Singh held the pan after turning the burner on.

"You pull a thorn out of your foot with the help of another thorn; you throw them both away in the end. The biggest problem with humanity is that we cling to everything." Pinky Singh stood, with his arms crossed, facing Bruno and Kumar as the tea brewed.

"Suppose I show you the moon with my finger. Yes, of course my finger has shown you the moon. It's important for you. But if you forget about the moon and start holding on to my finger, start debating it, worshiping it or fighting for it, then you are missing the whole point. The moon is important, not my finger." Pinky Singh lowered the flame to a simmer. "I am least bothered about whose voice is on the tape. Who knows, after learning his name, I might put up his pictures and statues in my house and start shouting in the street: Look! I am his follower and he is the real God!" He smiled pleasantly with folded arms.

"The problem is that we are so eager to create a religion, an ideology or a holy book and, I must say, a God that the real meaning behind all this is lost." He poured the hot tea into cups .

"What's the problem in a religion?" asked Bruno as he held his cup.

"I'll tell you a small anecdote." Pinky Singh sat on the edge of the kitchen shelf, dangling his feet in the air. "Once, among the devils, a story spread that on earth, a Mystic had attained Moksha and had become divine. One of the devils suggested that they should do something immediately or their empire would be in danger. The Mystic need to be eliminated before it was too late. Everybody was gripped in panic. Suddenly, the king of the devils said, 'Don't panic, there is nothing to worry about as a few learned scholars and priests have already reached and they will do our work!'" Pinky Singh slurped his tea. "Yes, this is how it is! The best way to miss a saint is to make a religion out of him. Start wearing clothes like him, start making your hair like him, start copying his entire manner and fix the do's and don'ts. This is the easy way out. It's just like adopting a child rather than giving birth to that child. A real, enlightened person is impregnated by the seed of the divine. He keeps it in his womb for a long time and then finally gives birth to a child of wisdom, truth and bliss."

"Huh!" Kumar jerked his head and waved his hand in ridicule. "These things are not possible for a common man." He was back in attack mode. "He has to earn his bread and butter, raise his children and perform all his worldly duties."

"I am never against performing worldly duties." Pinky Singh's eyes smiled up at Kumar. "Do whatever you feel is important but do it genuinely. The problem is that your mind is in this world but you keep pulling it toward God. So you build worship places like temples, mosques, gurudwaras, churches, etc. Just one visit and you feel that you are a holy man. It brings you a sense of relief. But if you ask me, I would say it's better to be a real atheist than to be a fake theist. At least he is true and has the possibility of knowing God one day." He placed his hand on his chest and blinked elegantly.

"But a fake theist can never know God because he has already believed in God and his search has stopped. Never do this. Instead, choose the world against God and do it wholeheartedly. Because when you are not immersed in the world wholeheartedly, then it becomes a way of life and a habit. Then when it's time for God, you miss him as well." Pinky Singh slurped the last of his tea.

"So you mean to say all the so-called religious personalities, priests and people who go to the places of worship are doing something wrong? Hmm?" asked Kumar, twirling his hands and bobbling his head sarcastically.

"There is nothing like 'right' or 'wrong' in my dictionary. But tell me, can your religious people or so-called believers of God accept life as it is and be totally happy with whatever was given to them? Can they thank God even on the worst days of their lives?"

This time, Kumar was not as quick to retort. He stood up, turned and leaned against the serving counter.

"No, they can't." Pinky Singh shook his head, raising his brows. "That's why all places of worship are flooded with only wishes but not gratitude. It is simple logic. If you complain, grumble and stare at something else instead of what was given to you, you are rejecting God."

This conversation was like a game where Kumar was predicted to win but Pinky Singh stole the game. In the end, when Kumar had nothing to say and looked away, Bruno had a suggestion.

"But we have to give meditation a name after all." Bruno smiled.

"If you really think so, then you can give it any name you like."

"It has produced a spiritual explosion inside me so can I call it 'explosive meditation'?"

Pinky Singh smiled and started toward the woods as he was least bothered about what name he gave it.



The next day during breakfast, Kumar remained silent. The taste of yesterday's smashing defeat was still on his tongue but he was in no mood to give up. Instead, he thought that from now onwards, he had to be extra cautious while attacking his opponent. Pinky Singh served them breakfast, removed his apron and sat with them. "So my warriors, I hope your meditation is going well."

"Yes, but in the fourth round, when we have to stay still and silently watch what is happening inside us, I still get a lot of thoughts," replied Bruno.

Kumar stole a glance at Bruno as he had wanted to ask the same question.

"You remember I told you something on the first day near the lake?"

"About the yucky and immoral thoughts in your mind?" asked Bruno .

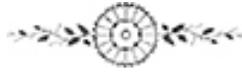
"Yes, our minds work on the theory of reverse action. Whatever you tell your mind not to do, it will end up doing only that. Just imagine your mind is like a see-saw and one of the two seats is positive thoughts and the other is negative thoughts. Suppose you choose positive thoughts and sit on that side, then the negative thoughts' seat will automatically come up to your eye level. Now all you see are negative thoughts because you chose positive thoughts. Now do things the other way around and the positive thoughts will come to your eye level. And by choosing, I mean let them come." Pinky Singh stared at the empty plates.

"Let all the immoral and negative thoughts enter your mind. Respect them and accept them but don't get attached to them. Keep them at a distance and treat them as thoughts and nothing else. Ask your mind to

bring in as many negative thoughts it can. Slowly, you will be surprised to see all your negative thoughts have vanished." Pinky Singh wiped the counter clean with a cloth.

"The mind is a beautiful mechanism. It works full circle. It brings forward both aspects of the positive and negative. The problem arises when we choose only one, thus breaking the natural balance."

CHAPTER TWENTY SIX



Real Flowers

The next day was a beautiful, sunny morning and all three had been enjoying gardening for a while. Bruno had something inside him that he wanted to share with them immediately.

"I tried it today and I was surprised to see that I didn't experience any split inside me. Otherwise, I was fighting to stop negative thoughts from coming in. I am feeling very much in harmony. I never thought it would be so simple." Bruno looked overwhelmed with content.

"Life is simple until we make it complex," said Pinky Singh, leaning forward and watering a plant.

"Can I ask you something? Yesterday, you said one shouldn't choose between positive and negative. But don't you think that sometimes we have to do this? Just like Hassan's subconscious mind kept pulling me toward what was wrong but I always chose what was right."

"But despite your choosing, on multiple occasions, you still ended up doing something that was not right, according to you. Isn't it?" Pinky Singh's eyes crinkled at the corners as he smiled at Bruno. He put the watering can down and stretched his back.

Pinky Singh's prompt reply initiated a thought process in his mind. Bruno agreed as Hassan's subconscious mind had taken over him many

times and he did things he would have never done otherwise. Instinctively, he nodded in agreement.

“Always remember one thing. You cannot exist in parts but only in totality. Your totality is your health and well-being. It is a bit complicated so you’ll have to understand it layer by layer.” Pinky Singh sat on a rock for a break. Bruno and Kumar also relaxed on the soft grass. “If you reject one part and choose another, then you have broken yourself. Now you are not one. You have become two. If you say love is good but hate is evil or compassion is good and anger is evil, then you have split yourself into two. Now, one part will go against the other and whenever you feel angry and lose your cool, you will be in trouble. The other part will tell you not to be angry. Anger is not the problem but fighting your anger is.” With his eyebrows raised, Pinky Singh bobbed his head and leaned his elbows on his thighs.

“For a moment, you forgot that you had vowed not to be angry. You had made a resolution. All your effort has once again gone down the drain. You become frustrated and feel like a loser. By rejecting the anger inside you, you have created a problem. Otherwise, anger is not a problem. It comes and goes. It’s momentary.” Pinky Singh stood up and picked up an empty basket.

“Same is with hatred. People say love your enemies. It is the most ridiculous statement I have ever heard. Some even practice a special meditation for it.” He started to pluck some bright yellow ripe lemons. “In that meditation, they say, ‘first start with your loved ones. Love them because it is easy to do. Then go a little further for the people you know, like your doctor, watchman, etc. Then come to your enemies.’” He glanced at them with a smile. “Well! If you ask me, I would say it’s like trying to fool your heart. Why do you need to do all this? Why have plastic flowers when you can have real ones?” Pinky Singh smelled a plucked flower, bringing it close to his face.

“Always remember that no emotion can be faked. Can you hate a person whom you love and adore so much? Can you abuse him, hit him or literally wish for his death?” Pinky Singh’s tough question didn’t get an answer.

“You would say not in any dream would I do that. Then how can you love a person who is your enemy? How can you wish a person good luck when he has done his best to destroy you and make your life hell? You can only pretend to do this but in your heart, you want that person to be punished for what he has done.” He knelt down to pluck some carrots and radish.

“Are you glorifying hatred, anger and revenge?” Kumar got a chance to launch a fresh attack. With folded arms, he stood and gazed at Pinky Singh.

“No, I am not.” Pinky Singh chuckled, looking up at Kumar. “It’s true that by hating somebody, you are the one who suffers the most. A feeling of revenge will never let you have peace of mind. You have to go beyond all negativities. But my point is rejecting them, fighting them or turning a blind eye to them won’t help. It’ll make it worse.” He stood up after adding enough edible roots to his basket .

“Then what has to be done?” Bruno couldn’t hold back his curiosity.

“First of all, stop being judgmental.” Pinky Singh patted Bruno’s shoulder. “Stop saying so-and-so is good and so-and-so is bad. This is positive and this is negative. This is divine and this is evil. This should be and this should not. Ninety-nine percent of the job is finished there only.” He moved ahead toward cauliflowers and ladyfingers. “Because the fight has stopped. The continuous civil war between one part and the other is over. Now you are in harmony with yourself and you are not a split personality. Now you do not have schizophrenia. You have regained your health. You are at peace with yourself. And in such a situation, tell me, how can you be angry? How can you hate or curse anybody when you are bubbling with joy and bliss? That’s why I never promote love, positive thinking or being good because there is no need of doing that.” Pinky Singh put the basket down and adjusted his turban. The basket was full but still had some space for fruits.

“You don’t need any encouragement or motivation to love. It’s stupid even talking about it. Does a small child need a discourse on how to be overflowing with love and joy? Do we need to give him reminders on

giving heart-warming smiles? Does he need a philosophical book on how to have explosive belly laughter? You can teach a million things to a small child, like how to read, how to write and how to dress up. But you can't teach him how to love because he is already doing it naturally and in a more authentic way than you do." The index finger pointed at Kumar left him dumbfounded.

"And please note you can snatch away these things from him by simply making him miserable. But you can't teach him to do so." He picked up the basket and moved to an orange mandarin plant. Bruno and Kumar followed. "Try it! Just start rejecting him as he is. Stop loving him and start being annoyed with him unnecessarily. Try to make him feel that he is unable to fulfill your mammoth expectations and is just a liability. And see what happens. Immediately, he is a changed individual. Now he is not laughing, jumping with joy or bubbling with life energy because you have snatched all that from him. The one who used to love you will start hating you. You have snatched the love out of his heart and replaced it with hatred." Pinky Singh's eyes intensified as if indicating something gravely dangerous. Bruno could feel in his bones that all that Pinky Singh said just now had a lot to do with Hassan's life.

"And then immediately stop doing all this," Pinky Singh continued, "and just behave normally with him. You will see your old child is back. He is again full of love, joy and happiness. Your efforts can make him miserable but not happy. Your gestures can take away the smile from his face but can't teach him how to smile. Your ideologies can cease his laughing and dancing with joy but they can't encourage him to throb in bliss. You stop doing all the nonsense and your child is happy. You don't need to do anything extra for that." He kept the basket down as it was full. The bright mandarin oranges looked enticing in the basket.

"This happens everywhere. People are telling you to stop hating and start loving. But all their efforts create a split inside you, thus making you more and more miserable. When they say love everybody, they are creating an ideal situation for you in which you only have permission to love. You can't hate now. This freedom has been taken away from you now. And when you fail to do so, which is certain, you start hating

yourself. And can you see the interesting part of this whole episode?" Pinky Singh's gleaming eyes confirmed something more interesting was to come. "In an effort to avoid hating someone, you end up hating yourself. The thing which was not to be done becomes the ultimate result of the whole action. You make an effort not to hate and this very effort, yes this very effort, is the root cause of hatred in the world."

Bruno was taken aback. He wondered how everyone had missed something so simple when Pinky Singh was able to convey it so transparently.

"When you hate yourself, you can't love anybody in this world." Pinky Singh flicked the dust, grass and tiny leaves from his clothes. "A dried-up river can't quench anybody's thirst. To quench others thirst, first, the river has to quench his own thirst. Others are secondary. They come later. Once the river has quenched its thirst and is full of water, everybody will automatically get water to drink. Similarly, talking about loving others is pointless. When you have loved yourself and have enough love to share, you automatically start loving others." Pinky Singh moved his fingers elegantly in his bushy beard. They sat down in the garden.

"And please note. For such a person, there are no enemies. In fact, he can't have any. When a river is abundant with fresh-flowing water, then it becomes pointless who he is sharing it with. A river never asks you whether you are Muslim, Christian, Hindu, friend or foe or rich or poor before quenching your thirst. Similarly, a person who is not split, who loves himself as he is, has so much overflowing love that by default, he is left with no option but to love everybody. Even after sharing his love with the whole universe, his love is still in abundance and is still overflowing." His eyes and face radiated with unconditional love and affection.

This gigantic and powerful discourse ignited a profound and unending silence in Bruno and Kumar. Their beings resonated with the impact of his wisdom for some time. Suddenly, Bruno broke his silence with a sigh.

“Just one small doubt.” Bruno joined his finger with his thumb as if he were getting permission to ask the question.

“Bring it on, bro!” Pinky Singh said happily with a finger gun gesture.

“A terrorist doesn’t listen to or follow these so-called priests and saints. I mean he is not choosing good over bad or love over hatred. Then why are the results of his actions so disastrous?”

“First of all, a terrorist does listen to so-called priests and saints but still does the opposite.” Pinky Singh chuckled. “To go against somebody, you first have to listen what he is saying. The priest says choose love over hatred but a terrorist chooses hatred over love just to oppose him. But whether you choose love over hatred or hatred over love, the result is the same. You have split yourself into two. Now one part will fight with the other, making you miserable in the end.”

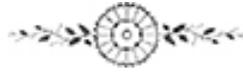
“But don’t you think choosing love over hatred is better than choosing hatred over love? At most, you only become miserable rather than killing innocent people,” asked Bruno.

Pinky Singh nodded, smiled and glanced at Bruno for a moment. “I am here not to give you the better option.” He stood up. Bruno too stood up with a gaping mouth and eyes filled with desperation for a great answer .

“But the best!”

Pinky Singh patted Bruno’s shoulder with affection and walked away. Bruno gazed at him for a long time and remained in the embrace of this unheard-of wisdom all day long.

CHAPTER TWENTY SEVEN



Passive Meditation

The next day, after enjoying pottery for hours, Pinky Singh took them into the woods. As they strolled toward the lake, they shared hilarious jokes. Soon their giggles turned into guffaws. When they reached the lake, they settled down and relaxed after a strenuous comedy session.

“Now, as your lot of garbage has been thrown out, you must be ready for passive meditation,” Pinky Singh said as he greeted the affectionate ducks.

“Passive meditation?” asked Bruno.

“Silent sitting meditations. The explosive meditation, which you do early in the morning, is just preparation. What we are going to do now is the climax.” As Pinky Singh said the word ‘explosive’, Bruno’s eyes filled with pride.

“As I told you earlier, these passive meditations were used a thousand years ago. But today’s modern man is a very new phenomenon. The body has changed and so has the mind. The whole atmosphere is artificial now: the air, the water, society and living conditions. Nothing is natural. It’s a virtual world. You were born in artificiality; you develop in it. So it’s impossible to sit silently and meditate. The explosive meditation has prepared you. You are now fit to sit and meditate passively. Okay, now close your eyes, sit comfortably and watch your breath. It must be effortless.”

Bruno and Kumar closed their eyes and followed Pinky Singh's instructions. Little did they know that they were going to do the same vipassana meditation that they had done numerous times at the Satya Ashram. Soon, they were in deep meditation and 45 minutes passed like 45 seconds.

"Now slowly and gradually open your eyes."

They opened their eyes and were so relaxed that they couldn't speak for some time.

"Tell me how you are feeling," asked Pinky Singh in a calm voice.

"It was magical. I never knew just watching your breathing had such power. But why didn't it work before in Satya Ashram?" asked Bruno in an equally calm voice.

"I told you before. Man has changed and so has his mind and body. So he has to throw the inner garbage out first with active meditation. Only then passive meditation is possible."

"But how can just watching your breathing and doing nothing gives you so much peace?" Bruno's calmed eyes held a little amazement too.

"Our breath is in the present moment and by taking the support of it, our mind learns to stay in the present, which gives us immense peace and satisfaction. "

"Why it is so important to bring your mind to the present moment?" asked Bruno.

"Because the truth is here." Pinky Singh smiled with a prompt reply. "The rest is a dream. Just look carefully. We either live in the past or the future but both don't exist. The past is dead and the future never comes. The gap between you and the future always remains the same. You move five steps and your future also moves five steps ahead. This goes on and on and on. It's just like running after the horizon."

Kumar spoke then. "But you are forgetting one thing. To plan, we have to be in the future." Deep meditation had charged him up enough to mount a fresh attack on Pinky Singh.

“Being in the present doesn’t make you incapable of going into the future or past.” Pinky Singh glanced at Kumar, cocking his head and smiling. “Of course, you have to plan sometimes. But if you are planning, planning and planning 24/7, then, I must say, there is something seriously wrong with you. Okay, tell me. Why do you live in the future? To plan a better life, isn’t it? And why do you plan a better life? To be happy in the end. But one thing you forget is that to rejoice, you need to be here in the present moment. But you are constantly in the habit of not being in the present. Let me repeat myself: you are constantly in the habit of not being in the present,” he accentuated. “Your mind either stays in the past or the future and you know habits can’t be changed overnight.” Pinky Singh shook his head calmly.

“So when the moment you were desperately waiting for or you have planned is here, you are not here. Unfortunately, at that very moment, you are planning for something bigger and better in the future. This goes on and on. It’s a vicious circle. Let me give you a simple example.” Pinky Singh waved his hand to assure them he had a more transparent example to help them understand better.

“Suppose you plan for a vacation. You start waiting desperately for the day to come; you say, day and night I am waiting to be there. Of course, you are not here in the present. And finally, the day arrives and you are on your vacation. But to your surprise, you find that you are not enjoying it as your mind is somewhere else, planning something in the future. This is because your mind has got into the habit of not being in the present. It’s simple.” His lips furrowed with a shrug. “So for that reason, these meditations are to make you capable of being happy in reality, here in the present, not virtually in dreams or fantasies. Remember, you can only experience something in the present because you are neither in the future nor the past. You are here in the present.”

Bruno and Kumar easily absorbed the nourishment of his wisdom after the vipassana meditation. They subconsciously started putting this wisdom into practice by doing their everyday work with full gusto and totality.



After spending 21 days in Mini-Heaven, their daily regime had automatically fallen in line.

6:00–7:00 am: Explosive meditation – Where they expressed themselves to their heart's content and threw all the garbage they had collected throughout life.

8:00–9:00 am: Breakfast – Where they would eat like horses after strenuous meditation .

9:00–10:00 am: Gardening – Where they nourished Mother Earth reverently and thanked her for giving them food to eat.

10:00–12:00 pm: Pottery – Where they gave a new shape to their inner creativity.

12:00–1:00 pm: Various passive meditations – Where they would simply sit and observe how time flew so fast.

1:00–2:00 pm: Lunch – They would eat meditatively.

3:00–4:00 pm: Into the woods – Where they would spend time in the wild. They took walks, watched the birds sing, the flowers grow, the fishes in the lake, felt the trees, etc.

5:00–7:00 pm: Evening meditation – Where they would dance to music and celebrate life. They would sit silently and observe within. After that, Pinky Singh would encourage them to ask whatever questions they had.

8:00 pm: Dinner

This spontaneous schedule was followed every day but without them being aware of it. Every part of this schedule was done zeal-fully and joyfully by all.

CHAPTER TWENTY EIGHT



The Lotus and the Rose

The next day during evening meditation, after celebrating for 30 minutes, Pinky Singh asked Bruno and Kumar if they had any questions. Bubbling with joy, Bruno didn't have any questions but an experience to share.

"Nowadays, all my unexplained anger and aggression has started turning into compassion and peace. I just love it." Bruno smiled reverently.

"That's great! But don't get attached to this either. Because sometimes, even these things create bondage. Just empty your cup."

"But how?"

"Whatever you feel after meditation, compassion, peace, joy, just spread it into the whole world." Pinky Singh swayed his arms in a circular motion, spreading them outwards.

"I can share my compassion and peace with the whole world except for one person."

Pinky Singh was a bit surprised that all the anger and hatred Bruno had was unexplained. That meant he didn't have any conscious memory of Hassan's life. And if he didn't have any memory then how could he hold a grudge for anybody.

“Rock the Rottweiler, who used to live in my neighborhood,” Bruno said. “When I was a dog, he would always bark at me ferociously. He was just like his master—rude and arrogant. One day, he attacked me and when my master, Russell, was saving me, he bit him. I can’t have compassion for him.”

Kumar couldn’t hold himself back. He burst into cheeky laughter, which was quite offensive to Bruno. But Bruno saw that Pinky Singh paid earnest attention to him and gestured for Kumar to be silent. He was a bit relieved.

“Okay, let it be! Just forget about it! You can’t be selective in that!” Pinky Singh didn’t give much importance to this as he knew that feelings couldn’t be faked or manipulated.

“Why is it so hard to forgive others?” Like every other human being, Bruno’s ego was hurt as he had failed at something significant.

“Charity begins at home. Until you forgive yourself, you can’t forgive anybody.”

“Am I angry with myself? Do I hate myself?” asked Bruno curiously.

“Hmmm! Okay! Let’s check it out.” Pinky Singh raised an eyebrow with an impish smile. “Close your eyes and sit comfortably.”

Kumar and Bruno did as he said .

“Now suppose God appears in front of you and asks if you wished to make changes in yourself or if would you like to be somebody else.” Pinky Singh let them meditate on this for some time. After a while, he asked them to open their eyes.

“If your answer to God’s question is yes, then surely you hate yourself. And if your answer is no, then congratulations. You undisputedly love and respect yourself.”

This simple litmus test jolted their consciousness. The embarrassment and restlessness in Bruno and Kumar’s eyes and their silence clearly showed what their answer was. They continued to be silent for a while.

“Why are we so annoyed with ourselves?” Bruno broke his silence. “Why is there so much discontent?” He added.

“Because you have been taught to do so. Or I must say you are very well trained in it.” Pinky Singh grinned.

Bruno and Kumar stared at Pinky Singh.

“You have been brought up in a way that it has gone into your blood, your cells and your very bone marrow. There are so many should and should-nots that society has imposed on you. From childhood, you were never accepted as you were. If you were a coward, you were told to be courageous. If you were courageous, you were told to play safe and fear God. If you were an introvert and shy, you were told to come out of your shell. If you were an extrovert, you were told to be sober and behave wisely. Yes! Society never accepted you as you were.”

While talking, Pinky Singh’s gestures and facial expressions were a treat to watch. Contrary to his rustic personality, his gestures and expressions were elegant and artistic.

“Society is always ready to set goals that are almost impossible to achieve. Remember that your miseries and pain are there because you are trying to achieve something impossible in your life. Unrealistic and impossible goals can never be achieved. The more you try, the more you fail and the more you fail, the more you try. You become frustrated, tired and miserable. You can’t even get out of this vicious cycle because it’s a matter of prestige and ego now.” Pinky Singh bobbed his head while pursing his lips.

“How can you forgive yourself for not becoming what society, your teachers and your parents wanted you to be. You start blaming yourself for not trying harder but you forget one thing. However hard you try, the impossible can never become possible. This creates a split, self-hatred and anger inside you. That’s why the whole world is becoming a madhouse!”

“You mean to say a person should not overcome his limitations or his flaws or improve upon his imperfections?” Kumar gave an instant rebuttal.

“Do you think that God made us?” Pinky Singh cast an unflinching eye on Kumar.

“Of course!” Kumar replied confidently.

“Then are you trying to improve on God?” Pinky Singh asked in a very moderate, gentle and polite tone but it fell like a nuclear bomb on Kumar’s consciousness. His whole being was shaken .

“It’s like a man who knows nothing about painting, finding flaws in Picasso’s painting. It’s immature and stupid.” Pinky Singh gave him another. “If you look carefully, you will see everything is perfect, including you.”

But Kumar was Kumar and he was not ready to give up. His sharp mind could still find other loopholes. “But how will one grow, learn new things or even learn from his mistakes when he thinks, 24/7, that he is perfect?” This time there was a little aggression in his tone.

“I am not against learning and growing. Learning from your experiences and mistakes is essential. Okay, let me make it simple for you.” Pinky Singh was, once again, all set to give them a transparent and easily understandable example.

“For example, a lotus flower is born. It gets sunlight, water and nutrients from the soil to grow. Wind and rain make it strong and capable of dealing with adverse conditions and finally it blooms into a beautiful flower one day. All this is natural growth and is good for the lotus. But suppose...” The grin on Pinky Singh’s face indicated that something interesting and fascinating was about to come.

“Suppose one day the lotus flower starts thinking why it can’t become a rose because its life seems perfect to him. A rose is more beautiful, fragrant, loved and is famous among youngsters. It also has better living conditions. A lotus rots in mud and muck its whole life, whereas a rose grows in your clean and beautiful garden. If a lotus starts thinking like this, then you can imagine the disaster it is heading toward.” Pinky Singh’s intense eyes went through Kumar’s and Bruno’s being like a hot knife through butter .

“Just a moment before, when it didn’t compare itself with a rose, it had its dignity. But immediately, the lotus becomes inferior as the comparison crept in. Its grace has been lost. To me this is insane. In fact, it is suicidal. A lotus is a lotus. A rose is a rose and you are you.” The last accentuated word ‘YOU’ came like a bullet from the index finger that Pinky Singh pointed at Bruno and Kumar.

“When you go against yourself and try to be somebody else because their life looks perfect to you, you create your own hell. That’s why everybody is so full of hatred because until and unless you accept yourself, love yourself and respect yourself as you are, you can only pretend but can’t love anybody. So drop all your idols.”

“But what about all the great personalities in the world? They became great because they had an idol, aim and target.” Bruno still had a doubt.

“I don’t know what personalities you are talking about. But what idol did Buddha have?” Pinky Singh opened his arms to the sky. “Whatever he discovered and achieved can’t be contained in any idol in this world except Buddha himself. Buddha is Buddha because he became himself, not anybody else. And it would be wrong to say he became himself. The truth is he found himself. He discovered himself.”

To make them understand better, Pinky Singh asked a question only Bruno and Kumar could answer.

“Okay, tell me one thing. When you were with Satya Maharishi, how would you feel with him?”

The very question created a palpable uneasiness in both Bruno and Kumar. It was visible on their faces. With great difficulty and hesitation, they tried to answer the question .

“Hmmm... well... I don’t know but I used to feel unworthy and inferior in front of him...” said Kumar.

“Yes, even I never felt comfortable with him. I used to feel small. He was a huge idol,” added Bruno.

“This is a sign. A litmus test.” The confident grin on Pinky Singh’s face stated he knew their answer beforehand.

“A person in whose presence you feel imperfect and inferior is a person who is also struggling with such a complex. Unknowingly, he made you feel like this through his gestures and actions. He couldn't accept himself so how could he accept others as they are. He also has an impossible idol which can't be fulfilled. Day and night, he is struggling, trying hard and fighting with himself to become somebody else. A true saint will never make you feel like that.”

Hearing this, a bright and peaceful smile dawned on Bruno's face, consuming the darkness of doubt.

“Yes, you are right.” Filled with reverence and gratitude, he went to Pinky Singh and hugged him.

This simple gesture spoke a thousand words, showing how Bruno felt when he was with Pinky Singh. This was the point where Kumar's and Bruno's opinion about Pinky Singh surprisingly converged. No matter whether he found Pinky Singh worthy of respect or not, he never felt uneasy and uncomfortable in his company.

CHAPTER TWENTY NINE



Somebody's Voice Is Calling Your Name

The next day, Pinky Singh couldn't join Bruno and Kumar for pottery as he went to the market to buy some cooking ingredients. Bruno was enjoying his pottery while Kumar was sitting idle, simply staring at a miniature of Lord Shiva in his hand. As Bruno saw Kumar observing the little statuette so affectionately, he became a little curious.

"Hey, what are you looking at?"

"Today, Pinky Singh was cleaning the car and found it near the front seat." Kumar twisted the beautiful little statuette with his eyes glued to it. "It must be Sachi's. Maybe on that night when you were together in Pinky Singh's car, she left it there by mistake."

Something happened inside Bruno. It was as if a bolt had struck his heart.

Hearing Sachi's name after so many days, his eyes became moist and his body froze. Immediately, a visual started playing in front of his eyes. He could distinctly hear Sachi's sweet voice calling his name. As he closed his eyes, her face illuminated with an angelic smile. He could still feel the warmth of her hands in his. Before this emotional tornado could take over him, he immediately got back to pottery.

“Don’t know in what condition she would be. I wonder if she is still holding on to the thread of hope or if she’s given up.”

Kumar’s last two words jolted Bruno completely. He broke his silence as he saw anger arising inside him after so many days.

“Hey, listen!” Bruno scowled at Kumar. “We can’t do anything. That’s her fate! So stop talking about Sachi.” He left the pottery and walked away in distress and anger.

“If you can’t do anything, I will,” Kumar shouted. He was in no mood to absorb Bruno’s rude behavior. “I am not a coward like you. You just keep yourself in your meditation and strange and lengthy discourses with this crazy man, Pinky Singh.”

After this incident, Bruno and Kumar didn’t talk to each other for a whole day.

CHAPTER THIRTY



Kumar Goes Missing

The next day after morning meditation, Kumar went missing.

When he failed to show up by evening, it became a matter of worry for Bruno and Pinky Singh. It was an unusual situation.

Finally, at 8:00 pm, an auto rickshaw stopped outside their gate and they saw a person alight. It was Kumar. Bruno ran toward Kumar, who was walking in low spirits toward them.

“Where have you been?” yelled Bruno.

Kumar didn’t answer and removed his shoes and sat on a cot in the lawn. Pinky Singh left them alone to settle their score.

“Didn’t you hear me? I am asking you a question. Where have you been?” Bruno was furious with Kumar’s unending silence. But it did not affect Kumar. “Come on, Kumar.” Bruno had to soften his stance. “We were worried about you!”

“But why were you worried?” mumbled Kumar flatly, removing his socks.

“Because we care for you.”

“STOP BEING A HYPOCRITE!” Now it was Kumar’s turn to yell. He stood up, pointing his index finger at Bruno. “You don’t care about anything.

You are selfish and only care about yourself. Otherwise, you wouldn't have left Sachi in that hell!"

In a fit of revulsion, Kumar instantly turned away, to avoid looking at him.

Bruno, with suspicious eyes, held Kumar's arm and spun him back toward himself. "You went to see Sachi?" He asked in a low voice.

"Yes," sighed Kumar as he had calmed down after the outburst. "At Satya Ashram, Sachi had told me about her dhaba and how it was famous in her town..."

Bruno slumped down on the cot, distressed. "How is she?" In a very downcast voice, he asked.

"I didn't meet her as she is locked in her house till tomorrow."

"Why till tomorrow?" Bruno looked up at Kumar. "What's tomorrow?" he asked urgently.

"Her wedding."

Once again, Bruno's heart was struck by a thunderbolt. He felt torn apart by this merciless truth.

"One of her employees, Sham, at her dhaba told me. He also told me that she weeps and repeats your name every day. She believes that you will come to her rescue."

Bruno was under the misconception that after going deep into his meditation, nothing would matter to him. But he was wrong. After hearing this, he realized that he still loved Sachi.

"HUH! Poor Sachi. She is so stupid," added Kumar.

"She is not stupid." Bruno's instant and firm rebuttal engaged Kumar's attention. As Kumar stared at him in amazement, Bruno got up and went closer to him. In a calm voice and with intense eyes, he said, "Come, let's go and get her."

Kumar whooped in jubilation and rewarded Bruno with a tight hug. Bruno had to free himself gently as Kumar was in no mood to settle

down.

Losing no time, Bruno went to Pinky Singh. "I need your car to rescue Sachi," he said.

"The coin is in the dashboard. All the best." Pinky Singh grinned cheerfully and encouragingly while he made his bed.

As Bruno and Kumar went to the car, Kumar looked a little nervous. "Are we going to rescue a girl in this car?" Kumar frowned.

"We don't have any other option..." Bruno looked at the broken headlight and distorted bonnet.

"I have heard that Punjabis don't beat their enemies but they drag them." Kumar's voice quavered as he looked at the car. "And they take full pleasure in that."

"Come, we have to get back before tomorrow morning's meditation." Bruno tapped Kumar's chest with the dorsum of his hand and got into the driving seat. Kumar followed with a nervous gulp. Bruno pulled out the five paisa coin from the dashboard and made a crank using the coin. The car didn't start.

"Holy shit, I think we are going to attain Moksha tonight." Kumar's voice continued to quaver.

After another two cranks, finally, the car started. Bruno held the steering of this vintage beauty and stepped on the gas. In the beginning, it was a challenge to tame it and that too, on the Indian roads. But by and by, Bruno won her heart and she embraced his authority.

"Are you aware of the location of her house?"

"Yes, I did a complete investigation. I have seen the house. But the problem is that Sachi's room is on the third floor and there are a lot of relatives and guards down. I don't know how we will get there."

"Don't worry. It will be done." Bruno stated casually.

"But how?"

“Hassan was trained as a terrorist for few months. His body is quite strong and athletic. I have felt this a number of times and on a number of occasions. I am sure his body and subconscious mind will know how to handle this situation.” Though his face was cold, for the first time, Bruno cherished having the body of a terrorist.



After a few hours' drive, they arrived at the destination. It was a corner house with a tall building. It was big in height and small in width. Without making much noise, Bruno drove the car to the back of the house and stopped it a few hundred meters away. Kumar pointed to her room.

“Stay in the car until I return,” Bruno instructed the visibly nervous Kumar. The dark corner, howling dogs and the fear of being caught, had sent enough chills down his spine.

“But what if I have to pee? Can I go out?” Kumar spoke in a thin, breathy voice.

“Of course you can!” replied Bruno politely.

“And why are those stupid dogs howling endlessly? I hate dogs.” Kumar flinched at what he said. He forgot that Bruno was once a dog. “No, not all the dogs.” He grinned fearfully.

“Hey! Relax; everything will be okay.” Unoffended, Bruno patted Kumar's shoulder.

Leaving the mousy Kumar in the car, Bruno moved toward the house. He started climbing the back of the house. As anticipated, his human body responded very well to the situation. He found himself climbing effortlessly like a professional. Within no time, he was at the window. Kumar, who was watching from the car, covered his mouth with his hands and cheered softly.



As Bruno entered the room, he could hear weeping and sobbing pierce the gloomy and grief-stricken darkness of the room. Immediately, the

light was turned on and a face emerged from the darkness of agony and sorrows. Yes, it was Sachi. She stared at Bruno with eyes surrounded by dark circles and a vision eclipsed by her messy hair .

A smile dawned on Sachi's face while her tears were still falling. It was like sunshine during the rain. She ran to Bruno with great passion, like she wanted to die in his arms and hugged him as tightly as she could.

"Oh, Hassan! Hassan, what took you so long?" Sachi gasped between her sobs. "Had you been a little later, you would have found my dead body." Engulfed in a tornado of emotions, Sachi babbled unendingly. "Everybody said you would not come but I knew you would. I knew it, Hassan. I knew it." Bruno put his hand on her mouth to silence her.

"Okay." Bruno swallowed the lump in his throat. "We don't have much time. Pack your clothes we need to go."

"I already did on the very first day because I knew you would come for me..."

Immediately, Sachi pulled a bag from under her bed. She looked like an innocent, helpless child and it melted Bruno's heart. He couldn't stop the tears from rolling down his cheeks. He cursed himself for the delay and for making her suffer so much. To soothe his guilt, he held Sachi's face; his palms squeezed her cheeks and he looked into her eyes. Then he hugged her passionately while mumbling something in apology.

But soon he had to pull away as time was running out. He ran a quick hand over his and Sachi's eyes. He started to program their escape plan but found a small problem. The door of Sachi's room was locked from the outside. And also, it wasn't possible to take Sachi down the same way Bruno had climbed up.

Ultimately, he planned for them to climb to the next room, which was a storeroom, through the window and then escape from the stairs. It was not an easy job for Sachi but her trust in Bruno made her do it. With great difficulty and struggle, they both climbed to the storeroom window and snuck in.

As they tiptoed toward the ground floor through the stairway, they saw a guard with a gun sitting by the main gate. Bruno knew that he could easily overpower him but while doing so, the guard could raise the alarm. A little impatience could ruin their whole escape plan. Bruno and Sachi hid under the stairs and decided to wait for some time.



Time started passing. Five minutes, 10, 15, 20. Each passing second became hellish for Sachi. She had to close her eyes and hug Bruno from behind, tight to cope with this stressful situation. The delay became equally difficult for Kumar.

But Bruno, on the contrary, was quite patient and very alert. He realized the meditation had transformed him as he was ready to sit here for the whole night, just waiting for the right moment to escape. There was no racing heart, no unexplained anger and anxiety and no panic attack. With his eyes and focus on the guard, Bruno rejoiced for his miraculous transformation.



Almost 30 minutes had passed. Suddenly, the corpse-like, frozen situation observed some movement. Bruno shook Sachi's hand to alert her as he saw the guard getting up and moving toward the washroom next to the main gate. The moment the guard entered the washroom, Bruno held Sachi's hand and darted out toward the main gate.

It took a while for Bruno to help Sachi climb the boundary wall as the gate was locked. With great effort and difficulty, Sachi jumped the wall but unfortunately, the guard was out of the washroom by then. Bruno was yet to climb the wall. It appeared that their plan had failed at the last moment. Fortunately, the guard didn't notice him standing near the wall as it was dark.

Bruno froze but didn't panic. His eyes followed the guard's movements. He didn't move even a muscle. Suddenly, the guard felt an urgent need to drink some water. He moved toward the drinking-water dispenser, which was just under the stairs where Bruno and Sachi had

been hiding minutes before. Had the guard decided to quench his thirst first before going to the washroom, the game would have been over. In no time, Bruno climbed the wall and jumped to the other side. Horrified, Sachi took a deep breath on seeing Bruno clear the last hurdle of their escape plan. Holding each other's hands, they ducked toward the car.



Kumar's long, harrowing wait was over and he was jubilant to see Sachi with Bruno. After greeting Kumar, Sachi and Bruno got into the car. Suddenly, Bruno looked into the rear-view mirror and saw a man with a stick in his hand coming toward them at a very slow pace.

"Who is he?"

Sachi turned toward Bruno to look back. "He is the night watchman in our locality. He can't see us from a distance as he is very old and his eyesight is weak. But if he comes any closer, he will see us and will alert everybody. Hurry up!" Sachi whispered, tapping the dashboard of the car.

The happy moment abruptly turned into a hair-raising situation as the old watchman gradually moved toward them. Losing no time, Bruno pulled out the five paise coin from his pocket and made the crank. But the car didn't start. He made two more attempts but they were in vain. Kumar and Sachi's panic soared as the old man was almost there. Finally, the car started on the fourth crank. Before the watchman could peep into the car with his narrowed eyes, they had sped away, leaving a thick cloud of smoke and dust.

As they touched the highway, all three whooped with jubilation. Sachi hugged Bruno in delight as he drove. She tried to express her gratitude to Bruno and Kumar for risking their lives to rescue her. Bruno let her know that Kumar put in a lot of effort and played an important role in her rescue.

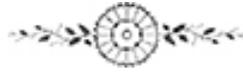
As they had come quite far, Kumar relaxed and soon dozed off. Sachi, with her head propped on the seat back, quenched her yearning eyes' thirst by endlessly staring at Bruno. During their journey, he told her everything that had happened in her absence, except about his past life.

Sachi had just emerged from deep sorrow and Bruno didn't want to push her back into that distress again. After hearing the story, Sachi couldn't stop herself from having a deep reverence for Pinky Singh.

Finally, after a few hours' drive, they were back home. She was overwhelmed to see Pinky Singh and hugged him in gratitude for dispelling all the pain of Bruno's life. With reverent eyes, she looked upon the "Mini-Heaven" written on the building as it was heaven for her in the real sense. She had found a new home and a new family after leaving hell behind. Overnight, she moved from infinite tears to blossoming smiles. Yes, this was no less than heaven for her.

After resting for some time, Bruno and Kumar got up as it was 6:00 am and time for meditation. Kumar was reluctant and wished to sleep but Bruno was determined to not miss even a single meditation.

CHAPTER THIRTY ONE



Mini-Heaven Celebrates

After Sachi's arrival, there was a wave of jubilation in Mini-Heaven. In the evening, Pinky Singh pulled out another bottle of homemade red wine from the store and made special arrangements near the lake. A bonfire, wine and dancing to some peppy Punjabi tunes took their jubilation to the next level. After exerting their whole jollity through various dances and roaring laughter, they settled down. It seemed like Bruno had gotten all the benefits of meditation that day as he looked quite elated. Maybe it was because he was relieved from the burden of guilt that had been lying like a rock on his heart for the past few days. Bruno and Sachi were sitting close, snuggling with each other like two lovebirds. He looked a bit drunk today.

"Hope you won't say that I should stay away from Sachi as she could disrupt my meditation." Bruno chuckled, wrapping his arm around Sachi and holding her closer to him.

Pinky Singh lay on the carpet, leaning on his elbow. "A meditation that is disrupted by a woman is worthless. Better not do it. In fact, love will help you go deeper into your meditation," replied Pinky Singh as he raised his glass to see how much wine was left.

Listening to this, Kumar, who was drunk as well, stood up and raised his hands in the air. In one hand, was the wine bottle and in the other, a glass.

“Oh my God! Oh my God!” His voice got louder as if he was doing a Greek play. “This man is so learned. Thank God for sending him down.”

“Shut up and sit down; you are drunk.” Sachi couldn’t control her laughter.

Since he had played an important role in Sachi’s rescue, Kumar had developed a daredevil’s confidence. With this confidence and a little wine power, he was again ready to launch a fresh attack on Pinky Singh.

“By the way, I have never seen any philosophy book or literature here.” Kumar held his wine glass like a snob. “Who do you follow? What is the source of your knowledge?” There was a sting of sarcasm in his voice.

Kumar wanted to make Pinky Singh feel like he was sitting among three well-qualified and educated persons, which unfortunately he was not.

“I don’t have any knowledge. I only have knowing,” said Pinky Singh as he licked drops of wine from his beard.

Before Kumar could grasp it and respond accordingly, this answer was enough to raise Sachi’s curiosity as she was new to the phenomena of Pinky Singh.

“What’s the difference? I think they are the same.”

“No, it’s not. They are not even alike. They are diametrically opposite to each other.” Pinky Singh sat up into a crouched position.

“But how?” asked Sachi, keeping her glass aside.

“Knowledge is something very cheap and easily available but knowing is something precious and difficult to attain. Knowing comes from your experience while knowledge is something borrowed. Let me make it easier for you.” As usual, Pinky Singh was ready with an example. He put his glass aside and helped them to understand better with glorious gestures of his hands.

“Knowledge is like a father and knowing is like a mother. The father comes to know from the mother of his child that he is going to be a father. This is all the information he has. But the mother keeps the child

in her womb for nine months. For every moment during this long period, she has been with the child. When she breathes, the child breathes. When she eats, the child eats. She has gleefully celebrated every single movement of the being in her womb. She has even felt her child's heartbeat. The father has just a piece of knowledge about the child while the mother knows her child." As they all stared at him, Pinky Singh smiled and picked up his glass. "That's why you don't see any philosophy books or literature here. I don't need them."

"This is ridiculous." By now, Kumar had found a loophole and was ready to launch another attack. "You mean to say these books are useless?"

"Well, if you don't have the 'knowing' then, of course, these books would be of no use. But if you have 'knowing', then these books could be revolutionary for you." Pinky Singh raised his eyebrows with a nod.

"Because knowing is very pure, fresh and transparent, it never accumulates. It is only absorbed. If you have knowing, then reading the Bhagwat Geeta, Quran, Bible, Guru Granth Sahib can transform you. But if you read the Bhagwat Geeta or Quran only because you are a Hindu or Muslim or because you are reading these holy books or philosophies to become a scholar, then you are missing the point. You would bring a new burden on your head—the burden of knowledge. Remember with borrowed knowledge, you can only attain a second-hand God. Not the original and true God." Pinky Singh stood up, spread his arms toward the sky and exhaled deeply.

"And how do we attain this knowing?" asked Bruno, who had been listening very patiently.

"Knowing is the quality of seeing things as they are." Pinky Singh turned toward Bruno and Sachi, who were gazing at him curiously. "It is when you could remove the colored glasses of religion, ideologies, belief, theories and philosophies from your eyes and see the truth with naked eyes. It is when you are not prejudiced and have clear eyes. It is when you are innocent again, like a child and when you go from mind to no-mind. Then you can say that you have attained knowing. There are many ways

to attain this knowing. Meditation is one of them." He nodded with a smile.

This brought a smile to Bruno's face as it confirmed that he was on the right path.

"But everybody can't do meditation. People have other priorities. For that, knowledge could be a shortcut. It can save time and serve the purpose." Sachi was a very religious Hindu. For her, all that Pinky Singh was saying was quite unusual, outrageous and rebellious. So her unending doubts and questions were quite obvious.

"Shortcuts! Hmm..." Pinky Singh turned and moved toward the lake.

"Okay, tell me," when he was near the water, he turned and spoke louder as he had moved a little far from them. "Suppose you want to learn swimming. Do you have a shortcut for that? Yes, of course, you can ask a coach, read books or watch videos on YouTube. But whatever research you do, in the end, you have to jump into the water." Pinky Singh gestured toward the water.

"Without jumping into the water, all gathered literature and information is garbage because you still can't swim. And let me tell you, many times it happens that a child, who doesn't even know the meaning of word 'swimming', learns it quicker and becomes a better swimmer because his parents threw him into the water." He started to amble back toward them.

"To learn swimming, the first thing you have to do is simply jump into the water. Of course, to learn something, you need a Guru or a master who will tell you the technique or the right way. But that's not a shortcut. The techniques would be practiced and mastered by you over a period of time and once you learn them, you don't even need that master or Guru. You only need a Guru when you don't have the courage to jump into the water." Pinky Singh came back and occupied his seat. He spoke softly now

"Following the religion given to you by your family is just like that. You simply believe in your God because your parents told you and they also did the same. Believing is again a shortcut. Easy, affordable and

cheap. Remember that God is not so cheap. He is very expensive. Only the ones like Buddha, Christ, Nanak or Mahavir, who have the courage to put their being at risk, can afford God. If I say, 'Come, let's go and find God.'" Pinky Singh stared at Sachi to let her think it over for a while. "You would say, 'Who has the time for that? I have other priorities. Money has to be earned, power has to be attained and millions of desires are there to be fulfilled. Family is there and you want me to leave all this and start searching for God? That too, whose existence is not certain? What if in the end, we find there is no God? What a waste of life it would be?'" Pinky Singh shrugged and leaned on his elbow again.

"So you choose the shortcut. You start believing and by this, I must say you can only achieve a second-hand God. Not the real one. A real atheist is better than a fake theist. At least he has a possibility of knowing the real God, which a fake theist or believer doesn't have." Pinky Singh pointed his index finger at Sachi.

"You said, 'What if there's no God?' Well, that's a valid point. Suppose it's true, then isn't it better to stay away from this useless search? I mean, what will you get in the end?" Kumar succeeded in finding another loophole.

"You will get experience worth a billion. That experience would be your own. It would be authentic, original and personal. It will bring a divine glow on your face and a smile that nothing in the world can take away from you. You will have knowing, not knowledge." Pinky Singh's eyes sparkled with sublime trust. "And an understanding that is not terrified by your petty doubts and confidence that nobody can shake. A belief that can be shaken by petty doubt is worthless."

The silent, gaping faces of Sachi and Kumar confirmed that they don't have any more questions to raise. But still, Kumar was Kumar. When he couldn't shoot any questions, he moved the conversation in some other direction.

"You talk too much. You know, my mom used to say that those who talk too much become stupid one day." Kumar tried to conceal his defeat

with his abrupt cheeky laughter. But as usual, Pinky Singh was not offended at all.

“I have to.” His lips curved into a dazzling smile. “I have to speak more than your doubts. If your questions are longer than my answers, then my answers are useless. My knowing is not terrified by your doubts. I will always invite you to ask as many questions as you can.”

“I may or may not agree with your other thoughts...” Sachi came out of her silence with a nod and a smile. “...but I certainly agree with this point. Unlike most priests and religious people, you are quite open to logical questions and valid doubts. Certainly, you are not a fanatic or orthodox?”

“One becomes a fanatic because he has to suppress the inner doubts of his mind,” Pinky Singh added a little more wine to his glass. “That’s why fanatics make so much noise. A fanatic shouts, 24/7, that his God, his religion and his ideology are the best. He is ready to kill and die for that. He can’t even listen to a word against his religion. That’s why there are so many loudspeakers, extravagance and promotional events.” Pinky Singh took a sip.

“A fanatic knows the moment he is silent he will be surrounded by his petty and valid doubts. So I would say, raise as many doubts as you can and I will answer them in the longest way possible. My answers need to be four times each doubt so that each doubt is surrounded by my answers in all four directions. Your doubt will find no way to escape and will finally have to give up.” Pinky Singh finished his drink as he concluded.

This long conversation finally ended with a smile on both Bruno and Sachi’s faces. Their eyes were filled with reverence for Pinky Singh. Kumar, on the other hand, was busy gulping the bitter wine of defeat.

“Okay, I think it’s time to sleep now. We have to get up early tomorrow morning for meditation.”

“Okay Commander, as you say.” Kumar dramatically saluted Pinky Singh in mockery. “But Hassan, did you tell Sachi about your past reality?”

“What reality?” Sachi, who was packing things away, stopped.

Before Kumar, who was quite drunk, uttered something inappropriate, Pinky Singh held him by his arm and tugged him away to give Bruno and Sachi some privacy.

After leaving Kumar in his bedroom, Pinky Singh returned to find the situation had become stressful. Sachi’s shell-shocked eyes were on Bruno’s face and confirmed that he had unveiled his whole story to her.

“Tell me, is this true?” She ran toward Pinky Singh, holding his hands in great desperation .

Pinky Singh nodded and confirmed this stranger-than-fiction fact. She would have never believed this story but the sublime trust in Pinky Singh’s eyes left no room for doubt or disbelief.

“And how much are the chances of fulfilling this condition?” Sachi’s eyes were thunderstruck.

“Very low,” replied Pinky Singh with a calm face.

“You are so learned. You must know the purpose of life,” she prattled. “Why don’t you tell him? Come on! I know you would do this for him, won’t you?”

Pinky Singh held her shoulders to silence her. “Sorry, I can’t,” he replied softly. “The answer to this question comes with a catch. The one who knows can’t tell you and the one who tells you doesn’t know it. The moment I say anything in answer to this question, it becomes a lie. Any answer given to this question would be false and not true. I am sorry. He has to find it himself.” Though his eyes were dispassionate, his voice was full of compassion.

His answer came like a sudden gust of wind, blowing out the flickering flame of hope completely. In less than 24 hours, Sachi’s life took many drastic turns. In the blink of an eye, she rose from hell to heaven and then again fell back into the abyss of sorrows. The prank played by her fate wasn’t amusing but was harsh and ruthless.

She refused to say anything and sat near the lake with tears in her eyes. It seemed like all the water of the lake had come from her eyes. Pinky Singh gestured for Bruno to leave and let him handle the situation .

As Bruno left, Pinky Singh sat next to Sachi. "Say something! Staying quiet won't help you in any way," he urged softly.

"I thought my woes had ended but I think I am going to lose him again!" A fresh bout of tears emerged from her eyes.

"We are all going to lose each other one day," said Pinky Singh in a calm and compassionate voice.

"But we have very little time to spend together. Just a few days!" Fits of sobs choked her.

"It's about quality, not quantity." Pinky Singh gave her a motivating smile. "These few days could be way better than those who spend their lives together but fail to touch each other's heart even once."

She looked into Pinky Singh's eyes, transmitting tons of positive vibes. But unfortunately, she could absorb none.

"Your logic can't heal my pain." Still sobbing, she stuck her head between her knees.

"Okay, then let's do something that can really heal your pain. Be ready tomorrow at 5:30 am." Pinky Singh concluded with an intense look in his eyes.

CHAPTER THIRTY TWO



She Accepts

Such was the hidden fervor and unflinching trust in Pinky Singh's eyes that Sachi voluntarily joined the explosive meditation next morning. As the meditation progressed and the second stage came, she expressed her woes with all the life energy she had. She remembered one line Pinky Singh had told her: Put everything at stake.

The session did so much wonder that after the meditation, Sachi was seen hugging Bruno endearingly. She looked much better. It seemed that all the nourishment Pinky Singh had given her yesterday was digested by the meditation.

After breakfast, when Sachi was strolling in the garden, Pinky Singh joined her.

"How was your first day?"

Sachi nodded, with a half-smile in affirmation. Though she didn't say anything, her gratitude-filled eyes said it all. They both resumed their walk.

"One thing I didn't understand," she spoke in a calm and low voice when she broke her silence.

"What?"

“During my house arrest, I wept a lot for Hassan. But I never felt so good as I am feeling now. The same crying, same screaming...”

“There is a huge difference.” Pinky Singh raised his brows with his hands behind him.

“First, it was forced on you and now you are letting it happen willingly. First, grief took over you and now you are allowing the grief to come out. First, crying was your master. Now, you are the master and you let the crying happen. Now, you are not running from pain and, in fact, you have made up your mind to explore it.” He gave her a serene, close-lipped smile.

After this, deep contentment radiated on Sachi’s face. While tucking her hair behind her ear, she smiled back with great reverence and gratitude in her eyes for Pinky Singh.



Sachi started living her life wholeheartedly. Meditation gave her the power to accept life as it was. She thanked God for at least allowing her to spend her life with Bruno, even if it was just for a few days. Both Bruno and Sachi spent quality time together. Whatever they did, pottery, meditation, cooking, gardening, they did together. During passive meditation, they would sit facing each other with closed eyes, holding hands. During pottery, they would snuggle and nuzzle together. For them, each and every moment of togetherness was precious and they didn’t want to let it go to waste.

Bruno had no interest in cooking. But to stay close to her, he would assist her in the kitchen. Their way of working in the kitchen was intimate and creative. For instance, many a time, Bruno was seen hugging and kissing Sachi while they kneaded the dough or cut vegetables together. Sachi took charge of the kitchen and, as she was a phenomenal cook, she prepared such delicious food that every day was a feast for Pinky Singh, Kumar and Bruno.

It was tea time and Sachi and Bruno had prepared samosas and tea.

“HMM!” After taking the very first bite, Pinky Singh was lost in its divine taste. “Thanks, Sachi, for such toothsome food every day.” He threw his head back slightly and chewed with his eyes closed.

“That’s for not coming between Hassan and me as Satya Maharishi did and for letting me stay with him.” Sachi hugged Bruno’s arm and put her head on his shoulder.

“Anytime.” Pinky Singh hissed as the samosa was a bit spicy and hot. He glanced at her and continued his indulgence.

“Does staying away from worldly objects really help you control your desires? Like most of the priests and saints do?” Bruno asked casually while chewing the hot samosa.

“First of all, desire is not about the object; it’s a state of mind!” He squeezed another samosa to let the steam escape.

“Desire is wherever I am, whatever I have is not enough. Something else. Somewhere else is my happiness.” Pinky Singh chewed patiently. “And remember, wherever you go, whatever you achieve, this state of mind, this discontent, remains the same. Leaving the world and going to the Himalayas or staying away from objects won’t help because your state of mind hasn’t changed.” He put the plate down and licked his fingers.

“After leaving worldly things, you start desiring God, Moksha and Nirvana. You simply change the target but you yourself don’t change. First, it was money. Now, it’s Moksha. What’s the difference after all? The crazy running is still on. You are simply shifting the goalposts. One has to change this state of mind.” He ran a quick hand over his beard and picked up his steaming cup of tea. “Secondly, running away from the world and going to the Himalayas definitely gives you peace of mind. After all, there are no distractions. No beautiful women walking around you to distract you, no expensive cars and houses to remind you of your poverty and no exotic foods and wine to make you drool.” Pinky Singh bared his teeth in a grin with a cheeky look.

“But remember, you may forget about these things for some time but they are still there deep in your sub-consciousness. And I must say,” The

gleam in his eyes confirmed something interesting was to come. "All the peace you feel is not yours. It's of the Himalayas. The moment you are back in the marketplace, WHOOSH. It's all gone," Pinky Singh lifted his arm to gesture. "You are not only the same again and are worse because the idea of escapism has made you more vulnerable and weaker. So according to me, renunciation is good but not escapism..."

"What's the difference between the two..." asked Bruno .

"Escapism is running away from the world while renunciation is a different phenomenon. You can even renounce the world by simply being in the world. In renunciation, you do all the worldly things. You marry, have kids, go to a job, enjoy with your friends, crack vulgar jokes but from inside, you do not get involved in anything." Pinky Singh pressed his index finger to his chest. "You remain detached."

"While in escapism, you run away from these things and go to the Himalayas but on the inside, these things keep haunting you and pulling you toward themselves. Renunciation comes from a deep understanding and knowing. Escapism is a by-product of your fear and lack of understanding." He slurped his tea.

"My God, your knowledge..." Sachi clucked her tongue. "I mean, knowing is so transparent and extraordinary. Did you really never go to school?" She expressed her amazement with wide eyes and a cocked head.

"I did!" Pinky Singh smiled nodding. "Till 7th grade. After that, I stopped going to school."

"But why?" Sachi asked.

"I had a thirst to learn something much more than the mathematical formulas, chemical reactions and a dead history." He smiled and once again ran a quick hand through his bushy beard. He twisted his mustache and thanked Sachi again for the delicious snacks. Then he left for a stroll in the forest.

Sachi kept staring at Pinky Singh with stunned eyes until he was no longer visible .

“My God, what kind of personality is he?” She spun back toward Bruno and Kumar to express her amazement and excitement. “He is beyond my understanding. I don’t know whether to call him a genius or a crazy man.”

“If a genius were to be like him, then why did people like us waste our life attaining degrees from schools, colleges and universities,” mumbled Kumar flatly while peeping inside his cup. “He is simply a trickster, not a genius. He knows how to play with words but his magic won’t work on me. He was lucky to get that meditation tape. That’s the only great thing he has. Wait and see. Soon I will show him his rightful place.” Kumar was all set to crush his opponent once he found the right opportunity.

CHAPTER THIRTY THREE



Karma

The next day, Pinky Singh was carrying a bag of raw clay on his shoulder when he accidentally stepped on an ant that died immediately. When Pinky Singh realized, he eyed the ant and resumed his work, unruffled and without any guilt. Bruno, who was helping him, watched this silently.

“Is there any way to get rid of your past? I mean, how can one burn his past karma?” Bruno always had questions about karma but never had the right opportunity to ask. Finally, he found one.

Pinky Singh threw the bag on the floor and grabbed a few breaths. “Our past contains many lives and millions of years.” He dusted off his clothes. “In these lives, you have infinite good-bad karma. How can you undo them in just one small lifetime? And even if you succeed in doing so, what about the new karma you are creating while burning your past karma?” He pointed at the dead ant. “They keep piling up. It’s a vicious circle or is just like running after shadows.”

“Then what has to be done? ”

“Have a burst of belly laughter!” Pinky Singh chuckled as he sat down and started opening the bag of raw clay with a cutter.

“But you didn’t tell me any joke!”

“The whole world is full of humor and stupidity. When you have eyes, you can easily find something funny and worth laughing at.”

"Please. I am serious. Tell me what has to be done?"

Pinky Singh stopped his work temporarily. "Hmm... okay." He hugged his knees and sat comfortably. "Have you observed a small child? How free of burden he is? A small child has the freedom to do anything. Even if he doesn't know you, he would come close to you and pick up your phone or your wallet and start walking away with it as if it belongs to him. Do you get angry?"

Bruno instinctively shakes his head.

"No, you don't! On the contrary, you smile. Now, suppose an adult does the same thing. Would you behave in the same way?" Pinky Singh smiled broadly with wide eyes. "I don't think so. You may call him a thief and even thrash him. What has happened? Why do you behave so differently in two similar situations? Why have you discriminated so much between a kid and an adult?"

"Because kids are innocent." It was a prompt reply.

"There you are." Pinky Singh fired a finger gun. "Innocence!" He glanced at Bruno. "Yes! When you are innocent just like a child, you don't accumulate karmas. A child doesn't know the difference between right or wrong. Good or bad. Should and should not. In a way, he is beyond all these things. The same things happen with a Mystic or a true saint." He resumed preparing the clay material.

"He never accumulates karma because he is beyond right and wrong, sin and virtue and morality and immorality. The only difference is that a child's innocence is out of ignorance whereas a true saint's innocence is out of pure consciousness and awareness. Become innocent and your karma is gone. Only the light of awareness can remove the darkness of karma."

"And how do we attain this innocence?"

"When all the conditioning of society is gone, when you unlearn all that you have learned and unnecessarily accumulated and when you burn all the past theories and philosophies and become fresh and new

again just like a child, then you can say you have attained that innocence. Just become aware and keep meditating.”

Pinky Singh got up and started mixing the raw clay with china clay and water, kick-starting a chain reaction of thoughts in Bruno’s mind. He was excited by the idea that it was easy to get rid of one’s past. But Bruno didn’t have enough time to rely simply on meditation. So he asked for a shortcut.

“You know what, once Satya Maharishi gave me a secret mantra and asked me to repeat it when I feel anxiety or aggression. Initially, it worked but slowly, its magic was lost. Can you give me some mantra to attain that innocence?”

“There was nothing magical in that mantra.” Pinky Singh glanced at Bruno while leaning forward to mix the clay. “Anything I tell you to keep secret will grow inside you and anything you express and say out loud is out of your mind. When you repeated that mantra, again and again, your mind became bored and it started becoming inactive. You thought you were relaxing. No, your mind was not relaxing but you started feeling sleepy just like you feel after listening to a lullaby.” Pinky Singh wiped his hands with a cloth after washing them.

“I am sorry.” Pinky Singh clasped Bruno’s shoulder gently. “You can’t attain something as precious and priceless as innocence by repeating mantras. There is no shortcut for that. You have to go the long way. You have to meditate.”

Bruno sighed with a downcast gaze as Pinky Singh walked away.



The next day, they all did pottery except for Pinky Singh who, for a change, was making a clay model of Gautam Buddha. He moved his fingers over the clay model endearingly, just like a mother bathing her infant.

“It’s beautiful. I thought you could only make pots.” Sachi said in amazement, hands on her cheeks and mouth open.

"I can make anything except one thing.... That is..." They gazed at Pinky Singh in curiosity. "Making a fool of others."

A sudden burst of laughter overwhelmed Sachi and Pinky Singh. When he said this, he glanced at Kumar. In a way, he had answered Kumar sarcastically. Kumar understood this and was offended. 'Did he hear all that I said on that day?' He asked himself. Sachi's growing laughter added oil to the fire .

"By the way, why was Buddha not accepted in India in the way he should have been?" asked Sachi as she settled down.

Immediately, Kumar stepped in. "How can he be? Buddha has said there is no soul, no God. When we go inside, there is nothing just emptiness. This is nonsense."

"Why do you find it nonsense?" Pinky Singh asked in a calm voice.

"Because it shakes our very foundation of logical reasoning." Kumar spread his arms in ridicule. "If the soul is not there, then who will seek and for what?"

After shooting this question, a glint of glorious victory had already started dawning on Kumar's face. He was sure that today he was going to show Pinky Singh his place. He had put forth a question that was technically impossible to answer.

"Yesterday, you had a headache. How is it now?" Pinky Singh craned his neck and slid his fingers over the clay model.

To Kumar, his victory had been declared as Pinky Singh had changed the topic.

"Yes, it's fine now. The homeopathy medicine you gave me worked effectively." He glanced at Sachi with a smug smile.

"Do you remember the medicine's name?"

Kumar felt sorry for Pinky Singh. 'He is so shattered by his defeat that he is asking me irrelevant questions. No problem! I will show him fun today.'

"Belladonna!" Kumar gave a smashing answer, expecting applause for his sharp intellect and memory.

"Yes, correct. Did you know that Belladonna's percentage was almost equal to nil in that remedy?"

"Really? Then why call it Belladonna? Call it Madonna instead." Drunk on victory, Kumar laughed loudly. "Or Arizona." He laughed more.

Pinky Singh waited patiently for his laughter to settle down and eventually spoke softly and calmly.

"Because it is not there but is still there, its presence is in its absence." Pinky Singh smiled graciously with glittering certainty in his eyes.

It seemed like Kumar's flying euphoria suddenly ran out of propellant and started gliding down into clouds of confusion.

"Okay, let me elaborate. Homeopathy remedies are made from plants, animals, minerals, etc. But it is diluted so many times that the quantity of the element is almost equal to nil." Pinky Singh wrung the clay from his hands. He sat down and wrapped his arms around his knees while his hands were still filled with clay. "People often fail to understand and raise this question as to how homeopathy works if it is almost not there after dilution. In fact, after dilution, that element attains magical healing powers that it didn't have otherwise. Belladonna is a poison. If you consume it as it is, it could be lethal. But after dilution, it changes its properties and becomes the opposite." He bobbed his head.

"When you say 'I am', you are toxic to yourself and others. That's why you suffer. But with continuous meditation and knowing, you dilute and dilute and dilute and one day, like Buddha, you disappear and become divine and pure. You exist but in a different way that can't be proved and established scientifically or understood by the mind. Buddha's being existed more authentically than anyone else. But only in his hollowness and emptiness." Pinky Singh gave an enigmatic smile and resumed his clay modeling.

As Pinky Singh ended, tons of praise flooded in the form of various gestures from Sachi and Bruno. He had explained the most difficult thing

in the easiest way.

But with each word of praise, Kumar's embarrassment and humiliation intensified. The stone of Pinky Singh's wisdom had ruthlessly smashed the crystal of his ego. He avoided making eye contact with anybody and, after a while, left, after giving an excuse.

CHAPTER THIRTY FOUR



The Secret of His Wisdom

Kumar went missing in the woods for the whole day and didn't even return for dinner. After dinner, Pinky Singh, Bruno and Sachi were sitting on the lawn and looking at the pots they had been making for days. Pinky Singh was cracking jokes and observing the pots closely.

Sachi and Bruno were trying hard to keep their balance as they were laughing uncontrollably. Suddenly, Kumar came from nowhere.

"Hey Kumar, where were you? Come here." Still overwhelmed with laughter, Sachi shouted for him.

Kumar came closer but ignored her as he saw his pot in Pinky Singh's hand.

"So what fault are you going to point out now?" Kumar glared at Pinky Singh, looking humiliated.

Pinky Singh had never appreciated his pots and had always asked him to be more authentic. Instantly, the relaxed and joyous situation was taut with tension and awkward silence.

"The only fault is that you don't trust." Pinky Singh looked at Kumar with a gracious smile.

"I can never trust you! You are a mysterious person!" Kumar bellowed like a wounded tiger.

“On one side, you say you are not very educated and don’t read holy books or any other books on philosophy and on the other hand, you have all the answers to my questions. Answers that are so authentic and correct that even a learned man like Satya Maharishi couldn’t give them to me.” Suddenly, there was a glint of amazement in Kumar’s angry eyes. “Tell me, how can a cab driver do this? From where did you learn all this? Tell me.”

Pinky Singh kept the pot aside, stood up and looked into Kumar’s eyes. “Okay, come with me...” He patted Kumar’s shoulder and started walking toward the woods. All three followed him. After a while, they reached an open area in the jungle where the sky was clearly visible.

“What do you see?” He pointed toward the sky.

“A beautiful moon and a clear sky with stars,” replied Kumar, looking up at the sky.

“Why couldn’t you see it yesterday?”

“Because yesterday was a cloudy night,” Kumar replied.

“Exactly.” Pinky Singh nodded with a warm-hearted smile. “Similarly, when your mind is clouded with thoughts, you don’t see reality. The reality of the beautiful moon and shining stars are hidden from you.” He spread his arms as he turned to look at the moon .

“To see reality as it is, you need to have a clear mind. That is, a mind free from thoughts, prejudices, theories, literature and philosophies. You can read about these stars and moon in books but it won’t help. Only when the clouds of your thoughts are not there, you can see how beautiful these stars and moon are. You can only see the truth when you are absolutely silent and when your mind is clear. And once your mind is silent, all the mysteries are unveiled.” He closed his eyes and his voice became calmer.

“Mystery of both the worlds, life and death, past and future, are all unveiled once your mind stops thinking. Yes, all these miracles happen once your mind stops and you go beyond your mind. Now you can see the truth as it is.” He opens his eyes unhurriedly. “And trust me, for this

you don't need a university degree. Remember wisdom comes to the innocent, not to the scholars and philosophers." He concluded with a serene and calm grin.

"I also want this clarity. Tell me how I can stop my mind."

It seemed like Kumar had finally acknowledged his ignorance and tasted surrender and trust.

"You can't stop your mind. This is beyond your power." Pinky Singh pursed his lips and patted Kumar's shoulder. His answer disappointed Kumar.

"For millions of years, people have been committing this blunder and have been trying to control or stop their mind forcibly, using various techniques. And even if you succeed in doing so for a while, it's of no use because your intelligence is gone. Your mind is like a spring. You may forcefully compress it with your hand and think that you have changed its shape. But the potential energy is still stored in it. The moment your hand becomes tired and you release pressure, it will bounce back with the same energy." He opened his hand and stretched it to demonstrate.

"Never do this to your mind. It is stupid. Don't try to control your mind. Instead, let it run wild in all possible directions. That is its beauty. It's a very powerful mechanism. See in one moment, it's here on earth and another moment, it's on the moon. It travels faster than light. Don't make it dull by repeating mantras and by focusing on something just to control it or stop it from thinking."

"Please tell me the way! What has to be done?" Kumar raised his voice in impatience and restlessness.

"First, you have to throw all the garbage of repressed energies out through active meditation or your so-called explosive meditation. Once you have thrown away all the garbage, you have created a possibility. Now, you can effortlessly sit down and meditate. Just sit and observe your thoughts. Let them come and go like clouds in the sky. You have to simply sit and observe. Don't judge good or bad, right or wrong, moral or immoral. Just watch." He moved his index finger and pointed upward, away from the third eye center.

“If you stand there aloof, distant and uninvolved, slowly your awareness and watchfulness will become deeper and gaps will arise between two thoughts. One thought has gone and other has not yet come and there is a gap. In those gaps, for the first time, you will get a glimpse of no-mind. In those gaps, suddenly there are no clouds and the sky is clear with the glowing moon and twinkling stars. You start seeing clearly and the whole existence becomes transparent.” The serenity and tranquility of Pinky Singh’s face radiated like the moon and stars.

“In the beginning, these gaps would be rare but they have given you the glimpse of Samadhi, no-mind. You know now that you are on the right track. You continue watching. When clouds come, you watch. When a clear sky comes, you watch. A clear sky has its own beauty and so does the clouded sky. Now you are not a chooser. You don’t say you are only interested in gaps. This is again stupid because if you choose only gaps, then you are again going against these thoughts. Those tiny gaps which you have seen will disappear because they happen in your effortlessness. They happen but can’t be forced. They are spontaneous. So that’s why I say it’s impossible to control or stop your mind. But it stops. Yes, surely, it stops one day but not by your effort or force but on its own. Remember, in the inner world you can only succeed as a lover, not as a fighter.”

As Pinky Singh concluded, Kumar realized that in desperation, he went too far. With a sheepish look on his face, he was embarrassed for showing his feelings but it was too late.

On the other hand, Sachi and Bruno were certain that Pinky Singh, who looked very ordinary, was actually not. He was something more than his crazy, rustic and suspicious personality. But still, it felt quite strange for them to call him an enlightened master as he was quite far from the concept of a Mystic that society believed in.

CHAPTER THIRTY FIVE



Kumar's Story

The next day, Pinky Singh returned from the market with big bags of groceries and a newspaper. Bruno started reading it while Sachi snuggled against his arm with her head on his shoulder. Kumar, who was smoking in the distance, suddenly darted toward them and grabbed the newspaper. He started reading it desperately.

"Easy buddy, what's wrong with you?" Bruno was shocked by Kumar's behavior and so was Sachi.

He peered at the newspaper for some time and dropped it abruptly. With shoulders slumped, he moved toward the woods. He didn't utter a word for the rest of the day.

The next morning, Kumar appeared for meditation with a different level of earnestness and determination on his face. He had never had such commitment for explosive meditation before, mostly because of his ego clash with Pinky Singh or his lack of trust in him.

But today, the situation was different. Kumar did his meditation like it was a question of life and death. His breathing was aggressive and forceful and so was his catharsis. It seemed like he would empty his reservoir of repressed emotions in just one single session. As the meditation ended and they all headed to breakfast, Kumar lay there like he was dead. Pinky Singh gestured for Bruno and Sachi not to worry and let him be there for some time as he was in deep meditation.

After an hour, while they were having breakfast, Sachi and Bruno saw something phenomenal happen. They saw Kumar walking toward them, looking quite different from the Kumar they knew. This was a Kumar who looked soberer, sane and relaxed. A Kumar who had no obsession with proving himself or showing his supremacy. A Kumar whose eyes were glittering with trust and faith. Without uttering a single word, he took his breakfast and started eating it calmly. Sachi stared at him in amazement.



This continued for another five days. Every day, in the same manner, he would give his all in meditation and would then remain silent all day long. Nothing new happened during these days. But on the sixth day, something exceptional happened.

After the explosive meditation, as Pinky Singh was about to enter the kitchen, Kumar came and gave him a tight hug with great affection and gratitude. Pinky Singh hugged him back with the same warmth. Bruno and Sachi were dumbfounded by this spectacle.

“I want to tell you my story.” Kumar looked innocently into Pinky Singh’s eyes .

Kumar had been a tough nut to crack. He always guarded the door to the dark room of his past life. He never allowed anyone in. And now he was willingly ready to spill all the beans about his past.

Where Bruno and Sachi were wide-eyed, Pinky Singh was all smiles. He knew that after doing the intense meditation sessions for five days, his old breathing pattern had been disrupted. So now it was very difficult for him to fake or hide his emotions. As all his repressed emotions had been thrown out, it was now only his burdensome past left that needed to come out.



They all sat in the garden to listen to Kumar’s story. Bruno and Sachi were eager as they knew there was something special hidden in Kumar’s past.

“On that day, in the newspaper,” Kumar started narrating his story, “I saw the picture of my ex-girlfriend, Mia, and my close friend, Nik Ahuja. Mia is a famous model from Mumbai while Nik is the man to whom I sold my business empire.”

The words ‘business empire’ brought a spark of pride to Kumar’s eyes as only a self-made, rich business tycoon would have.

“I’ll start my story from when I was a kid.” He paused for a moment. “My dad was a middle-class serviceman and used to earn enough to lead a happy life. But the only problem was that my uncle, my father’s elder brother, earned a lot more than my dad. My mother always used to grumble and complain about us not earning and spending as much as my uncle. In an attempt to match their status sometimes, my parents used to spend beyond their capacity thus, leading to a financial crisis in our house. I don’t know why but this had a deep impact on me.” Kumar’s gaze was downcast.

“When I grew up, my uncle, with the help of his contacts and money, got both my cousins admitted to IIT—one of the top engineering institutions in India. Seeing him do so, my dad also started cultivating the same dream. He wanted to see me in the same institution, attaining my Bachelor’s degree. Simultaneously, a dream of becoming a businessman was brewing in me as I knew I could be a good businessman. But my dream couldn’t see the light of day because business is a risky affair that needs a lot of money. My dad suggested I stick to my studies as we were service class people. I started putting all my energy into my dad’s dream. I had to do it on my own, as we did not have enough money and contacts as my uncle had. I started putting in extra effort, much more than my capabilities, as it was a do or die situation for me.” Kumar clenched his hand; sweat trickled down the side of his neck.

“And in doing so, I ruined my youth and not for any use. Even after repeated attempts, I could not clear my IIT entrance exam. I was strong enough to handle this but when I saw my dad’s face, it would tear me apart.” Kumar heaved a deep sigh as he hung his head.

"I did Mechanical Engineering in an ordinary college in the hope that I would perform extraordinarily well and get a good job. But even this didn't work. I did not score extraordinary marks and hence couldn't get a job. I remained jobless for almost a year and that was the most difficult time for me." He rubbed his taut face with both hands .

"Then one day, an old friend called Rickey met me. He told me about a sick industrial unit that his dad had started and about how it was shut down. He offered me control of it so I could try to make it a success. He told me that I wouldn't be answerable if I failed to make it a success. But if the unit started working again and was profitable, then I could have sole ownership just by paying him a certain amount that was double the total investment. I had nothing to lose in this deal so I agreed. With my consistent skills and hard work over two years, that project became a success and to the extent that nobody could have ever imagined." Finally, Kumar's face relaxed a bit.

"Within the next year, I had paid 100% of the money back and attained sole ownership of the unit. Now I started getting what I dreamed of; I had a big house, a business earning millions and of course, a beautiful, celebrity girlfriend, Mia. I used to spend a lot on my parents, even more than my girlfriend. The happiness and the pride in my parent's eyes when they got out of their S-class Mercedes, wearing expensive clothes, used to give me immense bliss." Kumar's eyes sparkled with glee and pride. A smile crept on his face as he looked up at the sky unseeingly.

They were all listening silently, patiently and attentively.

"Now I had what I dreamed of and lived for my whole life. I had the money. I had power. I had prestige and a celebrity girlfriend. I sacrificed my childhood, my youth and everything I ever had for this." Kumar gushed in excitement.

"But slowly, the shine of this dazzling lifestyle started fading away." Suddenly, Kumar's glee oozed out and he sighed. His gaze was downcast again .

"All these things stopped giving me happiness. The darkness of boredom and a lack of interest for life started creeping into me like a

venomous snake. To cope with this, I became more aggressive and started spending insanely on expensive watches, designer suits, expensive cars, etc. But unfortunately, all this couldn't fill my inner emptiness. Nothing could make me happy and I found myself incapable of being happy. I had never thought being happy would be way more difficult than becoming successful or earning money. Along with my insanely dazzling lifestyle, one thing more took of me." Kumar shook his head in remorse and deep regret as if he didn't want to complete his sentence. "Alcohol," he said it, however.

"I started drinking a lot. In the beginning, it worked like a wonder. But slowly, even this stopped giving me any pleasure. To cope with this, I increased my dose. I started drinking more and more. My interest in my business started diminishing and I started developing behavioral problems. My business started suffering and so did my relationship with Mia. Many a time, I became the reason for embarrassment for my parents and girlfriend. I started losing my confidence and before the monster of depression could gobble me up, I took a big step." Kumar looked up with a glint of superiority in his eyes. Snobbish creases started forming on his forehead.

"I renounced everything and took Sanyas. I sold my business at a throwaway price to a friend, Nik Ahuja, and went to the Satya Ashram. I gave part of the money to my parents so that they could live their lives comfortably and donated the rest to Satya Maharishi's charitable trust." Kumar became silent for some time. This short speech had tired him emotionally.

"Today, when I look back at all this, it looks like a bad dream to me. Still, I don't understand what suddenly went wrong with me after achieving everything that I always desired. Why couldn't I control myself? It seemed like somebody else was controlling me." Kumar frowned pitifully, looking helplessly at Pinky Singh's dispassionate eyes.

"You know, my grandmother was my favorite person when I was a kid because she used to tell me ghost stories. From childhood, I was very fascinated with ghosts and wished to see one once in my life. But I never

thought that I would see it in myself one day.” Saline water trickled down Kumar’s cheek. Sachi hugged him in consolation.

“I want to know what happened to me when I attained it. What mysterious external force took over me and mind?” Kumar wiped his tears away, dabbing his eyes. Kumar became silent after this.

“It wasn’t external but was an internal force. Just inside you.” As Pinky Singh replied with a compassionate smile, Kumar stared at him with hopeful eyes. He knew that all his questions were going to be answered today. He had been waiting for this special moment for a long time.

“Life is energy that flows in all the directions and dimensions. It is converted into laughing, dancing, crying, loving, creativity, work, etc.,” said Pinky Singh with a gracious face and in a polite voice.

“When this flow goes in all directions without any obstructions, life is rich, satisfying and happy. But if you start putting all your energy in just one direction, that is your goal, other parts start drying out and your life starts losing its balance. I know what’s going in your mind. ‘I had no time for all this. I had to put my energy into achieving my goals. Laughing, dancing and loving could have distracted me; I need to be serious...’ Blah, blah, blah!” He bobbed his head dramatically with a smile.

“But let me tell you, seriousness is a slow poison! You start killing yourself slowly by being serious. You need to be sincere, not serious.” He glanced at Kumar for a moment and kept nodding. “Laughing, dancing and loving wouldn’t have affected your sincerity. On the contrary, they could have elevated it. Can you say, ‘I will not breathe until and unless my goal is achieved’? No, you can’t because you won’t survive even a minute without breathing. But you can put your joy and happiness at risk because if you don’t laugh, dance and love for a few days, you think you won’t be dead. But let me tell you; you are not alive either...”

“Why was I so serious?” Kumar’s voice had become a little hoarse.

“The very beginning was wrong. You grew up in an atmosphere where comparison and competition were in the air. Out of these things, nothing positive can come out because their very nature is incorrect, wrong and negative. Illness can never produce health. When you do

something out of love, passion and trust, the outcome is always good. Having a good life is not wrong. Having a big house and a big car is not a sin. But if you want to have these things just because others have them, then you are on the wrong track." Rubbing his thighs, Pinky Singh got up and strolled around the garden. They followed him like disciples.

"These are second-hand desires. Yes, second-hand desires. The desires that others put inside you and are not yours. Just like a kid who wants only what is in the hands of the other child. He is least interested in what he has in his own hands, even if it's bigger and better. This is very childish. At least have your own desires." He pointed a finger at Kumar.

"If you want to become a good businessman, then this is your desire. But if you want to become the number one businessman and be richer and more famous than your friends, relatives or competitors, then you are being possessed by a second-hand desire. A successful businessman may not be very rich or number one. Success has nothing to do with riches or being the best. Success means that you are thoroughly enjoying what you are doing. After doing it, you feel more energetic, ecstatic and full of life. Not lethargic, tired and frustrated."

"So it was my parent's fault." Kumar sighed and shook his head as he stopped walking.

"You are again making a mistake." Pinky Singh halted and turned toward Kumar. "Blaming your parents will worsen your condition. No parents can wish misery for their kids. It sounds absurd. Yes, indirectly and unknowingly, they are responsible. But remember their parents did the same to them and so on and so on. This neurosis was passed down through the ages."

"Then what should be done?" The uneasiness grew in Kumar. His mouth went dry. He looked up at Pinky Singh, seeking an answer in urgency.

"Just forgive your parents and forget about them." Pinky Singh put his hand on Kumar's shoulder. "Now you have to stop this neurosis here and not let it go to your kids. This is the best you can do." Pinky Singh resumed his walk and so did everybody else .

“And for that, you have to understand it first yourself because kids are very intelligent. They don’t learn what you teach them. They learn what you don’t. Their observation power is very subtle, precise and strong. They can easily sense what’s hidden inside your gestures. First, you have to understand what went wrong.” Pinky Singh nodded till he got a nod from Kumar.

“From the very beginning, you kept postponing your happiness, fearing it would distract you from achieving what you wanted. In a way, you were right because happiness will always try to stop you from achieving what is not good for you, like a second-hand desire. This is a criterion, a litmus test. Always remember, anything that is disturbed or hindered by your happiness, joy and ecstasy is not and can’t be good for you. These are deterrents and mechanisms given to you by God to prevent you from doing something wrong. Anything that makes you more serious, unhappy and lifeless... never do it.” Again Pinky Singh looked at Kumar for an affirmative nod. Kumar nodded like a sincere student.

“You remained serious and postponed your happiness for a long time while running after your goal. This became your habit—A die-hard habit that penetrated your deepest cell and couldn’t be changed overnight. You had almost forgotten the art of enjoying and celebrating life. And when you had everything, especially money, and still couldn’t buy happiness, your youth and childhood back, all of which you had sacrificed for money, it subconsciously shattered you from the inside. Immediately, your whole life, your achievements, your success turned into failure and a waste of your effort and time. It became difficult for you to accept this.” As Pinky Singh ambled with his hands behind his back, Kumar felt like each word was thumping his consciousness.

“Another thing, money is a neutral force. It can’t produce happiness or unhappiness. It can only enhance your pattern, whatsoever it is. If you are happy and you have money, you will become happier. Similarly, if you are unhappy and have money, you will become unhappier. That’s why money and power are dangerous in the hands of a miserable person. Mankind’s history is filled with such examples.”

Bruno and Sachi continued strolling along, staring at Pinky Singh's face, innocently, like children engrossed in what he was saying.

"So when your success turned into failure, you started denying reality and wanted an escape from this merciless truth. And what could be better than alcohol? It temporarily disconnected you from reality and took you into a world of illusion or what you wanted to see. In the beginning, it looked like it was working but slowly, its effect went and it was reduced to an addiction. Being in the virtual world for so long made you incapable of facing reality. So you gave up everything and chose another escape that was more dangerous than alcohol, Sanyas. People come out of alcoholism one day but it is very difficult to come out of Sanyas."

"What are you saying?" Kumar halted abruptly. "I gave my riches to Sanyas. Not everybody has the guts to do so." There was a glint of offense in Kumar's eyes and voice.

"Try to understand." Pinky Singh turned and smiled. "Your life can be divided into three parts. The first part is when you were struggling. The second is when you attained success. And the third is now when you are here." Pinky Singh counted on his fingers. "First, you wanted 'money'. Then you attained 'money' and finally, you gave away your 'money'. Now did you notice that 'money' was present in all three parts? You have given away all your 'money'. This idea is still in your mind. The money is still in your mind."

This hard truth had hammered Kumar's only asset, which he was quite proud of. The monument of his great Sanyas started developing cracks.

"Let me make it simple for you." Pinky Singh resumed strolling. They walked along. "Suppose you are in a dark room and you realize that you stepped on a snake. You would definitely be scared. Every moment till the room does lights up, you would remain terrified. You sit in a corner and stay frozen there. Not even for a single micro-second are you not thinking about that snake. Your mind is captured by the thought of the snake. And suddenly, there is light everywhere in the room and you

discover that it's just a piece of rope. Finally, you take a deep breath. You relax." Pinky Singh stopped, closed his eyes and exhaled.

"Now, is there any need to remember the fact that it's not a snake and is just a rope?" He glanced at Kumar as he opened his eyes with a serene smile.

"You forget about it and start doing your work as if nothing happened. You don't take a stick in your hand and start beating the rope. You are least bothered by it now. The same is with money!" He elegantly ran his fingers through his beard. "If you realize money can't give you happiness, you forget about it. You have known its worthlessness. Why create so much fuss about it? Let it be wherever it is. And remember, money is not even worth renouncing. If you are renouncing something, it means you still believe in its power. You believe that it can still pull you back or attract you so you run away."

And at last, Kumar's worst fear came true as Pinky Singh had demolished his only asset. The tall high monument of his Sanyas came crashing down into debris and his pride of 'giving away his riches' went up like a cloud of dust.

"Then what should I do? Master, tell me." Sniveling like a baby, he fell at Pinky Singh's feet.

Pinky Singh pulled him up by his shoulders as a master does to his disciple. They all settled back in the garden.

"First, you have to go back and remove this blot of 'escapism' from your forehead. Once you stop running from reality and start facing it, 90% of the task is completed. The meditation and knowing what you have attained here will help you do so. Then start a new business."

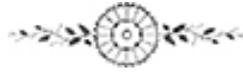
Kumar looked astounded by this as he wiped his tears. He had never expected Pinky Singh would say something like that.

"Yes, a new business!" Pinky Singh confirmed with nod and smile. "I am saying this because I know you can do it. You have the talent and aptitude and this time, it wouldn't be that difficult because you have done it before. You are a good businessman, I know. A businessman who

can generate millions of jobs and help to remove poverty. Removing poverty is important because spirituality can't be a poor man's cup of tea. He has to fill his stomach first. Moksha comes afterward. And I don't want a businessman who can create endless jobs to just sit in a forest and waste his life listening to a crazy cab driver's bullshit. "

Jaws dropped and six eyes speechlessly gaped at Pinky Singh for a while. This abrupt turn in the conversation astounded all three. With a sudden spurt, they burst into roaring, uncontrollable laughter. This unpredictable twist tickled their funny bone to such an extent that they had to hold their aching bellies. Mini-Heaven resonated with their laughter for a long time.

CHAPTER THIRTY SIX



Kumar Goes Back

Kumar was a new person now. A new clarity had dawned in his eyes as all his doubts had died. All the complexities and confusions of his mind had melted into a simple child-like smile.

He was all set to face the world he had been running from for so long and complete his unfinished story. This time, he had a different zeal and zest and looked prepared to face all the odds of this world.

He hugged Bruno and Sachi and in the end, touched Pinky Singh's feet. "Thanks for everything, Master."

"I hope you had a good time here." Pinky Singh smiled, running an affectionate hand over his shoulder.

"Yes of course. But how will I meditate at home?"

"Oh yes, I forget." Pinky Singh fished out a cassette from his pocket. "I made a copy for you. Now you can do it at home. Do it every day."

Kumar stared at the cassette .

"Is there a problem?" asked Pinky Singh, seeing Kumar gazing downcast at the cassette.

"So from today, I will be doing it alone..."

"Even I did it alone. You won't have a problem with that. But your neighbors might have some when in the morning they have to bear with

your screams, monstrous laughter and other horrific sounds.” Pinky Singh chuckled. Sachi and Bruno laughed loudly too.

“Yes, I was also thinking about that.” Kumar nodded. “It would be difficult to handle them.”

“Don’t worry. Gradually, they will get used to it. Someday, they will surely join you.”

Kumar chuckled while gazing at the cassette.

“Just remember one thing. This meditation is a very powerful tool, a double-edged sword, so you have to do it very responsibly. Don’t be selective. Like to save time, you do only the catharsis part or to get more benefits in less time, you exceed the time limit of catharsis given in meditation. This may harm your brain. All the stages are important and only with the respective time limit. First breathing, then catharsis, then jumping, then silent-watching and finally, celebrating. These stages are pearls of the same necklace; you break one, you break them all.”

“Sure.” Kumar nodded sincerely. “Master, I must say it now.”

“What?”

“This place is really and undisputedly heaven on earth! ”

Kumar touched his Master’s feet again, hugged Bruno and Sachi and walked toward his old life, not like a fighter, but like a poetic-cum-lover walking toward his annoyed beloved to coax her. He had confidence and trust in his eyes that his true, authentic and love-drenched verses would definitely win her heart.

CHAPTER THIRTY SEVEN



Master of Contradictions

Kumar had gone and Bruno and Sachi felt his absence. But they were happy he had found his way.

The last day's episode had raised Pinky Singh's stature many notches high. He was no more an ordinary person to them. His magnificence and sublime majesty had captivated Bruno and Sachi's consciousness completely.

In the evening, Bruno and Pinky Singh were sitting in the garden while Sachi was in the kitchen. Mini-Heaven was resonating with a melody of 'Pahadi-Raga', which Pinky Singh was playing on his flute. Bruno was swaying to the enchanting melody, with his closed eyes. When Pinky Singh stopped, Bruno opened his eyes.

"Master, can I call you master?"

Pinky Singh glanced at Bruno, moving his tongue on his dry lips. "If you are doing this because Kumar influenced you, then this would be second-hand faith." He measured the gaps between the flute holes using his thumb.

"NO! It's not like that," confirmed Bruno, assertively.

"Then go ahead..." He put the flute aside.

"These days, I am getting a lot of sensual thoughts. Why is it happening? I am a spiritual man now."

"Because your repressed energies are rising and sex is one of them."

"How do I stop them?"

"No need to stop them! Enjoy them!" Pinky Singh's mouth rose into a waggish grin. "If a spiritual man can laugh, dance, feel hungry and enjoy food, then surely he can enjoy making love as well. There is a delicious wine in the store I made last month. Share it with Sachi and this time, go beyond kissing and hugging. After a point, it becomes boring and you need to have some more fun."

"Are you serious?" asked an astounded Bruno.

"Yes, of course I am. And one thing more." Pinky Singh gestured for Bruno to come closer.

"Once, me and Gurinder Kaur, we went boating in the night." He craned his neck closer to Bruno's ear and whispered. "Boating and wine. It was just awesome—a totally different experience. You and Sachi must try this as well. Have fun!" He winked cheekily and returned to his normal sitting posture. Bruno peered at him.

"What?" Pinky Singh asked the gaping Bruno.

"Did I make a mistake by calling you master?" Eventually, Bruno spoke up.

"No problem." Pinky Singh closed his eyes, raised his head a bit, took a deep breath and released it. "I am not a perfectionist so I don't mind mistakes." Immediately, Pinky Singh slipped into deep meditation. Bruno couldn't stop himself from staring at this crazy man. After 20 minutes, Pinky Singh gradually opened his eyes and found Bruno still sitting there, gaping at him. He smiled at him and got up to move inside as it was getting colder.

"One thing I don't understand."

"What's that?" asked Pinky Singh as he wrapped a shawl around his shoulders.

“Why you are so strange? Just some time ago, you were talking about wine, women and making love. The topic didn’t even end yet and you slipped into deep meditation.” Bruno got up and started walking with him.

“At one point, your eyes are lit with the super-consciousness of divinity and in another moment, you are seen drinking a glass of wine. At one point, you are giving such profound spiritual discourses and at another time, you are seen cracking vulgar jokes. At one point, you look like a true saint and at another, you are seen escaping from prison, driving rashly or talking about something forbidden. You confuse me as you keep on contradicting yourself with your actions. Why don’t you have a defined character?” Bruno emptied his heart. He had these questions in his mind for long but couldn’t ask before as he couldn’t find the appropriate words. But today, it all came out spontaneously.

When Bruno’s question ended, they had reached the lawn where Sachi had lit a small fire in a metal container. Sachi had heard the last part of the question. They sat down near the fire to absorb some of its warmth and Pinky Singh started answering his question .

“Contradiction and confusion come when you try to choose.” Pinky Singh’s voice was very calm after meditation. “A true saint never chooses. He is choice-less. He accepts whatever is given to him or whatever happens to him. Life has two parts: the center and the periphery. When you are in the marketplace and doing worldly things, you are at your periphery. When you meditate, you are at your center. Life is neither just the periphery nor the center but is a balance between the two. It keeps oscillating between the two poles. The problem arises when you try to choose.”

By now, Sachi and Bruno had become aware that something very profound and unheard was going to be delivered. They had already prepared themselves to absorb all this.

“When you choose only one of them and reject the other, your life becomes imbalanced. Life is so rich and vast so why be selective and choosy. Rejection is arrogance and acceptance is modesty. Feel grateful

for whatever life offers you.” Pinky Singh brought his hands out of the shawl and lifted them toward the sky in a gesture of gratitude for existence.

“When you are at your center, be there like there is no periphery and when you are at the periphery, be there like there is no center. Meditate in the morning and then go to the marketplace. When you are tired, come back and meditate again and then go back to the marketplace. This is the biggest, refreshing change one can have. People keep moving from one periphery to another just for a change. But that’s not a refreshing change. Let me give you an example.” Pinky Singh was ready with an interesting example. Sachi and Bruno sat up with hands in their lap, gazing at him in anticipation.

“You get bored with your home, office and routine life and decide to go on a vacation to some distant place just for a change. You do feel good as your surroundings, climate and people have changed but that’s not the real change that your being is seeking because you have just moved from one periphery to another. The real and refreshing change happens when you move from the periphery to the center or from the center to the periphery. You must have observed that just 30 minutes of deep meditation and the same old house, your car, your office, your friends all look so new and fresh. You feel like you are born again.” Along with listening to Pinky Singh’s words, Sachi and Bruno were enjoying watching his hand gestures in the form of various mudras.

“So always remember, never choose. Choosing or being selective is just like having a small window in the sky. It’s foolish. When you can have the whole sky, why have a window? That’s why a true saint doesn’t have any character. He is simply characterless. Yes, you heard it right. Characterless!” He smiled, seeing creases of confusion forming on their foreheads. “Having a character means you have been defined.” He joined his hands with his fingers threaded together.

“You have commandments now. You have moralities now. You have a sword of should and should not’s hanging on your neck all the time now. There is something that you can do and something that you can’t do. Your freedom is gone. You have become a dead pond now. You are not

flowing anywhere and are no longer fresh. A true saint is like a river stream, always flowing, full of freshness and having no defined path." He ended with a pleasant smile.

This profound discourse changed Bruno and Sachi's perspective on life. His piercing gaze melted their beliefs like ice cream in the open sun. All their decaying inhibitions and worthless reservations shed like the dead leaves of a tree.



With this fresh outlook on life, they both went into the woods to indulge in the taste of the forbidden fruit of love. Hugging each other, they lay in a floating boat in the lap of the gentle waves of the lake.

The crescent moon looked as if had covered its face with one hand to give Bruno and Sachi some privacy. Two empty glasses of wine kept moving in the floating boat, conveying that their love was in progress. After spending a passionate and gratifying time together, they laid in the boat and looked at the stars. Suddenly, a tear fell from Sachi's eyes onto Bruno's shoulder like a shooting star.

"Hey! What happened?"

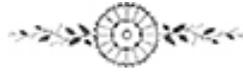
"Very few days are left! I will miss you!" Sachi choked with grief.

Seeing the pain and longing in her eyes, Bruno hugged her passionately.

"You will always remain in my heart." Sachi wrapped her arms around Bruno.

"And so will you." Bruno had no more words to soothe her pain. They laid in the boat, snuggling closer.

CHAPTER THIRTY EIGHT



The Purpose of Life

The next day, Bruno was cleaning the kitchen while Sachi sat in the garden, staring at him with a deep yearning in her eyes.

“What are you thinking?” Pinky Singh cut through her thoughts.

The intoxication of last night was still on her mind and so was the pain of separation. It seemed as if Pinky Singh had read this all from her face.

“The time is coming closer,” she replied in a low voice.

“But he is least bothered about that now.”

They both eyed Bruno, who was enjoying cleaning the kitchen.

“He is not but I am. I will miss him.” A solitary tear trickled down her cheek.

“Who knows he might still make it?” Pinky Singh twisted his mustache with a glint of playfulness in his eyes .

“WHAT?” She wiped her tears in haste and turned toward Pinky Singh. “BUT HOW? Did he fulfill the condition given by God? Did he find the purpose of life?” she asked in a single breath.

“There is no purpose or goal of life in the first place.” He adjusted his turban delicately.

“WHAT?”

“Yes! Otherwise, it would have been achieved by mankind until now. Trillions of light years of existence have passed. If the goal or purpose hasn’t been achieved by now, then when will it?” He shrugged, spreading his arms. “The reason is simple. There is no purpose or goal in life. Life is a goal in itself. It’s not a business but a play to be enjoyed thoroughly.” Pinky Singh nodded with his signature grin.

“But why then did God tell him to find it when it doesn’t exist?” Sachi squeezed Pinky Singh’s hand in great desperation.

“Maybe... so that he fails badly...”

“God wanted Bruno to fail? Why?” She shook with restlessness. “Why is he being so cruel to Bruno?” She grabbed Pinky Singh’s arm and started shaking him in distress.

“NO, HE IS NOT!” Pinky Singh held her shoulders tightly to bring her back to her senses. “In fact, he has been very kind to Bruno.” Pinky Singh went back to his normal voice when he saw she was normal. “First, you have to understand that the subconscious and unconscious mind of the human body that Bruno has is in bad shape. Hassan’s harrowing childhood and Abu Jwahiri’s venomous brainwash had done severe damage to his subconscious mind. And until and unless Bruno repaired that damage, this human body could prove to be lethal for him. He needed a miraculous remedy to cure it. And that miraculous remedy is Moksha.”

“Moksha?” A dim ray of hope and expectation started peeping through the cloud of shock and confusion on Sachi’s face. She had immense trust in Pinky Singh. She anticipated some another unheard and unusual truth to be revealed today.

“Yes, Moksha! I know Moksha has been projected as a very big, unrealistic, unfeasible and otherworldly phenomenon by our so-called priests and religious people. But let me tell you it’s not. Moksha is simply becoming pure again, just as you were born. Moksha is just like coming home back again. It’s not reaching somewhere but a U-turn toward

yourself. It's not about achieving or gaining something but it's all about losing whatever you have unnecessarily accumulated till now."

Pinky Singh moved his fingers in his dense beard. "Now coming to your question about why God wanted Bruno to fail badly."

Sachi's heart pounded in her chest as this was a question of life and death.

"Well, without failure Moksha is not possible. We have made failure a very negative thing. But it's not. To burn all impurities, gold has to pass through the fire. Failure is that fire. In the world of Moksha, failure is critical and crucial. Failure means the outer world is over; it has come full circle. Failure means all the false hopes, dreams and expectations from life have disappeared. Now you are as you should be, pure and natural. Failure filters all that is bad inside you and purifies you. Failure is like an electric shock to put you back in your senses. And remember the more complex your mind and ego is, the bigger the shock you need." His gaze was penetrating and intense.

"A person who hasn't had an ultimate failure or the final failure of his life yet will always find something or other in the outer world to hold on. He keeps creating false hopes thinking, 'maybe this time I can find happiness and peace in something out there'. But that time never comes. Marriage, business, politics, kids, grandkids. You don't leave any area but unfortunately, you never find happiness and peace in them. The reason is simple. It's not there!" he blinked and shook his head slowly with a smile.

"Yes! You can never find happiness and peace in the outer world because it's simply not there. In the history of mankind, all those who have found happiness and peace are those who found it inside. Nobody, without a single exception, has ever found it in the outside world. But people still keep hoping endlessly. They hope that maybe in their case it may happen. Maybe they are different and might find it in the outside world. Maybe this last time, maybe after my second marriage or maybe after having grandkids." He wrung his hands delicately.

"You keep running and running and don't want to accept the fact that you are on the wrong track because it hurts your ego. The one who stops

this unending search and experiences his ultimate and final failure finally attains true happiness and peace. God has created an opportunity for Bruno where he can experience his final failure and finally attain Moksha. So..." His lips curved into a glorious smile as he ran an affectionate hand over her shoulder. "The real condition to be fulfilled here is Moksha not finding the purpose of life."

"But if the real condition was to attain Moksha, then why didn't God ask him to do that straight away, directly?" she asked.

"Because you can't approach Moksha directly. It's like sleep. Whenever you want to sleep, you lie down peacefully, wait for it and allow it to happen. You can't force it. You can't conquer it. That's the major reason why people become insomniacs because they are trying to sleep. Moksha has to be approached indirectly." He blinked with a gracious smile, exuding a wonderful sense of calm.

"Try to understand it in this way. First, you are in the world and you try all possible things to be happy and blissful, which, in fact, has to be done because it's part of the process. You can't bypass it. You grow up, get married, earn money, prestige and power; you have kids, grandkids. Then one day, you get fed up with all these and turn your whole focus toward God. But even that doesn't work because God has become part of the same world. You have reduced God to a mere desire or a goal. You are still hopeful. You are still running." He walked the fingers of one hand briskly on the palm of his other hand.

"But ultimately at the end, when all these things fail to make you happy, blissful and peaceful, you give up. You relax and let go. And in this let go state of mind you suddenly get a glimpse of Moksha, enlightenment, God, ultimate bliss or whatever you call it. Blessed are those who experience this final failure! Enlightenment happens when all your hopes and all desires, whether worldly or otherworldly," Pinky Singh lifted his eyebrows to emphasize on the last two words, "all disappear."

"You asked why God didn't ask Bruno directly to achieve Moksha? Well if Bruno would have had done meditation just to achieve Moksha, then he would have never achieved it." He unhurriedly shook his head in

denial. "Moksha is not a goal. God is not a goal. He is already there within you. Searching for him is all about missing him. All your efforts will only take you away from him. All you need to do is relax.... That's the reason we have these meditation techniques to help you relax." With his beard and mustache all over his face, his gleaming eyes were accentuated in all its glory.

"So will he attain Moksha in this limited time and will God give him human life?" she effused.

"Well, there is less time but again, it all depends on when the boiling point is reached and all his false hopes and desires get evaporated."

"So it means he can still make it?" Sachi's eyes twinkled with an overwhelming desire for an affirmative answer. Squeezing his hand, she had already started nodding in anticipation of a 'yes'.

"Yes, he can attain it even in the last moment of his life."

Tears of joy erupted from her eyes as a wide smile parted her lips. Sachi darted forward to give Pinky Singh a tight hug in exhilaration and jubilation. The darkness of distress was so dense and intense that even this small ray of hope was enough to illuminate her heart.



Time passed and Sachi prayed for Bruno every day. She was sure that Lord Shiva would listen to her prayers and fulfill her wish. Her child-like innocence turned the whole situation into quite a strange one. Sachi was hopeful that Bruno would become hopeless and desired for all his desires die. Though she knew very well that she was one of his biggest desires, she still prayed for him to become free of desires, every day. Time flew and these leftover days were reduced to just seven sunrises.

CHAPTER THIRTY NINE



A Call from the Past

It was another beautiful day in Mini-Heaven. Bruno was deeply engrossed in his pottery. Pinky Singh was at the market and Sachi was in her room. Suddenly, the rumble of a vehicle's engine caught Bruno's attention. He turned his head and saw a jeep enter the main gate. Curious, he walked toward the jeep. As Bruno went closer, he saw a tall, fat man step out of the jeep.

"Hi, there is a problem with my car. Can you give me some water please?"

"Sure."

Bruno went inside and returned with a jug of water. The man was looking for something in the engine of his car. He took the jug with a smile.

"Thanks, Hassan!" The man poured water into the engine.

Bruno flinched in shock and wondered who this man was and how he knew his name.

"I trained you and you forgot me so fast." The person grinned wickedly

As Bruno pondered this mystery, the stranger gave him another shock.

“Now, listen carefully.” The stranger closed the bonnet. “Abu Jwahiri is in India. He wants to see you,” he said in a low voice, taking everything around him under the radar of his eyes.

Bruno felt like he had heard this name before. Yes, it was the venomous and noxious Jihadist leader who had brainwashed Hassan and provoked him to execute terror attacks. This man was Usman. He had trained Hassan at Abu Jwahiri’s private ranch.

“Actually, that won’t be possible... mmmm.” Bruno wondered how to frame his words. “... I’m very busy. So...” Before Bruno could complete the thought, he found Usman standing close to him, pointing a gun at his stomach.

“I’m sure you don’t want to put your friends’ lives at risk,” he whispered in Bruno’s ear. “Would you?” He pressed Bruno’s stomach with the muzzle of the gun, making him wince in pain.

Visibly scared, Bruno shook his head.

“Good; let’s move.” Usman withdrew his gun.

Bruno had no option other than to obey Usman. Seeing him, sitting in the jeep through the window, Sachi came running out but they moved.

As they started moving, another person sitting in the rear blindfolded Bruno without giving him a warning.



After a short drive, Bruno struggled to maintain his balance as the jeep halted abruptly.

“Hey! What the hell are you doing! Let me go!” Bruno tried to resist as they shifted him to another vehicle.

His blindfold was removed roughly. He blinked, narrowed his eyes and found himself sitting in the backseat of a luxurious SUV. An old man with a long beard and no mustache, wearing Muslim clerical attire, was staring at him. ‘This must be Abu Jwahiri!’ Bruno guessed.

“My little boy, you don’t know how worried I was about you!” Abu Jwahiri spread his arms, “At last, I found you.” He kissed Bruno’s forehead.

Behind the veil of Abu’s fake affectionate dramatic tone, Bruno could clearly smell the filth of his being. The other men who were standing around looked stupid and barbaric. For a meditative person like Bruno, this was all quite unbearable. Bruno badly missed Pinky Singh and Sachi at that moment.

“How did you know I was here?” Bruno faltered.

“We know everything about you.” Abu Jwahiri moved his thumb over the beads of his rosary with a wolfish grin. “When and with whom you came to India, how you beat up two Kafirs (non-Muslims), how you landed in jail and how you escaped. We also know that the police are still in search of you.”

Bruno saw a glint of wickedness in Abu’s eyes. Rather than being a big-shot Jihadist leader, Abu looked like a cheap blackmailer. Bruno wondered how people gave so much respect to this kind of third-rate criminal .

“You know, just by beating up a few Kafirs, don’t be under the misconception that you have made Allah happy. You need to do much more.” Abu nodded. “Well, there is good news for you. We have planned something huge this time. The whole world will be shaken and you know what? Allah has chosen you once again. You are one of the few lucky ones whom Allah has given a chance to serve him.” Abu’s effort to speak calmly and slowly looked deliberate and phony and was quite annoying. Bruno felt a rush of revulsion.

From Abu’s words, it was clear that they were planning another terror attack but of a large magnitude this time. Bruno wondered about how stupid and retarded these people are. Why were they wasting their precious life with such crap?

“Why do we have to do this again and again...?” Bruno asserted himself as he couldn’t hide his feelings.

But this was not Mini-Heaven and the person sitting in front of him was not Pinky Singh. His question was not well-received. Suddenly, the fake and unauthentic smile on Abu's face vanished and his face became quite frosty.

"My son, these Kafirs (non-Muslims) are a threat to our religion and our Allah. If we don't protect him, then who will? Allah needs us. Our people have a lot of anger buried inside; it's time to tell them who we are."

"What's the point in killing and being killed to vent one's anger? Why don't we learn catharsis? It's safer..."

But even the frosty look on Abu's face couldn't stop Bruno from asking some more tough questions. Due to his intense meditation and catharsis, he had become like a child who couldn't fake his emotions or stop himself from asking valid questions. But he did not know that these direct questions were not well-received by such fanatics.

"SAFE?" Abu looked quite rattled. "A jihadi never talks like that." He didn't have any logical answer to this question so it was time to make some noise. "We are warriors, my son. We are here on a sacred mission, not to sell kids diapers.... Huh, safe!" He scowled. The fake calmness and serenity, which had been on his face from the beginning, went down the drain with Bruno's question.

Seeing him lose control, Bruno concluded the sensitivity of the situation and held himself back. He saw it was no use arguing with these knucklehead terrorists.

"I mean to..." Bruno tried to pacify him.

"Please, my son!" Abu cut in with a raised hand and ferocious eyes. "I don't see the fire I used to see in your eyes."

Bruno wondered how this learned scholar couldn't even bear one direct question. Whereas, Pinky Singh would always encourage him to ask as many questions as he could. He cursed himself for comparing this piece of shit to a glorious man like Pinky Singh.

“Go back and take a break. My man will call you. If you find your self-respect again, join the fight in the name of Allah. Otherwise, die by an ordinary police bullet and waste your precious life. Khuda Hafiz.”

Before Bruno could say anything, he was forcefully blindfolded again and taken back into the jeep.

“Keep this with you; we will call you on this phone,” he heard a harsh voice say, as a phone and charger were inserted in his pocket .

Bruno was dropped a few hundred meters away from Mini-Heaven. Before he could remove his blindfold and open his eyes, the jeep had sped away.



When Bruno entered through the main gate, Sachi, who was waiting for him impatiently, darted out to him. Pinky Singh hung back, relaxed. He followed her calmly.

“Hassan, are you okay? Who were those guys? Where did they take you?” Sachi anxiously held Bruno’s arm as if somebody was going to take him away from her right away.

“I am okay, Sachi!” mumbled Bruno, freeing himself gently from her grip. “They were nobody. They mistook me for somebody.” Downcast, Bruno walked toward the woods.

Unable to contain her anxiety, Sachi tried going after him. But Pinky Singh stopped her. He gestured her to let Bruno be alone for some time.

After sitting alone in the woods and meditating for more than an hour, Bruno settled down. A smile of clarity dawned his face. ‘Had I not met Pinky Singh and done meditation, I might have been brainwashed by this man, Abu Jwahiri, again,’ thought Bruno.

He came back and kissed Sachi with a hug. She sighed in relief to see him behaving normally. After exchanging a few words of affection with Sachi, he went toward the garden area to spend some time with Pinky Singh.



"It was Abu Jwahiri," Bruno said, glancing at Pinky Singh. "The one who brainwashed Hassan earlier and planned the terror attacks. He is in India. They want me back. They are planning something big this time."

Bruno narrated the incident in detail to Pinky Singh, who had just come out of deep meditation.

"I wished I could spend my last few days in peace and love but these bloody jihadis." Resentful over his fate, Bruno punched his palm. "What should I say when their phone call comes?" Vacillated, Bruno eyed Pinky Singh, expecting some suggestions.

"You don't have an option!" mumbled Pinky Singh, wiping his face with his hands.

"W-What do you mean?" Bruno faltered.

"You can't say no to them. If you do so, the very next moment, all three of us will be shot. After all, you know a lot about them."

"But why they would kill you and Sachi?" groaned Bruno with wide eyes.

"Because they won't take any chances. They would assume that you shared everything with us. And why would those fanatics shy away from firing two extra bullets when the security of their mission is at risk?"

Bruno was stunned. Just the thought of Sachi and Pinky Singh being killed because of him gave him a severe panic attack.

"Oh God, what have I done!" gasped Bruno, eyes on the verge of falling out and his hands on his head. "I shouldn't have returned here! What a blunder I have made. I am not worried about my life but I don't want you and Sachi to be killed. I think we should hide somewhere to save our lives!" he babbled in panic.

"If they can find you here, then they can find us anywhere. It's of no use!" Pinky Singh sat calmly with his hands in his lap.

"Then what should we do? Oh God! I don't want to go back to them and do that blood-filled work again." Bruno kept speaking in a panic until an affectionate hand touched his shoulder.

“Calm down! There is one way out!”

Bruno looked at Pinky Singh to see a therapeutic smile on his face. The sublime trust in his eyes finally helped Bruno come back to his senses. He knew his master, Pinky Singh, had an answer to every problem.

“What? Tell me please!”

“Before they kill us!” Pinky Singh leaned toward Bruno to whisper in his ear. “Why don’t we kill them?” Pinky Singh suggested with a glint of playfulness in his eyes.

This unforeseen statement dropped like a nuclear bomb on Bruno, leaving him completely dumbfounded and shocked. Every now and then, Pinky Singh had shown some unprecedented and unexpected aspect of his being. But this was far from anything Bruno could have imagined. He never expected this, even in his wildest dreams.

“What? Are you kidding me? So this is your way out? It looks more like a suicide plan!”

Seeing Pinky Singh still smiling, Bruno lost his cool. “For God’s sake, why don’t you understand? They are not street boys; they are professionally trained terrorists,” he yelled.

“And so are you,” Pinky Singh replied promptly, polite and calm. “I know you can do this job. I am not putting a burden on you. They are not just murderers but are a threat to humanity. They not only kill but destroy innocent brains. You can prevent many lives from being lost and many brains from being brainwashed.”

“Perhaps you forgot one thing!” Bruno peered at Pinky Singh to remind him of something. “Now I am not a terrorist! I am a spiritual man!”

“Spirituality is not cowardice; it’s not escapism.”

“But we can go to the police. What’s the need of doing it all ourselves?” Bruno stood up and waved his hands in annoyance against this impractical and unrealistic idea.

“Police? Are you kidding me?” Pinky Singh sniggered. “We are fugitives. Our photographs would be in all the police stations in the region by now, especially after rescuing Sachi the second time. Nobody would believe us. And even if they believed us, you don’t know our police. They are very spiritual.”

“What? Spiritual?” Bruno frowned, looking puzzled.

“Yes, you heard it right. Spiritual! They are the greatest non-doers. They are effortless. They laugh at everything, even at your serious problems. They can side with the criminals anytime. AHHH! They are so non-judgmental.”

Bruno got this one-liner only when Pinky Singh laughed.

“Huh! I can’t believe this!” mocked Bruno in contempt. “I came here in the hope of finding the purpose of life and some peace of mind and look what somebody is encouraging me to do. Enjoy a bloodbath. BRAVO!” He clapped insolently in a dramatic way. “This is what Hassan was doing before, isn’t it? Killing people he didn’t even know. Then what’s the difference?”

“Lord Krishna has said the soul is not born and it does not die. It is eternal and permanent; it does not die when the body is killed. And when a man knows this, how does he kill or cause anyone to kill? The soul can’t be cut by a weapon or burned by fire. So it’s just your illusion if you think you could kill anybody.” Listening to these powerful sutras from Lord Krishna in Pinky Singh’s calm voice soothed Bruno’s anxious mind.

“And there is a lot of difference between what your body and mind were doing before and what it would be doing now. A difference of north pole and south pole.” Pinky Singh nodded with an assertive gaze.

“During morning meditation, when you scream, they are not your screams. They are the screams of the innocent people your body and mind killed in New York. You didn’t suffer less compared to those innocent lives. Rather, I would say you suffered more. And now by killing those terrorist masterminds, who give birth to such situations, you can prevent many more innocent screams. I must say you would be saving

many young brains from being brainwashed and suffering as you did. This is the difference!"

Bruno became silent but only for a while. His wavering mind raised its hood with a hiss !

"Whatever you said is right but I still can't imagine a person meditating peacefully after killing somebody."

"Hmm!" Pinky Singh exhaled. "Come, I need to show you something."

CHAPTER FORTY



Spirituality and War

Once again, Pinky Singh led Bruno into the basement. There was another room next to the storeroom. As he opened the door, Bruno was spellbound to see paintings all around, on all the walls of the big room. They were the paintings by some of the greatest painters of India, which Pinky Singh had collected over the years. They looked priceless. Pinky Singh took him to a specific one.

“Do you know who he is?”

Bruno looked carefully and saw something written on the bottom on the right. “Is it Sobha Singh?” asked Bruno as he peered at the painting.

“No, Sobha Singh is the painter.” Pinky Singh chuckled. “The one who made this great portrait.”

Bruno shook his head and shrugged to express his inability to provide him with the correct answer .

“This is Guru Gobind Singh, the tenth Guru of Sikhs. He was a spiritual master, a poet and, yes, a warrior at the same time.”

Bruno observed closely. The details and expressions captured in the portrait were outstanding and breath-taking. It was definitely a state-of-the-art portrait. Bruno couldn’t take his eyes off it and was busy studying its finer details.

"This arrow in his hands looks beautiful," said Bruno.

"Actually, it's an arrow with a gold-plated arrowhead."

"A gold-plated arrowhead? But why?" Bruno furrowed his brows.

"As I have said, he was a warrior. He fought many battles. And this couldn't be possible without killing people. A gold-plated arrowhead is a symbol that he had no animosity, hatred or contempt for those he killed or fought with."

"But what was he fighting for?" Bruno expressed his curiosity with a shrug.

"For truth!"

Pinky Singh stared with his dispassionate and detached eyes. "India had been invaded many times in the past by various invaders. The Mughals were one of them. They invaded India somewhere in the 16th century. In the entire Mughal empire's reign, Aurangzeb is the name which remained infamous for his atrocities, like the destruction of Hindu temples, execution or forced conversions of his non-Muslim subjects to Islam, etc. He was such an extreme fanatic that he never shied away from even butchering the non-Muslims who refused to convert to Islam. He had a simple slogan 'either convert to Islam or die.' "

Bruno could very well imagine the barbarism and cruelty of this man called Aurangzeb. He could feel the kind of threat and menace he was to the people of India.

"No one had courage or power to stop this maniac, except for one. That was Guru Gobind Singh. He was such a glorious warrior that it is said that the Mughal tyrants used to shiver upon hearing his name. He was the only warrior who had never fought for any kingdom, money or power but the truth. And in this life-long battle, his sons (aged 13 and 17) were killed in battle, while his other two sons (aged 5 and 8) were buried alive in a wall by Wazir Khan. Had he not picked up his sword, you can very well imagine what kind of world, this country, India, would have been."

Bruno was taken aback by the story. He looked at the portrait to see the most fearless eyes he had ever seen. But at the same time, they were pure and there was no sign of aggression in them. With an arrow in his hand and a falcon perched on his hand, Guru Gobind Singh looked magnificent and majestic in his imperial attire.

“The reason behind why I told you this story is to make you understand that sometimes you have to pick up weapons when you have no other option. But that doesn’t make you non-spiritual or non-peaceful. Everyone has his own way. Jesus had his own way. Krishna had his own way. Nanak had his own way. And Guru Gobind Singh had his own way. The only condition is that you should be awakened and your consciousness should be pure. You should know what you are doing and why you are doing it.”

Bruno was silent. But deep inside his consciousness, a big occurrence had occurred. In his opinion, Pinky Singh’s personality had come full circle by converging all the aspects of human life.

They moved out and got busy with their normal day-to-day activities. After exhausting all the possible doubts in Bruno’s mind and bringing a bright smile to his face, Pinky Singh was again cracking jokes at dinner time.

The seed of knowledge, which Pinky had sowed in Bruno, remained with him for the whole night. And with the next day’s explosive meditation, it flowered into new clarity and wisdom. With trust and faith in his eyes, he walked toward Pinky Singh, who was busy watering the plants in the garden. “I think you are right! I know you don’t fear death but at least for the sake of Sachi’s life, I will have to do this! I want her to live and I would do anything for that.”

Pinky Singh smiled and continued to water the flowers.

“But how will we do it?” Bruno sat down on a rock.

“Good question.” He grinned playfully. “We will see but for now, if you get the call just say you are doing it.”

Bruno nodded in affirmation.

After breakfast, Sachi was busy with some work and they resumed their discussion.

“We know that you were professionally trained to be a terrorist but the task is big. So let’s check out what level your body and mind are at right now.”

Bruno glanced at him with curious eyes, wondering what on earth was on this crazy man’s mind.



Once again, Pinky Singh led Bruno to the basement, toward the third and the last room’s door. Bruno had already prepared himself for something unexpected. He knew very well that whenever Pinky Singh took him to the basement, something phenomenal happened.

“My God!” Bruno was right because when the door opened, he was stunned to see a huge collection of guns. “Whose guns are these?” His eyes were the size of watermelons.

“My dad’s.” Pinky Singh picked up a double-barrel rifle and started examining it. “Rich landlords generally have this kind of passion.”

“Rich landlord?” Bruno was extremely astounded and puzzled. “Then how come you are a cab driver?”

“After my father’s death, my two elder brothers took control of everything and kicked me out of the house. But thankfully, in compensation, they gave me this farmhouse and my dad’s old ambassador car, which I use as a cab.” Pinky Singh made a gesture of delight and gratitude.

“I don’t believe this. This is unjust and you didn’t fight for it.” Bruno showed his resentment.

“I don’t have time to fight for petty things like money.” He waved his hand in denial as he peered into the rifle’s barrels.

After taking two double-barrel rifles and few bullets in his hands, Pinky Singh motioned for Bruno, who was still gaping at him in amazement, to follow him.

As they went out, Sachi was stunned to see them carrying guns. "HEY! What are you guys up to?" she asked, with her jaw dropped .

"We are going to the bank!" said Pinky Singh in a firm voice.

"Are you serious? You are going to rob a bank?" Sachi was wide-eyed. Her hands flew to her mouth in disbelief.

"No! But tell them to stop calling my phone for new insurance and investment plans." Suddenly, the intensity on Pinky Singh's face flipped into cheeky laughter. Sachi glared at him in mock-anger.

He and Bruno went inside the forest and started testing the rifles. Pinky Singh fired a perfect shot and threw the rifle at Bruno. As Bruno grabbed it and was ready to fire, Pinky Singh corrected his posture. "Like this. Okay, fire! Hmmm! Good!"

After a few shots, Pinky Singh was happy to see that Bruno was still good at handling guns. As he re-examined the rifle, Bruno shared a guilty thought he had been holding since yesterday.

"Don't you think you have been unnecessarily dragged into a problem that is not actually yours? Don't you think God is being unfair to you?"

"Deciding that is not my problem! My problem is how I should deal with it. I don't want to waste my time and energy just grumbling, brooding and cursing my fate." Pinky Singh held the barrel of the gun with the gun-butt resting on the ground.

"But still... I mean.... Don't you fear death? Even a little bit? I mean, you can get killed in this." Bruno showed his desperation for a transparent answer.

"I have lived my life so I won't regret or fear death." Pinky Singh sat on a rock .

"You lived your life? But you are just 38." Bruno raised his brows in dissent. He had expected a more logical answer.

"It's not about quantity; it's all about the quality of life." Pinky Singh stood up and exhaled. "You can keep vegetating unconsciously for hundreds of years and still regret that you have not lived at all. But if you

are awakened, even a few moments are enough. The last seven years of my life were worth seven thousand years because each moment in this period is equal to a lifetime." His wide eyes sparkled with throbbing and pulsating life energy and extraordinary vitality.

"I lived my life with totality and never bypassed a single moment. When it was time to laugh, I laughed like a child. When it was time to cry, I cried wholeheartedly. When I loved, I became love. When I danced, I was not there. It was only dance. I never postponed happiness. That's why you fail to find any traces of regret on my face. That's why you find my life an unending celebration. I lived each moment of my life and died at that moment. Death is just a routine thing. Nothing to fear in it." He cast an unflinching eye on Bruno.

The magnitude of Pinky Singh's being, which Bruno had witnessed just now, was direly needed by him as it would give him a lot of courage to fight against the jihadis.

They kept practicing like this for another four to five days. Along with guns, Bruno also started regaining his physical strength with push-ups, chin-ups and running. After meditation and physical training, he would spend the remainder of the day with Sachi.

CHAPTER FORTY ONE



Only Two Sunrises Left

Sachi's fading hope was about to die as 88 sunrises had passed and just two were left. Her heart sank with each passing moment and a sense of impending doom gripped her. But in this dense sinking darkness of sorrow and distress, she still held onto that single ray of hope that Pinky Singh had shown her. Thanks to the immense trust she had in Pinky Singh.

On the other hand, Bruno and Pinky had just completed their daily practice session.

"It's been five days and no call. We just wasted our time. I think they dropped their plan or me out of the plan."

"No, they haven't!" replied Pinky Singh, picking empty bullet shells from the grass. "They were keeping an eye on us continuously. The very next day, you started training and didn't go to the police. So they got their answer. That's the reason we are alive! They will call you at the right moment, close to the attack, just to get your formal consent."

"How do you have all this knowledge on them? "

"Knowing!" Pinky Singh raised his eyebrow. "Not knowledge!"

This answer had the power to settle all of Bruno's escalating doubts and curiosity. He wondered how stupid the terrorists were. They put in so much effort to trace him and were still keeping an eye on him. They were

wasting their precious time, for what? Just for a concept called 'Jannat (heaven)', which they were promised after death. He wondered why they waited for it for their whole life when they could have it right now. He pitied them for not valuing precious human lives.

Suddenly, the phone the terrorists had given him started ringing. As Bruno gaped at Pinky Singh, he motioned for him to answer the call.

"Hello."

"Aslam walekum." A lifeless, barbaric voice was heard on the other side. It was Usman.

"Walekum aslam..."

"So are you ready?"

"Yes! Bhai Jaan!"

"Good. Tomorrow at 8:00 pm."

The phone was disconnected.

"Tomorrow. 8:00 pm." Bruno muttered. "It means I will be doing this just hours before my last sunrise? HUH! What a disastrous end to my short human life! When I should be sitting silently and meditating on the purpose of human life, I will be committing bloodshed and fighting those barbaric fanatics."

Before Bruno's grumbling and complaining escalated, he looked at Pinky Singh, who was enjoying moving his neck in a relaxed way. Bruno instantly realized his mistake. With a smile on his face, he accepted his fate and reality as it was.

"Well, now tell me. How we are going to do it?" He sighed.

"Yes!" Pinky Singh continued his stretching. "They will pick you up at 8:00 pm. As we are in a border area, their meeting point before the attack will be no further than 70 to 80 km. So you will reach there by 10:00 to 10:30 pm. If I am not wrong, a Pakistani terrorist organization is also involved in this because without their help, Abu Jwahiri can't execute an attack in India."

“But why did Abu Jwahiri come so far to India?”

Pinky Singh stopped stretching, fished out a newspaper and showed it to Bruno. Two hundred Americans, which included top education officials and students from Oregon, Indiana and California, were to arrive in Amritsar the next day and visit the Golden Temple the day after. Their aim was to study Sikh history.

“It could be a joint venture. They are planning to kill two birds with one stone. On the one hand, Indians and 200 Americans on the other hand.”

“So that’s why they were saying that it was gonna be very big this time.”

“Yes! And that’s why they are so desperate to involve you: the more men, the more casualties. The American group would be visiting the Golden Temple at around 8:00 am so they won’t attack before that. So you must be there between 10:30 pm to about 6:00 am. We have to do this at, approximately, 2:00 am when everybody is asleep.”

“Can I ask you something?” A glint of doubt dazzled in the corner of Bruno’s eyes. “Is it a wise thing to put one’s life at risk just based on some vague assumptions? I mean—” He faltered with his words. “Your theory could be correct but in case it turns out to be incorrect, our effort and precious lives will all be wasted. We have no surety here.”

“Surety!” Pinky Singh grinned and sat on a rock. “Okay, tell me, when Edmund Hillary started climbing Mount Everest, what surety did he have that he would return alive? After failing one thousand times during discovery, when Thomas Edison was still persistent on trying it one thousand and one times, what surety did he have that he would succeed? When a man falls in love with a woman, what surety does he have that she will love him forever and not leave him?”

As usual, Bruno had no answers to Pinky Singh’s questions. Seeing Bruno gazing at him, he motioned for him to throw the water bottle toward him.

“Surety is a word that the stupid use.” Pinky Singh caught the water bottle. “A man of wisdom knows that life is uncertain, unpredictable and full of risk.” He gulped down some water. “Trust is what you need to have, not surety!”

“Okay!” Bruno sighed and put his hands up before sitting next to Pinky Singh. “But how will you find me?”

“You don’t worry about that.” Pinky Singh waved his hand. “As a cab driver, I know every inch of the area around me. I will find you!” He took another gulp of water. “You just have to take care of two things. One, find a mobile phone to call me with and two, keep your ears open during the journey.”

Bruno’s doubts vanished as he looked into Pinky Singh’s intense eyes.

“But right now, you should be thinking of something else.” Pinky Singh delicately put his hand on Bruno’s shoulder. “Sachi! Today is your last night with her,” he said in a low voice.

This relentless fact brought profound desolation to Bruno’s face. His gaze was downcast. But instead of going to Sachi, he asked Pinky Singh for his phone and called Megan.

Megan had left for America just a week ago. He asked her for a favor as he wanted her to make all the necessary arrangements for Sachi’s immigration to America.

When Megan couldn’t understand anything, he requested her to do as he said as he didn’t have much time to explain everything. For the sake of their good, old relationship, Megan agreed and promised to try her best. This came as a great relief to Bruno and he thanked Megan for her large-heartedness.

After talking to Megan, he called Mr. Gill and asked him whether he could leave a close friend with him for a few days. Bruno wanted to do so because there was no certainty about his and Pinky Singh’s lives. He wanted to keep her in safe hands until Megan could take her to America.

As usual, without a single thought, Mr. Gill agreed. After Mr. Gill’s warm response, Bruno was assured of Sachi’s well-being after his 90

sunrises were over. He and Pinky Singh went toward the building.



With a heavy heart, Bruno informed Sachi about what he had planned for her. Sachi's response was quite predictable. She refused to do so and insisted on being with him till his last moment. Finally, Pinky Singh had to intervene and persuade her by saying that things could become quite complicated if she didn't do as Bruno said.

He tried to make her understand that she had to part with Bruno either way. But if she were in safe and trustworthy hands, Bruno would be relieved and assured.

He told Sachi that by not doing as he was saying, she was only making the situation difficult for Bruno. Finally, she agreed when Pinky Singh said, "Trust me." These two words reminded her of the secret talk she had with Pinky Singh where he informed Sachi that Bruno could make it even in the last moment of his life.

CHAPTER FORTY TWO



Last Night Together

Sachi and Bruno, with an ocean of emotions in their hearts, held each other's hand in great passion and walked to the lake to spend their last night together. It was a luminous night, with a rare, incandescent and magical moon bathing everything in a pale blue light. The sky was jeweled with glittering stars. The lake shone frostily under the full moon. As they moved closer to the lake, the image of the moon floating in the water looked immensely beautiful.

Sachi was carrying the radio, which she listened to quite often, with her. When she turned it on, a song was playing.

*"Lag ja galey ke phir ye haseen raat ho na ho...
shayad phir is janam me mulaqaat ho na ho..."*

(Embrace me again this beautiful night, we may greet or not,
who knows after this, in this lifetime, again we meet or not.)

Bruno came face-to-face with Sachi and stared deep into her ocean-like eyes. The reflection of Sachi's face in Bruno's eyes looked similar to the floating moon in the lake's water. Bruno held her neck gently and put his forehead against hers. Suddenly, they both started crying profusely. They passionately fell into each other's arms and started melting. They wept their heart out and the music played an important role in this.

After emptying their hearts, they stared into each other's eyes as they wiped their tears. The slow, romantic music had now changed into a slightly peppier tune.

"Ye ratein ye mausam nadi ka kinara ye chanchal hawa."

They started swaying along to the music while hugging each other. They felt quite light after weeping profusely. They kissed each other passionately, still moving to the music.

After this, they ambled along the lake's banks, holding hands. Soon they settled under a tree and snuggled together. Sachi laid in his lap, holding Bruno's arms. They could hear the radio playing in the distance. Bruno nuzzled her hair. All this happened in deep silence with neither of them saying a single word. This moment was so profound and wholehearted that it was more satisfying than spending a lifetime together. They continued celebrating this silent converging of two souls to leave no regrets behind.



The next day after doing their last meditation and having breakfast together, Sachi was ready with her packed bag to go wherever Bruno wanted her to be .

This was Bruno's second last sunrise and he was not sure whether he would be able to see his last sunrise or not. But it didn't matter to him anyway. What could he achieve in one day that he couldn't in 89 days? The purpose of life was still unknown to him.

Sachi, with tears in her eyes, said goodbye to Pinky Singh and thanked him for all that he had done for her. After gazing at Mini-Heaven with yearning eyes, she got into a cab that Pinky Singh had arranged. The cab driver was a trustworthy friend of his and could handle the situation perfectly. As the cab moved away, Sachi could see her world being taken away from her.

It was a difficult journey. Throughout, Sachi kept her head on Bruno's shoulder and held his arm tightly. Each passing minute increased her pain and anxiety.



Finally, they could see Mr. Gill's farmhouse. It was visible from a distance. Sachi started hating the farmhouse and the cab they were traveling in.

As they entered the main gate of Mr. Gill's farmhouse, Bruno expected the same welcome again. But this time, it was only Mr. Gill there to welcome them. The whole farmhouse bore a disquieting look. Bruno sensed a death-like silence and a profound sadness in the air. It was a striking contrast to the earlier picture he had of the place.

"Where is everyone else, Mr. Gill?"

"For the past two to three days. Sparrow has been very ill. They are with her." Mr. Gill replied with a grim look on his face. This time, he didn't have the fervor in his voice that he used to have.

"Please take me to the hospital!" Bruno said desperately.

"She is in her room. The doctor said her time has come so she is here with us at home." Today, Bruno could feel helplessness in Mr. Gill's firm and tough voice.

As they went in, Bruno saw all the relatives sitting around Sparrow, watching her sleep.

"Hey princess, wake up. Your prince is here." Bruno kissed her forehead.

Sparrow opened her eyes and looked at Bruno with narrowed eyes.

"I am sorry," Sparrow said in a breathy voice. "I can't marry you because I am dying." She had become very weak and could hardly speak. Her body trembled.

"No, you are not. You will live!" Bruno moved his hand through her hair.

"Everyone is saying that I will live. I know that's not true. But I trust you a lot..." She looked at Bruno with helpless eyes. "Is it true, Hassan? Tell me? Will I live? Please, I want to live. I wanted to become a pilot." Her face shrunk into a pitiable frown.

They all started weeping profusely and inconsolably. Her innocent pleading had the power to wrench the heart of a rock. And yes, today, even Mr. Gill couldn't hold his tears back and started crying like a baby.

Suddenly, Bruno, who had hung his head in grief, looked into Sparrow's eyes with confidence. "Yes, of course, you will live." He squeezed her hand. "That's my promise; you will fly in the sky one day and will have everything you desire in life."

Everyone knew that this was not possible. But still, the much-awaited smile that blossomed on Sparrow's face after hearing what Bruno said brought momentary contentment to their faces. In their heart of hearts, they blessed Bruno for giving them a last look at something they wouldn't be able to see for the rest of their lives.

Sparrow's angelic smile made it easier for Bruno to say goodbye. But after this, he had a very difficult task: say goodbye to Sachi. After getting Mr. Gill's promise to take care of Sachi and never let her parents take her back if they came to know she was there, Bruno prepared himself to say goodbye to his lifeline, his hummingbird, his beloved Sachi. Bruno held her neck passionately but gently and put his forehead against hers. A fresh bout of tears emerged from their eyes. They started weeping and finally had their last hug.

"See you, my dear." Sachi sniffed and sobbed. "Some other day in some other life." Her words ripped Bruno's heart apart.

He instantly pushed himself away from Sachi, stumbled into the cab and asked the driver to move as quickly as he could. He knew that he had to make himself cold. Otherwise, he wouldn't be able to leave Sachi behind. Once again, he wondered if this short human life was really a reward or a curse!

Sachi ran after the cab like an insane person until the main gate of the farmhouse. Bruno didn't have the guts to look back at this heart-wrenching scene. He simply closed his eyes, putting his head against the seat.

CHAPTER FORTY THREE



Goodbye Heaven

Bruno reached Mini-Heaven and saw Pinky Singh cleaning his car with gusto. There was not even a trace of worry on his face about the lethal task they were going to perform that night.

“So you are back!” Pinky Singh greeted Bruno with delight. “Look, our car is all set for tonight!” he whispered.

“Did you fix the right headlight?” mumbled Bruno, in low spirits. He looked weary.

“Yes, but now the left one has stopped working.”

“But why?”

“Because I didn’t have a new headlight lamp. So I took it from the left side and put it on the right side.” Pinky Singh giggled.

“Oh God!” sighed Bruno, squeezing his forehead. “And what about the starting problem?”

“Yes, I repaired it!” Pinky Singh made a hand-gun gesture. “I think it must be okay by now! ”

“What do you mean ‘it must be’? You didn’t try it?” By now, Bruno had started becoming crabby.

“Actually, after fixing the starting problem, I realized,” Pinky Singh tapped his temple with his finger, “that the five paisa coin I generally

used to start the engine, I accidentally gave to a beggar two days ago.”

“What!” Bruno yelled, his hands on head. “I can’t believe this! Then how will you start the car tonight?” His face was scowling and flushed. “And by the way, what will the beggar do with your five paisa coin. I heard it’s worthless nowadays.”

“OHHH!” Pinky Singh uttered in intonation while bobbling his head. “That’s why while leaving, he touched my feet and said that I was a greater beggar than him.” Suddenly, Pinky Singh started braying with uncontrolled laughter. Holding his belly, he staggered to his feet, swaying a little. He laughed till tears sprang to his eyes. Bruno gaped at him, stunned by his behavior at this point of time. “Now I get what he was trying to say!” With one hand on Bruno’s shoulder and one on his stomach, he slowed down and bent slightly forward.

“Relax!” He waved his hand in assurance, throwing his head back. “Everything is okay. I was kidding! I have a duplicate key.” Pinky Singh replied while panting.

“You find this funny?” Frowning, Bruno glared at Pinky Singh. “Tonight could be your last night. Why aren’t you serious?”

“When you are serious, you are already dead. You want me to die before my death?” With a long exhale, Pinky Singh moved toward the hand pump to wash his hands .

These words instantly charged Bruno with energy, which had been drained by his overwhelming emotions and unending sorrow in the last 24 hours. He was ready for a new thumping strike of his destiny that was saying goodbye to Mini-Heaven and his reverent master forever.



It was 8:00 pm and the cell phone rang. It was Usman. He asked him to walk toward the highway alone. Pinky Singh raised his eyebrows enquiringly.

“The time has come!” Bruno informed him, overwhelmed with grief. “If you fail to trace me tonight then surely, this is our last meeting.”

Suddenly, Bruno saw the Angel of Music standing in the garden, playing an erhu (a Chinese violin) at a slow pace.

“I feel the story of my short life is squeezing into this single moment.” He immediately closed his eyes and spoke in sync with the erhu. “All that I experienced, good or bad... all those I met, friends or foe, all the emotions I went through, pleasant or unpleasant, all that I gained or lost, knowing and ignorance, all the time I spent with you and Sachi, my whole journey... I can see it all with my closed eyes.”

With great reverence, Bruno opened his eyes, knelt down and squeezed Pinky Singh’s hand! Pinky Singh stood graciously in a poised manner with a divine smile on his face and trust in his eyes that would never fumble or stumble and was so sure of itself that it could not go wrong.

“Thanks for all that you taught me. Being with you was an awakening experience.”

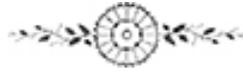
Pinky Singh held him by his shoulders and pulled him up. “Thanks for being the reason for sharing whatever I had!” Pinky Singh said politely with a gracious smile. He hugged him tightly. The dispassionate smile on his face gave Bruno a lot of courage to say goodbye. With longing eyes, he took a final glimpse of the place called Mini-Heaven, where he spent 44 glorious sunrises.

With Pinky Singh and Sachi, this place had been a real heaven for him. Bruno wished he could stay there forever but he knew his fate very well.

As he turned and started walking toward the highway, the Angel of Music moved with him, playing a huge orchestration of strings at a fast pace to give a glimpse of Bruno’s inner emotions. He walked but each of his steps was equal to a million—flashbacks of all the precious moments he had spent there played uninterruptedly in front of his eyes. The strings quartet kept playing with his falling tears and reluctant footsteps.

Finally, he reached the highway and sat in the jeep. After blindfolding him once again, the jeep started moving. Gradually, the sound of the music faded and Bruno observed all that he was passing through with closed eyes and open ears.

CHAPTER FORTY FOUR



In Hell

After driving for almost an hour and forty minutes, the jeep halted with a jerk and they all got out. Immediately, Bruno's blindfold was removed. He explored his surroundings with narrowed eyes. He saw a deserted, solitary house in bad shape with barren land around it. They climbed the narrow and broken stairs with a torch.

Bruno immediately noted the time on his watch and followed them. As they moved to the first floor, they entered a room lit by candles and emergency battery lights. It had furniture that looked like it had been moved in recently. He saw Abu Jwahiri sitting on a chair, surrounded by four to five men who were holding new generation guns. Their chests were buried under magazines. Another person was sitting next to him in full traditional Muslim attire. He was holding a map and pointing at something with his finger. On seeing Bruno, Abu Jwahiri instinctively folded up the map and gave him a wolfish grin .

"Khushamdeed (welcome)... May Allah embrace you." Abu opened his arms. Bruno moved forward, kissed his hand and hugged him while bending a little.

"There are thousands but Allah chose you. You should be proud as this will be remembered in the history of mankind." Abu Jwahiri bragged, lifting his hands.

Bruno felt like punching this idiot in the face but he controlled himself and nodded in affirmation. He had thought that after doing intense meditation, he had forgotten the art of controlling and faking his emotions. But he was surprised to see that he could do it in a better and smarter way now. He started doing it playfully as if he were a theater artist who was performing the role of a terrorist.

“Meet this man; he is Hafiz Raees. Our ‘Troops of Allah’ in India. The glorious event in the history of Jihad that is gonna happen tomorrow is possible only because of him. He is the prime invisible thread between Pakistan and India.”

As Abu boasted about Hafiz Raees’s worthless efforts, Hafiz stared at Bruno with a smug face. With meditative eyes, Bruno could clearly see the hidden inferiority complex behind the other man’s disdainful eyes.

“Thanks for reminding me of my forgotten purpose in life. I am ready to give away my life for Allah. Please tell me the plan.” Bruno’s performance was so fine that he could put a method actor to shame.

“I know, my child. You are eager but you have to wait till tomorrow morning.” Abu showed his wicked teeth. “The plan will be revealed to all at 5:30 am tomorrow. Till then, rest, eat and sleep early. Tomorrow is your big day. Allah-hu-Akbar. ”

Everyone, including Bruno, enthusiastically answered in unison, “Allah-hu-Akbar.” With that, Abu Jwahiri and Hafiz Raees left.

Bruno looked at the faces of all the boys who were his age or even younger than him. Their faces were dead, expressionless and had no life. It appeared as if their lives were nothing but unending mourning. Forget about greeting him, none of them even glanced into his eyes. They were so under the influence of their fanatic ideology that they looked more like robots. It was as if their souls were missing. It was becoming tough for Bruno to adjust to such an environment. He wondered if the place he had left just two hours ago was named Mini-Heaven. Then undisputedly, this should be called Big Hell. A person came and took him to a small room stuffed with bedding and bags on the floor. Out of these, one was supposed to be his. It looked like a small prison of suffering.

Suddenly, they were all called to the hall on the ground floor where they were served food. In the name of the food, there was red meat, red meat and red meat. Somewhere in between, he could see some Indian bread and rice. They all ate ferociously like animals as they knew this was their last meal. Forget about eating, Bruno couldn't even bear the smell of the food. He went out after making an excuse. After the food, they offered their prayers and went to sleep. Within minutes, the atmosphere was filled with the ugly sounds of snoring. Bruno waited for the right time while lying in his bed.



It was 1 am. Bruno got up and began to tiptoe out of the room. As he snuck into the adjacent room where the other jihadis were sleeping, he saw a mobile phone connected to a portable power bank for charging. As quiet as a kitten, he tiptoed in and grabbed the phone. He climbed down the stairs and moved away from the house. It was almost a full moon night, like yesterday. After walking a few meters, he saw a big tree. He hid behind it and called Pinky Singh.

"Hey, I am here! There is a problem." Bruno panted nervously. "There are six to seven terrorists in the house, excluding Abu Jwahiri, Usman and one more scumbag called Hafiz Raees. I don't know what to do!" he spoke in a rush.

"Relax, Bruno! Just relax!"

It had been just five to six hours since Bruno left Pinky Singh. When he heard his voice, it was therapeutic and exuded phenomenal serenity. Through his ears, his voice nourished Bruno's soul, giving him immense relief. His anxiety started to settle down.

"First of all, tell me, Bruno. What do you see around you?"

"It's all deserted land. There's just one house in the middle." Bruno started talking normally. "And there are wild bushes and a few trees around."

"Okay, now tell me how much time it took to reach there." Pinky Singh continued to emanate calm through his voice.

“Approximately 1 hour and 40 minutes.”

“Now tell me about what you observed during the journey.”

“First, it was a smooth highway for around 30 minutes. Then we crossed a toll plaza. After another 30 minutes, we passed a railway crossing. I heard the train whistle while we were waiting at the crossing. Immediately after that, a bumpy road started, like we were crossing some river. This continued for 15 minutes. After that, it became very peaceful. There was no traffic, nothing. And the road had a lot of potholes. It continued for another 15 to 20 minutes.” Bruno provided Pinky Singh with more precise details of the journey.

“Tell me, do you see anything unusual around you? Anything? Any landmark?”

“There is no landmark. Just one...” Bruno craned his neck to look up, “...big and strange tree.”

“What kind of tree is it?”

“It’s a huge tree, covering a lot of area.” Bruno touched the tree. “I have never seen this kind of tree before. It must be 200–300 years old.”

“Hmmm.”

As Pinky Singh quietly connected all the dots, Bruno’s quivering mind started making noise again. “I still don’t believe that we alone can handle this situation. It’s a difficult situation—”

“Now listen, Bruno.” Pinky Singh cut him off. “During all those battles, Guru Gobind Singh’s army was heavily outnumbered by the Mughal army. He always said ‘*sawa lakh se ek ladaoon, tabbey Gobind Singh naam kahauun*’, which means ‘call me Gobind Singh only when each of my Sikhs fight with more than one and a quarter lakh of the enemy’. I know it’s difficult for you to imagine it practically but look at the magic of these words. Even though they were heavily outnumbered at the time of Guru Gobind Singh and even after his death, the Sikhs always won most of the battles they fought.”

Suddenly, Bruno saw his nervousness drowning somewhere in the ocean of these powerful words.

“Courage is the greatest and highest form of strength in this world. We will win this battle on the basis of our courage.” Once again, Pinky Singh’s authentic words won over Bruno’s petty doubts, leaving profound trust and courage on his face. By defeating Bruno’s doubts, half the battle had already been won.

“Okay, very well. Now match your time with me. In exactly an hour and a half, you meet me under that tree. If you’re not there, I will assume something’s gone wrong and I’ll do the job solo.”

“But how will you spot me?”

“You have already been spotted, bro. Be ready.” Pinky Singh’s face was not visible to Bruno but he could very well imagine the glorious smile on his face.



Bruno went back and removed the sim card before placing the phone where it had been. Then he lay on his bed. Waiting for an hour and a half in bed, that too in such a situation, would have been very difficult for anyone. But it was not for Bruno, thanks to the meditation he had been doing for quite some time.

When it was time, he got up again and moved to the tree. As he reached, he saw the flash of a torch. Assuming it was a signal from Pinky Singh, he started running toward it. As he reached, he was delighted to see Pinky Singh leaning against his car, relaxed and with folded arms. Smiling, he slowly unfolded one arm to wave at Bruno.

Seeing Pinky Singh gave Bruno’s soul profound solace. It was like a shelter in a dark, stormy night or a saving hand to a drowning person. Losing no time, Pinky Singh threw a rifle toward him. As he picked up the bullet belt from the front seat, Bruno saw something unusual in the back of the car.

“Who the hell is he?” whispered a startled Bruno.

Pinky Singh took a look and tapped his head, "Oh!" as if he forgot to tell him. "He is your buddy, Russell."

Bruno's mouth fell open as he saw Russell lying unconscious in the back seat, hands tied with a cloth.

"After your call, I started toward you. He popped up in front of my car, pointing a gun. I couldn't control the car as he fired at me and I hit him. I don't know what pleasure he gets from suddenly jumping in front of cars." Pinky Singh shrugged with open arms.

"But why did you bring him here?" Bruno tried to yell in a whisper.

"There are a lot of wild animals in the nearby jungle. Had I left him there and had nobody noticed him, the animals would have eaten him up."

"My God!" hissed Bruno. "I thought he would have gone back to America by now but he was still searching for us all this time." He opened the car door and ran an affectionate hand through Russell's hair. He looked at him lovingly for a while. "Is he alive?" he asked empathetically.

"Ya! He is a tough man." Pinky Singh propped his rifle on his shoulder. "Must be having some internal injury. He was crying in pain so I gave him a lot of wine. Don't worry; he will sleep for long."

"What?" Bruno closed the door. "You were carrying wine with you?"

"I always carry some. Who knows when you'll get a chance to celebrate!" With a finger pointing upwards and a closed fist, he moved his hand like in bhangra.

"Oh, God! Now can we get back to our plan?"

"Yes! Come on, let's do it. We have very little time left." Immediately, Pinky Singh's expression changed as he handed Bruno the belt of bullets. "They might wake up at any time."

"Are we going to kill them while they are asleep? I mean this is against the rules." Bruno furrowed his brows.

"Bruno, if we follow the rules, then we can't win this battle." Pinky Singh patted Bruno's shoulder. "Tell me what is more important to you."

Winning this battle or following the rules? That too, for those who don't follow the basic rule of existence, which is to respect every human life?

"Winning this battle." Bruno sighed and nodded.

"Good choice!" Pinky Singh grinned. "And remember one more thing. Do not hold any hatred for those who we are going to kill. We are not doing this to settle a personal score. It's because it's our dharma."

Bruno nodded again. "Let's do it." Suddenly, he saw something unseen. He saw Pinky Singh in a new avatar—a warrior avatar. It was diametrically opposite to what he was a few minutes ago .

His fearless eyes, firm and upright posture and tough face said it all. He was going to have no mercy on those who had been chosen by destiny to be killed by him. Bruno, who was walking along, couldn't remain unaffected by this fervor.

Tactful and vigilant, they went inside the building with their rifles and ammunition. In no time, they shot two sleeping terrorists. The third one, who was sleeping nearby, pounced on Bruno with a knife as soon as he heard the gunshot. It showed to what extent their consciousness was corrupted that they didn't even rest peacefully in their sleep. With a little struggle, Bruno knocked the terrorist down. He was then shot by Pinky Singh. The good news was that they had successfully eliminated three terrorists. The bad news was that the other four in the front room had been alerted and were armed with the most sophisticated, new generation guns. However, they couldn't alert Abu Jwahiri as Bruno had removed the sim card from the only phone they had.

Here started a fierce and earth-shaking combat. It continued for quite a long time. Gradually, it started becoming more and more difficult for Bruno and Pinky Singh to fight the sophisticated, new generation guns with their old-school rifles. It was like facing a rainfall with an umbrella made of paper. But still, it didn't affect their courage. In the meantime, Pinky Singh killed one more terrorist and injured the other with his super accurate shot. They continued fighting their battle persistently until they were knocked down by misfortune.

While returning fire to the terrorists, a bullet whooshed into Pinky Singh's shoulder, knocking him to the floor. His turban came off and his long hair scattered as his bun unraveled. It appeared as if the king had fallen.

'It's over!' was the first thing that came to Bruno's mind as he saw this heartbreaking scene. With shell-shocked eyes, he dropped his gun and looked at Pinky Singh's shoulder. The thumping bullets and the injured Pinky Singh crippled Bruno's mind momentarily. He assumed it to be the end of their story.

Suddenly, Pinky Singh twisted his mouth in pain and tried to say something. "BRUNO!" He held his arm, engulfed in pain. "Look at those bags." He motioned with his head toward the bags of the terrorists they had killed.

Hearing his voice, Bruno came out of his momentary frozen state and ran toward the bags. Finally, fortune favored them as he found a big bag filled with hand grenades.

Without even giving it a second thought, he instinctively took a grenade, pulled the pin and rolled it inside the front room. And BAAM! A thundering blast shattered their eardrums and shook the whole building, like a high-intensity earthquake. The firing stopped instantly. As their ears returned to normal, they could hear the atmosphere filled with the cries of the injured.

"Bruno!" Pinky Singh winced in pain. "Hurry up! Go and kill them!" He groaned and his upper lip quivered.

Losing no time, Bruno vigilantly snuck into the room and found three injured people, partly covered with debris from the roof and the back wall, which had blown off. They were alive and were crying in severe pain. Bruno went closer and shot them, one by one.

After releasing the prisoners from their tormenting and unending imprisonment, he immediately took Pinky Singh out of the house as it could collapse at any time. When they reached the tree, they rested there. It was 4:00 am and Abu Jwahiri was supposed to arrive at 4:45 am.

Each passing minute became difficult for Pinky Singh as he was bleeding profusely. It seemed like the close-range shot had ruptured an artery.

“I must take you to the hospital,” Bruno insisted, his voice quivering.

“No, we can’t take the risk.” Pinky Singh twitched his lips in pain. “It’s important we kill Abu Jwahiri. Otherwise, our efforts will go in vain. We have to wait. You just do one thing. Get a cloth and tightly tie it around my wound.” He said with great difficulty, clenching on his arm tightly.

Bruno ran back inside the house and brought out a piece of cloth. But even after tying his wound, the blood continued to trickle down his shoulder. Bruno gave him some wine to soothe his pain. Suddenly, Pinky Singh closed his eyes and became lifeless.

“Master! Master! Talk to me, Master.” Bruno howled, holding Pinky Singh lovingly.

“What are you doing?” yelled Pinky Singh, wincing in pain as Bruno had accidentally touched his wound. “I’m not dead. I was just silently observing my pain. When you observe and accept your pain with full awareness and stop running from it, it starts going down.” He completed with great difficulty, gasping for breath.

“GOD! How can you talk about meditation and awareness in such a situation!”

“If I lose my awareness now, then it means I never had it.” With a twisted face in pain, Pinky Singh looked at Bruno from the corner of his eye. “Now do one more thing.” He asked Bruno to fish out his cell phone from his pocket and insert the sim card he had from the terrorists.

After a while, he asked about the time. Bruno looked at his watch. It was 4:30 am. Pinky Singh asked him to give him his old-school gun, go inside the building and wait for Abu Jwahiri. He instructed him to attack Abu and his fellow men as soon as they entered the building. Bruno followed his command.



At sharp 4:45 am, a luxurious SUV stopped outside the building. Two men were sitting in the front—Usman and the driver. Hafiz Raees and Abu Jwahiri were sitting in the back.

Three things proved to be fortunate for Bruno and Pinky Singh. One, the blast had taken place in the back of the building. So the impact wasn't visible from the front. Two, at 4:45 am, it was still dark and a lot of fog had gathered and concealed the damage the building had suffered. Three, due to safety reasons, the terrorists had been told to keep the portable emergency lights off—except for the one in the corridor—until Abu and Hafiz returned.

Usman got down and started looking around carefully. He called the terrorist's cell. As the phone rang, Bruno, who was keeping an eye on them from inside, answered.

"Is everything okay?" enquired Usman .

"Yes, bhai jaan!" Bruno tried to answer with the voice and accent of the terrorist who had the phone. Fortunately, Usman easily fell into his trap and gave the green signal to Abu and Hafiz. As they start getting out of the SUV, Usman's sight fell on a broken window with blood stains on it.

"JANAB (sir)! DANGER!"

They were alerted by the single, loud cry that pierced the dead silence of the deserted area. Usman darted into the SUV and in no time, the massive vehicle was speeding away like a raging bull with the roaring grunt of its engine.

They could have fled had they not found an obstacle in their way. It was Pinky Singh, standing with great difficulty and persistence, in their way. He pointed a gun at the driver. His long, untied hair swayed in the wind. With a few strands on his face and his bushy beard, it appeared like Jesus was standing there with a gun.

Before the driver could blow him up, Pinky Singh pulled the trigger and fired two shots. Out of two, one bullet pierced the driver's forehead and the vehicle was steered to the left. It crashed into a broken wall.

The vehicle was filled with airbags. Struggling and making his way through them, Usman stumbled out of the SUV. Completely scared and disoriented, he gaped at Pinky Singh, who was trying hard to reload his gun.

Unfortunately, he couldn't because of his injured shoulder. He lost his balance. Seeing him fall, Usman gained some confidence. He pulled out his gun and moved closer to the fallen Pinky Singh. He pointed his gun at him and a loud gunshot was heard .

It was fired by Bruno. It ripped through Usman's arm before he could shoot Pinky Singh. Bruno moved nonchalantly toward the bellowing Usman and stared into his eyes. 'How dare you mess with my beloved Master!' The intensity in Bruno's eyes said it loud and clear. Usman begged for his life until Bruno shot him right between the eyes.

When Usman's death was confirmed, Bruno took Pinky Singh in his lap. Seeing this, Abu and Hafiz, who were hiding under the airbags like mice in their hole, saw a chance to escape. They stepped out of the SUV.

The holy troops of Allah, who preached the holy war 'Jihad' throughout their lives, instigated innocents to kill other innocents and be killed and took pride in bloodshed, couldn't even pick up a gun to save their lives. In disorientation and panic, they ran like sheer cowards.

"Master, please talk to me!" Bruno tried to bring Pinky Singh back to his senses.

"Did you kill Abu and Hafiz?" Pinky Singh's breathy voice shook with pain.

"No, Master! Not yet!"

"Then go and kill them. Don't let them escape. Today is your 90th sunrise. So don't miss your last meditation. Now, go!" Pinky Singh looked critical as he couldn't even open his eyes. Bruno didn't want to leave his master in such condition but he had to for the sake of dharma.

Bruno immediately got into the SUV. Its engine was still on. He chased Abu and Hafiz. Hafiz, who couldn't go far due to his injured leg, was easily caught and killed. After a short chase, Abu Jwahiri also gave up. All the

red meat he had eaten through his life couldn't give him enough strength to run for a little longer and postpone his death by a little more.

"Please, don't shoot! Please, don't shoot!" Panting pathetically, his body shivered in panic. He begged, in a feminine voice, for his life with his hands joined together. Today, there was no rosary in his hands. Maybe, he had dropped it while running to save his life.

"Why are you scared? After all, you are about to meet your Allah!" Bruno's eyes were calm and dispassionate.

"No please." It seemed like Abu had suffered a mental seizure.

"And do tell him about your achievements! Let's see how happy he is!" Calmly, Bruno pointed his gun at Abu and... BOOM! BOOM!

These two shots in Abu Jwahiri's forehead blew the trumpet of their glorious victory. One bloody battle was over and one was averted. But unfortunately for Bruno, there was nothing to celebrate.

Bruno instantly returned to find Pinky Singh still alive. As he sat down, took Pinky Singh's head in his arms and pushed strands of his long hair away from his face. Pinky Singh smiled at him with his twitching lips and his eyes half open. A lot of blood had oozed out of his wound. The flame of this divine light became weaker and started fading. And so did Bruno's hope and desire for his own life.

He realized that the time had come to say goodbye to his beloved master forever. Bruno wondered what he would do with his human life if he got it. His master wouldn't be there with him. A human life was pointless, worthless and purposeless for Bruno. As he stared at his master, with his hopeless and lifeless eyes, Pinky Singh breathed his last in Bruno's arms.

The death of his beloved master felt like a thunderbolt to his consciousness. His whole being was so shaken from deep inside that not even a single tear fell from his eyes. It was like his fading flame of hopes and desires for life blew out with a sudden gust of wind. Hollow and empty, he sat there, watching his master's dead body.

Suddenly, something happened inside him as he got up and got a shovel from inside the house. He dug a grave near the tree and buried his beloved master's body in the heart of Mother Earth. It would be wrong to say that Pinky Singh left for his heavenly abode because he was already in heaven. *It appeared like Pinky Singh was never born and had never died .*



It was 5:45 in the morning. Bruno went inside the house and took a shower with the water the terrorists had kept for drinking purposes. He found some clean clothes and wore them. By now, it was 6:00 am. He had no desire to meditate but as he had promised his master. He started meditating without the cassette. As he meditated, he was surprised to find that he still had something inside to throw out. It was his last scream, born of his hopelessness and 'final failure'.

This scream was so powerful that it burst his inner being like the big bang theory and a burst of belly laughter took over him. With his eyes still closed, he laughed and laughed uncontrollably. He laughed at himself and at the ignorance he had carried for so long. He felt like a severely long-aching tooth had been extracted. He could not feel his body so he touched himself, again and again, to see whether he was alive or dead. He felt like a spring of love and joy had erupted inside him. He felt like his destination had arrived and was knocking at his door. As Bruno witnessed his inner spiritual explosion, suddenly... BOOM!

A gunshot resonated through the atmosphere.

Bruno was dead.

A bullet pierced his head. Russell had fired it. While Bruno was in meditation, Russell had gained consciousness and succeeded in freeing himself. After shooting Bruno, he walked carefully toward Bruno's body with his injured leg. He took a deep breath as he confirmed the death of his enemy.

Russell sat on the broken wall, panting and gazing at his victorious hunt. But surprisingly, all his pride and glory faded into frustration. He started doubting this revenge. Was it really worth giving so many days of

his precious life and putting in so much effort? He asked himself what substantial change it had brought into his life, except for gratifying his needless ego. To escape from his inner conflict and confusion, he walked hastily toward Pinky Singh's car and drove away.

CHAPTER FORTY FIVE



Another Date with Almighty

Finally, Bruno's short human life was over. He again woke up in heaven, with the same beach and the same table with candles. As he got up, a voice from behind grabbed his attention in the same way it had before. It was the same dazzling Godly Girl.

"I am so blessed to have one more date with you." She showered the flowers of her winsome smile on Bruno.

Bruno touched his head where the bullet had hit him. He could still feel its impact. He recalled how he got a glimpse of something precious in his last moments. All the secrets of life were about to unfold but Russell had ruined it. He thought about how Russell had unknowingly killed his own buddy, Bruno, and stopped him from experiencing the ultimate truth. He pitied Russell and wondered how one's hatred and urge for revenge could ultimately harm himself one day .

"Come, I have your favorite chocolate here." She waved her little angelic hand. Bruno smiled and followed her to the table. He ate the chocolates patiently and gently after the Godly Girl offered them.

"Congrats, you did a good job. It was your bad luck that you got shot in your last precious moments. But still, you almost experienced the ultimate truth!" Her eyes twinkled as Bruno's achievement was her own achievement.

"Why can't I experience it now? Why did it suddenly stop with my death?" Bruno asked, holding a half-bitten piece of chocolate in his hand and chewing the other half.

"Because now you don't have a body or a mind," she replied with child-like intonation, bobbing her head. "The point is that you have to go beyond the mind while having a mind and beyond the body while being in the body. You have to attain the truth while in the world. That's the condition. But don't worry. As soon as you get your human body back, all that continues from right there."

"Did you say human life?" Bruno raised his brow gently with a smile. "But I couldn't find the purpose of life..." He had changed. Bruno reacted very calmly to this revelation.

"What you achieved in your last moment was much beyond this 'purpose of life', which does not exist." She moved her hand as if warding off a fly. "There is no purpose in life and there can't be. The purpose is a mind thing. Something business-like." She furrowed her nose and lips. "Life is a goal in itself. It is to be celebrated endlessly." She smiled pleasantly.

Bruno nodded to himself. It was apparent that her answer didn't surprise him. Perhaps in the last moments of his human life, he had already gotten a glimpse of this truth. He took a deep breath and resumed eating his chocolate in a relaxed and comfy way. "Can I make a wish?" he asked promptly.

"Well, according to rules, I can't do that." She twisted her face as if she was not comfortable denying him. "I can only give you human life. Or you could take a wish and go back to the life of a dog." The Godly Girl informed Bruno very politely.

Bruno put his hands behind his head as he leaned back and closed his eyes. "A wish..." He sighed and opened his eyes.

"Are you sure?" The Godly Girl raised her brows and placed her elbows on the table.

Bruno nodded as he leaned on the table with a smile and gleaming faith and trust in his eyes.

"Okay, as you wish." She spread her arms with a deep sigh. "Tell me, what do you want?"

"I want Sparrow to live a normal and healthy life." Bruno cocked his head with a half-smile.

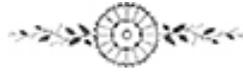
The first time Bruno met the Godly Girl, she had astounded him and made him speechless many times. But today, it was Bruno's turn to do the same.

"Are you sure?" she asked, concern lining her forehead.

"Yes, I am."

"Hmmm, okay, Bruno." She sighed. "As it is said, love is a four-legged word." Affection gleamed in her eyes as she stood up and moved to give him a farewell kiss. "Have a nice life ahead."

CHAPTER FORTY SIX



Back to Dog Life

Bruno was born as a street dog somewhere in the semi-rural area of a Middle Eastern country. He found himself lying under a car, along with his mother and many other siblings. It was raining heavily. He could feel the drops of water on his body whenever a vehicle passed through the adjoining highway with thumping vibrations.

'So this was the best God could do for me even if I were to be given a dog's life.' Bruno wondered as he struggled through his siblings to get some milk from his mother. But suddenly, he saw a sparrow hopping under the car to save herself from the rain. He forgot about his plight. The fact that his friend, Sparrow, would live now gave him immense happiness and content.



In Amritsar, the Gill family witnessed a miracle. Sparrow, who had been clinically dead a good few moments before, suddenly started moving. The act of howling by the wailing family members was disrupted by this supernatural phenomenon. Their family doctor saw all this with stunned eyes and had no explanation. Suddenly, the boiling atmosphere of mourning at Gill Farms froze into a moment of amazement.

With each passing day, Sparrow recovered at lightning speed. It was enough to draw the attention of the whole nation. Gill Farmhouse became the talk of the country. Specialists from all over the world

couldn't resist visiting Sparrow. They called it something beyond what science and the human mind could understand.



Bruno was one month old now. As he was a stray dog, his survival wasn't easy. But after spending 90 sunrises as a human being, this was nothing. The glimpse of the ultimate truth he got before being shot by Russell gave him enough strength to live this life without grievances and complaints. He played with his siblings, ate food from the garbage and slept under the junk car. He was happy with what he had chosen and had no regrets.

The place where Bruno lived had a very wide road in front of it where vehicles moved at breakneck speed. None of his siblings ever crossed that road. From day one, Bruno had a dream to cross the road and get to the other side, where many other puppies would play. Finally, one day he decided to give it a try.

The task was big. He stood by the roadside, making assessments and gathering the courage to cross. The vibrations and air pressure produced by the speedy vehicles pushed him back. But Bruno was determined to cross this road today.

Ultimately, he ran with all the strength he had. His effort was appreciable as per the size of his body and brain. But unfortunately, his small and not-fully grown eyes failed to notice a speeding truck. Bruno ran as fast as he could to save himself from being crushed. But it was not enough. It was certain that Bruno wouldn't make it. The driver applied the emergency brake but it was too late. The truck came to a screeching halt and it appeared the giant vehicle had run over Bruno. Shocked and disoriented, the driver immediately got down to see what had happened to the puppy. But to his surprise, there was nothing.

"Hey, what happened? Why did you stop, man?" His friend, who had been sleeping beside him, shouted.

"I saw a puppy run under my truck. But there is nothing," with his knees on the road, the driver yelled back, still peeping under the truck.

“Oh, come on.” His friend stretched his arms with his legs splayed all over the seat. “From the day your dog eloped with a stray female, you only see dogs and puppies everywhere. Come on in. We are getting late.” He looked quite annoyed.

The driver, still confused and stunned, stood up, got into the truck and drove away.

CHAPTER FORTY SEVEN



His Third Meeting with God

Bruno, still frozen in shock, found himself back in heaven. He was sitting in front of the Godly Girl at the same table they had sat at before. It seemed like the scene was being continued from the same point it had left off.

Bruno, still under trauma from the incident, recalled how the gigantic tire of the truck was so close to his body before he magically vanished from the scene. He was still frozen in the same reflex-posture. As he became aware of his surroundings and was assured that it was over, he took a deep breath and propped his body on the chair with a deep sigh. The Godly Girl was busy filing her nails. It seemed like she was just doing it to avoid eye contact with Bruno.

“Okay, enough.” Finally, she broke her silence and put the nail-file on the table. “You win. I give you both. Sparrow’s life and a human life as well.” She put her hands up .

Even this great news couldn’t take away Bruno’s composure. “Thanks.” He smiled graciously. “But why didn’t you give it to me before?”

“I wanted to see if you were doing this out of pure love for Sparrow or if you were just trying to be a hero and were forcing fake chivalry on yourself.” She looked away as she pushed her fringe out of her eyes.

"But it's been more than a month. Hassan's body would have deteriorated by now." Bruno pursed his lips, bobbing his head delicately.

"Yes, you are right" Suddenly, a glint of playfulness appeared in her eyes. "So you can choose some other body!" She furrowed her lips to hide her smile.

"No way!" Bruno chuckled with equal playfulness. "I just want to be myself, not anybody else."

BONK! CRACK! HISS! DLING! DLANG! Suddenly, the drums rolled with a guitar, marking the presence of the Angel of Music. With an impish smile, the Godly Girl started a rapid-fire round.

"What if I give you Mr. Gill's body?"

"NO! He drinks too much."

"Satya Maharishi?"

"I broke his bum!"

"Russell?"

"Nah, he farts too much."

"What if I give you Pinky Singh's body?"

"Ahh, never! He is a crazy man. "

"Kumar?"

"He is a money man."

BONK! CRANK! HISS! Finally, the rapid-fire round ended with the drum roll.

"Okay, I was just kidding." The Godly Girl sighed. "Actually, the very day Russell shot you, I took charge of your body and preserved it, keeping it in my mind as you might get it back. You can have your body back." Finally, a pleasant smile blossomed on her lips.

"Thanks! That was very smart of you." Bruno said with a smile.

“Now, please eat something.” The Godly Girl insisted with wide eyes. “I know you have been feeding on garbage for long.”

Bruno smiled back and started eating whatever was on the table. But he did so very calmly.

CHAPTER FORTY EIGHT



Gill Farms Jubilates

In Amritsar, Gill Farm was overflowing with jubilation after getting their little angel back in their life. Each member of the family was exhilarated with relief, triumph and joy. They couldn't ask for anything more. India's top journalist, Shobhita Ray, was there to cover her story. Though Sparrow had recovered a lot, the doctor had suggested she stay in bed for some more time. As she was lying in her bed, Shobhita interviewed her with a cameraman standing beside her.

"So, you came back from the jaws of death. You would have never thought this would happen. Are you surprised?" the journalist asked snobbishly.

"I am not surprised! I knew this would happen." Sparrow replied innocently in a weak, husky voice.

"Oh really?" The journalist sniggered. "How did you know this?" she asked dramatically in a scornful tone.

"Because my friend promised I would live. And he fulfilled his promise!"

Shobhita laughed and looked back at Mr. Gill as if it were just any other imaginary friend. But her insensitive gesture was not at all entertained by Mr. Gill. He stared back indifferently, without a smile.

“Is Santa Claus your friend—” Shobhita couldn’t complete her question as a woman suddenly barged into the room, disrupting the interview. She was filled with such happiness and excitement as if another miracle had happened. Completely annoyed, embarrassed and humiliated, the journalist couldn’t understand what could be more important than an interview on national TV with a top journalist.

“SPARROW! HE IS HERE!” the woman shouted from the core of her being. Sparrow pleaded with Mr. Gill to take her out. Mr. Gill, who was equally thrilled by this news, took a while to pay attention to what Sparrow was saying. In great urgency and haste, he took Sparrow in his arms and ran outside. The dumbfounded journalist and her team followed them to find out what the matter was.

When they got outside to where all their family members were standing, overwhelmed with various emotions, they saw a young boy walking toward them. Yes, it was Bruno. With a calm, serene and gracious smile, he walked like Buddha toward them. He looked like a new sun of faith, hope and love rising out of the darkness of pain and misery. Overcome by her emotions, Sachi ran toward him and hugged him passionately. As Bruno wiped her tears, she saw the same divinity in his eyes that she used to see in Pinky Singh’s eyes.

Bruno moved toward Sparrow and took her into his arms. Out of pure love, she clasped Bruno’s neck with her tiny arms and hugged him .

“I was there.” Sparrow’s little eyes were filled with infinite delight.

“Where?” Bruno asked in a calm voice.

“When you were talking to God, I heard everything. How you asked for a wish and you got a dog’s life. I was clinically dead at the time. I was standing just behind you.” Sparrow said with her winsome eyes, eager to tell Bruno everything.

Bruno’s smile was dispassionate and detached.

“I told this secret to everybody in the family.”

“Did they believe you?” Bruno raised his eyebrows playfully.

“Why not?” Mr. Gill ran a quick hand over his eyes. “What’s unbelievable about it?” He came forward and put his hand on Bruno’s shoulder. “Thank you, Hassan. You gave us our life back.”

Bruno saw a profound trust in the eyes of the Gill family. Some ladies even joined their hands to give Bruno the status of an angel.

Shobhita, who was trying hard to overhear their conversation, couldn’t understand anything. As she heard Mr. Gill’s last words clearly, she couldn’t control her desperation any longer.

“Mr. Gill, what unbelievable secret were you talking about?” She cut in, in a loud and unmannerly way, holding her microphone. “Let the whole nation know.”

The cameraman wiggled like a chimpanzee, urgent to capture this moment .

Mr. Gill stared at her with a casual and frosty face and whispered something in her ears.

“Nothing madam, it’s just her imagination. Why do you believe her?” Now it was Mr. Gill’s turn to snigger with his signature grin. Leaving the journalist flushing in sheer embarrassment, they went inside to kick-start their celebrations in a hardcore Punjabi way!

CHAPTER FORTY NINE



The Last Lesson

Two months later

It was a beautiful, sunny morning in Los Angeles, California. It was March and spring had just started. Bruno was walking down a busy street. People were headed toward their offices in their official attire, with a fire in their eyes, to conquer the whole world. Everybody looked like a stretched arrow. A person wearing a business suit and running in uncomfortable, leather shoes passed Bruno. Maybe he was late for an important meeting today.

Bruno had his hands in the pockets of his comfortable pajamas. His T-shirt swayed with the breeze. He had a profound silence in his whole being. He walked through them as if he was not in a hurry to get anywhere. Suddenly, he saw a beggar sitting by the roadside, smiling at him. He fumbled in his pockets for his wallet but couldn't find it. Maybe he had been pickpocketed or he forgot it at home. "Sorry." Bruno kneeled down and held the beggar's hand. "I have nothing to give you."

"But I have something for you." The beggar smiled and slid a paper into his hands. "You always wanted to know whose voice was on the meditation tape. Here is the answer."

Bruno peered at him with his calm face, smiled, got up and walked away. After walking a few steps, he looked back to see that the beggar had disappeared. Bruno had gotten used to this kind of supernatural

phenomena. Holding the paper close to his chest, he walked, lost in deep thought. Today, after a long time, he found himself in a dilemma. He was confounded by what to do with this secret piece of paper clenched in his fist. Suddenly, Pinky Singh's words resonated in his ears like a potent ray of light piercing through the long, dark tunnel of enigma.

The moon is important, not the finger pointing toward it.

Instantly, a smile of trust and faith dawned on Bruno's face. Immediately, he threw the paper into a garbage bin without even opening or reading it. His last test and lesson were over. Sliding his empty hands into his pockets, Bruno resumed walking.

Note from the Author

My beloved readers,

Thank you for sparing your valuable time. I am well aware of your curiosity about whose philosophy Pinky Singh was preaching and, above all, whose voice was on the cassette that transformed multiple lives in this story. Well, I will not stretch this mystery any further. I am pleased to inform you it was none other than Acharya Rajnish, whom we all know very well by the name of Osho. The so-called 'explosive meditation' in the book is the world famous 'dynamic meditation' which has transformed millions of lives worldwide. (Please note that this meditation should be learned and practiced under a trained practitioner. I strongly recommend you do not start this meditation just with reading this book. If done wrong, it can develop mental or physical complications.)

First of all, let me put forward that I am not a Sanyasi of Osho, who has a different name and wears a mala with his picture. I have been listening to Osho for quite a long time and have tried many of his meditations. Before Osho, I also listened to and followed many other spiritual masters. But none could give me the clarity and satisfaction he gave me. I would also like to mention that Satya Maharishi in the book is totally fictitious and doesn't have any resemblance to anyone dead or alive.

Talking about Osho, I have come across two types of people who speak of Osho. First are those who call him the most original thinker, transparent and ahead of his time. While the second are those who have reduced him to a Sex Guru. The interesting fact is, in this second

category, I haven't come across a single person who has read him, heard him or tried any of his meditations. You can call this a second-hand opinion. But my objective behind writing this book was not to prove which type of people are correct and which are wrong. It's aimed at initiating a chemical reaction between Osho's not so philosophical philosophy and my creativity.

Now let's talk about Pinky Singh's character. I still remember around ten years ago, I was at the 'Osho Commune Pune' for 'Mystic Rose' (another tremendously powerful meditation designed by Osho). I came across two illiterate, old Sikh men, who would come every year for the said meditation. They were so rural that—forget about English—one of them could not even understand Hindi. Initially, I wasn't very impressed by them. But when I saw their participation and involvement in the meditation, it just blew my mind.

In the first week of Mystic Rose, you just have to sit and laugh for three hours. Trust me; it wasn't easy. In just 15 minutes, your vigor and your stamina are put to the test as your lungs start giving up.

But those old Sikh men did it so effortlessly and enthusiastically that it was a delight watching them. Their laughter was pure, spontaneous and child-like. Young girls from Europe, America and Australia would start to ignore all the young boys and sit in a circle around the 'Laughing Buddhas 2.0'. Their jollity was so infectious that simply watching them laughing would give one a burst of laughter, right from your belly. They were the show stealers .

Not only at the time of the session but 24/7, they would have that high spirit and jollity on their faces so much that I used to wonder how a person could be so happy and lively at this stage of his life when he was so weak and old. It seemed like they had defeated their old age and aged like fine wine. Pinky Singh could be somewhat like them.

Again, I would like to mention that I am not on a mission to spread 'Osho-ism' all around or try to prove his supremacy over others. When I started writing the story of Bruno, it was meant to be the story of a person seeking peace and happiness. But slowly, I started feeling that a

character like Bruno didn't need a person like Satya Maharishi but someone like Pinky Singh. A point came when this story started writing itself. It moved like a river creating its own path.

Initially, my motto was to write a morally correct novel and stay away from any elements that could create controversy. But the beauty of a character like Pinky Singh fascinated me so much that I couldn't stop myself from making him an important character in my story. Yes! You may agree with Pinky Singh. You may disagree with Pinky Singh. But you can't ignore Pinky Singh.

Another thing, in this story there are many incidences which may sound unbelievable or bizarre to you. But they really happened. For example, Pinky Singh starting his car with a five paisa coin. But let me tell you, I saw this happen. When I was in school, the cab driver, who would come to pick me up, did this many a time. Or Pinky Singh celebrating his mother's death. Osho sanyasis often did this. They call it 'death celebration'. Or the old man in the beginning who gave Bruno Satya Maharishi's book. You must be wondering how he was so calm and composed when Satya Maharishi was not an authentic Guru. Well, my answer is that I have seen such a case. It won't be appropriate to name the famous personality but I have known a person who was not less than any saint. But if I tell you about who he follows, you would be filled with revulsion. But this is how it is. Sometimes, it's about the quality of your surrender, not to whom you surrender. Sometimes, a God is God just because of his disciple.

The End

Acknowledgments

I would like to thank my beloved readers for showering me with so much love. Reading was never my cup of tea and writing a novel over 80,000 words long was far beyond my imagination. But it happened. Maybe it was because I have a storyteller, hidden deep inside me, of whom I wasn't even aware.

Thank you to my readers for embracing this storyteller and for accepting me as an author. I have nothing to give you in return except my gratitude. Thanks to my editors for concealing my grammatical flaws. Thanks to Notion Press for helping my story reach my readers. Thanks to my friends and my parents for their kind support. Thanks to my teachers for all that they taught me. I would like to thank my dog, Simba, for making it possible for me to understand and know how a dog feels.

Special thanks to Swami Naraian Satyarthi (Osho Harmony Panchkula, India) for giving me an ideal environment to meditate and know about Osho. Thanks to OSHO Commune, Pune for giving me an otherworldly experience.

About the Author



From the harshness of the scorching desert sand to the softness of dew drops on a rose petal, Barry Cheema has deeply felt every facet of life through his sensitive and poetic heart.

After graduating in music vocal from Punjab University, Chandigarh and completing an acting and theatre course with 'Actor Prepares', he knew he had one other thing in him—being a storyteller .

Apart from poetry, composing and programming songs, he is well known for his singing. He is from Panchkula.



<https://www.facebook.com/BarryCheemaOfficial/>

 barrycheema@gmail.com