

The Bookworm Chronicles

THE HOSTEL DIARIES



Preface

I, have always had these faint images of unfamiliar characters running across my mind. Normally I would dismiss them all as ramifications of so many characters I come across in movies and the ones that my mind had spawned while catching up on a book by my favorite authors.

I strongly believe in the legendary Paulo Coelho's statements in the most awesome creative pieces of modern times "The Alchemist" where he speaks something about 'Beginner's Luck' when everything goes right with people who dive into nebulous areas, but perhaps only the truly gifted and the lucky ones survive the nebula and come out to see fresh light on a new world. In his words, it is the 'principle of favorability', a force which exists that wants you to realize your personal legend and it whets your appetite with a taste of success.

For me, coming up with a story line that was something different from the millions of plots that are already out in the market, the television, the internet and the movies; itself was the taste of success. I would not claim to have found my personal legend as it is always an eternal quest of the entire evolving species called the human race to discover their personal legend.

I would not say that my characters ever came to life and spoke to me about any difference in opinions they might have had. Maybe, many of the characters hate the way I have portrayed them, but I know I will be forgiven, for I am a man searching for my soul; and a traveller, hunter, gatherer are always seen in different lights by the controlling force.

I have always been intrigued with the imagination of little children. These sweet little people are reflections of everything that's good about humanity – innocence, trust, innocuous curiosities, and sense of adventurism, aptitude for conjuring new tools and an unshakeable faith in the self. These are the very attributes that have gone into the writing of this short story.

It takes off from where it had stopped earlier, in the little hamlet in India's Scotland, Coorg. A tiny play of destiny had triggered a great characteristic in my story's lead protagonist – Chavi, The bookworm. This story is about the journey she takes to a distant place and in between she adds along friends who would be her driving & guiding forces and also realizes that the Universe had planned something very special for her.

I have been extremely conservative with the language of narration as I do not want to taint the innocence of childhood with the corrupting forces that a bold and expletive laden narrative style often carries. Of course, you do find some depictions of gore and violence but I have tried to keep them as restrained as possible, without diluting the intensity of the plot.

I am a very strong believer in the cause and effect relationship of the world of which fate & destiny are major components. I presume that for every 'cause' there is an 'effect'. This theory underscores the latent philosophy in my narration.

I am an amateur and I agree that my work would be riddled with deficiencies and short comings. I have only created this work by putting myself in the shoes of the average reader & not the uber intellectuals.

I take pleasure in offering my first 'real' work of fiction and I hope you all enjoy.

Vinay Palsamudra

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Chapter 1 – The Migration

"**Brave local girl accosts security guard turned thief at St.Patrick's** - reported by the *Mercera Mirror* correspondent Neethi Holla"; read the headlines of the largest circulated local tabloid; lauding Chavi's little adventure the previous day.

"I gotta get this thing framed", Sunil exclaimed as he proudly read the morning newspaper along with a hot cup of Coorg coffee and biscuits from *Tiffany*.

"Have a look Anu, go read it for Chavi and Teju. Tell them we are going to Bangalore this weekend. A grab all you can shopping extravaganza, courtesy, yours sincerely" Sunil was committing the most common mistake of making a promise when happy.

"Are you sure honey?" asked a puzzled Anitha.

"Why? of course dear! go spread the news! Chavi and Teju can start preparing their lists" confirmed Sunil.

"Sunil, honey, just think about it, Chavi just finished her middle school at St. Patrick's and we have to now find her a new school, is it right to make her so happy and then suddenly break her the sad news?", Anitha was right; St. Patrick's Convent was a very good school indeed but since it did not have upwards of middle school, its students had to move out to other schools for their senior high school.

"I know Anu, I have spoken to one of my ex colleagues, you know Vishesh right? Vishesh Arora.. We were on the same project team"

"I guess I know, he was from Chittorgarh right? Nice fellow; what about him?" asked Anitha

"Nothing about him, it's about Chavi, her school to be precise; I had recalled that his family was part of a trust that ran an International resident school on the outskirts of Bangalore and they have classes right up to twelfth" explained Sunil.

"Oh! so you have already decided that we are sending Chavi off to Bangalore?" Anitha was very worried to let go of her dear daughter to a place so far from herself.

"I haven't yet Anu, that's why I am discussing this with you" Sunil was trying to control the situation.

"Why can't Chavi take private tuitions here itself? she will be here with us and we don't have to worry about her safety either, moreover she will have Teju for company and Teju will do good at school if Chavi is here to guide him" Anitha knew in her heart that her method would not be in favor of Chavi's academics & her fear of separation from her beloved daughter was growing strong.

"You very well know it is not possible Anu! It is for her own good that she will have to move to Bangalore. I planned this weekend to Bangalore so that Chavi understands what she would be getting into. It is unavoidable".

"We will be meeting up Vishesh & his family at their home and then he has promised to take us to this International residential school outside of Bangalore" Sunil had planned everything well in advance as would any responsible father and he was only executing his plans.

"Well it seems like you have already decided everything by yourself, what's the point of this so called discussion" fumed an upset Anitha who was not ready to come to terms with the impending separation, though temporary.

"Oh Come on, Anu! don't be a child! I am sure you know what I am doing is absolutely right! You just go over to the kids, read them the article and just take a power nap! Sleep over the issue. OK? No need to rush up things; weekend is still a good 3 days away. I shall be at the house in case you need me for anything" signed off Sunil to supervise the work at the green house.

"I should have never agreed to leave our jobs and move here" grumbled Anitha complaining about the latest turn of events in her life. It is always most hard for the mother to let go of their children and sometimes become very selfish in their thoughts forgetting that a momentary separation might in fact be instrumental for the holistic development of the child.

"Wake up kiddo!" Chavi woke up a sound asleep Teju.

"Get up Teju, it's already 8 o' clock! see, what I have in my hand" coaxed Anitha

"noooo... mumma...go away..close the curtains.." mumbled little Teju in his sleep as Anitha started opening the curtains and the windows to let the sun and some fresh air in.

"Teju, get up, see akka's name is on today's newspaper..don't you wanna see it?"

"ummm.. what? akka's name? you tell me later mumma... let me sleep for a while now.. no school remember?" Teju would make it hard for Anitha.

"Ok..you sleep as long as you wish, then don't blame me if the three of us eat all your pasta that I cooked this morning" Anitha was resorting to shock treatment.

"Pasta! you made pasta!" Teju's eyes lit up like the Olympic flame!

"Well kiddo, now that I have got your attention, come with me to akka's room and we will surprise her with the newspaper"

"Ok, but you **have** made the pasta right?" Teju would not be hoodwinked that easy.

"Of course, now come with me" Anitha and Teju walked up to Chavi's room to see Chavi was already up and had just finished her morning calisthenics.

"Good Morning dear, slept well?" Anitha was still a little worried and frankly stunned to know that her little Chavi was the town's new hero!

"Good Morning mumma, Morning Teju" smiled a radiant Chavi. Anitha then shared the bit of news on the *Mercera Mirror* and then Chavi also elaborated a bit more on her little adventure, how she had felt and what was going on through her mind.

Later that morning, the four did have delicious pasta just like Anitha had promised little Teju.

"Guys!we are driving to Bangalore this weekend! Mumma wanted to do some shopping and then we will go to a special place" Sunil side glanced at Anitha who had squeezed her eye lids just a little in a naughty taunting fashion, when Sunil accused her for the shopping when it had been solely his idea.

"We are going to the malls?" casually questioned Chavi.

"Whoohooo! I want a PSP2 &an PS3! now I will show that Monukabachcha that even I can play *The Droid Dozen*, why! I will even better his best score! awesome!" Teju went ballistic and was all over the place. The

little piece of information from his dad was just too much for the little boy to handle and he just could not contain his joy over the anticipation of his dream gadgets!

"okok! now rest your *tuchi* and finish your pasta!" chided the quasi - disciplinarian Anitha.

Teju hardly had ears for her mother's 'stern' warnings which were only those and nothing more and went on for a little while with this happy repertoire until his adrenalin exhausted.

The day passed on without any event and Sunil was back from the green houses after a hard day at work.

"I have confirmed about our weekend drive to Bangalore to Vishesh" Sunil told Anitha who was busy cleaning up after dinner.

"hmm.. hmm.." was all Anitha could reply.

"Have you spoken with Chavi about this?" queried Sunil

"I don't know, its your idea, why don't you go speak to her yourself " every time the subject was brought up, Anitha began to lose her composure.

"Damn It! Anitha! you are still not convinced about this, are you?" Sunil thought that she was taking this a little too far.

His outburst was answered in silence for a good 30 seconds.

"Ok, I will tell her" Sunil thought he saw Anitha wiping off a tear that had fallen on her cheek, but he decides to let it be since he understood it as a natural process and was sure Anitha would soon come back to her senses and would even make it easy for Chavi to understand.

When Anitha approached Chavi's room she felt a lump down her throat. Words would not come out easy for this doting mother who endeared her daughter more than her own life.

She was probably unaware that Chavi had already anticipated that this had to happen to her eventually. She was very mature for her age possibly due to her proximity with her parents, her love for her solitaire status and her deep bond with her books.

"I don't how to say this to you, dear. I am not sure if you can understand. But papa and I always do what is best for the both of you. You do know that, don't you?" Anitha had thought breaking the news to her daughter would be the best way to get Chavi realize the gravity of the situation.

"Of course mumma, but why are you talking in riddles today?" asked a bemused Chavi.

"Your papa had spoken to his friend in Bangalore earlier this week..hmm.. about your senior high school.." Anitha was taking it very slowly since she hadn't planned this conversation at all and now she had to tell Chavi, thanks to Sunil's short little tantrum after dinner.

"ok. Is it about me moving to Bangalore to study high school?" Chavi sounded totally cool! Anitha was surprised, not because Chavi knew about it, but she sounded so okay with it.

"Yes dear, it is about that. But how did you know? and aren't you a little worried?" Anitha was confused.

"I overheard you guys this morning, you know I don't oversleep like Teju. Don't worry mumma, I will be back home for the vacations before you even know it. Moreover, Bangalore is hardly a 4 hour drive from here. You can come over any time you want to see me, yes?" Chavi sounded like the elder one among the two in this conversation and she was taking a mature stand and was convincing Anitha!

"That's my girl!" roared a proud Sunil who had eavesdropped on the entire tetetete from the door itself.

"I wonder who my little girl is here" teased Sunil just as Anitha slapped him on his shoulder.

They all had a good time and little Teju too joined the trio in his akka's room. He will be told later about Chavi leaving for her studies.

The next morning, Sunil and Anitha had a few visitors. In fact, they had come over to see brave young Chavi. They were members of the Indian Women and Child Welfare & National Upliftment Coordination Committee or 'IWANACUCC', Coorg chapter.

IWANACUCC's plenary body had decided to felicitate Chavi for her rare display of courage & presence of mind that would incidentally happen during the grand conglomeration of its members across the state that would include colorful performances by girl children replete with fiery speeches by well-known feminists and social activists.

"Madam" addressed the petite lady in a dapper Salwarkameez looking at Anitha only and choosing to completely ignore Sunil who was right beside his better half. Apparently these IWANACUCC members were fierce feminists and refused to acknowledge any of Sunil's contribution towards Chavi.

"Madam, we are from IWANACUCC, Coorg Chapter, hope you know about our organisation, the activities that we are involved in, blah, blah, blah..."she went on for a good 5 minutes pausing in between to introduce herself as one Ms. Dhaniya and her associate as one Ms. Swati, no surnames were given out.

The duo behaved as if they had taken an oath to completely renounce their associations with their male counterparts, though it was well known that Ms. Dhaniya's husband of 10 years Mr. AshwinCheriappa had dropped her to the IWANACUCC office the same morning.

"We are both glad to have you at our home" Anitha was polite in her response after a patient hearing.

"What can we do for you Ma'am" quipped Mr. Sunil Kumar oblivious to the fact that he was addressing a couple of ardent man haters.

"Madam, we are here to invite your family to IWANACUCC's 5th annual Woman power celebrations and this time around we are proud to announce that this grand event is being organized in Coorg itself. We heard about your daughter's brave act and decided to felicitate her on the occasion. That would serve as an example to all men who take us women folk lightly" Ms. Dhaniya again chose to ignore the presence of Sunil and continued talking only to Anitha.

Anitha was enjoying this as was evident from the faint grin that she sported throughout the conversation, imagining Sunil's growing discomfiture. The poor object of hate was in a conversation and could not walk out as it would mean disrespect to the 2 fierce feminists lurking around and it would also add to their already burning fire as being un - chivalrous.

"Why! it is our pleasure that you have considered our family for this honor. Chavi would be ecstatic. I am so glad that IWANACUCC has organized the event so close home this time around, aren't we Sunil?" Anitha mocked at Sunil.

Sunil replied only in kind, by meekly pursing his lips and nodding his head briskly up & down.

"So when is this grand event?" inquired Anitha.

"This Saturday evening Madam! you will be expected to come latest by 7 o'clock" quipped petite Ms. Dhaniya without even waiting for the Kumar's acceptance of her nearly hostile invitation.

"But..." Sunil was about to commit *Hara Kiri* by elaborating about his earlier plan for the weekend, just when Anitha saved him from impending mortification at the hands of Ms. Dhaniya and Ms. Swati

"We will be there at 7 o'clock; Thank you. Would you like to have some coffee?" Anitha proceeded to be host to her new acquaintances from IWANACUCC while grossly ignore Sunil slipped away from the scene.

A good 30 minutes later, when the mercurial lady walked out of their property, Sunil slowly regained lost ground.

"Anu! why did you?..."

"Because Chavi needs it.. If she is going to Bangalore for a long time, then she better have a farewell befitting her act in the school. You know... something for the family album" winked Anitha & winced Sunil.

"Suit up! Chavi, we are getting late for the function..it's a 45 minute drive, hurry up, Uff.. stand still Teju.. let me tie the tie.." the Kumars were getting ready for Chavi's grand felicitation event.

"But I don't wanna come mumma, akka also said she doesn't wanna go! aren't we supposed to be in Bangalore today?! what about my PS3?" Teju's dream looked like they were fading away and his ambitions of making Monu jealous with his boy toys were fast losing steam.

"Tejooo, stand straight, don't act like a monkey! we are already late, thanks to you" Anitha was in no mood to be receptive to her son's annoying antics.

Teju was a smart kid and he did not say much when Anitha was on the threshold of catching a lousy temper. Perhaps he had learnt the silent art by observing his father. Sunil had always chosen silence over reason whenever Anitha lost her cool. This was just one of those days! Like father like son.

"Ok, guys, I am ready" Chavi stepped down to the living room, where Anitha was busy with Teju's tie and Sunil had just stepped inside after getting the car out of the garage.

"Gosh!" gasped Anitha. She could not imagine that her little child had grown so fast and so beautiful. Chavi was looking divine in her sequined lehanga ensemble with matching ear drops and necklace embedded with mock diamonds. Her hazel eyes and long flowing hair would catch everybody's attention in the function and moreover she would be taking center stage too.

Teju gave a happy smile at his beloved akka. Since they were born 7 years apart, there was never any chance of sibling rivalry. Chavi was more of a second mom to Teju and he loved his sister just too much. After struggling to get the knot right and Teju stand straight, the Kumars finally arrived at the grand ceremony, thankfully on time and Sunil just avoided the torture of a dozen ferocious feminist eyes had he been late for the occasion.

"These men can never do one thing right. I really wonder if they have bricks for brains" Ms. Dhaniya would have insulted poor Sunil. Thankfully, that did not happen and the event went on well.

For much that they claimed, the dance & song & speech routine went off without glitches, but the food wasn't something to talk home about, at least this was what Sunil felt while little Teju stuffed his face with the *panipuri* that was being served at one of the stalls.

Chavi was called on stage and after a few words of praise and a few words of man - insult, she was given a commemorative plaque bearing IWANACUCC in bold red letters and other details of the event. The local *Mercera Mirror* photographers could be seen clicking away a lot of photographs, a select couple of them would grace the inside pages of the popular tabloid.

The Kumars were a tired foursome when they returned home and they hit the sack almost immediately.

They had to get up early tomorrow to visit Vishesh Arora and the shopping could be done in the evening.

The Kumars started before the break of dawn and was able to reach his friend Vishesh's apartment block just in time for breakfast.

Chapter 2 – The Liaising

"NamaskarNamaskar! welcome to the software farmer family!" Vishesh Arora, a tall 6' 2" fair skinned, bespectacled man with a thinning hairline that seemed to be more partial to the sides near his ears than the center of his scalp, came around as a warm person, ushered in the Kumar foursome to his apartment.

"Mridulaaaa!" screamed Vishesh to call his wife who was busy with her kitchen obligations preparing delicious Rajasthani cuisine for the South Indian Kumar family.

"Meet the Kumars! the farmer family" at least Vishesh thought this was funny.

"Shh...Vishesh, hello ji, he keeps talking about your family all the time. It is something great that you are doing. If all of the people move out of the village to work in front of computers then in a few years' time we all will have nothing to eat!" Mridula Arora was just playing courteous hostess.

"Sunny grows flowers Mri" corrected Vishesh.

"Ha haha.. I Guess we will have at least flowers to eat if everyone decides to become software engineers" snorted Vishesh in his own inimitable style which was quite endearing actually.

The atmosphere of laughter and cordiality immediately broke ice and both Chavi and Teju were found laughing along with Vishesh. Not because they got his satire, but they found his snorting when he laughed, quite funny.

"You have very beautiful children ji" Chavi and Teju had caught Mridula's attention. The Arora kid was an 8 year old boy who was still sound asleep as it was a Sunday and all the raucous laughter that his father emitted did not disturb the 8 year old's slumber as he was used to such noises.

"Baba is still asleep, we had been to a late nighter at the multiplex last evening and he had quite a heavy dinner. The poor fellow deserves some sleep, especially in the vacations. God knows what the schools burden our children with, these days!" Vishesh explained his son's absence from the living room before being questioned about it.

"These two here are no early birds either and they have no interest for the juicy worm" Sunil likened their kids to Vishesh's son just to normalise the situation.

While the ladies huddled up in the kitchen, the 'men'; Little Teju inclusive went about their usual discussion & contemplation over the world situation.

'Baba' was woken up and after freshening up, joined the Kumars at the table for breakfast. Delicious *Pyaz & Gobi Paranthe, dahi and saag* to go with it.

After a fillip, Sunil and Vishesh broke away from the crowd to discuss on more serious issues. Chavi's school admission.

"Sunny yaar, I have spoken with my dad and he has spoken to his friend Mr. KaustabTiwary who is a trustee of the school"

"what was the name of the school again? it slips away from my mind every time" queried Sunil.

"The Aaradhya Center of Excellence or ACE. Quite cheeky eh? actually its named after the founding member's eldest son" clarified Vishesh.

"It is a co - ed, but has separate hostels for the girls and the boys. It is quite safe actually. There is a police outpost just about a kilometer from the school premises and the police regularly do rounds near there. The school has also entrusted the security of the campus to an acclaimed private security company. Bilkull tension nahi hai Sunny bhai!" assured the boisterous Vishesh Arora.

"Moreover you shall take a look yourself when we go there after lunch!".

After a pleasant morning in front of the television and a sumptuous lunch served by Mridula, all of them leave for ACE which is a huge campus overlooking a private lake and a bungalow by its side. There were piers leading to less shallow portion of the lake where a small fishing boat was also tethered.

The Kumars and the Aroras later learn from the hostel warden that the bungalow belonged to an old widow who went by the name of Ms. Lily Mary D' Cousta whose husband was a self-made millionaire who had made it big in the early 60's with his business of dealing with exquisite works of art. The D'coustas did not have any heirs for their huge property and only had a motley group of domestic helps who were appointed by the family trust that her husband had bequeathed his entire property before he died. The Kumars could also notice a couple of burly Rottweiler hounds that howled at the sight of strangers near their mistress's property.

The school building was a built like a giant horse shoe with sharp corners replacing the round U bend. They were three storied blocks and each block looked exactly same as the other. The whole building was given a generous coat of white both from the inside and the outside with a striking coat of Violet on the borders where the plinths and columns crossed each other with a streak to give the structure a contrasting effect of Vanilla and Black Currant shades.

At the mouth of the U shaped structure was a concrete ground large enough to house the school's entire population for the morning and post lunch assembly sessions. There were two masts on which the flags of India and the school were hoisted.

The school flag had a violet background with an emblem emblazoned in bright orange. The emblem was remarkable, more like a coat of arms and had a white Pegasus on its hinds and wings spread wide, a phoenix with its claws in seizing position and a giant mythical turtle on which what seemed like the sun rested with the Pegasus and the Phoenix on its either side.

The school's motto was written on a scholar's ribbon in usual Latin as is the fad with all schools that liken themselves to the schools of Oxford and Cambridge.

Gloria Fortitudo Victoria

The Pegasus of the Olympians represented eternal Glory as it was immortal, the turtle supporting the sun represented stupendous strength and the mythical bird Phoenix which rises from its own ashes represented Victory under all circumstances.

The school's management had quite aggressively promoted this International residential all across the country as well as abroad by sponsoring various Indian cultural programs by the huge expat community. It was well rewarded with people from many parts of the world evincing interest in the school and since then the school had gone from strength to strength churning out quality students who came in as pupils but went out as ladies and gentlemen.

Like most International residential schools, ACE's brochures were full off attractive shots of the school's sprawling grounds, main structure, lab facilities, equestrian courses, Olympic grade swimming pools, a fully functional state of the art athletic track with a football & hockey grounds, tennis court and a huge Indoor gymnasium. Vishesh had brought along the brochure of the school which he had received from his father.

"Oh My Gosh! Sunny! I should have admitted Baba too here!" an astonished Vishesh remarked while an unimpressed 'Baba' looked at his father with suspicious eyes.

"It is indeed a fantastic school! Isn't it Chav?" Sunil was happy that his decision was turning out to be the right one.

"I will survive Papa!" was Chavi's way of expressing her excitement in a more suppressed manner.

"Good, then! since the admission itself is not a problem, I guess we can fix up a meeting with the school's princy, a one Mr. Aadarsh Prasad for an F2F with Chavi! What say Sunny boy?" Vishesh asked.

"Of course" Anitha was fast in her response. She had fallen in love with the school and had now begun to think like a responsible parent.

"Will I also be coming here papa?" little Teju was feeling left out of the conversation.

"No, baba, you are now too small to be staying away from home! don't you like your home better?" Mridula was trying to convince Teju in her own style.

"But papa, if akka is coming here, then I also want to" Teju was getting restless with the idea of his separation from his akka.

"No Teju, you will be with St. Patrick's till your seventh grade!, you can come over in the vacations when mumma and papa will come here to pick me up. Ok?" Chavi was more direct and drove home the point straightaway.

Teju usually did not throw tantrums while with company so he just stood silent sulking to be attended by his caring mumma as well as Mridula.

"Well, then let us go have a look at the facilities here, dad had asked me to call up one Ms. SadhanaTalapatra. Wait up, let me try her number, I only hope the reception is good around this place" Vishesh had been asked to contact Ms. Sadhana who was the warden of the girls's hostel.

"Hello! Mrs. Talapatra? this is Vishesh, Vishesh Arora.. I am a friend of Mr. KaustabhTiwary..yaya.. ok.. we are here.. ya...correct... ok" Vishesh got off the line with Ms. SadhanaTalapatra.

Originally from Paradip in Orissa, now Odisha Ms. SadhanaTalapatra had settled in Bangalore with her family. Her husband, Mr. SandipTalapatra was also a member of the school's faculty and taught gym classes as an assistant gymnastics coach. Their daughter was also admitted into the same school and they all lived in the faculty quarters just a stone's throw away from the boys' hostel which was in fact about the quarter of a kilometer from the girl's hostel.

"Hello Sir! I hope I didn't keep you waiting for long!" Ms. Talapatra was in her mid-thirties and bore a pleasant outlook unlike the stereotypical wardens of girls' hostels portrayed in most of Indian movies. She was dressed in a violet track suit with the school emblem embroidered on the top. She was a petite woman

and would have been around 5' 2" in height, she was quite fit as she doubled as gym instructor for the girls and also had her husband's assistance in maintaining a tight fitness regime.

"Not at all, we were just appreciating the school campus!" Anitha replied.

"Great! Aadarsh sir had called my husband earlier this morning and had informed us about your arrival. Sandip, is engaged with the boys' on the equestrian course and I shall be obliged to give you a tour of the school campus" Ms. Sadhana was very cordial and guided the two families to follow her for a campus tour.

"We shall now be going towards the grounds, the labs and classrooms are all closed today and only the gym, pool, the open grounds, the auditorium and the equestrian course is accessible on weekends and national holidays" said Sadhana.

"Ok. No problem Madam, we shall be pleased to see whatever is available now" reassured Sunil.

After she showed them around the football & hockey grounds and the tennis court where a small group of kids could be found engrossed in their games, they proceeded towards the grand Olympic grade swimming pool.

"Some of our students have been representing the school at district, zonal and state level swimming competitions, In fact a couple of them have been champions and have got the school significant recognition. We have a national level swimmer who coaches the students thrice in a week. He comes down every Sunday, Wednesday and Friday" one could see the sparkle of pride in Ms. Sadhana's eyes when she spoke about the school's accomplishments.

After showing around the splendid campus and leaving the two families gaping in sheer admiration, Ms. Sadhana took leave to carry on with her duties in the gym.

"Wow! Sunny boy! what luck! Chavi will not learn swimming, dancing, singing, horse riding and what not!these guys probably offer flying lessons too!" Vishesh was at his jovial best.

"haha, right Vishesh, anything is possible! so when do we meet up with the principal, Mr. Aadarsh?" Sunil was eager to close the deal and confirm Chavi's admission into the school

"What say Anu, Chavi and Teju?, shall we go ahead huh?" Sunil realized he must fulfill the formality of consulting the remaining members of his family, though it was obvious from his behaviour that a decision was made already.

"Sure Sunil" Anitha smiled at Chavi.

"Ok then, I will give a call to Mr. Aadarsh, he probably lives with his family in the faculty quarters as well, he should be here any minute" assumed Vishesh

The phone went dead after a very brief conversation and after a 15 minute wait near the hockey ground, Mr. Aadarsh met the two families.

"Hello everyone! Ms. Sadhana appraised me of your arrival. I would have come myself but was preoccupied with some other work, so I requested the nice lady to attend to you" Mr. Aadarsh was not hesitant to readily get acquainted.

Mr. Aadarsh Prasad had been an academician all his life and had made quite a good name as a teacher and principal of a very well renowned school in Bangalore city. When ACE was established and its founders were scouting for the best faculty, some one proposed Mr. Aadarsh as an ideal choice to head the faculty and the management soon found out that they had made the right decision appointing him. He was a middle aged man with dark curly hair, hairy forearms, large broad shoulders and a slightly protruded belly which was acceptable for his age. He was married and had a single kid who was studying college in Bangalore & the wife was a master at home management.

"Not at all Sir, she was very courteous and happily showed us all around the campus, might we say we are pretty impressed by what we see" Anitha responded. Such niceties were her forte.

"Very well then, so where's your child who wants to get into ACE?" Mr. Aadarsh queried with a light smirk on his slightly wrinkled face, rubbing his hands in animated anticipation.

Chavi was introduced and after a few informal questions and few serious questions, Mr. Aadarsh seemed quite convinced to allow Chavi's admission into the school. Her grades were testimony to her intelligence and her little brave act preceded her and the so called 'interview' was a mere formality. ACE would have been proud to admit Chavi.

"The semester begins from 10th May, we plan to start early and complete the portions well in advance for our students to get sufficient time to revise and master the subjects. As you know we follow the central board syllabus here and the classes are going to be quite rigorous" Mr. Aadarsh had come down straight to the point and directed Sunil about the fee structure, the progress reporting structure, ward monitoring, hostel fees etc etc.

"Ok then! WHO WANTS TO GO SHOPPING!" Sunil was setting the mood right after bidding good bye to Mr. Aadarsh and getting inside the car!

Tejus was quick in grasping the opportunity and his hopes of getting his gadgets soared high again.

The two families reached the city and spent the rest of the evening wandering through aisles and aisles of clothes, perfumes, sun glasses, toys and what not! After a mega shopping spree, Sunil seemed to have wiped off a small portion of his hard earned fortune in one single evening!

"Thank you Vishesh, Bhabhiji for the wonderful weekend. I insist you come over to Coorg while we can try to repay your hospitality in kind" Sunil & Anitha bade farewell to the Aroras and the Kumar foursome proceeded to their hilly abode in the dark of the night.

It was soon 30th April, and Chavi had just 15 more days at home.

Chavi was quick to escape into her world of books and the wonderful tales that her companions would spin. Chavi was trying out different genres and was soon in the clasp of *Adrien O Toole's* horror thrillers. The tryst with the supernatural & the paranormal would send shivers down her spine when she would read the books in the privacy of her cozy room with a view. The large French windows and the Venetian blinds provided her no consolation during times when she just wanted to tightly clutch on to something.

All of you might have heard of *Deja Vu* when things strangely feel like they have happened with you before. It's that feeling in the mind that sometimes leaves exasperated & short of breath! Chavi's life at the school hostel was about to take a much unwanted drastic turn when something unearthly begins to happen to her and the people around her.

"Chavi! go to sleep! you need to give your books a break! you have the whole day tomorrow!" Chavi could hear Anitha shouting from across the living room.

"Hmm.. I guess I must give it a break now.." Chavi turns off the lights.

The next 15 days are quite hectic for the Kumars and they are busy getting Chavi's school uniforms, gowns, equestrian suits, fencing gear, swim suits, books, stationery etc etc. Time flew by and before she could sit back and relax, Chavi was standing in front of Mr. Aadarsh Prasad's office at the ACE campus.

"Good Morning Sir"! Chavi's voice sounded like chimes caught in a mild breeze.

"Good Morning Ms. Chavi! please come in" Mr. Aadarsh Prasad was extremely formal and he looked quite different that day and was quite a departure from the smiling and warm person that she had met along with her family some time back.

"You will have to meet Ms. Sadhana Talapatra who is the hostel warden, she will guide you to your room and brief you about the house rules" explained the celebrated academician.

The International residential school had houses - 4 of them and was a mixture of girls & boys. As is the case with all schools, the house would be given points for their effort in academics, sports and other extracurricular activities. This was most essential to imbibe senses of team work, ownership, pride, reliability, mutual trust, competitive spirit and leadership qualities among the students.

The 4 groups were named after creatures of Indian mythology: *Uchashrava* (The celestial horse), *Garuda* (The Bird King), *Airavatha* (The celestial elephant) and *Mayura* (the divine peacock)

There was no particular means of classifying students into the group and the faculty randomly selected students for the houses to try make the teams as even & balanced as possible. Chavi was 'randomly' selected for Uchashrava, the celestial horse which is described as being pure white & was most difficult to get hold of, may be a metaphor for man's highest desires which are almost impossible to get hold of.

"Hello mumma? haa.. I have been given a room in the hostel, it's on the fourth floor, haa.. no.. yet to set up my stuff.. I gotta get ready for the morning assembly.. will talk to you later mumma.. love you.. bye.."
Chavi got off the line with her mom.

Chavi would be sharing her room for the first time in her life! her roommate would be in the same class as she.

Chapter 3 - Legacy

"Hello, I..my name is Chavi, I have just joined.." Chavi initiated the warm up session while the roommate looked hardly interested in making acquaintances.

"I am sure you have.." curtsy roommate replied.

"God! it's gonna be harder than I had imagined" contemplated Chavi.

After a couple of minutes of uneasy silence, the curtsy roommate having felt a little sorry for the newbie spoke up in a less hostile manner "I am Peeya, Peeya Mukherjee" just as she reached out to Chavi to shake hands out of formality.

"Nice to meet you" Chavi was as sweet as always.

Peeya just replied with a wry smile. "So which house have they put you in?" queried Peeya

"*Uchashrava*"

"Well that's sad. Those losers have been bottom dwellers all their life. Tough luck girl!" Peeya was back to her tomboy attitude.

Chavi was wise not to respond to such loose statements. "Well that's something time will decide" she promised herself.

"Come on let's move! you don't wanna be late to the mess hall" Peeya marshaled Chavi out of the room.

The large mess hall could accommodate all the 500 students and the fare served for breakfast was standard. Military standard. The school was built on the lines of discipline and was modeled on the military norms. Hence, it was mandatory for its students to eat only with the cutlery provided and hands were a strict no - no!

There was one boiled egg, plain milk with sugar, 2 loaves of toast, a cube of butter or a small dollop of jam. Fruits were mixed dices of papaya, apple and pineapple and sometimes watermelon depending on the season.

On rare occasions when the faculty felt generous, local delicacies were also included in the fare much to the delight of the students. All sorts of food that the students would have thoroughly enjoyed at their homes were all forbidden here.

"You don't have to follow me all around the place, go find your own friends" Peeya wanted to brush off her new unwanted baggage, her roommate Chavi.

Chavi had loved it at St. Patrick's. She would have Teju for company during their 30 min drive from home to school and during lunch as well and the students there had never been rude to her. This was all very new for poor beautiful hazel eyed Chavi.

Peeya rushed towards a group of kids who looked just as angry and destroyed from inside just as she did. It was a depressing group. Peeya was in the house of *Airavatha*.

"You can come here if you want" a pair of welcoming eyes invited Chavi to share the table. It was the head girl of the *Mayura* house.

"Thank you" Chavi let her smile mesmerize the group of *Mayurans*.

"Oh my God! Isn't she just so pretty?" gushed Praneethi Darshan, a 9th grader.

"Yes she is! I am Disha Gowda and I am the head girl of *Mayura*. You can call me Disha. What's your name?" Disha came around as a very nice person to Chavi, but in fact was quite vain herself since she was the head girl and *Mayura* had been ranking second for two consecutive years.

"Hello Disha, pleased to meet you, my name is Chavi and I am from Coorg. I am in *Uchashrava*" Chavi answered a bit nervously.

"Wow! you mean you are with the champion house! cool" again gushed Praneethi Darshan.

"*Uchashrava* are the champion house? I had heard otherwise!" Chavi was a little perplexed.

"Of course they are, but we will beat you guys this time around. you know what they say, third time lucky!" Disha Gowda sounded very confident in this rebuttal of hers.

"Who is your roomie?" asked another 9th grader, Pawan Siddhaiah.

"It's Peeya Mukherjee"

"Oh shit! that *Airavatha* loonie! I wonder what Sadhana ma'am was thinking putting you two together! you seem like a nice girl" Pawan did not have anything nice to say about Peeya, who was apparently notorious in the school for her rebellious & devil may care attitude. Moreover she belonged to *Airavatha* who were many times found resorting to cheat tactics during annual sports competitions.

"I am sure she is a nice girl once I get to know her" Chavi had hardly been exposed to anybody who had ever been rude to her and she had faith in the goodness of people.

"Don't worry, you'll find out soon, she won't privilege you with a long wait" Pawan promised her.

"Shut up guys! it's her first day at school! there's no need to go all hoohaa about her roomie" Disha Gowda intervened to control the situation. It wouldn't reflect well on her if her group of friends were back biting on someone else.

After the morning prayers were recited by a trio of sixth graders, everyone had their breakfast in stark silence and proceeded towards their respective classes.

The classes were more like operation theaters where you could cut the silence with a knife. The students of this residential school were extremely disciplined and many a times bordered on stoic and eerie. There was an uneasy calm in the school.

Chavi found her way to the classroom where all of the students were already in their positions leaving very little choice for Chavi to select her chair.

The modular desk and chair were arranged in three files and each file had 5 such modular desks and chairs. Each module could accommodate two pupils taking the total class strength to 30 and there was no unoccupied module in the classroom that would eat up on space. The ACE management preferred quality over quantity. There were just two sections for each class with 30 students each.

Chavi's place had been earmarked by the students and she had to share her desk with a girl from the north east.

No smiles were offered when Chavi settled down in her place and the teacher who came in a little while later, started with the attendance & carried on with the first chapter in her subject which was political science without pausing to inquire about the kids' summer vacations or to introduce the new girl to the class.

The strangeness in the air was beginning to get very pungent for Chavi as she started smelling something fishy. Things were definitely not alright.

After prevailing through the first four hours of the first day at school, Chavi dragged her feet to the mess hall for lunch.

Since, her classmates had been less than receptive to her on her very first day, she had no option but to join the *Mayuran* group with it's head girl DishaGowda.

"So Chavi, how did you like the first day at ACE?" asked Pawan with a smirk on his face.

"Well it wasn't all cream and sugar. I felt the air in the classroom quite suppressed to the level of stifling. For four hours, nobody spoke up." Chavi had not wanted to complain, but the events were so strange that it had brought her to this. She needed someone to discuss.

"Welcome to ACE! village girl!" the previously gushing Praneethi Darshan now wore a more stoic gesture. Apparently her first four hours at class did not go quite well either.

"It's that damn princi!" quipped Pawan Siddhaiah.

"Will you all just zip it up!. How many times do you have to tell you people not to go yapping about things you have no comprehension about!" a furious DishaGowda rebuked the duo of Pawan and Praneethi.

"It's my final year and I would not tolerate if you bunch of clowns mess it up for me!" Disha roared.

The two just fell silent and went about their business of finishing lunch and preparing for another four hours of class.

"I'm sorry Disha, it's entirely my fault, I shouldn't have complained, I should wait for a few more days for my class mates to open up" intervened Chavi in an effort to calm down Disha.

"Look, Chavi, I appreciate you opening up with us like this. But we really don't want any trouble. We have already had enough already! I just want to focus on beating your house this year which would be a feather in my cap" Disha sounded curtsy this time around.

Chavi wondered why whoever she met acted so scared and different.

Her first day at school was drawing to an end without an event or without her having made any friends, boy or girl alike. She badly missed her family and her home. It was soon 4.30 in the afternoon and it was time to retire to the rooms in the respective hostels. First day - No gym.

The hostel lobby was a dull place which had a closed cabin that had plywood planks from floor to roof separating the warden's office from the rest of the ground floor. The warden's office was like an office cubicle but with covered walls.

The office had a simple sober looking wooden table with a glass top, a water cooler, a rack of shelves, some random photographs and paintings hung up on the wall, a calendar showing 15th May, a small green plant in a brown plastic pot which looked like it could do better with some watering, an upholstered chair with no wheels and no great swivel, a phone that looked vintage but had push buttons, a photo frame that rested on the glass top of the table, a few paper weights, pen stand, a register, a whistle and just one chair on the opposite side of the upholstered chair with no wheels & no great swivel.

Chavi sat on the guest chair while Ms. Sadhana Talapatra, the warden occupied the other.

Ms. Sadhana opened the thick fools cap length register and searched for the page where she had made Chavi's entry.

"mmm.. Chavi Kumar, 8th grade, Sec A, yes! here it is.. Room no 417 with Peeya Mukherjee. Alright! Ms. Chavi Kumar! I hope you have already moved your things to your room and have gotten acquainted with your roommate Ms. Peeya Mukherjee. There are certain rules in the hostel which you need to follow very strictly. Violation of any of these rules will be dealt with very sternly and offenders will not be given a chance to repeat their mistake.

First rule - No warnings. Always stick to the rule" Ms. Sadhana Talapatra who had come across as a such a lovable character during Chavi's first encounter with her, seemed to have taken a strange new color when she was in her elements.

"Yes Ma'am" Chavi was not intimidated but she was being mellow.

"The room lights go out after 11 p.m every night - No exceptions except during test and exam time.

"No mobile phones allowed inside the rooms"

"Music that you listen to should not wander out of the room in any case".

"No loud talking & shouting. Your behavior will be under continuous monitoring and I don't appreciate a single incident of violation of rules." Ms. Sadhana bombarded poor Chavi with a dozen more rules consisting of more don'ts than do's.

Overwhelmed by the day's proceedings and the latest explosion of rules that felt like warm tincture on a fresh wound, Chavi retired to the annals of her hostel corridors. Since she was hauled up for the briefing, all the other students had already retired to their rooms and not a single soul was to be found on her way up the stairs to her fourth floor room no 417.

It was about 7 o'clock in the evening and dinner was to be served at the hostel mess exactly at 8 o'clock. Chavi was supposed to dress up in her dinner suit and arrive 5 minutes prior to the official commencement of dinner.

Chavi never was of the whining type, so she soon started pulling out her uniforms, night gowns and dinner suits out of her luggage and began arranging them in the individual cupboards provided in the spacious room.

Peeya Mukherjee of course selected complete ignorance of Chavi's existence.

"Aren't you getting ready for dinner?" asked a concerned Chavi.

"Listen! what did I tell you about getting close with me?. I plan my stuff my way; ok, honey?" Peeya was being heavily harsh and sarcastic with Chavi.

At dinner, Chavi wore a sullen face and ate her food silently and just made an effort at smiling when Disha and Praneethi looked on from a distance.

The hostel lobby had a pay phone near the warden's office and students were allowed to use it till 10 P.M. Some of the older students finished dinner fast and went over to the phone to call up their parents or relatives.

Chavi had to wait for a while till she got a chance to call up home.

"Hello mumma!" Chavi's voice faltered a bit.

"Chavi, yes honey, how are you? you did not talk properly when you called this morning. Is everything alright there? have you got your room? made any new friends? how is the food there?" Anitha had a volley of questions to fire at Chavi.

"I am fine mumma, how are you all? It's all ok here. The classmates are all friendly. Food is ok but I prefer your cooking over thing mumma. I only wished I could be home every day to see all of you" Chavi tried to sound happy.

Anitha hooked up the phone and turned to see a surprised Sunil who had held up both his arms in a questioning gesture. "Didn't she want to talk to me?"

"Well she said there was only one pay phone and since this was the first day after the vacations, many other students were waiting up to use it. She will call again tomorrow" Anitha relayed Chavi's message to Sunil who looked despondent for having sent his beloved daughter away.

"Come on now Sunil! we have done the right thing. It's our responsibility to secure our children's future. She will be back before you could know it" they had switched places and now Anitha was consoling Sunil who looked like he would break down any moment.

"Guess you are right, Anu. I only hope Chavi be happy there"

Sometimes paternal instincts go on high alert when there is something wrong or strange that threatens the safety of the apples of their eyes. Sunil was right in worrying because all was not well at the Aaradhya Center for Excellence.

"...It is always an epic tussle between the brevity of human life and the paranormal that threatens to disturb the balance created by God.

My latest offering 'Lasting Fondness' is an account of real life incidents where a man's ugly greed disallows him to rest in peace even after he was buried 6 feet under. Well I am not sure about the authenticity of these 'reports', I advise the readers to be very careful not to construe this as a mere work of fiction or a figment of my imagination. I am but a narrator of life. I am no creator.

The Story of Guss Schneider, a third generation 'self-made' millionaire whose ancestors had set foot on American soil some hundred years back with nothing but the clothes on their back to start with.

Lasting Fondness is testimony to the corrupting power of greed that even soils the soul and destroys its journey to its rightful owner after the body has long perished.

- Adrian O Toole "...

Chavi had just read the preface to her new favorite author *Adrien O Toole's* latest horror thriller *Lasting Fondness*.

The room itself was quite spacious for two people. After all, all the students belonged to rich and affluent families and they had to be provided the best amenities. The room was perfectly rectangular with no columns or beams awkwardly protruding in between eating away on space. There were two identical sets of cots, cupboards, reading desk, wall cabinets and one attached bathroom. There was a large window at the center of the wall that marked the end of the structure.

The window gave the inmates of the roof a generous view of the vast green pastures of the village & the huge D'Cousta bungalow with the burly rottweilers on guard, outside of the school premises.

It was already 11 P.M and Ms. Sadhana's instructions were still ringing in Chavi's head and she quickly turned off her table lamp and went to sleep.

"Good Night, Peeya"

Silence.

Breakfast the next morning and four hours of robotic assimilation of a barrage of words and equations later Chavi finally met up with the *Mayura* group at lunch.

"Hi Chavi" Pawan was the first to greet her.

"Hello Pawan, Hello Disha&Praneethi" Chavi greeted everyone.

"So? had a good night's sleep? congratulations for surviving the first night with Ms. Peeya Mukherjee!" Pawan was back to his ways.

"Yeah, it was not so bad"

"Glad that you are getting adjusted fast!. ACE will be your home for the next 5 years girl" chimed Praneethi

"I guess you're right. Anyway what's with the bungalow behind our hostel block? We'd seen it on our first visit and last night too. Anything hardly happens there. Such a big place and I could see no one but the dogs there" Chavi was in investigative mode.

"Oh! The D'Cousta bungalow! the whole school knows about it! they say it's haunted" Praneethi spoke about it in hushed tones just to enjoy Chavi's reaction.

"Oh come on! surely there are no such things. Do you guys believe in all such things?" Chavi was not easily scared and she questioned Praneethi's knowledge about the D'Cousta bungalow.

"Listen Chavi, there are certain things in this world that needs no explanation. You just gotta believe and be alert" DishaGowda was losing patience because of Praneethi's tomfoolery as there was no reason she thought, to enlighten the new girl about things that could easily be taken for being silly.

"She has to know, Disha Di" Pawan challenged Disha's stand.

"Ok! if you think so! be my guest! you be the narrator" Disha scoffed at Pawan.

"Ok, Di, chill, we still got some time for the noon session, we could very well use this time for the KT" Pawan joked and starting narrating the story soon after the foursome disposed of their plates in the pantry.

Before the IT boom and the real estate had engulfed the serenity of Bangalore which was known for its Babylonian promenades & pristine lakes where migratory birds made their nests, Mr. Richmond D'Cousta who started out as an avid art collector had bought this stretch of land at a throwaway price and had himself supervised the construction of his dream abode.

The D'Coustas had named their bungalow *Ararat*, after the biblical mountain where Noah's Ark finally comes to rest after the great deluge of God cleanses the earth of all its sin and sinners. The one Christian God had handpicked Noah and his family to be the custodians of life on earth because of their piousness and their faith in God and because Noah was the descendant of Adam.

Richmond was originally from a remote fisherman village in Southern India and had worked his way up in the village ranks and after he thought he had made enough with his fishing trawlers, his ambition to be someone bigger drove him towards the big city of Bangalore, where he thrived first as a full time *punter* in Bangalore's legendary turf clubs all thanks to lady luck showering her excesses on him.

He had met his wife through some relatives in his home town and his was an arranged marriage. Lily Mary was a demure girl whose parents had given her a decent school education if not all. Richmond was on the lookout for just her kind of a girl as he wanted an independent woman who could neither make her own decisions nor influence his.

Richmond's luck with wealth continued and his greed to amass more and more grew uncontrolled to the point that he could no longer distinguish between the right and the purely evil means of making money.

The whole process of making money in itself was so enticing to Richmond that he had renounced the whole concept of marriage and family. He had very little interests for the material pleasures that his money could have got him. Instead he was romancing the idea of making money! more money than he deserved and more money that he could have ever handled.

This small time *punter* soon graduated to an ugly money spinner. He willingly let himself be involved with anti-social elements and clandestine syndicates who could just about do anything for the wealth which

they so dearly guarded close to their hearts that even human lives were but pawns in their dangerous schemes.

Lily Mary had never mustered up the courage to question her husband's ways. She was one of those women who even though had a position in the house, never had one in their men's lives. She only symbolized something that was necessary and not something essential.

Richmond was never a philanderer. He was no miser either. He lived life lavishly and soon he exploited his contacts to get hold of a huge piece of land on the outskirts of the city where he then constructed a bungalow so huge that the nearby villagers had only heard of such magnificent mansions in the stories that their mothers and grandmothers used to tell them.

His deep indulgence in illegitimate activities had begun to consume him slowly and painfully and because of the untold animosity that existed between the long married couple, he had no confidante to discuss his issues and this was killing him from inside. His trauma was not to be mistaken with a sense of remorse or a desire for retribution. No! he was disturbed from within since his schemes of generating more income from his ways were all turning out to be futile.

While he continued with gambling, bootlegging, smuggling he was introduced to the world of art and the huge wealth potential that this seemingly noncommercial affair held within it. He was informed by his associates and 'advisers' that there was a huge demand for art work of Indian artistes of renown across the seven seas and there was a clear lack of art suppliers. Richmond was quick to grasp this opportunity and he soon set up a 25 - 75 partnership business with an art house that regularly exhibited works of Indian artistes.

Within no time his new business venture boomed and he was adding at a quick pace to his already huge mound of wealth. But greed seldom leaves a man content.

The art house *Devadutta* was run by a family headed by its patriarch Mr. Abhigna Kamat. The Kamats were straight businessmen and they owned a couple of artisan guilds and gallerias across the city and they did decent business before art was being considered for investment across the progressive first world.

The Kamats' encounter with Richmond might have been made in the most inauspicious moment as this affiliation cost the former family very dear. The patriarch and his two sons and their entire families were burnt to cinders in the ancestral farm house by a freak fire that engulfed the palatial home within no time leaving minimal chance for its inhabitants to survive. The case made waves across the nation and yet the police could not nail anybody for this ghastly crime though their suspicion towards Richmond was extremely strong & **valid**.

Richmond became the sole owner of *Devadutta* since the complete family of his partners was reduced to ashes and they had no other relatives who could stake claim for their vast property. Richmond had in fact connived with the Kamat family advocates to transfer the entire title of ownership of the entire Kamat family fortune including the successful *Devadutta* business house to his name.

Richmond had completely forgotten his human side and had awakened the devil himself within him. He was not a man to be reasoned with. One can never reason with a man who feels no remorse and his judgment has been clouded by greed.

Greed is such a powerful sedative, a narcotic that puts the afflicted in an eternal hallucinatory state & the only escape to the soul is when greed consumes the man in whole leaving nothing more for it to feed on.

However in Richmond's case, his greed had life. It was like a tangible entity which perhaps only Richmond could experience and sometimes Lily saw it too in Richmond's eyes and she was scared, for her husband's and her life as well.

After many years of wedlock the D'Coustas did not have a child of their own simply because Richmond was too preoccupied counting his quarters to stop and smell the roses.

Richmond was doing extremely well in his art business and was already being named among the city's elite and the affluent. Perhaps Richmond's heart was slowly making him content with his position, but greed had other plans for him. It felt ignored and spurned and it did not like it one bit.

One fine Sunday, 5 years after the monstrous blaze that gulped the Kamat family, something sinister was waiting to happen at *Ararat*. 35 years into the marriage, the D'Coustas were just a couple with a set of burly dogs for company in a huge mansion that was full of art work and expensive furniture but still felt eerily empty like the house lacked a soul.

There was never any love or any other sentiment. Lily Mary had long stopped being angry, sad, indifferent and now was just in a passive state that can be given no definition.

Richmond had only one passion other than making money and that was fishing. After all he was from a fishing village and he made his first dime as a fisherman. *Ararat's* estate also had a modestly sized lake and Richmond had got a deck constructed on wooden piers and had a small boat too which he used to row to the deeper side of the lake with this anglers and fish bait.

That evening after he anchored his small fishing boat and tied the rope around the pier column, the air smelt stale. The wind had stopped blowing and a pleasant day did not seem all that pleasant suddenly. The D'Cousta house maids and other attendants were away to the town since it was a festival day and Richmond had been kind, something previously unknown to him and had let them off duty.

Only the tranquility of the estate, the silence of the huge mansion, the suppressed emotions of a wife who had long lost her purpose in life and the sound of heavy breathing of two canines gave Richmond company that day.

On his way back to the bungalow on the pier deck, he seemed to sense the presence of something invisible around him that was attempting at gripping him and stop him in his tracks.

He could not move a muscle and Lily saw him from a distance while resting on an arm chair laid out on the balcony of their room, that Richmond looked petrified.

For the first time in her 35 years with her husband, Lily saw terror - in the raw; in Richmond's eyes.

She was not in a state of mind to react, it was not her fault, it is not that she did not want to help him, may be just to be humane, but she just could not. It never occurred to her that Richmond would require her help. It is just one of those moments when *rationale* gallops away from your cognizance.

It all happened in a flash, the D'Cousta family hounds, *Lucifer & Gabriel* brought down the well-built Richmond effortlessly and began tearing at his flesh even before he realized what was happening to him. It seemed like they were possessed. While Richmond screamed in terror and searing pain, Lily only watched, emotionless and without shock like she was expecting this.

The two massive hounds maimed and mauled Richmond for such a long time and amazingly Richmond was conscious throughout the ordeal although he did not come out victorious. After a painful struggle, he

finally gave up and he looked like pieces of flesh sticking to a coat hanger. The attack of the Rottweilers was so vicious that many of Richmond's ribs, thigh & neck bones were severely fractured at several places. It seemed like that something wanted Richmond to suffer the pain and it ensured that his death would not come to him in a swift action but in a slow and deviant manner.

This ghastly incident would forever haunt the villagers and this incident would be discussed only in hushed tones and the villagers best avoided it. They construed the whole thing as an ominous warning and attributed his abnormal end to his evil deeds. Rumors abounded that it was Richmond who masterminded the killing of the Kamat family just to usurp their fortune for himself.

Most of the D'Cousta maids and attendants left the house in sheer fear while a few loyal ones stayed back to tend to Lily Mary. The hounds however were not silenced. Lily Mary opposed it. In fact, she never gave the true account of the incident at all. It was as if she wasn't witness to her husband's savage death. The police had closed the case by attributing the case as an attack by jackals even though they'd mentally ruled out such an incident while the two hounds had been guarding the bungalow. Maybe, they weren't too keen on spending their time on a rumored criminal who had never done any good to the society. The police always had felt insulted that they could not bring this man to justice & some even thought that he deserved such an ill fate in the end.

Richmond had never bequeathed his wealth to anyone and since Lily Mary was the natural heir to his property, she was named the custodian of the business, the estate and the bungalow and the family advocate constituted a trust that would take care of Lily's interests.

During his funeral at the estate, which was attended by a few of his distant relatives from his village and some of Lily Mary's family members, she did not shed a single tear and had earlier refused to eulogize her husband of 35 years. *Lucifer* and *Gabriel* looked on from a distance towards their departed master.

The villagers shunned the dreaded estate and feared that their fright would materialize into an evil force beyond their comprehension and something over which they would have little control. The estate was left alone until the school construction started....

Pawan was supported by Praneethi in his narration and he was about to go ahead when it was time for the noon session to start.

"What happened next?" Chavi almost jumped off her seat.

"Whoa Whoa!relax girl! we will let you know tomorrow. What's the hurry? we have all our lives to spend here" teased Pawan.

That afternoon session Chavi was disturbed in the mind throughout and could hardly focus on the teacher's words. Chavi had it in her nature to deeply connect with a story such that she herself became a part of it.

That evening after gym class, when she retired to room no 417 in the girls' hostel, all she could do was to stare into the cold evening out of the single window of her 4th floor room. The bungalow with a painful legacy occupied her thoughts and she had fixed her gaze on the dimly lit bungalow. The dogs were nowhere in sight and were probably inside with their mistress. Chavi reminisced about Pawan's narration of Richmond's violent end & then she could not control the eruption of tiny little goosebumps over her hands. She seemed to be lost in something just when she was jolted out of her dream state by her snobby roommate Peeya.

"Hey! open up the door!" she could hear Peeya scream from outside.

"Sorry, I didn't hear you coming" apologized Chavi

"What do you mean you didn't hear? I looked like an idiot banging and yelling from out of the door and this goddamn school doesn't allow cell phones, perfect!" Peeya was in her usual lousy mood.

"Listen, I said I am sorry, It won't happen again" Chavi apologized a second time

"Whatever, just be a little sober next time around" said a miffed Peeya

Chapter 4 – Symbiotic Relationships

Peeya's terseness did not bother Chavi as she had things of a higher order to ponder about. While her train of thoughts was derailed by Peeya's sudden blast, Chavi thought she would do some catching up with her *O Toole* novel.

"I do not give a damn if she has to miss her appointment with her physicist! you better get her to the sets by evening or else she better kiss her career good bye! I will finish her off unless she gets her act right!" barked Guss Schneider at silver screen starlet Annabelle Christopher's agent & manager Ian Pebblestone.

Guss Schneider had made quite a fortune as a movie producer in Beverly Hills. The early 50's era were dominated by musicals since people were still in awe of the Chicago broadways and the New York Opera houses. His luck had favored him quite well and Guss was soon a force to reckon with in the industry.

Originally from Warsaw, Poland his family had migrated long back to escape prosecution by the Tsar's regime. The Jewish family was a closely knit one and through it's enterprising means had established quite a decent business of a 'kosher' restaurant in Los Angeles in a block mostly inhabited by immigrant Jewish families.

Guss Schneider's father inherited the small restaurant from his father who had first set foot on American soil. Nicholai Schneider was a hard working individual who was totally committed to his family that included his wife Tara & his three sons Guss - the eldest, David and Benjamin. The three sons studied the Torah and the Talmud alike due to the strong influence of the community synagogue. Nicholai had wanted Guss to continue his studies of the Torah and Talmud and perhaps one day become a Rabbi. After all he had three sons and he had wished to contribute his first born to God's service. David and Benjamin attended the local public school along with Guss, who got a formal education till he turned 14.

Nicholai's failing health had forced Guss to abandon studies and take care of the family Kosher restaurant while David and Benjamin who were 3 & 5 years younger than him, continued to attend the school.

Tara was a good mother and she had raised all her 3 children with equal love and care and at least she thought she had raised them well. She was partially right.

Guss was never a happy kid. Even while he studied the Torah and the Talmud he would constantly question the existence of God and if he did he questioned why the world had been so unfair to the Jews and why his people always suffered.

Tensions were brewing in the middle east in a region called Palestine and the Israeli settlers had notched up more area than they were originally intended to, at least that is what the Arabs accused them of. The Jewish community in America were supportive of their brothers & sisters in Israel - the promised holy land and had started voicing their strong dissent. The Zionist movement in America was slowly beginning to gain steam and Guss would not be the one who would be left out.

Guss association with Zionist clubs & societies helped him network with many people from his community and a few from outside as well. A poison of hatred had begun to spout in his heart which was turning it black from inside out.

By the time he was 18, Guss had lost his father, who finally succumbed to a type of pneumonia. The Schneider family was so poor that it could not save their patriarch and Zionist Guss promptly blamed it on external factors. He was now possessed to make money, lots and lots of it. He was tired of just surviving the ghetto life. He was aiming large.

Guss abandoned his mother and two brothers who were now quite old enough to take care of both themselves and their mother and moved to the part of the city of Angels where dreams were weaved on film. Hollywood.

Guss was a fierce individual and had a certain spark about him which was quite easy to spot by the way he carried himself, walked and spoke.

He would usually dress up impeccably well so that the guards on gate duty at the studios would not stop him from entering.

Guss had befriended some guys who worked as chauffeurs to Hollywood studio's producers, actors, directors, musicians etc and would use their services for a small fee just to gain entry into the studios. This was an age old trick and it usually worked perfectly every time one tried it, though a confident con would usually succeed over a nervous one.

"May we know the intention of your visit today Sir" the bespectacled young lady at the studio's extensive reception had asked a suited up Guss. He had borrowed a pin striped biege suit, a fine cotton cream shirt, a black cross striped tie, leather boots from the second hand market and a nice looking grey bowler hat. He was only 19, but by his attitude and gait looked like a 30 year old, easily.

"The Gentleman is here on a special visit of Hollywood studios all the way from New York" his chauffeur friend would do him the honors, just as instructed by Guss. Half his job would be done if the receptionist was convinced that he was an important man.

"I am here to have a rendezvous with Ms. Augustine Schessman" spoke Guss in a manner reserved for the new elite of American society. Slow and clear.

"Very well Sir, you may proceed towards Studio no 14 where Ms. Schessman is filming her next". Back in those days, people were not as suspicious and therefore the nice young lady did not think twice before letting the gentleman from New York to meet the illustrious Ms. Schessman who was a well renowned movie director since she was the first lady in Hollywood to don the director's cap!

Guss waited while Augustine completed the shot. He had done his research quite well. Ms. Augustine Schessman was a first generation refugee who had escaped Warsaw, Poland before the Nazi regime plundered and bled her fatherland. She had studied film making and cinematography in the University of Warsaw and had long aspired to travel to Bavaria where the German film makers were churning out exemplary works of art, before the great war destroyed everything for her.

America was the promised refuge for the fleeing Jews and Augustine was the few lucky ones who escaped the horrors of holocaust and her family found a new home in Los Angeles. Her degree in Cinematography was instrumental in her getting inside the famous Hollywood studios and she had worked her way up the ladder, working as assistant to many great directors and finally had come out on her own. She was just 20 when she had arrived in America and now she was a lady all of 35 years.

Her work had never let her get romantically link with anyone and this void in her life had inflicted a great wound which she had silently nursed all this while. Until Guss appeared on the scene.

"Good day isn't it Ms. Schessman" Guss had nearly startled Augustine with his sudden approach.

"Oh Gosh! you scared me Sir! Do we know each other? I am sorry, I do not quite recall having met you earlier" Augustine responded.

"Charmed to meet you Madam, My name is Guss Schneider and I had embarked on a momentous journey from New York just to gain an audience with you" Guss was being overtly mature and chivalrous. He had wanted Augustine to be completely swept off her feet. She was her ticket to fame, success and wealth.

"You are Polish too? oh I am sorry, I am being rude, pardon me Sir" Augustine was being vulnerable and quite frankly she did not know why. May be it was Guss's charm and chiseled looks that had Augustine mesmerized with him on first sight. You know how things work, when it is somebody's fate, the whole universe conspires to give him his due, borrowing Paulo Coelho's words.

"No apologies poprosil o Pani" replied Guss in Polish and that had made an instant connect with the lady desperate for love.

"I am a great admirer of your art and I would be honored if I would be offered a chance to elaborate on some of my schemes that I had intended to share with you. In fact, my expedition from New York is for the same purpose" Guss said in a fashion of confession.

His impeccable manners and laborious way of speech had partially convinced Augustine that perhaps Guss belonged to the Polish royalty or the business elite and had escaped to America just like her family and she. Augustine was willing to let down her guard and indulge. For once in her life.

"Well I don't know, Sir"

"Please Madam, call me Guss"

"Only if you call me Augustine"

They both had a good laugh and a date was made. Guss would pick Augustine up from her Beverly Hills residence from where they would proceed to a famous Italian restaurant "Leonard" in downtown LA and then catch up on the latest Broadway show starring Franklin Steppers and Miralda Houston about a rich American businessman falling in love with a poor immigrant girl.

Guss had hooked up with his close associate in the Zionist club who worked as a saxophone player in the studio's orchestra. The cash for the disguises and the chauffeur driven cars were all sponsored by Guss's friend who had earlier casually discussed with Guss about Augustine and Guss had been extremely quick in cooking up his dangerous plot.

Augustine was smitten with Guss and never suspected anything wrong. This boy from the ghetto was dangerously ambitious and had a clear view of his goal and Augustine would take him there.

Soon, Guss and Augustine started being together and Guss's expenses were the least of his worries since Augustine would take care of everything. She had never been in love before and frankly she did not care if Guss was from Warsaw, New York or El Dorado. She was happy and that is all that she had wanted.

Guss got himself involved with Augustine's work and being a quick learner rapidly learnt the art of handling the camera, visualising the scenes, editing etc and was working as an assistant director in many of Augustine's films.

After a good 9 years of blissful courtship, Guss proposed and Augustine accepted. At 28 and 44 Guss Schneider and Augustine Schessman were married. Hollywood's elite attended the grand wedding ceremony and the couple was the cynosure of all eyes. Hollywood's most loved director had finally found her soul mate.

"Oh God!its already 8.45 now! gotta get ready for dinner!" Chavi quickly got ready for dinner.

9.20 P.M dinner was over and Chavi dashed towards the one single pay phone to call up mumma and papa.

9.35 P.M Chavi was back in her room and Peeya was already asleep.

10.35 P.M and Chavi could not sleep. She was restless and the sandman just did not visit her bed tonight. Chavi pulled her study chair near the window and sat looking at the D'Cousta bungalow. The girls' hostel and the bungalow were separated by a huge boundary fence put up by the D'Coustas and the hostel was just about 100 meters from *Ararat*.

Tonight too, all Chavi could see was a dimly lit bungalow and the hounds were nowhere in sight. It was an uneventful night and the silence of the night slowly embraced little Chavi into its fold and soon she slept.

A few days passed and Chavi could not get the timing right to ask new friends from the *Mayura* house about the *Ararat* legacy. Since Pawan&Praneethi were 9th graders and Disha was a twelfth grader, Chavi had no chance to meet any of them at class and Peeya hardly ever spoke with her.

Slowly, Chavi had begun to let go of her short time obsession with the D'Cousta house and had adjusted quite well to her new school, though she had not graduated beyond the 3 *Mayurans*.

"Anil",

"Present Ma'am"

"Brinda"

"Present Ma'am"

"Chavi"

"Present Ma'am"

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. .
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"Peeya".. "Peeya Mukherjee"! Ms. Sarojammal, the Mathematics teacher who had to engage the first hour was taking attendance and Peeya was nowhere to be seen.

"Has anybody seen Peeya. Wasn't she at the mess hall this morning?" queried Ms. Sarojammal

Nobody replied. Peeya seemed to have a rift with anyone who had tried to get close with her. She was a lovely girl but with a repugnant attitude. Her parents had left her for their heavenly abode and she was being taken care of by her maternal uncle and aunt. They were nice people too but did not have the time to dedicate their attention for their niece. Peeya had spent many a summer vacation at the hostel itself as their care taker family would have plans of their own and Peeya would never figure out in any of them.

She was actually hurt inside but put up an extra brave front and fought away all friendly approaches. She had become rebellious and opposed to the idea of socializing and making friends. The motley group of kids she hung around with were more of company for convenience rather than made out of choice.

"Anybody knows who Peeya's room mate is?" it was obvious for Ms. Sarojammal to raise this point.

"I am Ma'am" replied Chavi

"Well then where is she?" Ms. Sarojammal sounded like an officer during interrogation.

"I woke up late this morning and I did not see her in the room either. I had thought she was already out in the mess hall or somewhere. Moreover we do not eat together either" Chavi clarified.

Just then to everybody's surprise, Peeya Mukherjee rushed into the classroom to find 30 heads including the teacher's that had synchronously turned in her direction.

"Why are you late, Peeya? don't you know the timings?" rebuked Ms. Sarojammal

"I..I'm sorry..It won't happen again" Peeya did not elaborate and she really didn't seem all that sorry.

"You better do not" warned Ms. Sarojammal. Perhaps maths teachers are normally over the top strict.

Chavi looked into Peeya's eyes as she made her way to her fourth row desk and a flop of hair just fell on Peeya's left eye cutting off her face from Chavi's prying eyes.

"We'll continue with the classification of *Venn* diagrams... " went on Ms. Sarojammal towards the white board marker and for most of the students everything was a haze.

"I wonder where she was? I did not see her at the mess hall either.." Chavi was genuinely concerned even though Peeya exuded vibes that made even the most friendliest of kids move away from her. Peeya guarded her privacy like a pitbull.

Things usually happen when one least expects it to happen. That Friday afternoon, there were swimming classes for the 8th and 9th graders but alas! the swimming coach was nowhere to be found and the kids got a reprieve of three whole hours.

"Why hello there! how have we been?" Praneethi greeted Chavi who seemed a little lost in the crowd of 120
"Hi fellas! glad you are here. I was bored to death"

"Good to be at your service Madam" Pawan Siddaiah mockingly bent over with his right hand folded over his diaphragm and his left knee bent down.

"hehheh" giggled Chavi while Disha all along carried a dignified smile on her face.

"Hey you were so eager about that D'Cousta stuff that day and now you seem to have completely forgotten! leaky brain!" teased Pawan

"Of course not! I have been trying to catch hold of you every single day since then and I have been unlucky most of the time. Well go on! I am all ears!" Chavi had become very friendly with the trio and had always enjoyed their company.

"Not here" Disha cut in.

"Of course Of course, let us all go over to the auditorium. These kids will all go to the grounds or the courts now. The auditorium is rarely visited" Praneethi suggested.

"Alright that sounds cool" Pawan hinted at Disha.

"Ok, if you guys think so..but I still think that you guys think way too much of this cock and bull...." Disha started off.

"Cool, then it's the audi then..let's go.." Pawan decided to cut Disha off.

After finding strategic seats in the spacious auditorium, Pawan and Praneethi sat together on two seats while Disha and Chavi sat on two other seats on the front row with their backs turned towards the stage facing the narrator.

Chapter 5 – Omens

"Well where was I? hmm.." Pawan started to think

"You had finished the funeral and had started about the school construction.." chirped Chavi who sounded extremely excited to be able to hear the rest of the story.

"Good then you remember" Pawan grinned at Chavi

"Of course I do! now stop joking and continue" Chavi almost shouted.

"These are just rumors and I don't claim to know the facts.... I am just passing on what I heard from the others..don't blame me for misrepresentation of facts.." Pawan was enjoying Chavi's desperation to listen to the remaining part of the legacy.

"I don't care if they are just rumors or real facts..just go on with it Pawan! sometimes you are just like my brother..." Chavi hissed.

"Ok here goes nothing" Pawan started

The ACE management had started the school's construction about 3 years after the horrible incident had sent shock waves across the sleep little village on the outskirts of Bangalore. The plot of land owned by one of the school's head trustee was far away from the hustle and bustle of the city, had a lake that proved as ideal nesting grounds for exotic & migratory birds. The villagers were simple and the area was free from crime. These were strong enough reasons for the trust who were also managing regular schools within the city itself to plan over a state of the art International residential school that would be built on the lines of the military academy school in Patiala and offered it's students curriculum as well as holistic development.

The trust was very well aware of the D'Costa incident and though they thought it was an unnatural incident they did not consider the fear of the villagers to be anything serious. Villagers always talk about spirits, omens and ghosts and they neither have head or tail in their stories.

However, contrary to their educated beliefs, things started going right from the day that the construction work had to start at the site. The trust members along with their families, the school campus architect, a few investors and their families had gathered on a particularly stormy day during the monsoon to perform a little *puja* at the ground before excavating the ground for the foundation. The state education minister was also present for the ceremony as he would be laying a symbolic foundation stone to mark the commencement of the construction.

A large pavilion was set up at the site where the guests and their families could enjoy the view of the magnificent bungalow and the expansive lake with the migratory birds and their nests. Tables were set up and a delicious fare was laid out.

After the *puja* concluded and it also drizzled a bit much to the delight of the investors and the trustees since it was a good omen, the guests were guided towards the pavilion.

The minister along with his tiny entourage and tag alongs was in an animated conversation with a few of the trustees and a couple of well-known investors just then something unimaginable happened.

"What?" Chavi was so deeply involved and the story was taking an interesting turn.

Pawan just gestured with his hands to hold on and he looked in the direction of the stage, Chavi and Disha both turned towards the stage in unison to see Peeya standing at the foot of the small flight of steps leading to the elaborate stage.

"Since when was she here?" whispered Praneethi

"No idea, I stopped when I saw her..guess she might have just entered.. quite a sneaky little..." Pawan was about to let out an expletive when he was stopped by Disha's discerning gaze.

Feeling uneasy with the sudden attention towards her, Peeya immediately scurried out of the auditorium.

"I wonder why she had come here alone?" asked Chavi to herself.

"Hey go on!" Praneethi told Pawan

"Yeah, the minister was chatting and the guests were all busy enjoying the feast, when there was a commotion at the sprawling fence that separated the school's property from the D'Costa bungalow.

The guests were startled to watch a disheveled old lady wearing an old torn knitted sweater, a thick rimmed pair of spectacles, a laced floral gown that dropped down just below her knees and a pair of white - red sneakers staring at the crowd, at least that's what they thought. Lily Mary D'Costa had never stepped out of the patio of her bungalow ever since Richmond met a tragic end, tragic to him, and had never dared to come close to the piered deck. But here she was at the fence, out of her cordoned off zone.

She was in fact staring at a little girl who had wandered off close to the fence. The girl might have been just over 2 years old and she was the daughter of one of the school's investors. When the minister's attention was drawn to the commotion, he signaled one of his men to check into it. Just when one of his men had gone a step too far to shoo away the scary old woman, *Lucifer and Gabriel* were on their hinds with their fore paws resting on the fence bearing their canine fangs and spewing thick saliva, barking furiously at the man who had come too close to their mistress.

The hounds could have easily leaped over the fence and made mincemeat out of the man, but they were restrained, all by themselves. Lily Mary hardly spoke a word & did nothing to reign in her dogs. This was the beginning of several omens. The dogs behaved like they possessed human personalities.

Some say that the land on which the school was constructed once belonged to Richmond D'Costa. In fact, he had bought such huge swathes of land across the village that he practically owned more than half of the tiny village. The D'Costa family trust had sold this land to the ACE trust for a handsome price since the main source of income was from the art house and the galleries and without a caretaker, the business had flagged down and the trust had to sell this extra piece of land to earn just enough money to operate the bungalow's and the estate's expenses from the interest it earned.

Sometime after that weird incident, the architect came along with his blue prints, drawing board and surveying instruments and 25 odd workers and assistants, the second omen happened and this time the warning was more intense.

It was monsoon and it had been raining for quite some time now, the ground was all wet and soggy, but the excavation & other work could start without any hitch. The architect had stood where the girls' hostel stood now and had given his surveying instrument which was a special lens on a tripod which would spell out the ground's levelness against a reference.

The main school structure would be a little far away and the very first construction had to be the girls' hostel which was closest to the D'Costa property. It also had easy access to the road and provided an

excellent view of the lake. The girls' hostel was to be built in such a location that it would be closest to the school for obvious reasons.

The laborer who was carrying the survey instrument on the tripod was a little hyperactive and kept running about the ground, just to get off with his work soon. The architect would guide him from a distance and the laborer would place the tripod there. After a good 30 minute of this exercise, the architect had wanted to position the instrument near the fence and he directed the laborer to do so.

The over enthusiastic laborer was jogging over to the fence when within a fraction of a second, he slipped & fell. He was impaled in the neck on the fence and this was the exact same spot *Lucifer & Gabriel* had barked warnings at the crowd of onlookers. The laborer died instantly.

The management pooh poohed this incident as an accident and went on with the construction of the school. The laborers were all from the city and therefore were unaware of the dangerous past of the estate.

The construction of the school did go on without any incident and the school even got completed as planned. The unsavory incident was soon forgotten and the school was thrown open for admissions. This all happened about 9 years back.

"So it has been 12 years since Richmond's death now" Chavi calculated.

"Yes Einstein. It has been. Now let's go to the ground. I am bored. Rest for later" Praneethi played spoilsport and Chavi had to wait, God knows till how long until she got her feed of the real life horror thriller.

After an hour of fun and frolic with other 9th and twelfth graders, Chavi returned to her room with a view and threw herself over the bed.

It was but wrong to presume that the omens had subsided though it had taken quite a long break after the freak accident that impaled the laborer. For twelve long years there had not been any untowardly incident at ACE.

Maybe, the unknown force that had manifested itself into something extremely vicious had waited in long anticipation for this moment in time.

It had now been a good month since Chavi had joined ACE and she had made some other friends primarily from the *Mayura* house thanks to her proximity to the house head girl. The school had preached about some extra ordinary facilities for its students in its glossy and highly attractive brochure. ACE had lived up to its promises

The school announced the resumption of the equestrian classes for all students from 8th to 12th graders. The notices were sent across to the individual laptops of all students while keeping their parents in the loop.

The classes however were mandatory and Chavi could not feign any excuse to avoid mounting a horse.

Chavi received her equestrian ensemble 15 days after the school memo was circulated.

"Not quite bad" Chavi praised herself as she observed her image with the suit on. A jockey's helmet, a pleated blazer, cream lycra leggings and ankle length boots with cowboy spurs.

"This is your first time too, right Peeya?" Chavi had still not given up on her roommate.

"Obviously! This is the first time in 8th grade for me too, isn't it?" Peeya was at her obnoxious best.

Dressed for the occasion, Chavi was accompanied by Peeya who had no choice but to follow the hostel warden's instructions to come out in twos in accordance with the room numbers.

The equestrian ground was a makeshift one designed on the lines of amateur competitions and the circuit had only 7 obstacles as compared to the standard of 10 - 16.

The highest steeple was a mere 4.5 feet high, not even a challenge for the experienced thoroughbreds that the school management had managed to acquire at a decent price from a nearby stud farm.

Chavi's horse was a black mare with a streak of brown running vertically on its broad forehead, while Peeya's horse was a brown – white stallion.

“HEEL BOY!” shouted the stallion's handler.

Peeya's stallion was behaving strange and quite frankly it's handler had never seen him behave so gruff. The stallion's anxiety seemed to grow large as Peeya approached him with a whip and she looked quite resolved to tame him.

How often have we come across incidents where the mute creatures of the animal kingdom have heightened senses to sense lurking danger while the most evolved creature of them all does not carry the slightest ability for the same. May be it this disability could be man's unbecoming in the near future.

The handler was having a harrowing time in controlling the agitated animal and he lost total control just as Peeya came within arm's reach of the beast. The stallion raised on its hinds with a blood curdling neigh and it came down with all its fury and strength upon the unsuspecting handler. The iron clad hooves of the stallion broke through the man's rib cage and a shard of his bone ripped through his lungs and heart, bleeding him from inside and killing him instantly.

After 2 omens in quick succession, the third one had taken a patient 12 years to show up and it was deadly.

Peeya was unperturbed by all this. While a commotion & a crowd gathered to witness the misery, Peeya coolly left the scene without expressing a hint of shock or fear and Chavi had watched all along. For an eighth grader and a girl, it was easy to scream, shout and even faint when such drastic events had taken place right under her nose, but Peeya exhibited a stoicism of a veteran crime scene investigator who was used to seeing human carcasses in the most inhuman of conditions.

All her life, Chavi had the nicest things for company and her departure of her home and hamlet had suddenly exposed the naïve yet brave girl to a world that was unknown about which even the adults were unsure.

“Mumma & papa will be disturbed if I tell them about the school's past and about today” Chavi confided with her trusted three friends, Pawan, Praneethi and Disha.

“The adults will never believe if you are gonna tell them a story about ghosts and omens. They will only dismiss your plea as a child's excuse to get out of this prison!” spoke Pawan as if logically.

“I guess you are right. But I really think that there is something strange about my roomie”. Chavi had been almost correct with her suspicions.

Peeya's parents had not died a natural death and their demise was mired in controversy and it was a great riddle as to how Peeya alone survived the ghastly car accident that the Mukherjees were involved in.

Her maternal uncle and his wife had been kind to adopt her into their family and raised her as their own. She had a normal life until she was nearly around 11 years old – Puberty.

Chavi got back to her O Toole thriller *Lasting Fondness* just to divert her attention from the day's incident and to avoid making eye contact with her strange roommate. But hardly had she anticipated the how closely fiction and facts were linked and how *Déjà vu* would change her perception about this forever.

Guss was leading a good life, he was practically high society, the crème de la crème. His spouse was the most celebrated member of the Hollywood fraternity and he basked in her glory but seldom had his share of the fame and fortune. Augustine Schessman Schneider's huge fortune was looked after by her trusted accountant and manager Teddy Birmingham. Though Guss was earning quite well for his age and skills as an assistant to his wife, he was not content. His disagreement with life's plan for him had made him move out of the ghetto long back and quite frankly he never had second thoughts of returning to his family. He had elected to purge his frugal past and was married to the thought of aristocracy and fame. In the modern era, the rich & the famous were the new royals and the ones who ruled the hearts and controlled the minds of the people, possessed the ultimate weapon. Power. Power to influence

Three years into the marriage and the huge age gap notwithstanding, Augustine bore Guss his first child, a daughter.

"How could I make such a frivolous error! I must have been on my guard!" cursed Guss at his fate. He had never wanted his relationship with Augustine to progress to the next level and was wary of committing to the family life. His conscious was still not totally corrupted but was in every way vulnerable.

Nevertheless, Guss displayed signs of fatherly affection towards his daughter Priscilla Schneider though he vowed that he would never falter again.

"Honey! Look at what we have got here, an invitation for the 15th annual Hollywood Studio gala and we have the front row seats!" exalted Augustine.

"Splendid!" Guss was excited too but soon his face was crestfallen when he noticed that the invite had been in Augustine's name and she could bring along a plus one. Guss wanted to be 'The one' and not a mere plus one.

Though he had not deserved it, his ego was bruised very badly. This was the beginning of Guss's moral decline.

"Good Evening My lady! Most charmed to welcome you Ms. Schessman" greeted an old acquaintance of Augustine who received her at the gala event while the press snapped away at free will when the distinguished lady director and the famous socialite rubbed shoulders. All this while a grinning Guss Schneider was standing behind his famous lady and was grossly snubbed by the highly biased media men.

Augustine was so consumed in her own world that she completely forgot the basic etiquette of introducing her husband of 3 years to the people who came to wish her at the event. At this point, Guss's ego had taken a massive beating and his self-esteem had taken a nose dive.

After the gala event, Guss maintained an uneasy silence throughout their drive to their Beverly hills residence. Guss sulked while Augustine gushed about the grandeur of the event. It had never crossed her mind that she was distancing her husband from this childish indulgence of hers. Not that Guss was truly in love with his lady.

"Good Morning my lady, Good Morning Sir! I presume the both of you had a marvelous evening at the gala" spoke Augustine's manager & accountant Teddy Birmingham in a polished English manner.

"Oh It was fine, just fine! Wasn't it honey!" Augustine was still gushing about the previous evening.

"If you say so darling!" Guss said it in a matter-of-fact manner.

“What brings you all the way in the morning Teddy?” Guss interrogated Teddy.

“Well, it’s about Augustine’s accounts, I had to discuss a few tiny issues with her”

“Oh my! Please spare me from all the numbers! They all look like Greek and Latin to me! That’s why I hired you Teddy!” Augustine joked.

“Augustine, its nothing major, there were some bills to pay off and I need your signatures on the cheques here. No pain”

“Alright, get them here”, Augustine trusted Teddy since he had been with her for a long time now and she had no reason to suspect as she was doing quite well. Augustine signs half a dozen leaves without even allowing them her glance.

Ted would usually time his meetings with Augustine when Guss wouldn’t be around, but this time, he had faced Guss who was quite not amused with the way his wife trusted an outsider.

“Honey! Don’t you think you should be a little more pragmatic about how you deal with your money?”

“Oh no dear, Teddy is a good hand and I trust him completely. Nothing wrong has happened for the last 10 years he has been with me and I can’t imagine if I should be trusting him less”

“You are not the same person you were 10 years back Augustine!” asserted Guss trying to assert that he wore the pants in the house. Taking Augustine’s name in a conversation should have been an indicator that all was not right in the Schessman – Schneider household.

“Well that’s why I got married to you, Guss Schneider. You will take care of me!” mocked Augustine playfully not taking him seriously.

Guss was not convinced of Ted’s honesty and had decided to put him to test, may be it would have something for him as well.

A few days pass and Guss had devised a plan to extricate information from Ted and lookout for probable avenues from which he could benefit as well.

Guss got his opportune moment when Augustine had to fly to Beirut to shoot for her next film based on a bestseller which had the male protagonist falling in love with a Bedouin girl on his expedition to the lawless lands of the Horn of Africa.

Chapter 6 – The Ascent

“Are you alright dear?” the voice on the other end of the phone was distressed and it was Anitha.

“Of course mumma, don’t you worry! It’s just one of those days” Chavi tried to pacify her hyperventilating mom. There was reason for it too.

The equestrian incident had spread out of the school campus like wild fire and soon it reached the Kumar family residence within no time. It was out in the papers and some local television news broadcasters ensured that the incident created a flutter.

It is the human psyche that always yearns for excitement, no matter how short lived it might be.

All of us just love to disturb a giant flock of pigeons pecking peacefully at grains generously donated by patrons, only to enjoy a few seconds of excitement that runs through the air when the doves vacate their feeding grounds as a singular entity & come back as quickly as they left. The media does something just like that; it creates ripples in tranquil waters. News of the stallion incident had both Anitha and Sunil worried and while Sunil was on his way to the school, Anitha had called up the principal’s office who had summoned Chavi.

“Please be calm, it was just an accident; we have never had any such incident in the school’s history. The horse was a trained one and we are still investigating into what could have gone wrong” a calm looking Aadarsh Prasad was seen explaining to the dozens of concerned parents including Sunil.

“We want you to suspend the equestrian classes altogether” Sunil demanded

“Yeah, we send our children here to study not to ride on horses” another parent chipped in.

“Please gentlemen please; the ACE management is committed to the safety and welfare of all its students. As I told you, this had never occurred in the school’s 12 year history and I assure you on behalf of the school that this will not repeat” Aadarsh Prasad was having a tough time fending off angry parents.

“It better not Mr. Prasad, I assume I speak on everyone’s behalf that our children are everything to us and God forbid if any such incident occurs again, I will dedicate all my resources to shut his school down” one of the beleaguered parents threatened the ACE principal.

The equestrian classes were suspended for a while as the management decided that it was in its best interests to let the embers cool down.

“Listen Chavi” Sunil held her daughter by her arms.

“You don’t need to do anything if you don’t like to. The school cannot force you on horseback if you are not willing to. You will always have me and Anu to speak to; Right?”

“I know papa. It’s fine. I can take care of myself you know. Relax and ask mumma to take it easy. She sounded very worried today” Chavi assured Sunil just as he hopped onto his car on his way back home and Chavi watched the car disappear past the school’s huge gates.

The school was quick in resuming regular classes as a suspension of the same would be detrimental to bringing a sense of normalcy amongst the school’s students and even the faculty.

Room no 417 in the girls’ hostel would have no bigger than a regular hotel room and yet there was an enormous distance between its two inmates. Peeya had been completely ignoring Chavi’s existence in the room and Chavi never ever felt that her roommate wanted to share with her what had happened at the equestrian course.

The next morning, Chavi and her three friends meet in the library. Though Disha was a little reluctant to join the trio, she being the head girl and the senior and all, she was coaxed into joining them by a pursuant Praneethi and Pawan.

“Stallion kills his handler in Intl School near Bangalore” the morning tabloid *Indian Standard* reported and Pawan scoured the page for every detail though Chavi had given the best possible description of the incident to her only three friends in the school.

“Do you think the omens have started showing up again” Chavi put the question on the tiny forum.

“It is quite possible; but I wonder why it took 12 long years for them to show up and why?” Pawan responded as he had been thinking about the stallion incident for some time now.

“Have you guys ever heard of the word ‘accident’?” Disha wanted to curtail Chavi and Pawan’s growing curiosity about an incident that was seemingly about a stressed out horse.

“May be the handler used to abuse the horse, may be it had enough and decided to end it all for once” Praneethi tried to give it a rational explanation.

“Are you listening to yourself? You are watching way too many movies Pranee” Pawan chided her for her immaturity.

“The police need to investigate into this issue properly, this was definitely no accident. It looked like it was all orchestrated” Chavi was thinking on different lines.

“Obviously the management has already got the case closed using its clout. They don’t want the press go bad – mouthing about the school’s programs” Disha told in a matter of fact way.

“Hmmm... that’s for sure, but my gut says that this is not going to be the end of such things in the school” Pawan spoke like he was an oracle.

The school library is usually deserted on normal mornings since the kids do not believe in sacrificing their time at the mess hall which is probably the only place in the entire school where the supervision of the faculty is relaxed. That day the library had, apart from the foursome, the librarian, her help and a few other students for company.

The library was on the 3rd floor of the U shaped school building and the foursome had found seats near the window which gave them a splendid bird’s eye view of the assembly area and the large raised platform, alongside which the Principal’s office, the administrative office and the staff rooms were located.

While Pawan, Disha and Praneethi were engrossed with the news of the world, some movements in the deserted raised platform caught Chavi’s attention. It was Peeya, coming out of Aadarsh Prasad’s office.

“Hey guys, look!” Chavi turned the busy trio’s attention towards her mysterious roommate.

The three of them leaned towards the window to see Peeya, now timidly walking towards the assembly area from what looked like the principal’s office.

“The assembly is still a good 15 minutes away and we were the only four to come out of the mess early. I am sure no one else followed or led” said Pawan.

“I guess she might have got a call from....Oh my God!” Chavi ducked away from the window much to the trio’s surprise.

“I think she saw me, she turned her head up towards the window, how did she know?” Chavi whispered in a suppressed tone.

“Stop overreacting Chavi! We are three floors up, obviously it’s just a coincidence” Disha tried to allay Chavi’s fears.

“I guess you are right” Chavi looked down the window a second time and this time she could not find Peeya but she could see a stream of students gathering at the area for the morning assembly.

“Let’s go for now, shall we meet up after the classes? We will have at least 2 hours before reporting at our hostels. Moreover it’s Sunday tomorrow and we need to plan for our city visit” said Praneethi.

“We’ll meet at this garden restaurant ‘*Baageecha*’ in the city. It’s a nice secluded place and not many people know about it, it will be perfect for us to hangout” Pawan suggested.

So, it was decided that the foursome would be meeting at this old garden restaurant which was started by a retired army Subedar who was popularly called *chacha* by the young collegians who frequented this spot.

ACE made it a point to let its students take a trip downtown once in a month just to unwind and have some fun; responsibly of course under the distant supervision of their teachers in *mufti*.

It had been some time since the school had let out its students out but since things were not all that pleasant in the school, the management decided upon hastening this practice to avoid spreading the fear and hysteria amongst students and more importantly amongst the parents. The students will definitely have something good to say about the school once they are unleashed into the urban wilderness.

It was Sunday & Pawan was caught amidst the four girls who had decided that they would go about window shopping in the city. Poor chap had the moral responsibility of accompanying and safeguarding the three pretty girls from prying eyes. This meant spending intolerable amounts of time in ice cream shops, boutiques, and artificial jewelry.

“Aaw, come on females! I thought we had an agenda for today! It’s already been 4 hours and I don’t see anything in your hands. Do you even want to buy anything at all?” rued a dazed and tired Pawan much to the amusement of the giggling trio.

“Come come bro, we are almost done now, don’t have to be all that melodramatic. Let’s go meet your *chacha*” said the elder Disha.

“He is not **my** *chacha*” replied the grumpy ninth grader.

After a heartfelt roundabout of the shopping street, the girls and Pawan walk into the spacious restaurant with tables and chairs laid out under huge lawn umbrellas in the green lawn outside the hotel’s kitchen and a newly constructed air conditioned indoor restaurant. *Baageecha* on a typical Sunday afternoon was full of college students, especially of the love bird variety who craved for peace and seclusion. Hours together of sweet nothings would be exchanged over a couple of cups of coffee and if *chacha* was really lucky, they would order something to eat as well.

The *chacha* or Subedar Karim Siddiqui was a middle aged man with a pleasant face and a clean bald head. He had a distinct mark on his forehead indicating that he read his prayers regularly. He often would keep his shiny bald head exposed but sometimes his customers would catch him wear a skull cap and on some rare occasions he would also sport a fashionable fur cap. The lanky Karim would usually be dressed in simple & comfortable Patiala suits and his thick beard and moustache were flame red in color may be due to his habit of applying *henna* on his braid. He was someone who was hard to ignore even in a crowd.

Karim’s hotel was not very plush or over the top in its surrounding and ambience. There was an old world – homely charm to it. Karim made it a point that he welcomed anyone stepping into his sprawling green lawns with a broad smile and a nod of his head and in his absence, his manager or one of his three sons would do the honours. All the waiters were trained to be most patient and give the customers maximum

space and time, after all Karim had accepted that the maximum of his revenue would be derived from innocuous college couples.

The foursome were greeted by the ever smiling Karim into *Baagecha's* green lawns and a set of chairs, a round table and a huge beach umbrella at a corner of the lawn and by the side of a medium sized hedge seemed to beckon them towards it.

Chavi, Praneethi, Disha and Pawan quickly occupied their places around the table and took cursory glances at the menu cards placed by the waiter.

The waiter was accustomed to receiving orders very late and by natural instinct he backed away from the young crowd immediately after he had placed the menu cards, not that the foursome had anything specific in mind to order.

A few moments later, the girls ordered watermelon – mint smoothies while Pawan ordered an iced cappuccino.

“Now people! Coming back to the agenda, let’s not forget we are here today to discuss about the mysterious girl of room no 417, not you Chavi; Peeya Mukherjee” Pawan announced in a lowly circus side show manner to a crowd of three girls with raised eyebrows.

“You are so cheap, Pawan” Disha was quick in expressing her feelings.

“Alright then, let me summarize this..” Chavi went about loud - documenting the events that had led to the stallion incident right from the slaying of Richmond.

“I was just wondering guys, didn’t you say that Chavi’s parents were killed in a car crash when she was just a kid?” queried Chavi and it seemed like she was on to something or someone.

“Yeah that’s true, Peeya was born and brought up in an obscure town near Kolkata. Her family was like, big landlords or something and her father owned acres of land there. They were quite rich. Nothing much is known, but I heard rumors that Peeya was adopted” Pawan narrated to Chavi what was well known amongst the seniors in the school. Peeya, after all had been in the school for a very long time now.

“The whole family was killed with the car’s driver. It was messy; the car smashed right into a truck parked on the side of the highway. Some say, the driver was a little tipsy, while some say he was just very tired. The most weirdest account I have heard is that the car lights just went off seconds before the collision and the driver had lost control completely over the car and the next thing they know is a huge truck within inches of the car” Praneethi continued with a sense of terror in her eyes.

“Was Peeya in the car too?” queried Chavi.

“No, she was lucky. Apparently her mother threw her out the window in the nick of time before the car was blown to smithereens” told Disha.

“How old was she then?” Chavi had queried.

“Don’t know, if the loonie hasn’t lied about her age, then she could have been 2 – 3 years old back when the incident occurred” Pawan answered.

“Tell me Pawan, didn’t you say something about a girl of about 2 years back when the school foundation stone was being laid?” Chavi was definitely on track to finding out something amazing.

“Yeah it was when the first omen occurred. The D’Cousta dogs were just inches away from the girl, but somehow they did not go any further” Pawan replied.

“Any idea who that girl could have been?” Chavi put forward her stupendous question in front of the forum.

“We don’t know, It could have been anyone for all I know. It was a huge party that day and all the trustees, guests and investors were present for the occasion” Praneethi answered.

“Is there any way we could trace out the guest list?” Chavi pondered out loudly.

“Are you kidding me? It happened a good 12 years back and moreover how the hell are we supposed to get hold of such a document?” Disha fumed.

“I have a hunch about this Disha di, trust me on this. Something’s definitely not right with my roomie” said Chavi.

“You mean, you suspect that little girl at the party was Peeya?” Praneethi almost gasped.

“I have a hunch like I said, not sure, first we must get to know when Peeya’s parents, if they were really what that, were killed in the car crash and when the school’s foundation stone was laid” Chavi said.

“Well the dates are not hard to trace, a simple search on the internet would give us some answers” Disha guided the ‘kid’.

“That just gives us part clarity, but most importantly, we must ascertain if Peeya’s parents were really her biological parents or she was indeed adopted as the rumors say” said Chavi.

“Well that sounds a bit out of our syllabus Chavi, how on earth are you going to find out about that? Peeya’s uncle and aunt live in faraway Kolkata and there is no way we can contact them. You don’t exactly have an equation with your roomie, do you?” Pawan was perplexed with what Chavi had come out with.

“Keep me out of this stuff, this is really stupid. Moreover what’s the need to play Sherlock Holmes now? Just finish the semester and get out of here for the vacations” Disha never had been a willing partner to such schemes.

It was a difficult proposition that Chavi had set for herself and her group of friends, but may be her brush with crime and justice in her hometown had spurred her on to spark off the inquisitive side in her. The usually retracted and introverted Chavi was slowly spreading out her wings and was showing signs of a very articulate detective, if one might call her that.

It only takes a moment for greatness to ascend; the efforts of the world & the universe culminate in the formation of something amazing and larger than life. There are several instances in everybody’s lives when they experience an inkling of greatness within them; a queer desire to fight ones’ inhibitions and fight the ebb. Chavi was now on the path of her ascension to something monumental for her and her close ones.

Chapter 7 – Litmus Test

“Augustine had landed with her cast and crew in the dreamy city of Beirut. The city looked like a fare and the flea markets laden with the most exotic of fruits the lady could lay her eyes on. The port city was the best locales she could have found on earth to film her romantic magnum opus. The marinas, clubs, breathtaking architecture were just like a director’s prescription for a fabulous backdrop to a heartwarming love story.

“Ooh, Honey! I wish you were here with me”, gushed the still madly in love Augustine to her Polish – American husband, Guss.

“I wish the same too my love, but you know I had to be here for the editing, the damn thing needs to be completed by Wednesday”

“Alright honey, won’t keep you away from work, Good Bye Darling” Augustine hung up the phone from her desk at the luxurious Four Seasons hotel that gave a breathtaking view of the Riviera and the bustling thoroughfare by its sides.

“Could have at least offered to take me along!” fumed a visibly upset Guss as he sat on his couch by the fireplace holding a glass of scotch and smoking a cigarette.

The rot had started setting in and it would soon overwhelm Guss before he could do anything to stem it. Jealousy pangs and a Nadir of his self – esteem had driven him to the edge of the cliff and he was about to hang by a thread, so to speak.

“Have you taken a look at this boss?” Stephen Rudolph, Guss’s trusted lieutenant and a close confidant was holding out the evening edition of the Los Angeles Chronicle which ran an article by star gazer and popular columnist Alisa McNeal.

“Of course I have, these paparazzi maggots hardly have anything to write these days” Guss was upset over many things happening with his life, this time over an article by a very popular columnist in a well read newspaper that alleged that he had poached Augustine for her large fortunes and her estates in LA and Chicago.

“That’s a load of Bull Shit, I tell you” thundered Guss at the hapless Rudolph who could not say anything immediately that would pacify his boss.

“What do you want me to do about it boss?” stammered Rudolph. Though Guss was just over his 30s now, he commanded a fear among his subordinates, mostly because of his ignominious temper and the after math of his fury.

“Let it be, these things are a dime a dozen, we have other important things to look into” Guss quickly revived himself.

Rudolph was in his mid – 30s and was a simple man but with a resolute will. He was like a remora that latches on to a shark and feeds on its refused crumbs. It was well known in Hollywood that Guss had duped Augustine into believing in his love for her and he had married her solely for her money. Stephen had been attracted by the city lights just like thousands like him from far off wheat & maize growing villages. His dreams of making it big in front of the arc lights in the city of Angels had been quashed like a cruel joke. He never could become an actor or anything significant, may be because he did not make the right company or follow the right flock. His productive years had deserted him long back and now he was just a sad reflection of his own past. Alone and almost broke, he had decided upon a complete revamp on his morale standards.

How luck favors the brave and the risk takers, Stephen was a classic example of this. Guss had put up a clean image to the world and was dabbling in direction and production. But beneath his Persian carpet

there was a lot of foul smelling garbage and Guss had found Stephen to be a more than effective Janitor to clean up his mess.

Guss was living two lives and one of which was something he was not particularly proud of, but nevertheless gave him access to his wildest dreams. Stephen was no bonafide benefactor of the Schessman – Schneider household; he was a mere agent at Guss's disposal. Stephen's loyalty was always on Sale as he had long renounced the straight path and this in fact had yielded him very positive results.

Augustine had always turned a blind eye to her husband's behind the scenes endeavors since she did not want to act his mother. She had long suffered loneliness in the crowd and Guss's entry in her life had given her much needed companionship and had eradicated her loneliness.

Guss wanted to be famous, which he was now albeit in a manner that he had not wanted. But at the same time he wanted to be rich, very rich. His skills were limited to conning people and thus circumventing law.

The 50s was a time of shift & great unrest. New countries were being born and old empires were crumbling to dust. Great Britain was no longer recognized as a superpower and the European nations were all reeling under the after effects of a long and expensive war. The free world in the USA and the communist USSR were the only remaining superpowers.

The tensions across the many kingdoms of Africa and the Middle East opened up an unprecedented demand for weapons of all kind, light, heavy, and tactical and Guss would not let go of this opportunity to make money; lots and lots of it.

Guss was a facilitator for underground agencies and outlawed groups who wanted quick access to modern weaponry for a price. Over the years, Guss had befriended several black sheep in the armed forces of the western world's lone superpower and was running a thriving business of supplying sophisticated arms to the local mobsters. Now his thirst for more had made him join hands with enemies of the state. Contrary to popular belief, there is NO honor among thieves.

It was a great nexus and probably would never be exposed to the general public or the political administration. As long as they were away from the public spotlight, the incumbents were not even slightly bothered by what they were doing.

"Tonight in the park, 21:15 hrs" read the note that Stephen Rudolph had been carrying in the pocket of his long dark brown overcoat along with a photograph. The photograph was that of Sgt. George Gilmore of the 88th Infantry. He was the store keeper – in charge of the US Arms Depot situated on the outskirts of Los Angeles. This was an old Spanish Garrison converted to a fortified arms depot by the federal government. Sgt. Gilmore shared Guss's ideologies of wealth amassment and his job as a stores keeper in an ordinance depot would only get him as far as a Lincoln Premiere after his retirement. He had met Guss at a function organized by Hollywood Studios to honor the sacrifices of the American armed forces on the Japanese frontline.

Guss, shrewd and with an eye for recognizing similarities in other people, was quick in singling out this ambitious Sergeant. He soon discovered his potential in the domain of arms dealing and smuggling and was quickly drawn towards the idea. He later learns of Gilmore's affiliates and acquaintances within the armed forces and the depot who shared his dreams of living a high life. Thus a network was established and they went about their business unchecked. They had little risks, they had to siphon out just a small segment from the huge consignments that the depot would regularly receive from the ordinance factories and the accountant who was also an accomplice would make a false entry. It was quite easy, since the US was always involved directly or indirectly in any armed conflict taking place at any corner of the world and a shortage of a trunk or two of artillery pieces and machine guns wouldn't make the alarm bells ringing.

The weapons had made way to all wrong hands imaginable.

Augustine, meanwhile was engrossed in putting together the pieces that would bring life to her magnum opus.

She had intended to film her movie in the exotic locations of Egypt, but the escalating tensions in that region over a marine trade route had forced the US embassy to issue travel alerts to its citizens and the next best choice after Egypt was Beirut. Her crew had erected amazing sets which made the backdrop strikingly Egyptian and the moviegoers would not suspect a thing.

On the other hand, Stephen Rudolph laid waiting at the park in the LA suburbia for his target. The Sergeant had a habit, a fine one in fact of taking the circuitous route through the park from the arms depot to his home downtown. His, was a desk job and the field man in him craved for physical exertion. The park was no obstacle course but it nevertheless aided in stretching his limbs a bit.

The night was cold and so was Rudolph's heart. He had sold his soul to the devil and he had forgotten all things human. His despondency had forged him to become a hardened machine, impervious to the effects of nature.

9 P.M : Gilmore enters the nearly deserted park, taking a brisk stroll by the lake side.

9:05 P.M : Rudolph fetches his tool from a hidden side pocket of his long dark brown overcoat.

9:10 P.M : The predator watches his prey approach.

9:12 P.M : A struggle for survival, tufts of precious oxygen slips away from the lungs.

9:15 P.M : Sergeant George Gilmore loses the most important battle of his life.

Stephen Rudolph saw his reflection in the dark moonlit waters of the lake. It was that of a beast that hunted for survival.

In the middle of the walkway, an army man's corpse dressed in fatigues sprawled. A small piece of leather lied a few inches away from his neck. It was swift, but definitely not painless.

A recent deal had gone awry and the network's cover was at the risk of getting blown over. Free lancing mercenaries who fought alongside militias were apprehended by British forces during the conflict in the Middle East and to their utter shock, found American weapons on their person. This was a major embarrassment for the US Government which had stayed away from the conflict and this incident sparked off speculations about its double stand.

The Sergeant had pressed the panic button and had confided with some of his pals that he would turn Government witness and implicate all those involved. But as they say, money buys eyes and ears and this news soon reached Guss who let his minion Rudolph do his bidding.

The evening paper, Los Angeles Chronicle carried a half page report on the killing of a veteran Sergeant. LAPD had initially suspected it to be a case of killing for profit as his wallet was nowhere to be found, but they were still dumbfounded on the murder weapon since petty thieves wouldn't risk choking a 6'2 sergeant with a piece of leather. They had kept the case 'open & under investigation'.

"That should take care of things for a while" Guss had a wry smile on his face. He was looking older than he should have been. He was hardly over 30 and yet the stress of his affairs had carved several lines on his forehead and around his mouth.

Rudolph had passed the litmus test. He was now a deadly killing machine and he would do anything if a pile of notes were placed in front of him.

Chapter 8 – The Caveat

Two whole months had passed since Chavi was admitted into ACE and the tests were on the threshold. Chavi was always attentive in all her classes, maintained impeccable notes and studied every day, the traits of an achiever and a bookworm. Needless to say, Chavi topped her class in the tests and she made quite a few other friends and distanced quite a few too in her class.

Peeya, the dark horse, was not so bad either. For all her legacy and ill repute, she had done quite well in the tests herself.

Chavi's oldest friends in ACE had done quite well for themselves and they all sat gushing about their stupendous feats during their regular post lunch talkathons.

“Now that the tests are over, will you guys try figure out the great Peeya mystery now?” Chavi opened the Pandora's box again which the tests had managed to shut for a while.

“There you go again! Why do you have to be such a prick Chavi?” Disha sounded annoyed.

“Oh Come on Disha Di, she is right, we must get under her skin to find out if she really has any links with the omens” Praneethi came out in full support of her junior while an amazed Pawan looked on with a fake surprised look over his face replete with a downward smile.

“Now tell me Nancy Drew, how are you going to get access to the registers, Peeya's contacts in Kolkata, the 12 year old guest list” Disha went on teasing the girls.

“That's where you come in Pawan” Chavi told to a shocked Pawan who almost recoiled from the crowd as if confronted by a venomous snake.

“whoa whoa! Hold on ladies! Where did that come from?”

“See, this is what you get into if you play their silly games” Disha turned towards a dazed Pawan.

“Chillax Pawan! All we need you to do is browse on the internet to find out the guest list. I am sure that the event would have been covered by at least a local newspaper, after all it was inaugurated by a minister” Chavi clarified Pawan about his role.

“And that would do what” Disha frowned

“That Di, would give us the names of the guests there, Peeya's parents who died were very rich landlords right? I am sure that the papers would carry the names of the distinguished guests who had attended and that would give us the lead to our next search, the date and cause and the circumstances under which they died” Chavi said while the trio listened in attention.

“Inauguration of International school in Bangalore + 1996” punched Pawan on the school's internet enabled computer and the search engine yielded around 50 results out of which only one would capture his interest.

“Central HRD minister Mr. Jagdish Mathur inaugurates grand International School in Bangalore – J J Prashant” a link said and Pawan had nailed it on first attempt.

The brief article in the city section of the *Indian Standard* dated 12th May 1996 praised about the facilities that would be part of the new International School. It also mentioned about the important guests who had attended the ceremony and Pawan zeroed in on the one name that was all so important for him.

Kunal Roy Mukherjee, the renowned social reformist and progressive agriculturist had also flown down all the way from Kolkata along with his wife and daughter to attend the ceremony.

“So Peeya’s father was indeed a well-known man” Pawan spoke to himself as he jotted down the lines in his notebook.

“Kunal Roy Mukherjee” keyed in Pawan on the internet to search further his school mate’s illustrious father & this time around the search engine yielded around a hundred plus results and the most important one being a brief introduction of the man himself.

“Born in his father’s tea estates in Assam on 22nd March 1958..... he studied in Doon College.... Went onto Harvard Law school...returned to India.....married Saritha Brahmadutta on 14th January 1993 at the age of 35.....a daughter named Peeya... Gotcha! was born on 18th September 1994.....died in a car crash near Kolkata on 14th May 1996, survived by 2 year old daughter..... family trust set up by him will take care of her interests...” Pawan read out loud only the important points in the lengthy article and he made quick notes on his book and left the scene in a hurry.

“You were wrong on all account Chavi dear!” Pawan proud of his recent research findings approached the female pack.

“What do you mean?” asked Chavi

“About your roomie” Pawan replied.

“I don’t get it, weren’t you the one who told me about Peeya in the first place?” Chavi rebutted Pawan’s statements.

“I still feel that there is something wrong with her, no doubt, tell us what you found out instead of going about in circles” Chavi mock scolded her senior.

“Hold your horses madam, I have the full report here, it says that Peeya was indeed Kunal Roy Mukherjee’s daughter and she was just 2 years old when she had accompanied her parents for the school’s foundation laying ceremony. Their parents died just 2 days after the ceremony” Pawan read out from his notes.

The three went about proposing theories and counter theories about how Chavi could be a manifestation of evil and she could be the cause of everything that happened and might happen. The three girls sat on the small raised platforms cum corridors of the ground floor while Pawan stood on the assembly area in front of them. In the heat of the argument, something triggered Chavi’s senses and she looked up to see a falling tile from the 3rd floor of the school. The three were safe as they were seated but Pawan was vulnerable, a direct hit over his head and he could have even suffered a serious hemorrhage, but for Chavi who let out a shrill shriek and shoved him away from her.

She still could not prevent the heavy tile falling flat on his left arm which he had raised in response to stimuli action. The tile falling from a height had done its damage and Pawan’s left arm swelled up like a balloon. It was fractured. Pawan screamed in agony.

While Disha attended to her house mate, Praneethi and Chavi caught Peeya scurrying away from the 3rd floor parapet. They only could look at each other in mute concurrence.

It was perhaps a Caveat – a warning of more dangerous things to come if they would not stop in their tracks. Somebody knew that this group of friends was being rather too curious and were fishing in troubled waters. Somebody wanted to scare away the rookie detectives. Somebody hated their cover to be busted.

Chapter 9 – Reapers

Priscilla Schneider was now 3 years old and she was admitted as a preschooler in one of the best prep schools in the whole of Los Angeles County. It was a school for the elite's children and Guss and Augustine were certainly in the elite list. The little girl had everything one wanted, rich parents, a doting mother and a supposedly caring father too. The school was paradise for little Priscilla, but things change very fast.

The Sergeant's gruesome murder had sent chills down his accomplices' spines in the ordinance depot and they were caught between the devil and the deep sea. They could not approach their seniors or the cops as they themselves had the blood of innocents on their hands and they could not confront Guss, who had grown very powerful now and had graduated to dealing with senators and Generals in the lucrative arms smuggling business and the lower echelons were left to fend for themselves in the cold annals of the cruel money world.

Guss had to be thought a lesson for forsaking them, leaving them in the lurch. Depriving them of their dream life was probably the greatest sin, Guss had committed and this would prove rather too costly for him.

Lt. Sam Perez of the 125th Paratroopers and posted in the ordinance depot was a major influence among the syndicate members. Guss had to pay. Period.

Their agenda was simple. Make an example out of Guss. No one should take the men in uniform lightly.

Their mode of operation had to be swift, giving too little time for their foe to think and to take cover.

The men of the armed forces were deadly killing machines themselves, they were trained by hardened war veterans and hardcore trainers to survive the most inane, the most punishing of environments and the most dominating of adversaries. They could disappear in the forest, snow, and desert alike and they were expert recons.

"Alright, James, you will be on trail, Guss's wife Augustine Schessman – Schneider. It has to be lightning fast. You will fly to Beirut on Pan Am 227 tomorrow at 1030 hrs. Any doubts" Sam Perez directed his subordinate Pvt. James Fillimore and handed over an envelope with a portrait of Augustine. An acclaimed Hollywood director shooting in far off Arab land would not be hard to find.

"Frank, Stephen Rudolph. Show no mercy" Sam handed over an obscure photograph of Guss's trusted Lieutenant. Guss had not intended to hide his identity. He had wanted to send a clear message to anyone who had panicked and wanted to blow the lid. He had gone berserk with the heady mixture of power and fortune. He had assumed he was invincible. He had been very mature when he was without money. Fortune had made him a little less mature. He had faltered.

"You better go under the hood till things cool down here. It's very hot here right now. I have been warned. I can manage my back. No one can come within a hundred meters of me. I will contact you when the time comes. Here take this" Guss directed his henchman to go incognito for a while till the police hounds lost the scent trail. He did not want his thriving business to go awry just because some old Sergeant could not keep his mouth shut.

"They won't need to come within a hundred meters of you, boss" Stephen said in a cold manner.

"Like I said, I can take care of myself, now get going" Guss shove away his trusted aide.

"I will take care of that bastard myself, Privates Cooke and Guerrero; you shall be my eyes and ears. His mansion will be well guarded. We need to use the cover of night. Be sure that no friendlies are involved in this op" Sam likened the assassination operation to a sanctioned legal one.

"No sanctioned guns. Strictly off the streets. Frank?" Sam nodded at Frank Simmons.

"It's been arranged sir, the contact will transfer the consignment at the scheduled rendezvous point at 0100 hrs" Frank rattled out in typical military fashion.

Frank's brother Timothy Simmons was an LA police officer and he knew the streets rather too well. It was like the whole family was corrupt. He would usually collect from his brother some guns, semis and magazines at the rendezvous point, which was just an old abandoned aquarium, but this time, he was the delivery man, he was delivering the murder weapons.

After the exchange was made successfully, James leaves for Beirut on board Pan Am 227. He did not require carrying a gun. His instructions were dire.

Frank had already hired a man to tail Stephen, and while it was like walking on thin ice for Stephen, Frank had the task cut out for him.

Sam Perez was very clear in his instructions to his team. The targets are not just be killed, they should all be reminders to anybody who would take their syndicate lightly. The killings have to be most brutal & repulsive in their execution.

James landed at the Beirut International Airport at 1200 hours local time and was escorted by their contact who had arrived from Algiers just that morning. He would be provided the directions for his return path along with tickets that were booked earlier. James was given two days to review his position and strike at the most opportune moment. 48 hours was all that Augustine Schessman – Schneider & her magnum opus had.

Sam Perez along with Privates Cooke and Guerrero set up shop at the Beverley Hills avenue where the Schessman – Schneider mansion stood imposing. The assassin trio could watch a couple of burly men with concealed arms doing the rounds in the mansion's lawns. Guss was not to be intimidated. His business interests were more important than anything else for him. He had never suspected that the betrayed syndicate would also target his wife and trusted lieutenant.

To err is human; not to correct your err is just deadly.

Stephen had taken refuge in a small ranch run by her sister's husband in Jersey. Alice and Ronald were simple farm folk living with their two small children Peter & John in Ronald's family ranch a good 250 Km from the Manhattan Island. They were leading a peaceful life which was about to be ruined by a storm which Stephen had brought along.

Frank too had two days to execute his targets. He took one full day for a brief recon along with some of his trusted aides and hatched a plan on the spot.

Meanwhile in Beirut, James noticed that Augustine took a solitary walk on the Beirut University campus every day at work. He noticed her on the day of arrival and a brief chat with her chauffer confirmed that she had been doing this ever since she had come to Beirut. It was so easy.

Sam Perez could easily make out that the gunmen out on Guss's lawns were no cops or servicemen. They were mafia. So, snipping them off would not set the whole state on them.

Despite putting up a brave front, Guss was a worried man. Executing the Sergeant was his Waterloo. Unfortunately, he knew it and he could approach no one to bail him out. His former associates in the armed forces had turned against him and the Generals and Senators had washed their hands clean off him. His image of a film producer and the spouse of a famous film maker had turned against him since he could not even exploit the dozens of photographs he had with the Generals and Senators. After all, what was their crime? Meeting with a film producer? Come on!

Guss, had no real feelings for Augustine, but he treasured his daughter Priscilla and she meant something special to him. While he still carried on with his deadly underground businesses, he had grown a tender vein in his heart and it would bleed if Priscilla was hurt.

Guss, therefore had sent away Priscilla from the school to his brother Benjamin's house in Tel Aviv, Israel. Being a former Zionist himself had helped him reconnect with some of his acquaintances in the Zionist club and had managed to send across his daughter to far away Israel.

Benjamin had joined the Israeli Secret Service in Tel Aviv but continued with his father's business of Kosher food and used it as an effective cover. He now lived with their mother and his wife Edna. They did not have any children of their own and he readily welcomed little Priscilla into his home.

Back in Jersey, Frank laid waiting for his prey along with two of his associates, mercenaries themselves. Frank's weapon of choice; a beret.

It was a fine Thursday evening and Ronald was busy in the ranch's barn tending to his dozen cows and two horses. Alice was held up in the kitchen cooking up dinner. The kids Peter and John were playing with sticks near the corn field while their Uncle Stephen kept watch over them with a cold face. Stephen was oblivious to the impending danger to his life.

"Ray, to the barn, take the crow bar" instructed Frank to one of his associates, who slithered away to the barn with a standard crow bar.

"Rocky, you enter the house from behind, take care of things inside" Frank directed his other associate.

"God Bless America" Frank said to himself just as he lunges forward towards the patio where Frank is observing his two nephews playing blissfully.

"Here you go Madame" a street side vendor hands over a can of tart soda to Augustine who had made it a habit to sip the carbonated drink while resting on her favorite bench in the sprawling parks of the Beirut University campus. The lawns usually looked deserted in the evenings as they were close to the library and the classrooms, while most of the students would be either out in the city or inside their rooms in the hostels.

James shadowed her closely till they reached her favorite spot in the university campus.

"Private Cooke, Private Guerrero, I shall be entering the mansion from behind, it is probably guarded too, I will manage, take out the two bulls on the front. Remember! I shouldn't hear gunshots! It has to be flawless" Sam directed his two Privates.

At the rear of the mansion, Sam's guess was right, but his calculation was wrong. It was guarded but a little more heavily. It had to be a shock and awe attack. He had to give minimum time for the guards to react.

Augustine settled herself on the green wooden lawn bench and relaxed, sinking in the beauty of the sinking sun.

"Good Evening Madam" James introduced himself to Augustine who greeted the towering Sergeant with a smile.

"Good Evening" Augustine replied with a look of wonder.

"I am a great admirer, Ma'am, of your works" James flattered her.

"Thank you sir, are you American too?" questioned Augustine.

"Yes, May I?" James pointed his four fingers towards an open spot on the bench.

"Of course, how rude of me" Augustine shifted a little left in a symbolic gesture to allow James to sit.

"So what brings you here?" said James

“Oh, it’s really nothing, I just wanted to get out of the LA traffic for once” giggled Augustine who did not want to disclose about her venture and her identity, since she was used to wannabe actors and actresses trying out antiques just to impress her. Americans and Europeans were common sight in Beirut & Augustine was just weary of strangers these days.

“I am sure you are here for a movie shoot, eh Madam?” winked James.

Augustine was all the while caught in the beauty of the changing colors of the sky from bright orange to crimson red to pink, while she was surprised by her new companion’s guess work.

Even before she could react and turn towards him for a response, James had got up from his position, saw that Augustine had let her guard down and in a swift action, fitting a battle hardened Sergeant, removed his 8” army issue beret from a concealed holster and drove its edges deep into Augustine’s tender throat. The sun set, engulfing the Beirut University campus in a shell of darkness and took Augustine along with it.

James had disappeared from the scene with the murder weapon. It seemed like Augustine was slayed by a ghost. There was no trace of humanity both at the scene of crime and in James, who slit the throat of an innocent just to set an example.

Augustine stared at the cold sky, colorless and dark with her eyes. They say that the eyes live for a while even after the soul departs. They had a story to narrate and it was a pity there was none to listen.

Jersey: Ray had slid into the barn unnoticed through an opening in the barn’s attic. He saw Ronald, humming a tune and feeding his cows and his horses. The wily mercenary slowly down the far side of the barn and was in Ronald’s hindsight. The sudden entry of a stranger inside the barn took it’s inmates into a frenzy and the cows and the horses started mooing and neighing like crazy. A confused Ronald had little time to come to terms with the sudden outburst of his stock and oblivious to his murderer behind him.

A fast swing of Ray’s arm and the crow bar’s hooked end latched onto Ronald’s neck, his own blood entering the ruptured wind pipe and choking him slowly. Ray was instructed to show no mercy and he did just that. In a cold action, Ray pulled away the crow bar from Ronald that pulled more flesh and blood spurted all over the place. It was a most horrible end for a peaceful farmer. The actions of a vice man does not spare his kith and kin.

Ricky had successfully entered the house by opening a window in the couple’s bedroom above the living room, like a cat, he entered the kitchen below and saw the unsuspecting Alice with her back towards him. No remorse, no regret, Ricky was a paid mercenary and he killed to live. Ricky’s machete proved too much for Alice. Ricky’s strong left arm clasped her mouth to prevent her from letting out even a whimper, it was tight enough to smother her to her death, but it would be no example. His other free hand slashed into Alice’s back and broke the spinal cord, instantly killing her, while bacon and beans burnt on the stove.

Frank’s ‘boys’ had completed their act. It was now left to Frank. ‘Frank the Bull’ he was called by his peers in the 125th Paratroopers.

Stephen was the perpetrator of the crime. He was Guss’s hands. He was soaked in the Sergeant’s blood. Death would not come easy for him. He would die a slow tortuous death and he would have an audience too.

Ray from the barn side, Ricky from inside and Frank from behind had cornered Stephen who was completely lost in thought as he sat passively watching his nephews play. His focus was shattered only when he noticed that both Peter and John had stopped playing and looked at him with confused faces.

“Enjoying your stay Sir?” Frank taunted at Stephen as Ricky and Ray watched with eyes that were carved out of stone.

“Look! He could have compromised the whole racket for God’s sake! It was just my job” Stephen was trying to reason out with his killers. He was heavily outnumbered and outflanked. He had no escape route and he was still thinking of his sister and brother in law’s safety, for he was unaware of their horrific ends.

“So is this!” Frank’s long machete made a deep cut on Stephen’s torso and he immediately collapsed to the ground screaming in horror and pain.

Frank then took out a pen knife from his jacket pocket. Sam wanted Stephen to suffer. Frank, Ray and Ricky inflicted a hundred cuts all over Stephen’s body, which would slowly bleed him to death. It was an old Chinese execution style called ‘Slow Slicing’.

Stephen lay on the dirt, bleeding from a thousand cuts and he could see the light before him dimming and the voices getting denser and thicker, just when a heavy kick to his chin jolted him from his trance due to severe lack of oxygen being transported to the brain. Frank’s boots smashed Stephen’s jaw line and it fell apart from Stephen’s skull. He had left.

The three murderers then set the barn and the house on fire, before setting fire to the fields. The kids were spared to narrate a story to the world.

Meanwhile, in LA, it was night and Sam, Cooke and Guerrero had the perfect cover of darkness. The trained paratrooper hopped from rooftops and over hedges and gained entry to Guss’s mansion. A silencer fitted onto his ‘Berretta Tomcat’ exceeded his expectations and in a trained action he staved off the three mafia men guarding the mansion’s back.

Cooke and Guerrero had easily overpowered the burly looking mafia men and had driven 6” long sharpened iron bolts through the back of their necks. This had to look like an execution and the cops would suspect a rival gang since the dead were mafia.

Inside the mansion, Guss lay huddled on his bed sweating profusely and shivering with absolute terror. He could now see the spirits of his victims haunt him, he was hallucinating. He was hearing screams, screams of pain and terror, so loud that it would split his head in two. His heart beat so fast that he thought it would rip through his skin and fall to the tiled floor.

“Ralph, are you there? Is everything fine down with you guys?” Guss took the radio caller to speak to the men guarding him at the back. All he could hear was the sound of the radio static.

“Ralph, what the hell is happening? God dammit! Louts! Imbeciles!” Guss cursed at the absence of a response.

“Mark, come in, Mark!” yelled Guss by turning the radio knob to a different frequency to speak to the two men at the front. Static.

“Save your breath Guss” Sam Perez startled the already shaking Guss who promptly leapt for the door.

“No use resisting” said Sam.

“Listen, I have a safe full of stash, all yours, here’s the key” Guss was trying to buy out his life.

“Take it to hell” said Sam while he raised a metallic baseball bat that he had borrowed from the mafia men below. The blow was so severe that it split open Guss’s skull and there was blood all over, but he was still alive, too terrified to let out a scream.

Sam held him the scruff of his collar and dragged him down the stairs staining the expensive carpets with Guss's blood to the bathroom below. Cooke and Guerrero had made the arrangements as planned. The marble bath tub had been filled with scalding hot water. Sam undressed Guss and threw him into the tub; the steam from which had filled the bathroom like a blanket of mist.

Guss body reacted violently to the temperatures and he screamed like he had never screamed before. Sam pressed hard the baseball bat on Guss's head and drowned him in the boiling water. He did not let go till he saw pieces of skin fall apart and float up from Guss's face. Guss's end was extremely violent, but perhaps the spirits of the countless innocent that had been felled by the arms he had supplied found it justified.

The syndicate had set a deadly example.

Little Priscilla was all alone in the world. In faraway Tel Aviv, the 3 year old held onto her aunt's hand as she bought bread in the local market, smiling, smelling the warm baked flour, and not knowing she was now an orphan in foreign land.

"It's been done. Yes. All three of them" Lt. Sam Perez put the phone off the hook.

Chapter 10 – Windfall

“Ugh! I am never going to touch this book again! It’s so full of gore and violence” Chavi remarked as she bookmarked *Lasting Fondness* while the three girls waited in the school infirmary where Pawan was treated for a fractured elbow by the school doctor and a cast was placed and a sedative had been injected to relieve Pawan of the agonizing pain for a while.

“Shh” said the nurse in the infirmary with the customary finger on the lips and bulged out eyes that were supposed to intimidate the noise maker.

“Oops, sorry” said Chavi just as Praneethi giggled and Disha looked up at Chavi with a downcast face sitting beside injured Pawan.

“First the horse incident and now this, my parents are surely going to pull me out of this school!” frowned Disha.

“Mine too maybe” said a now concerned Praneethi.

“I guess many of the parents will be genuinely concerned, it’s not like they do not love us, it’s just that most of us are here because there were no good schools back at in our towns and villages” Disha explained.

“But I am in the middle of my last year and no school will accept me now, if my parents take me out now, I will lose an entire year” Disha worried.

“And so will all of us if this issue gets any bigger, we must find out who’s behind all this” told Chavi.

“Shhh” the shhh had gotten longer this time as the girls were fast getting into a debate mode.

“Aall of yew jest go out nou or I will caal yewr prinncy” warned the nurse.

“Ok! Ok! We are sorry!” Praneethi apologized to the nurse.

“mmm...mmm...” Pawan was coming to his self as the effects of the sedative were wearing off slowly.

“Pawan! Can you hear me?” Disha called out to Pawan who was like her brother.

“Doon’t disterb him Disha, I will caal the Doctor nou” went off the nurse to alert the resident doctor.

“How do you feel Pawan” Dr. Ram Shankar walked in with Aadarsh Prasad

“It still hurts” Pawan replied

“ha ha; of course it will my boy, I will write down some pain killers for you which must keep the pain down for a few days”

“How did this happen? Who is responsible?” asked Aadarsh Prasad.

“We don’t know Sir, it was a loose tile which hit from above” Chavi answered cutting short of giving out more details as Praneethi’s and her eyes met.

“Had it not been for Chavi, the tile would have hit Pawan straight in the head” Disha wore a worried look on her face.

“Good work indeed, Chavi” said Aadarsh Prasad and his statement had no special emotion attached towards it. Chavi responded in silence. It was no time for her to feel happy while her friend lay in pain.

“You must inform his parents Mr. Prasad” said Dr. Ram Shankar

“I already have, his dad will be here by tomorrow afternoon. God knows what will happen with this school” grumbled Aadarsh Prasad.

“Is he going to take you away Pawan?” asked a concerned Chavi.

“Don’t know yaar, may be for a while, who knows” replied a still drowsy Pawan.

“That’s enough girls, better leave him alone for a while” Aadarsh said tersely.

Even as the girls turned away from Pawan’s bed in the infirmary, they saw Aadarsh covering the portable partition blocking their view from Pawan.

“I saw Peeya on the 3rd floor; so did Chavi! Tell her” Praneethi said tensely to Disha

“Yes, I think I saw her too” Chavi agreed

“What are you girls talking about, when did you see her” asked Disha to find Chavi and Praneethi were exchanging glances again.

“It was when Pawan got his hand fractured, we saw Peeya on the 3rd floor corridor from where the tile fell. We think she dropped it on purpose” Praneethi told Disha about their suspicion.

“She wouldn’t dare to!” Disha was furious.

“We are not sure Disha, we just saw her walk away fast from that spot, and it could have been just a coincidence. It could have been really an accident” Chavi tried to be more reasonable and unbiased.

“We must complain this matter to Princi, he will enquire about it. It is wrong to hide things” Disha’s anger was growing by the second.

“No Di, he won’t believe us, they never do, we must catch her red handed, we must...” Praneethi paused just as the trio saw Peeya standing in front of them with a face so sad that it would have stopped the earth from turning.

“Please listen to me, I have something to tell” Peeya’s tone and behavior had changed so drastically that all the three were taken aback and stood their ground completely speechless, may be in anticipation of what she had to say.

Back at the infirmary, Aadarsh Prasad had completely disregarded Dr. Ram Shankar’s words to allow Pawan much needed rest. Pawan was hurt and the sedatives were making him drowsy. He was running a light fever and he was in no position to be up and sitting for a barrage of questions.

“Mr. Prasad, you must let him rest, now is **not** the time to ask questions, please” requested the concerned resident doctor.

“Let me do my work Doctor, I did not interfere in yours, I expect the same for me” Aadarsh cut the doctor off rudely.

“His father is coming here tomorrow and I do not want him to be bad mouthing the school and accusing us of harassing his boy here” the doctor tried to warn the callous principal.

“There will not be a school left for anybody to bad mouth about!” Prasad barked at the shocked doctor.

“Do whatever you wish, I am not going to sit and take this load of crap from you” the doctor left the scene in a fit of rage.

“Tell me Pawan, what were you doing in the internet room? What notes were you making? Where have you kept them? No use lying, I know what pages you were browsing” Aadarsh threatened an injured Pawan.

Pawan was confused. He had made sure that no one saw him do what he was doing and he had shut down the browser immediately after he left the internet room.

“I was just going through the online encyclopaedia Sir, I.. I was just noting down some specifications of a sports car I like” Pawan tried to bluff his way out.

“I am asking you one last time. Your father is coming tomorrow and he will meet me before he will see you. Do you want your father to feel ashamed of you? Trust me, he will hear things from me about you, that he will not be very proud of!” Aadarsh Prasad’s threats were tasteless and unbecoming of his position and stature.

“But Sir, what did I do?” Pawan was almost in tears. He could not believe that his good run in the school would take a U turn in just one afternoon. First a broken hand and next a broken image. It was too much for the young ninth grader to digest.

“I will tell your father what you do, always hanging out with those three girls, I understand your test results have not been all that great this time. Your father can make out the rest of the story, I need not even elaborate” Aadarsh was keen on making Pawan’s life miserable.

Pawan broke easy; a threat of humiliating him in front of his father was just too heavy for him. He divulged everything that the foursome thought about the omens and Peeya and were investigating about her.

“Do you kids come here to study or do police business!” thundered Aadarsh Prasad. The foxy man had noticed that Pawan was suspiciously observing the monitor for a long time and murmuring to himself and making harried notes on his scribbling pad. The test was long over and the next one was a long time from now.

“You boy are not going to hang out with those girls any more, I warn you” Aadarsh wore an angry face and had a finger pointed at Pawan’s face. It was extremely intimidating.

“And as for that nosy girl, She will be punished” Aadarsh promised himself and he had Chavi in his mind.

“It’s not safe here, shall we all go to the auditorium” Peeya asked the gawking girls.

“We have classes now, we can’t bunk them!” Disha corrected Peeya.

“Ok, but we have to meet later, Chavi, meet me at the room this evening, I will tell you when and where to meet” Peeya had taken Chavi’s name for the first time and without contempt and all Chavi could do was nod her head in agreement and total disbelief.

The post lunch session was most difficult for all five of them Pawan, Peeya, Praneethi, Disha and Chavi.

But nevertheless, their investigation was about to get a supreme boost as their assumed nemesis Peeya was willing to talk to them or was it just one of her other plots to subjugate them. It was definitely a windfall of events at ACE that afternoon and new hues and colours were brought to the fore. The dust covering the truth would soon be unsettled.

Chapter 11 – The Bitter Truth

After four tortuous hours of classes and one whole hour of gym class, Chavi hurried back to her hostel room and her sprint to the stairs was followed by Ms. Sadhana Talapatra's eyes.

"God oh God! What is this girl going to do now?" Chavi was equally scared and curious of what Peeya had to tell her, if at all she had something to say.

Chavi knocked on the door expecting a response. Peeya had left Gym class early and it was natural for her to assume that she was in the room.

She knocked the door again the second time and a third time and still there was no response. Finally, she opened the door herself with her spare key.

"Just perfect, she was just diverting our attention away from her, she acted nice, God we were so gullible" Chavi cursed herself.

"Guess I will go down to Praneethi's room and talk to her." Chavi locked the door behind and went down to the second floor to room no 210 after getting fresh for a couple of minutes.

"Praneethi!" called out Chavi and the door was opened by her roommate, Rupa another ninth grader.

"Hi Chavi, what brings you here? Praneethi is not inside, she went to see Disha" Rupa told Chavi.

"Oh, thanks Rupa, see you again sometime, bye" Chavi took leave of Rupa and proceeded to Disha's floor which was on the ground floor. The seniors usually had the best rooms since they were saved of the effort of climbing up four floors. The eighth graders were the most unlucky ones.

"Disha Di, Disha Di" Chavi knocked on her door only to be answered by another twelfth grader Adithi Shetty.

"She is not here; Praneethi and she went out towards the school just 10 minutes back I guess"

"Thanks Adi Di" Chavi smiled at Adithi who returned the favor.

"I wonder where they would go without taking me along. What's going on?" Chavi could not find the two and Peeya anywhere in the assembly area or the restrooms on the ground floor.

"Hey Rishi! Did you see Disha Di or Praneethi or Peeya, like just now?" Chavi asked her *Ucchashrava* housemate Rishimukh Srivatsa, a tenth grader.

"I guess I saw Peeya running towards the auditorium, no idea about the other two"

"Thanks a lot!" Chavi had springs in her shoes as she seemed to be sprinting rather than walking.

"There are you guys are! You all had me worried! Why couldn't you wait?" Chavi yelled at Praneethi, Disha and Peeya who had huddled themselves at the far corner of the dark auditorium.

"Shhh", Disha signaled at Chavi to keep it low.

Chavi ran up the stairs towards the girls and saw that Peeya's face was red. She was crying.

"Chavi, we saw her running towards the auditorium and it looked like she was going to cry, we followed her here and we saw her sitting at the corner, sobbing uncontrollably" explained Praneethi.

"I think you should take her back to your room" said Disha.

That evening, Peeya slept so deep that she did not even wake up for dinner. Chavi and Disha explained to the warden that Peeya was running a fever and she was not feeling like coming over for dinner. Ms. Sadhana Talapatra seemed to understand.

“I guess I will just have to finish off the rest of the book; now that I have bought it” Chavi said to herself as she picked up *Lasting Fondness*.

“News of the ghastly multiple murders of Augustine, Rudolph, Alice, Stephen and Guss in that order had spread like wild fire across the tinsel town. The Los Angeles Chronicle ran an investigative report a few weeks later of the deadly affiliations Guss Schneider had with a rogue syndicate within the armed forces and a detailed narration of what went wrong between the partners, though the piece looked more like a theory or a hypothesis to the readers since it seemed too surreal.

Priscilla, Benjamin & Edna Schneider had flown in from Tel Aviv for the funeral of their brother and sister in law. Since the funeral was organized immediately after the autopsy reports were generated by the police and sometime before the Chronicle released its expose, the Hollywood fraternity was in full attendance in fashionable blacks to mourn the demise of their beloved filmmaker and feared producer.

The funeral service had brought the bodies of the Hollywood couple in richly veneered rosewood coffins mounted on horse drawn hearse carriages.

The ‘wake’ was avoided since the murders were so ghastly that it could have horrified the mourners and therefore an open cast was ruled out.

The family accountant Teddy Birmingham was seen chatting with the family advocates and others and little Priscilla stared at the one familiar face among a sea of famous faces.

Eulogies were read out and a Jewish Rabbi chanted out hymns in Hebrew and in Yiddish, and the coffins were ready to be lowered into the trenches.

The media, both print and reel were present at the cemetery in full strength to capture the celebrities in their mourning gowns. This was reason enough for many of the ladies present to display their most effective enactments of pain, sadness of departure.

When the huge crowd was engulfed in a mask of grief, something was going wrong in the background. A malevolent force was at play and it was all set to put little Priscilla in harm’s way.

One of the horses pulling the hearse carriage suddenly got extremely distressed, it began clicking it’s hooves on the cobble stoned pavements and started neighing and bellowing in absolute terror and pain. It started mounting the small hillock at the funeral site and galloped along with it’s tethered partner towards the crowd.

A chaos and commotion ensued and the crowd ran hither and tither leaving behind rows of chairs empty and at the mercy of the runaway carriage. The horse came with a constant braying noise and some could see blood oozing out of its nostrils. The horse was no doubt in pain, but it seemed like it had other intentions.

The confusion in the air made Benjamin and Edna unknowingly take shelter away from the rolling carriage and in their action, they had completely forgotten about little Priscilla who stood by her parents’ coffins.

The maddened horse ran straight towards the motionless little girl and in an action as swift as it began, the horse collapsed inches away from the coffin. Since the carriage was downhill and the other horse was still galloping, the carriage hit the coffins that lay on the ground and smashed open Guss’s casket, before the healthy horse could stop.

A lady let out a scream and another just fainted at the bile churning sight of Guss's skin peeled face and eyelids that looked like they could fall off moment. Augustine was spared the humiliation.

Little Priscilla, certainly had not deserved to see her dead father in this manner and this would certainly leave her scarred for life.

"Oh my God! I am so Sorry dear! Forgive me Lord!" Edna came running towards the little girl and embraced her covering her face from the horrible sight. A few brave men managed to shut the casket and it was immediately lowered into the trench.

Priscilla again watched the familiar face among the sea of famous faces, watching her from a distance. It looked very familiar, but it definitely did not look friendly.

"Mr. Schneider, I would like to have a private word with you. I am Rory Medvev, the Schessman family advocate. Could you please join me at the mansion after the ceremony" Rory minced no words and he meant business with one of Augustine's only surviving relative, her husband's brother.

"I am extremely sorry at your loss Sir; I have no words to express how sad I feel for your family and Priscilla" Rory spoke to Benjamin in a slow & pacifying manner.

"He left us all a very long time ago, he must have gotten himself into some kind of trouble, he didn't even join Priscilla to Tel Aviv" Benjamin told Rory something that he already knew.

"I represented Augustine before and both Guss and Augustine after they got married" explained Rory who had been Augustine's advocate ever since she had begun making a name for herself.

"She was dedicated to her art and she hadn't quite thought about any family, until Guss came into her life. The couple had made quite a huge fortune. Augustine has three bank accounts; she has \$15 million in the Federal Bank, \$3 million in the Bank of America and another \$3 million in the Bank of Zurich, while Guss has 5 accounts. He had evacuated all of his four American accounts a few days before his death and transferred the total to his one account in Liechtenstein. Apart from the money, the couple owned this mansion we are sitting in, a ranch in Idaho and a stud farm in Kentucky." Rory read out the figures while a numbed Benjamin listened.

"How much did Guss transfer you say?" queried Benjamin.

"Ahem" Rory cleared his throat and adjusted his bow tie and straightened his round metal rimmed glasses and wiped off what seemed like tiny droplets of sweat accumulating on his brow.

"Well, it's a big figure for sure!" said Rory.

"How big?"

"\$125 Million big!" exclaimed Rory to a bewildered Benjamin who looked like he could fall off his chair any moment.

"What! That's ridiculous! Hollywood gives you so much?!" Benjamin was out of his elements and he had not heard before of such astronomical sums of money.

"I am afraid it is the truth Sir"

"And what happens to the money now?" asked Benjamin who looked like he could faint anytime now.

"Well, here's the thing, both Augustine and Guss had not prepared a will. Priscilla is the natural heir and she will inherit the entire property. But since she is a minor now, she will have to wait until she is 18 till she gets to enjoy the fortune." Explained Rory

“No will! Just great! You still haven’t answered my question, what happens to the property now?” a restless Benjamin asked.

“As the family’s lawyer, I have decided it would be in the best interest for the child that our firm manages her money on her behalf. My company shall be forming a trust and the entire sum of money would be deposited with a bank of our choice who will then invest part of the money in ventures that will yield maximum returns. As Priscilla’s guardians you Sir, will be sanctioned a sum of \$15,000 per month with which you shall fund her education in a good school and take care of all her needs. And on her 18th birthday, the trust will decide upon handing over the property to Priscilla depending upon the prevailing conditions then”

*“This is insane! **My** brother and his wife have in excess of a \$120 million and their daughter gets a measly \$15,000 per month as maintenance. You must be out of your mind!” retorted Benjamin.*

“You may approach the courts Sir if you may please, but I suggest you against it as it will do you more harm than good. The investigations on the murder are underway and any hasty decisions that you might undertake can be construed against you by the investigating team. Moreover, the trust will have some of the most distinguished personalities including some magistrates and federal judges in the directorate”

“This is blackmail!” Benjamin stood up to storm out of the discussion.

“No Sir! It is not! You still have the option of going your own way, but I once again suggest that you sign these papers for the trust to take care of the property until Priscilla’s 18th birthday”

“Well what if something happens to her before that?” Benjamin asked

“I thought you might ask that and my company has made arrangements in that case too, in case Priscilla dies naturally or otherwise, the decision to whether liquidate the property, a majority of which will be converted to bonds and equities will be taken by the trust board. As her natural guardians you also stand to inherit a small portion of her fortune, provided that you would have no hand in such eventualities. The trust board has already been formed and they have made a decision to start a school somewhere near Cincinnati in Augustine & Guss’s name and all the funds of the school will be managed by the trust and will add to Priscilla’s property” Rory had given an exhaustive explanation of the board’s plans.

“Alright! You leave me with very little choice, you leeches, now where do I sign?” yelled a disgruntled Benjamin and signed on the papers where Rory had marked with ‘x’s.

“Congratulations Sir and do take care of yourselves and our little Priscilla” Rory remarked in what seemed like a sarcastic manner to Benjamin who walked out without responding even with a stare.

Benjamin and Edna had loved Priscilla ever since she was brought home and he never felt bad that he would not get a part of his brother’s fortune. He only did not trust the lawyers.

Soon enough the board sanctioned the construction of a school in Cincinnati, Ohio on the East Coast. The board’s decision of setting up a boarding school in a city over 2000 miles from Los Angeles had Benjamin boggle over theories and counter theories. He was afraid that a larger conspiracy was behind the killings of his brother and sister in law and not everything was as black and white as it seemed.

The trust board had been formed swiftly and its conception, it seemed like was planned in parallel to the Schessman – Schneider family massacre.

Benjamin thought that he would never be able to find out the truth if he was in faraway Tel Aviv and the injustice being meted out to Priscilla was becoming greatly intolerable for him day by day.

“Edna dear, I think some evil force is at play here, I am not convinced that my brother and his wife were killed by his business rivals” confided Benjamin with his wife.

“What’s wrong dear? I have never seen you so tense” Edna was worried for her husband.

“I have a feeling that our lives and that of Priscilla’s in in danger, I did not want to scare you so I didn’t speak about this before, but now I had to, It was driving me nuts” Benjamin put his head on Edna’s laps as she sat beside him on their bed.

“You are overreacting honey, nothing’s wrong, we are here in Israel, no one can harm us here. We are among brothers” Edna tried to calm her husband but she was not totally aware of the powers of the Syndicate.

“There is far too much money at stake Edna, they are afraid more than I am, If I go to the courts, they will have no choice but to hand over the money to us, but I am afraid they expect me to change my mind soon and they will not be sitting ducks” Benjamin trembled with the consequences.

“You know what they say, keep your friends close, but keep your enemies closer. I think we must move immediately to New York to your father’s. We will be safe there.” Benjamin had a plan.

“What do you intend to do my love, tell me, you are scaring me” Edna had no clue what was going on but she would support her husband all the way.

“Trust me on this one Edna, I will bring them to justice” Benjamin took an oath.

After a few meetings with his friends in the Israeli Intelligence, he was all set to start a new life with Edna and Priscilla in New York. The Schneider family landed in America exactly 3 months after the horrendous murders of their kin.

Benjamin avoided informing Rory about their immigration and the board continued to mail the cheques to their Tel Aviv address which was promptly deposited in Benjamin’s account by a trusted friend.

Meanwhile, the school construction had started in full swing. The site was located a distant 50 miles from the downtown area; Cincinnati was the Original boom town of America and a lot of businesses had flourished in that part of the great nation. The Boarding school would house about 300 children most of whom were expected to come from the city.

Back in the Ordinance depot, Lt. Sam Perez, Sgt. Frank and James, Privates Cooke and Guerrero had just heard about something that had shook the ground below them.

Police had found the dismembered bodies of Ricky and Ray near the old abandoned railway yard. They had apparently been dumped there and were killed elsewhere.

“Those men deserved it, bloody mercenaries” Lt. Sam Perez dismissed the twin murders as something common that happened to mercenaries who killed for money.

That night, he was proved wrong. Lt. Sam Perez stayed along with his wife Mary in the well – guarded army quarters in the Suburbs of LA. Sergeants Frank and James were bachelors and stayed in their respective homes in the quarters while Privates Cooke and Guerrero stayed along in the army barracks.

After dinner, the Perez couple went to bed. Though he did not seem intimidated when he heard the news of Ricky and Ray’s deaths, he was afraid from inside. Fear; had sowed its seeds. He knew that the two men were extremely cunning, vicious and strong and to kill them with such savagery would require a more superior force. Paranormal perhaps.

He tossed himself left and right on the bed and could not catch a wink of sleep. In the cold November night, Lt. Sam Perez was sweating like it was Florida on a rainy day.

“Fuck this!” Lt. Sam Perez got up in the middle of the night to splash some water on his face. His house was a duplex with a small flight of stairs leading to the bedrooms and shared toilets from the dining hall and kitchen downstairs.

Like all American homes, a small corridor on the top floor, separated the rooms from the toilets. The Perez family had decorated the walls in the corridor with family photographs and babies since Mary had been expecting a child in a period of 3 months.

While a perspiring Lt. Sam Perez closed the room door behind him, he heard water running, but it sounded like it was from a distance. He checked out the toilet on his floor and found nothing, he then realized that the sound was from the bathroom below.

Back in Sergeant Frank’s quarters, things were not all that fine either, they say fear covers a large area and it had manifested itself in the rugged Sergeant’s heart which was pounding like a runaway train.

Sergeant James was experiencing palpitations and blurred visions and was losing control over himself. He walked towards the fridge to get some water only to find the fridge cold and empty. He was a bachelor but never was the freezer cleaned out like this as if someone had broken in and emptied out the fridge, he ran to the bathroom as the burn in his heart and throat were getting severe, he turned the taps only to hear the hiss of air blowing out.

He felt a sharp pain in his left shoulder and he thought that he might be having a heart attack; he broke open the wall mounted medicine cabinet and threw it on the tiled floor breaking the mirrors on the cabinet doors into a dozen pieces. He desperately needed an aspirin and he could not find any in the cabinet. All the bottles and vials were empty. It was like he was living in a showcase house, where everything is empty and nothing is real. His eyes burnt and his nose bled, he went to the bath tub to turn the shower faucets and his request was again turned down by a loud hiss.

The only option he had was to drink the water from the toilet. He opened the lid in a desperate attempt to cool his burning body.

All he could see was a thick red paste smeared all over the ceramic internals and in a move stimulated by his brain, he sprung back and slipped on an empty bottle of aspirin that lay on the tiled floor smacking his head hard on the hard ceramic bathtub that cracked open his forehead in the center covering his face with hemoglobin rich blood.

Sergeant James let out a hard scream but there was no one that would come to his rescue.

“Good Evening” he heard a voice.

“Who is it?” screamed James in agony while his head bled and his heart burned. He had never been as scared ever in his life even on the front lines when he landed in a distant island on the Pacific Ocean to fight the Japs who had holed up there.

“I just wanted to get away from the LA traffic for a while” the voice laughed. It was repeating the small conversation that he had shared with Augustine at the Beirut University lawn.

“It can’t be, I am seeing things!” Sergeant James thought he saw an apparition. An image of his victim whose throat he had mercilessly slit in a foreign land & abandoned it, leaving it to the night creatures to feast upon the carcass.

The giggle of the woman was scary, it haunted James and his heart rate increased and his throat went dry, so dry that he could feel his skin caressing his food pipe; it was parched for a drop of water. His fear was so intense that his eyes had gone pale and his mouth was without saliva.

The voices, the conversations, the eerie giggle had all filled up the small lit bathroom and all he could see were broken shards of glasses, strewn glasses, blood smeared ceramics. Everything looked tinted in red as blood continued to pour out of his cut on the forehead.

Lack of oxygen impaired his normal senses and he could no longer think straight, he could take it no more. It was not going to end soon and he was under a lot of pain. His eyes shut for a while, but a sudden rush of adrenalin woke him up only to see Augustine, face white as snow, eyes dark as ebony, lips red as the stripes of a coral snake, dressed immaculately in an evening gown and accessorized by a deep cut on her neck line and dark red blood staining her cleavage, advance towards him in a paranormal action. His adrenalin pumped and when the heart could no longer tolerate the speed, it gave in. Sergeant James died due to cardiac arrest in a pool of his own blood.

Sergeant Franks was up even after the clock had struck 12 midnight. Something inside kept him awake. He had his army issued Beretta 9302 with him and he took it out of the closet as he feared someone was out there trying to get to him.

“What the hell?! I am positive I had closed the door” said Franks to himself as he heard the door open with a light creak typical to seasoned wood.

“Hello, Sergeant Frank Simmons here, were there any visitors tonight?” queried Frank with the sentry over the intercom.

“Nothing this evening Sir” replied the Private stationed as the gate sentry.

“I’ll be damned if some thief is trying to sneak into the army quarters, tonight will be his last heist” Frank said to himself as he slowly went towards the living room with his loaded service pistol in position and the safety turned off.

“Thieves do not use doors Frank” a voice came out from the kitchen and the Sergeant turned in a reflex action and saw an image of a man standing by the kitchen sink, it was dark; he could not see clearly.

“You must be out of your friggin mind! Whoever you are, come out NOW! Or I’ll shoot ya!” yelled the powerful Frank.

His violent threat was responded in silence and now he could hear the same voice from behind him, whisper breathing into his ears, “Enjoying your stay?”

“It can’t be, I killed you myself, it’s impossible, Frank was losing his composure, he turned everywhere only to see nothing unusual and yet he had felt the warmth of a breath on his earlobes.

He could feel something trickle down his right cheek, he dismissed it as sweat and wiped it off with his arm, he felt it again and this time it was accompanied by a sharp pain in his right ear, it felt like someone had driven a bolt through his ear, only there was nothing to pull out.

“Aaargh! Oh Lord!” screamed Frank in terror and unbearable pain. He had lost a lot of blood and his breathing had become very hard and the next thing he could see was an apparition of Stephen standing, watching him with cold dead eyes with a hundred dried cuts on his body and a hanging jaw.

Sergeant Frank Simmons died of cardiac arrest with the pistol clenched hard in his right hand.

“Cooke get here fast and get Guerrero along” Lt. Sam Perez had called up the barracks and summoned the two privates.

“Cooke, check out James, Guerrero, Frank, Now, report back in 15 minutes” Lt. Sam Perez directed his men.

The two dispatches quickly made their ways to their destinations. Private Cooke was all of 24 years of age and he was yet to get married. He had fallen on the wrong path but he had very little choice. The lure of a fast buck and a life of comfort after he got out of service drew him into the path of arms smuggling.

Guerrero found the door unlatched, he was surprised and he quickly got on guard suspecting something fishy.

“Sergeant, are you in there?” Guerrero yelled inside the dark house that smelled of blood.

Private Cooke had drawn out his personal arms while he came closer towards Sergeant James’ quarters. Death always gives a warning, a chance to back off; you only have to have the instinct to read the signs.

Sgt. James’s house was silent & dark as it was supposed to be at that time of the night. The Private’s watch showed it was almost 3 hours past midnight.

“Aint gonna do this, Aint gonna do this” Pvt Cooke chanted in a rhythm as he proceeded to check out the kitchen and later the bathroom with his pistol still drawn out.

“Oh hell! Cried out Cooke just as he saw the bloody bathroom, chipped bath tub and shattered mirror pieces everywhere and a dead for good Sergeant James lying in a pool of his own blood.

“Gotta get outta here” stammered Cooke and almost fell down after seeing the horrendous sight and quickly and yet silently ran out to Lt. Sam Perez’s house.

“You gotta be shitting me here! He is a bloody monster for God’s sake! Who could take on him at his own house?!” wondered a puzzled Guerrero who was thinking what he was doing there in the first place so late in the night.

“Sergeant, It’s Guerrero! Just checkin on ya! Holler back if you are alright!” Guerrero yelled as he frisked the wall for the switches.

“Now I’ll be damned!” Guerrero could only watch the back of Sergeant Frank Simmons lying sideways with his still open eyes trained on something or someone in the kitchen.

“Sarge, what happened here? Why you?...” Guerrero stood still as he walked nearer for a closer inspection of the scene only to find a wide mouthed staring & bleeding from one ear Sarge lying dead with his face covered in his own blood.

“Holy Crap! This can’t be happening man!” Guerrero made a hasty exit from the house & ran like the wind towards Lt. Sam Perez’s house making sure that his army boots would not alert the whole neighborhood, he ran barefooted.

“What have you got Guerrero?” the Lieutenant asked the huffing and panting Private and Pvt. Cooke, who had already delivered the news looked on with fright written large on his young face.

“Sarge, It’s Sarge Franks Sir, I..I think he is toast” Guerrero conveyed the message in his own style.

“Franks too! Huh?! Guess they have taken this too far now! We gotta get to the bottom here, men!” the corrupted officer was angry and yet somehow restrained.

“Wait! Let me get that!” Sam was invited in to his living room by the sound of the phone ringing.

“Hello?” Sam could only hear the sound of heavy breath.

“Hello? Speak up will ya?! This is Lt. Sam Perez of the US Army 125th Paratroopers. Hope you are not just a prank caller!” Sam sounded angry but he was still hearing only heavy breathing and faint whimpers.

“He.. He was here” Frank had been alive; he was still in a deeply critical state and yet somehow had mustered up the last reserves of energy to dial up Sam. Frank’s last call destroyed his last bastion of resistance to death. The blood stained telephone holder fell down on the mosaic with a characteristic cracking sound and so did Frank’s lifeless hand.

“FRANK?! WHO WAS THERE?? Answer me Goddamnit!” Lt. Sam Perez shuddered at the thought of just having spoken to a ‘dead’ man and was at the same time both confused and furious. Confused, because of the message, and furious, with Guerrero who did not care to check on a fallen senior.

“You Idiot! It was Frank! He was alive!” a furious Sam thundered down at Guerrero who was apparently out of his elements and scared deep.

“But I saw him from like a foot far, Lieutenant!” Guerrero tried to explain only to meet a pair of angry disagreeing eyes.

“Can’t trust you rookies to do anything important! Should have gone myself!” Sam cursed his decision while Guerrero exchanged glances with Cooke.

“You two! Get in touch with our liaisons in Tel Aviv! I heard that Weasel has a brother there” he was referring to Benjamin Schneider his former partner’s younger brother.

A quick recon of the neighborhood easily gave their liaison in the Zionist nation’s most happening city, that the Schneider family had left Israel for good. Furthermore, the people there could not reveal to the inquiring stranger as Benjamin’s neighbors knew him to be a good man and would not squeal on him to strangers. Trust was the main component of the Israeli community’s fabric of life and nothing could act as an abrasive or a thorn to lacerate this finely woven fabric.

“So the beaver has abandoned its burrow! What would you do if were smoked out of your home Lieutenant?” queried Teddy Birmingham from his accounts office chamber with Sam Perez holding the other line.

It had all been unraveled now.

The man behind the Schneider family massacre was Augustine’s trustworthy and old faithfully accountant Teddy Birmingham.

The whole series of events that had led to the veteran Sergeant George Gillmore’s gruesome murder followed by the act of vengeance by the muscle fed army men.

It was a very deep nexus that even the shrewd and cunning Guss Schneider did not suspect and perhaps he was a little too wary about eyeing everyone around him with suspicion.

His little plan of exposing Teddy after their first meeting at their house did not work out as planned and Guss’s suspicion of Teddy being a leech who fed on Augustine’s riches was allayed when Teddy put on a face of honesty. Trusting Teddy could have been Guss’s biggest mistakes and yet gaining his trust had been on Teddy’s prime agendas for a very long time. He had timed his visit to the house in such a way that he caught Guss’s attention and retained it as well.

Slowly, Guss started to trust the accountant with more confidential matters and took along him on his clandestine meetings with the ‘syndicate’ and his other ‘business affiliates’.

Teddy had an inkling of Guss's sources of income and he had long made elaborate calculations to maximize his profits and eliminate all possible stakeholders with whom he would have to share his income.

Sgt. George Gillmore had been a mere pawn. Teddy sniffed out the veteran Sergeant's volatile state of mind and extreme alertness during many of the 'deals'. He was weak but was widely respected among the syndicate members. A prize target.

The accountant was handling Guss's frontline and backline cash flow and when the goose had fattened enough, he deemed the moment right to go for the kill. The feast would be king size.

He had also noticed the desperation in Stephen Rudolph's eyes and he realized that he could put a prize on his loyalty and he was right. Luck, also was on his side, when arms from the ordinance depot were found with extremists. A few words of caution kindled the anxiety in the ageing Sergeant Gillmore's heart and he was ready to blow the whistle.

Guss was obviously disturbed and also had tried in vain to convince the Sergeant, who would not budge from his stance; but he would never have thought of taking such a bold decision of taking the powerful syndicate head on. He was a mere facilitator and he never figured in the syndicate's larger scheme of things. He was scared for himself and his daughter.

Teddy's plan had fallen in place and he paid off Stephen to bump off the panicky Sergeant. The events that followed were a well – coordinated and synchronized act executed under the able leadership of Lt. Sam Perez, who all this while had been the syndicate's foot soldier, elevated himself to a commander exploiting the murder of their veteran colleague as a pointer towards things to come. Emotions always cloud judgments and the syndicate's top members thought it useless to speak to Guss before giving Sam the signal. For them actions indeed spoke louder than words.

But then, not everything goes as planned, Augustine and Guss's family advocate Rory Medvev had been completely ignored by Teddy in his plans. No doubt, they were all sharks lurching at the large piece of meat thrown into their domain, but always the faster and the more cunning wins and not necessarily the strongest and the ruthless. Teddy's hard thought out & well incubated plans were a God send for the wily Rory Medvev who immediately took the cover of law to protect his company's interests & in a way helping out little Priscilla too.

Since most of Guss's fortunes were unaccounted for, Teddy had plans of siphoning out most of the money which was liquid at that time and fleeing the country. However, Guss had done one right thing before his horrible death; he had deposited the entire sum of money in a foreign bank that specialized in exercising discretion.

When he had learnt of Rory's intervention and the prevalent law in case of an absence of a will, he made a shoddy plan of killing Priscilla which could look like an accident. He had paid the hearse carriage rider to inject his horses with an experimental Schizophrenia drug; an overdose would trigger off the disease rather than quell it. One of the side effects of the overdose was extreme thirst and a burning up of the Esophagus and the horse on the funeral day had been just trying hard to quench the fire inside it as it ran towards the lake located downhill where the coffins were being lowered. The accountant had calculated the entire scene in his mind but miscalculated the severity of the drug. Fate had other plans for Priscilla and the horse fell inches short of her; the coffins of her mother and father saving her from injury.

Also, the murders of the mighty Sergeants James and Frank had never figured in Teddy and Sam's scheme of things and both the masterminds were shocked and intrigued at the sudden turn of events. He had taken on someone or something beyond his comprehension and it was coming to get him with a vengeance, from the grave.

Chapter 12 – Metamorphosis

It is always a puzzle; a dichotomy; a Dogma.

The real world mimics fiction or fiction mimics real world. The human brain is probably the supreme divine's master piece and it so potent an instrument that it can construct universes, alter paradigms and blur the line between realism, quasi – realism and absolute fiction, where nothing but the human imagination is real.

An obscure author who earned his bread belching out one made up horror tale after another, might just be the missing piece of a giant jigsaw puzzle that had robbed peace from this restive village out of Bangalore and the site of the imposing 'Aaradhya Center of Excellence or ACE'.

Fate plays in ways and manners. The human race is in a perennial evolutionary stage; we are a young species and evolution takes its time, though the human brain might have just disturbed this equation to advance evolution itself by a few thousand years.

If it is not fate that brought a girl to a place mired in a virulent past and a turbulent present just to show its victims and beneficiaries a path of redemption and retribution, then the world of science is yet to discover a new postulate, an algorithm or a formula that would explain what was happening & more importantly what was to happen, at ACE.

"Whoa! Never suspected that! Nice, buying this was not a complete disaster either" Chavi told herself as she closed *Lasting Fondness* to get back to sleep. It was well over 10'o clock and she was over her allowed time.

Chavi was having a little trouble sleeping and she tossed around in her bed, thinking about different climaxes for *O Toole's* horror thriller and Peeya's crying incident also crisscrossed her mind every now and then.

It was 45 minutes past 11'o clock and Chavi still could not sleep.

"I promise I will stop reading gore stories, I can't even sleep, guhh!" Chavi was doing a soliloquy.

"mmm....Chavi? is that you? You still up? What happened?" Peeya had never been more mellow or kinder with Chavi before.

"Oh nothing, nothing, I just wanted some water" Chavi was a little embarrassed since Peeya had never spoke to her so nicely and she frankly did not know how to react. She then rose from the bed towards the water jug placed on the center shelf of drawers, just below the large window sill.

"Aah! How beautiful the nights are here! How lovely their lives could have been, if only..." Chavi sighed at the sight of the large D'Cousta bungalow *Ararat*.

"It could have been really beautiful. Yes. But fate always has schemes of its own" Peeya too was now standing near her end of the water jug and was seemed to be talking in a trance to the cold wind blowing outside their 4th floor window.

"What do you mean? Fate gave him what he deserved!" Chavi spoke about Richmond in a manner that she thought would fit his stature as a greedy murderer who reaped what he sowed.

"Stop It Chavi!" Peeya was hoarse and she seemed to be very sad.

"Do not speak about things you don't know about!" Peeya told Chavi just as she went back to her bed, turning her back towards Chavi.

“I know everything! Pawan told me everything!” Chavi responded.

“And how is **he** the authority?” Peeya was not going to ignore Chavi this time.

“So what everyone knows in the whole school is all false? And why do the villagers shun the bungalow? Why do I see no guests ever?” Chavi was a little agitated herself and Peeya’s retorts had spurred her to speak more freely and boldly.

“Because they are ignorant! Just as you all are!” Peeya said loudly turning only her head in Chavi’s direction.

“Well then enlighten us!” Chavi asked anticipating something interesting.

“The time will come, Chavi”

“Time for what?” Chavi again went into soliloquy and this time Peeya ignored Chavi. It was still not the time.

The next morning was no different from the others when Chavi ate with her friends minus Pawan, whose father had come and picked him for a week’s time. He needed the rest.

Peeya was found eating with her *Airavatha* housemates.

“Well! What was that all about yesterday?” Praneethi remarked at seeing Peeya snubbing them after speaking to them about something of ‘grave’ importance just the previous day.

“She is a loony indeed!” Disha passed a snug comment.

“No, she is alright, she is definitely up to something and I feel that we all figure in her plans” Chavi shared a piece of her mind.

“Did she say something last night? What happened? You guys spoke finally?” Praneethi asked with a smug face.

“Nothing monumental! But she definitely has something up her sleeve, we will soon be party to it” Chavi said

“When” asked both Praneethi and Disha in unison.

“The time will come” Chavi said with her eyes closed and chin up holding a spoon in her raised right hand.

“Ha Ha” giggled the three girls at Chavi’s dramatic statement.

The three were all the time being observed by Peeya at a safe distance. She did not want her friends to get hurt. She; was in fact protecting them all from a danger unknown to them. Yet.

Chapter 13 – Swashbuckler

Benjamin's fear of an imminent attack on him and his family to get to Priscilla was more like a premonition. He was extremely cautious of Rory Medvev's intentions. The trust board would be the sole discretionary body to decide upon Guss's huge fortunes in case Priscilla met with an eventuality.

The American Government was out of bounds to Guss's accounts since they were safe in a Liechtenstein, a self – declared neutral nation. The money of the arms & drug mafia, human traffickers, senators, politicians and dictators were all stashed in the vaults of the ultra – rich banks whose names wouldn't even be listed in the yellow pages of third world countries.

Benjamin soon found out from his affiliates in the Israeli Intelligence operating in sleeper cells in New York that a certain group of suspicious looking men had been inquiring about his family back in Tel Aviv, Israel.

"These are dangerous men; they have the tenacity of pursuing me to my hometown! I guess money can indeed buy everything" Benjamin said to himself after hearing the news.

"What do they want from you Benji?" asked the intelligence officer.

"I do not know! They have already killed my brother and his wife. The trust holds most of their money. May be they are after Priscilla, he did say that if Priscilla dies before her 18th, then the trust controls everything" Benjamin told him.

"Could you?" asked Benjamin, the officer.

"You don't have to say it brother, our men are already on the case" the intelligence officer held Benjamin's shoulder in a mark of assurance.

Benjamin himself being an able Intelligence officer swung into action almost immediately after he landed in New York. Cincinnati was still far at 500 miles from NYC. But that was the closest he could get without being sniffed out by villainous hounds. The Israeli Intelligence's sleeper cells operated in sizeable numbers in the city and he felt quite at home in this marvelous city.

Benjamin was wary about the figure that Rory had quoted. \$120 million was too much for a Hollywood producer to get hold of, in such a short span, unless all of his movies if he had made a 100 of them would be block buster hits.

"Guss obviously dealt with bad company" Benjamin's spy instincts were on high alert.

After a series of investigations, roundabouts, working undercover with drug suppliers, smugglers, human traffickers & arms dealers, Guss was finally able to trace a single name.

Sergeant George Gillmore.

Benjamin soon delved deep into Gillmore's murder at the park and the murders of his brother, his wife and Stephen, whose name came up only when could trace out from the police records that a certain Stephen Rudolph was also found murdered in execution style at a farm out of New Jersey.

From the autopsy reports that he stole from the New Jersey District records section with the assistance of his friends, told him that Stephen was killed in an old Chinese execution style.

He later learns that his brother was in the arms business and gotten himself into a lot of trouble with the authorities and the Federal Government, though he enjoyed the patronage of some very influential senators.

"It could be anybody Goddamnit! It's a dog eat dog world out there!" rued Benjamin.

"But why was Guss killed? And why in such a monstrous manner?" asked Benjamin himself day after day.

"It would have to be someone he knew for sure. Someone betrayed him. But who?. Guss was a film producer to the outside world, so no common man would be his enemy. Perhaps it was his other career as an arms mediator that caught up to him. Now he was close to very few people, Augustine & Stephen, both died around the same time as he. That leaves us with someone in the syndicate & someone that knew far too much about Guss"

Being part of a nation's intelligence network proved to be of the utmost benefit to Benjamin as he could quickly lay his hands on the ongoing investigation into the involvement of army men both serving or otherwise; that the Department of Internal Affairs and the Military Police was looking into along with spooks from the International Police or Interpol.

He could also learn about the deaths of two of the syndicate's members, Sergeants James & Franklin, on whose activities both DIA and MP had trained their hawk eyes.

While the syndicate and Teddy strongly suspected Benjamin's hand in the deaths of their colleagues, Benjamin was getting extremely close to finding out Teddy's involvement behind his brother's family's slaughter.

"He is getting very close; it's not good for us. Our spooks say he is Israeli Intelligence" Lt. Sam Perez was on the line with Teddy.

"So the beaver is more of a mole rat, he is blind for now, but he will grow eyes, soon!" said Teddy.

"We also know he is already in the US! He left Tel Aviv long back, Bastard's been on our trail and we were just sitting ducks all the while! This is gotta end now!" Sam was angry.

"Get your men to shut him up, this has to happen fast!" instructed Teddy.

"They left for New York last week" calmly came the response from the other end.

It was a game of Black Spy versus White Spy. Benjamin's friends were quick to tip him off about Cooke and Guerrero. They were driving all the way from LA to New York, just to wipe off their entire trail. The cops usually check for rail, air, car rentals and buses for hunting for suspects.

It would take another three days to reach New York.

Benjamin's undercover spook friends could not do anything to help Benjamin directly but provide him with valuable tip offs, firearms and an escape plan.

Guerrero and Cooke arrived in New York in their compact Chevrolet Corvair, 10 days after they left LA and they were men on a mission. To seek and hunt their nemesis – Benjamin.

"We must leave the city Edna, it is no more safe for us here" Benjamin confessed with Edna.

“But what have we done to them! We don’t even know them” Edna was in tears as her life had suddenly turned topsy - turvy for her.

“You must get out of here, Benji, they are armed and dangerous, they are troopers, here take these keys to the car I have arranged” said Benjamin’s friend from one of the sleeper cells.

“But! I don’t even know who killed my brother, these two are just minions” rued Benjamin.

“Keep low for a while, Benji, we do not want American blood on our hands, our country does not need this kind of attention now” the friend warned.

“I understand, I will be off to Cincinnati where the trust board has started the school’s construction, I will contact you or someone” Benjamin took the keys and left to collect his family and whatever he could gather from his new home in NYC.

He was reduced to acting like a fugitive, hiding and running away from agents of death. Cincinnati would be an overnight journey and he quickly packed the trunk of his Plymouth Valiant. Edna sat behind with Priscilla.

Both Benjamin and Sam Perez had excellent networks spread all across the city and a dozen eyes were on Benjamin and a similar number of eyes watched the two Privates. The only advantage Sam had was that Benjamin was in his territory, he was the trespasser and Sam would be the persecutor and his punishment was most severe.

The Schneider family’s exit to Cincinnati, Ohio was eventless and they soon met the darkness of the night.

“We need to stop somewhere, dear, the child is hungry” said a worried Edna who herself was tired with the packing and the moving always fearful about her fate.

“I can’t take chances Edna, we cannot afford to get spotted, next stop is in Ohio where we have our contact waiting for us, it’s all planned, we cannot be late” explained Benjamin who had pushed down the pedal hard and the car was rattling at 65 miles / hr.

They had come quite far away from NYC and were on the freeway to Ohio and all this while Priscilla had been a symbol of discipline, always smiling and never complaining like all 3 years olds do.

An small pile up on the freeway had completely blocked the evening traffic and trouble was mounting. Since Benjamin could not afford to wait for the traffic to clear, he took a short cut, an old route through an Amish village. Little did he know, that the ‘accident’ was orchestrated by Teddy in order to navigate Benjamin’s route himself.

The black compact Chevrolet Corvair received a radio signal on a dedicated frequency and it was soon on the trail of a sky blue Plymouth Valiant. The iron stallion revved up to catch up with the tiny red dots on the horizon which were the tail lamps of the Valiant. Benjamin also could see in the rear view mirror a pair of darting yellow lights, lunging menacingly towards him. He could immediately realize that the car had his would be assailants and Benjamin shifted gears and pressed the gas harder to throttle up the engine in an effort to increase the distance.

“How could I have been so foolish! God!” cursed Benjamin to himself as he had unknowingly fallen prey to his enemy’s plans.

“What happened dear? Why are you so worried all of a sudden?” Edna enquired oblivious of the danger lurking behind her.

“It’s nothing, hold on to something and hold Priscilla, it’s going to be rough” Benjamin sped up the screeching automobile.

The yellow lights soon came precariously close to them but Benjamin was not ready to give up yet. He had seen a huge tractor parked on the wrong side of the road. Since it was a village by the freeway, it’s people did not expect such high speed chases on the narrow lanes of their restive laid back farming village.

Benjamin had pushed the Valiant to its extremities, when he was within a 100 meters from the tractor, Benjamin immediately turned off his lights to the shock of the pursuing Corvair. The two Privates had little time to react and though Cooke swerved the car to the far left, the right side still caught the tractor’s trailer and the impact at such a high velocity threw the Corvair up in the air, rolled on to the gravel and then on to the fields.

The Valiant stopped at a distance and the lights were turned on. Benjamin drew his pistol and came slowly towards the Corvair that had turned turtle. One of its inhabitants lay dead or unconscious dripping with blood while the other was not to be seen.

Benjamin went further towards the field when a bullet grazed his left shoulder, taking with a small tear of his shirt and a smear of blood. His training kicked in and he shot a volley of bullets in the direction and at least two of them had found their mark. Two shots had penetrated Private Guerrero’s lungs and he was gasping for breath.

“Who do you work for? Why did you want to kill my family? Answer me” screamed Benjamin as he pulled up the fallen Private by his collar.

“Screw You”, the Private mumbled as he choked on his own blood.

“Benji!” screamed Edna at a distance, standing outside the Valiant “I see another pair of lights, there” Edna pointed from the direction they had been driving for a while now.

Benjamin could identify from the roar of the car’s engine and the low rimmed head lights that it was a Ford Mustang, a fast and mean car. His source of information was by now dead and Benjamin sprinted towards his own car.

Another car chase ensued and the Valiant was proving to be no match to the modern Mustang. Benjamin soon realized that he was going to lose the battle and the least he could do was protect his family.

“Edna, I will slow down for a few seconds, I see a hay stack on the left, Jump out of the car with Priscilla” Benjamin was expecting too much from his homely wife.

“I can’t Benji, I’m scared!” Edna cried as the Mustang approached closer.

“You have to! Now!” yelled Benjamin from the driver’s seat just as he hard pressed the brakes & swerved without control to the left, to the surprise of his pursuers who swerved right and sped past for a while. Edna was petrified to jump but she did manage to throw away little Priscilla onto the hay stack and she shut the door again.

“Oh Edna! Why didn’t you?” said a sullen Benjamin as he revved up the Valiant. The Mustang too had screeched to a halt and had blocked the path.

Benjamin went ahead full speed expecting to smash his way through the swanky Mustang. His adventure proved a little too much as a volley of bullets from two semiautomatics punched a dozen holes on the Valiant’s hood and wind screen, one penetrating Edna’s heart, Benjamin could see his hunters’ faces – It was Sam and Teddy, firing away. He went on with the intention of bringing the two fiends under his wheels only to be brutally thrown out of the windshield when his front tire burst open due to the force of the bullets.

The swashbuckler had at last died but he managed to save Priscilla. He was just 20 miles from Cincinnati, but fate had other plans for him. Benjamin though, had made a backup plan. A radio transmitter fitted on his person would give his contact in Cincinnati a real time idea of his locations. If he had stood at one spot for more than 10 minutes, then the contact was to assume that Benjamin had been compromised, but Priscilla was to be protected at all costs. His contact later found Priscilla at a villager’s home, sleeping blissfully. She was found by the villager’s dogs resting on his hay stack. Fate keeps a plan B too.

“Wait a minute! Weren’t Peeya’s parents killed in a car crash too? And she was the only one who survived! This is all making sense now! Perhaps Kunal Roy Mukherjee was indeed not Peeya’s biological parents and someone else was. Peeya had been trying to tell us something! I wonder what it could be. This book definitely is the key”.

Chapter 14 – Solder

Peeya had told “The time will come” and the trio of Chavi, Praneethi and even Disha were anxious for that moment in time to arrive.

6 ½ months, after the academic year had started and three tests and a mid – term examination later, ‘The time’ had indeed arrived. It was the 15 day vacation that arrives after the mid – terms get over.

Disha, Praneethi and Chavi spoke to Pawan whose injured arm had recovered much but was still wearing a crepe bandage since the fractured bone had still not set completely.

“Peeya Mukherjee is now talking!” laughed Praneethi as Pawan listened.

A small discussion later, Pawan was appraised of all the happenings just when his father who had been waiting called at him to get into the car.

“Sorry Guys! Have to leave! Wish I could have been here with you all! See you soon though!” Pawan bade them all Goodbye.

“Bye Pawan, Take care” wished the three girls.

On the day of the last paper, Peeya had spoken to Chavi.

“The library, in 10 minutes” Peeya spoke into Chavi’s ear just as she passed her. She had no intention of being seen speaking to Chavi.

After 10 minutes, Chavi, Praneethi & Disha separated themselves from the huge crowd of students who were busy discussing their performances and their plans for the 15 day vacation & found themselves among a sea of books in the library. The library was huge; it covered the area of almost 5 regular classrooms. It had reading desks a few feet away from its main door and there were also desks along the long walls and one had to cross a small maze of tall book shelves to reach such desks.

Peeya had settled herself behind one of the tall book shelves and when she heard the sound of school shoes clicking, she assumed it would be Chavi and her friends. It was highly unlikely that anyone else would visit the library just after the exams.

“I’m back here” Peeya pushed the desk with her toes while seated so that it inclined at an angle, enough for the trio to catch a glimpse of Peeya.

The trio soon made their way to Peeya’s secret hideout.

“How was your paper?” Chavi asked Peeya

“Listen; there is no time for that! I am here talk about important stuff. Things that you girls better beware of” Peeya addressed the trio.

“Well! We have been waiting to hear from you as well! Go on!” Disha was not to be bogged down by some words of caution by an eighth grader.

“Very well! Let me tell you that, whatever you have known about this school, the bungalow and the village. They are all false” Peeya stated

“Oh great! **This** is what you had to tell us” Praneethi interrupted. “Shh!” Chavi chided her friend.

“All those rumors you heard about Richmond and Lily Mary are just that, Rumors, those stories are a figment of somebody’s imagination. He might have gotten into wrong company, I don’t know, but all that I know is that he did not get the Kamat family killed. His death also was not an act of the supernatural, it was the act of coward men, who wanted to take him out of their way” Peeya explained.

“And why should we believe you? How do you know so much about that family?” asked Disha who was extremely skeptical of Peeya.

“Because.... Because they are my grandparents.. on my father’s side” revealed Peeya only to see a trio of totally shocked girls.

“You are out of your mind girl! Are you listening to what you are saying? Sounds ridiculous! They did not even have children and you say you are their grand child?! What a story indeed!” Praneethi made fun of Peeya while Disha and Chavi silently looked at each other confused how to react.

“No I am not! That is the truth” insisted Peeya.

“Hello! Madam! You are *Peeya! Peeya MUKHERJEE*” Praneethi laid emphasis on Peeya’s surname which was Hindu while Richmond was Christian Catholic.

“I know that; my grandparents loved each other very much and all those stories about them not sharing any relation is a load of crap. They had a son; their only kid. My granddad’s business associations with the Kamat family proved to be fatal for him. He might have been whatever he was called, a smuggler, a thief, a bootlegger, a *punter*. Of course, people will let their imaginations run scot free when they see a modest fisherman from a small village arrive at a big city and get rich in a short time. I, have never even seen him in the flesh, but my father always used to tell us that his father was a kind and gentle man. Perhaps he had told more, but I only remember these words as I was too small when I lost my parents” Peeya narrated emotionlessly.

“We heard your parents died in a car crash. Is it true?” Chavi asked before Praneethi could come up with another snide comment.

“Yes, they did, they were in the car when they died, but they did not die of a car crash. They were also murdered” Peeya said.

“Ha! Caught your bluff! Pawan had done some research on you and we found out that your father’s name was Kunal Roy Mukherjee. Would you connect the pieces? We are getting lost here” this time Disha assumed Praneethi’s role.

“After the entire Kamat family was burnt, my granddad started experiencing strange phenomena in the bungalow. He was being contacted by spirits from beyond the grave and they were warning him from something extremely vicious. My ageing father, quickly sent away my father whose real name was actually Russell D’Cousta to a village near Kolkata where my father bought a big piece of land, changed his name as instructed and started a new life” continued Peeya.

“What happened next?” Chavi asked.

“My granddad was experiencing more and more interactions with ‘spirits’ and he sometimes felt that he was going insane. My grandmother was slowly sinking into depression as she had to lose her only son and her husband of over 30 years claimed that he was being contacted by spirits” added Peeya.

“Why didn’t your father try to contact your granddad later?” asked Disha.

“He was instructed not to. His life as well as mine and my mother’s was all in danger. My granddad had bequeathed his entire property in my name and his enemies had no clue about this. They had to eliminate me along with my parents to hold sway over the huge D’Costa property” replied Peeya.

“Well then if your real parents are dead, then who are you living with now?” Chavi asked.

“With Kailash Roy Mukherjee, the D’Costa family lawyer. He was the only one who really cared for the family and immediately took me into his fold. When I turned 8, he sat me down and narrated all the events” said Peeya.

This was sounding like a potboiler movie that had so many twists in the tale and there is a lot of confusion about what was true & what was not. Nevertheless, the girls had decided in unison that they would put their faith in Peeya.

“My granddad’s enemies were successful in hunting down my parents, when they realized who they were. For 5 long years, my father had protected his identity, but he seized the opportunity of sponsoring the construction of this school when it came to light that it was being constructed with a spectacular view of his family estate. His emotions got the best of him” tears had welled up in Peeya’s eyes just as she lifted her hand to wipe them off with a handkerchief.

“We had flown down to Bangalore when I was probably over 3 years old when the School’s foundation laying ceremony was to take place. That was the first time that I saw my grandmother. I didn’t even know who she was, but was later told by Mr. Kailash, my foster father who she was”

“But what about your grandfather’s death? Why did his own dogs kill him?” asked Praneethi.

“Men can be unfaithful & ungrateful, dogs can never be” said Peeya.

“Well then how do you explain what happened to your granddad” asked Chavi.

“*Lucifer & Gabriel* were brought into the house when they were just puppies. They were a gift to my father on his 13th birthday. They were brothers and the whole family loved them like sons. They were 15 when my father was asked to go away to Kolkata and in dog years, believe me 15 means old, very old” reasoned Peeya.

“You still haven’t answered my question!” said Praneethi.

“That was a conspiracy too. My father had found out everything that happened to the Kamat family. Who was behind it and why granddad was so scared for his son’s family’s lives. He had done a great deal of research into granddad’s gallery and who the stakeholders were. To the outside world, only my granddad and the Kamat family were visible, whereas there were other key players too and apparently they were getting insecure about the growing relationship between my granddad and the Kamat family.

They had tried to intimidate my granddad who was a minor partner by ruthlessly killing the entire Kamat family. They even threatened to hold him responsible for their murders if he didn’t yield to their demands. My granddad was incorruptible; he did not want to betray his friends. So the bad people spread rumors about my granddad’s involvement thought the cops also could never prove anything against him” Peeya explained.

“Who are these ‘they’ that you keep talking about?” asked Chavi.

“They don’t have a name, yet! But that’s what I had wanted to find out, when I came here. This school has many investors and my foster dad Mr. Kailash came to know that the men who killed my dad & granddad were major stakeholders here. They actually have their eyes on the Bungalow and the huge estate & of course the gallery which is being managed by trust on behalf of my grandmother, Lily Mary” said Peeya.

“Well, the property is in safe hands then! How can anyone possibly seize the estate & the bungalow without either your grandmother’s consent or the trust’s?” asked Disha.

“Precisely the point! My grandmother seems to be in no state to think of anything at all. She has been in a state of shock ever since she saw the way granddad was killed” said a crestfallen Peeya.

“Have you spoken to her yet?” asked Chavi.

“No! It’s very dangerous. I cannot be spotted by anyone talking to my grandmother. That will expose my cover & moreover those dogs there, they are not ours. *Lucifer & Gabriel* were both poisoned & killed and they were replaced by these trained dogs by them” explained Peeya.

“There must be a way out to get to speak to her. We must! Maybe that will give us some clues” pondered Chavi loud enough for the other 3 girls to hear.

“Anyway, what is your real name? We know it is not Peeya!” asked Praneethi.

“Well I was baptized in Kolkata and was named Priscilla D’Cousta” revealed Peeya.

“No way! This can’t be!” gasped Chavi.

“What?” asked both Praneethi and Disha “What can’t be?”

“This.. this.. this book I am reading! Wait a minute! Peeya! Have you been reading my book?” asked Chavi.

“What no! I never read books! What are you talking about?” shrugged Peeya and there was no guilt in her voice.

“Amazing! Whatever you said so far is almost a replica of the story I am reading. The story is set in a land & time so different and yet the characters are strikingly similar and most interestingly, its your bloody name! the little girl’s name in the book was also Priscilla... Priscilla Schneider” said Chavi.

“Well maybe you could find out how it ends soon. Perhaps we could follow the hints from the book” said Praneethi.

“You people can’t be serious! We act based on a plot of a horror thriller that Chavi is reading! That sounds so silly!” said Disha and Peeya seemed to second her opinion.

“No! I think the book has definitely something to say! Maybe its fate’s decision that Peeya gets justice this way. We must leave no stone unturned. There are some things that we cannot explain easily” said Chavi.

“Whoa! You are freaking me out now! I think we must go now. We have spoken enough. We will get back together after lunch. Tonight is going to be a long one” said Disha.

“Alright our room at 9.30 P.M tonight!” said Chavi and Peeya nodded in agreement.

“But we all leave for our homes tomorrow!” said Praneethi. She was true. They had a 15 day vacation for which they had been waiting for more than 6 months and yet they were in a predicament.

“Can’t we stay here for 3 more days? I think we are getting close to something and if we take a break now, who knows what else will happen? Peeya will be staying here and I assume she can be in danger” asked Chavi.

“No Guys! This is my problem; I will try to solve this somehow. Please don’t spoil your vacations for my sake” Peeya said.

“Hey! I assume when you disclosed your case to us, we became friends and friends do not abandon each other in times of distress. We can bear to wait three more days to see our families. What say Praneethi? Disha Di?” said Chavi. She had spoken wisely & bravely and both Praneethi and Disha liked her stance very much.

“We are with you. We will call our parents tonight. Alright? Now shall we leave Madam?” giggled Disha.

Chapter 15 – The Union

It was 9 P.M after dinner when Peeya and Chavi huddled on Chavi's bed to read the reminder of *Lasting Fondness*, their guide to solving the mysterious case of Peeya Mukherjee a.k.a Priscilla Russell D'Cousta.

"I have already finished the part where Priscilla's parents are killed by Teddy Birmingham and Lt. Sam Perez, who were his brother Guss's business affiliates. Benjamin Schneider had seen his brother's murderers before he was killed." explained Chavi.

"I guess my dad had seen his killers too" Peeya spoke softly.

"I am sorry, but we have to go through this. This is our chance at finding out the truth" Chavi consoled Peeya.

"Priscilla Schneider was taken to her foster parents who shifted base to Cincinnati just as had been instructed by Benjamin before he died. The School construction there by the trust board was in full swing.

Her name had been changed to Mary Anne Middleton, an English name that would keep her real identity secret. This was her official name but she continued to receive the monthly dole of \$15,000 from the trust for her maintenance. The trust still continued to send across the cheques to Benjamin's Tel Aviv address which was duly deposited in his account in New York which was then taken out posing as Benjamin Schneider, by Neil Middleton, again an alias, her foster father, David Neumann had adopted.

Priscilla did her schooling at the Benjamin Franklin Memorial School in a small village, Helmsworth outside of Cincinnati. The isolation & calm of the village was an ideal place to go in hiding.

Years passed and Priscilla was looking forward to her 10th birthday when one day, Neumann narrated the entire story of her father, her uncle and how he had been protecting her from bad people.

Priscilla was about 12 years of age when she made a resolve to penetrate deep into enemy hold, to unearth the secrets that were rotting in her father's and Uncle's graves. At puberty, Priscilla not only was changing physically, but a lot of things around her seemed to change.

Realization of such bitter truth had been extremely hard on her and she was angry, very angry at her fate and at her helplessness as she was left all alone in a dark spot. She knew that her father and Uncle were killed but no one knew well enough as to name them. The only way out she thought was to gain access to the school that was built on her money and try and figure out if there was indeed a link between the trust board and the killers. She perhaps had even thought of slowly exposing herself to the outside world if need be, just to draw the attention of her hunters.

Priscilla, now Mary Ann Middleton to the rest of the world, soon joined the school and got an admission to the dorm. It was here that she realized that all this while, she was not only being protected by her father's devoted brother and his dedicated friends but also by her doting father, Guss, however not in the form she had desired for him.

"Could you skip to the part where she gets the clues about her father's killers?" asked Peeya.

"Why of course! Stupid me!" said Chavi as she slowly flipped the pages of the voluminous novel.

"Mary Ann Middleton's roommate had asked for a change of room and had it sanctioned as she had been sleeping in absolute terror, seeing Mary Ann speak to herself and look out the window panes for

hours together without catching a minute of sleep. Any child for that matter would be scared for their own selves when encountered with such strange phenomena.

The school authorities did not deem it necessary to quiz Priscilla about the reported incidents and transferred her to a smaller room in the dorm fit for single occupancy.

Priscilla would experience bouts of seizure in the middle of the night and there would be none to call out for help. There was terror in her eyes and her insomnia had taken a toll on her health and also physical appearance. The first few months in the school had never been eventful but the later months for her were full of penury. She would feel her legs and arms being pulled from each other in a searing pain that seemed like her arms and legs would be ripped off from her body and yet she would only wake up drenched in her own sweat to see her limbs intact.

“How could a nightmare be so painful?” Cried Priscilla alone in the darkness, but for a good while, she did not have answers.

She would never experience any such out of the body moments whenever she was with company, though for some reason she had, when she had a roommate. Maybe, the ‘force’ wanted her to be alone, to test her and try her, to check if she was ready to make the contact.

Priscilla Schneider had been extremely resilient and she chose to swallow the pain and endure the nightmares. She was resolved to finding out her family’s killers and no force, real or unreal would break her down. For a teenager, Priscilla had been very strong, in her mind.

The seizures and convulsions and the nightmares that pained her like hell, continued for the entire academic year. Priscilla had been a beautiful girl when she had walked into the school and now a year later, the other kids stayed away from her, even the two desks beside her in the classroom were abdicated by their previous occupants.

Finally, in the vacations at the end of her first academic year, she would witness something strange and yet very special.

It was the last night of the end of the year and the exams had just been concluded, while Priscilla lay silently on the wooden chair of her dorm room with a distant view of the school chapel outside the window.

“Priscilla, my child” the voice in her head asked her. She had been experiencing an otherwise head splitting migraine but she had been acclimatized to such pains for the last one year. The ‘voice’ had been training her to bear the pains the living have to endure in order to contact the souls.

The ‘voice’ she was hearing was that of Guss. Her father; she did not know if the voice was good or evil and she was more than thrilled to hear her father speak to her. Her innocence bound her from making theories about the voice really being her father’s. Her trust was her savior. The ‘voice’ had indeed been Guss.

In many cultures ancient, medieval and modern, it is a widely accepted philosophy that each and every human being has a soul. It is the life force. This was it. A soul to soul connection. The soul is immortal, it is energy that can neither be created nor destroyed but it can only be transformed from one mass of flesh, blood and bones to another.

After hours of silent staring at the white chapel with fire red tiles, Priscilla had fallen into the abyss of sleep. The voices, still she could hear but she was not awake. But it was no dream either. The voices were very much real.

“Is that you father?” asked Priscilla, still asleep & yet if anyone had shared her room, they would not have heard a single word from her, as she did not speak with her mouth, it was her soul, doing the talking.

“You’ve always been a special one, my child! You deserved life. I did not. I have done a lot of things that I am not proud of Priscilla. But you! You will make me proud, my love” the voice told her.

Priscilla body was starting to reject this interaction at the metaphysical level. Her body was slowly losing heat, her skin cold, not from the cool moonlight that lit up her dorm room, but by the regress of blood flowing to her heart and brain.

“You! Will avenge your father!” the voice raised & yet Priscilla was unperturbed.

“I will, mother!” Priscilla replied as her skin changed from pale white to a tinge of blue which was threatening to assume the colour of the dark night sky and just when Priscilla was shook up by a violent reaction by her nervous system, throwing her into a momentary convulsion and thereby delinking her connection with her dead father.

Surprisingly, in her conscious, Priscilla could remember exactly what she had been instructed by her father.

“But Chavi! This books speaks about ghosts and stuff, why did you think that this story is similar to mine?” asked an apparently miffed Peeya.

“Well I do not say this story matches yours perfectly, but it definitely gives pointers. We must look for hidden clues to get to your granddad’s and your dad’s killers” Chavi explained.

After reading another dozen or so pages, that only describes more painful interactions between Priscilla Schneider and her slain father, who was a spirit left in limber, awaiting redemption. He was a dissatisfied soul, he wanted to avenge his death through his daughter & since she had innocent blood running inside her, it was all the easier for him to manipulate her and she would offer minimum resistance.

“This supernatural, paranormal stuff is just freaking me out, like I said, you guys must leave immediately, there’s no point in staying back. I could not find out much in a year and I do not expect you to find out any in the next 3 days. It is impossible, forget it” said Peeya.

“Aha aha” muttered Chavi as she chose to ignore Peeya’s statements as mere words of desperation & frustration “Look! Here it is! Our clue!” exclaimed Chavi after coming across a chapter in the book, where Priscilla meets up with an old lady, a shaman who claimed to have access to the other world. Priscilla had been experiencing strange things that she could not discuss with any of her teachers or even David, and never with friends, because she had none.

“This is going nowhere! Where are we going to discover a Voodoo lady here in Bangalore! And moreover neither my granddad or my dad have ever tried to ‘contact’ me” said Peeya rolling her eyes while raising both her hands with the index finger up in the air, sarcastically, drawing out imaginary ‘quotes’ in the air.

“Perhaps, your grandmother is the key! She definitely knows something! After all, all that the Voodoo lady here is doing is but help out Priscilla make the right decisions, interpret the signs for her” explained Chavi.

“That’s impossible, don’t you realize those dogs over there in the bungalow, have been planted to keep anyone but ‘them’ at bay” said Peeya.

“Hmm, you are right! I did hear Pawan say that those dogs almost pounced on you when you were with your parents for the school function. Is that true?” asked Chavi.

“It is indeed! That incident still gives me sleepless nights whenever I recall that. I really don’t know what had stopped them that day! Maybe I had been lucky!” Peeya said all the while looking up at the standstill fan on the ceiling.

“I just remembered one more thing now! That stallion incident! Why did the horse behave strangely after seeing you?” asked Chavi.

“How the hell should I know? I was so scared myself, the way it acted! I thought I would die that day. I stood there frozen. I could not move a muscle” said Peeya.

“I guess, someone was behind that incident, all these so called omens, I think they were all planned. I really don’t believe that your identity here is a secret anymore” said Chavi when they observe feet shuffling outside the door.

“Did you see that?” whispered Chavi “Someone’s outside, but at this hour?” It was well over 11’o clock in the night and since it was the last night of the students before the vacations, Ms. Sadhana Talapatra had been in a little generous mood that night. However, Chavi & Peeya were reading with only Chavi’s study lamp lit & the room was dark enough for the both of them to see the light outside being filtered in by a pair or two pairs perhaps, of legs.

“I guess, we better stop for now” whispered Chavi as she bookmarked the page they had left at. Chavi switched off the table lamp & the room turned as black as soot and a faint halo of light tried to sneak inside, from the gap in the door. The feet had stopped shuffling; they stood still for a while and then left.

“Oh! God! Who could that be?” Peeya went into whispering mode & Chavi had no answers with her either.

Peeya, slowly turned towards the window in the room and caught her own faint reflection in the closed glass doors, dimly illuminated by the lights from outside.

“Poor, Grandma, she has been alone all this while, I really don’t know if she thinks I’m dead or not, Dad”, she said referring to her foster father, David Neumann, “had told me that Grandma had a nervous breakdown and is suffering with depression after granddad was killed”.

Chavi was standing by her side, both literally and metaphorically.

“Everything will be alright Priscilla, *we* will make it alright” assured Chavi as she put her arm on Peeya’s shoulder as mark of being with her.

For the first time, Chavi could see the sparkle of hope and a semblance of a smile on Peeya’s face. No one had called Peeya by her birth name ever before and she was happy that Chavi had believed her and was with her to help her all the way.

The next morning, the school grounds buzzed with laughter, giggles, and grunts of excitement as parents swooped in to collect their beloved children for the long awaited 15 day vacation. All that could be seen at the school was joy and happiness. While the rest of the school danced in mirth, 4 girls spoke in hushed tones in Chavi & Peeya's room.

"Now is the time" said Chavi after she had narrated last night's incident to Disha and Praneethi "we must slip past everyone & go see Peeya's grandmom"

"Are you bonkers?" Disha thundered "what about those dogs from hell?"

"I have a plan" Chavi said "Look at this" while showing a vial of a colorless liquid. The vial seemed to be tightly secured with a threaded cap.

"What is it?" Praneethi attempted to grab the vial from Chavi's hand.

"Be careful! You wouldn't want to break the vial here" warned Peeya.

Chavi explained to Disha and Praneethi, how she and Peeya had convinced the chemistry lab attendant to open the lab doors on the pretext of searching for Chavi's allegedly lost gold earrings. While the attendant did not suspect much, he left the lab, door ajar to attend to nature's call. The duo had seized the opportunity to transfer the contents of a big lab jar filled with & marked as 'Chloroform' replete with skull and cross bones indicating danger, to a small vial that Peeya used to carry with her. When Peeya had first come to ACE, this vial was filled with sand from her village in Kolkata when she was living with her father.

"Brilliant! All we now need to do is to create a diversion and slip past the commotion" said Praneethi.

"We were hoping you could help us in that, Praneethi" said Peeya.

"What? Me? Alone? What do you suppose I do?" Praneethi was taken aback by the sudden escalation of her responsibility.

"Nothing dangerous and don't worry, it will have Disha Di also" said Chavi and Disha was taken aback too.

"Ok! I will quit talking in circles! Disha Di, Praneethi, we need you two to create a diversion so strong that it would last at least a good 2 – 3 minutes, enough for us to slip past the gate security and into the D'Cousta estate" explained Chavi.

"Again! How do you suppose we do that?" asked Disha.

"It's an old trick, the four of us walk out into the crowd and Praneethi here, will act as if she is feeling giddy, drawing the crowd's attention towards her, she faints and that is when Peeya and I confuse the gate security to leave their spots to help you out. Disha Di, will be the one who creates panic in the crowd" explained an embarrassed Chavi.

"Oh God! You guys must be kidding me! Your plan work, Chavi, else I will kill you myself!" hissed Praneethi while Disha laughed at her plight.

The 'plan' was neatly executed and the parents and students who had still not left the school made a big huddle around the 'fallen' Peeya while Disha cried, shouted, pushed and held Praneethi's head on her lap all the while retaining the attention of the crowd.

“Somebody fainted! Quick help her out! Shouted Chavi and Peeya at the security guards, who could not think of anything but to run towards the crowd.

“The girls immediately ran towards *Ararat*. A good 30 – 40 meters later, they both stood frozen, at the sight of two vicious dogs hurtling down at them.

“Quick! The vial!” screamed Chavi as she held out her handkerchief, closed the mouth of the vial and bent it over in a swift motion of the hand so as to soak the cloth with its potent contents.

The barks had gotten louder since the dogs were now within pouncing distance. Chavi could see two pairs of darting black eyes of the canine imposters, the muscles on their fore and hinds bulging and rippling at their action, their fangs drenched in thick saliva which spewed all over when the hounds barked. The girls had relied on the primary instinct of dogs to bark at strangers. Unless, instructed, dogs, no matter how vicious would not attack humans and would basically try to intimidate.

The girls stood their ground and Chavi, though trembling with fear slowly dropped the chloroform soaked handkerchief in front of the two dogs, who naturally bent down to sniff. Within a few seconds, the barking had stopped and the dogs were lying on the ground, blissfully unconscious.

The girls sprinted towards the bungalow, but soon stopped to see activity near the small boat house. It was one of the house servants, tending to some routine work. He did not notice the two girls and Chavi & Peeya made a dash for the main door. The chemical would have its effect on the dogs for just another 40 – 50 minutes and they had to get what they wanted in this time.

They were not even sure if Peeya’s grandmother was in a position to speak to them. After all, she had only seen Priscilla last when she was but a small girl all of 3 years old & even if she was in the pink of health, it would be hard for her to say anything to a stranger, if at all she indeed had anything to say at all.

The grand door to the *Ararat* was open as is the case with bungalows in estates. The girls slid through as silently as possible. No one suspected a fly since the dogs had been silent and no one would have dared to trespass on their guard. The bungalow was quite big. A huge lobby cum living space hogged much of the space in the bungalow, which Richmond used for entertaining his guests, friends and business associates who poured in every single day. There were three – four doors on the far corners of the huge living room that the girls wanted to check. A nice winding staircase fashioned on the old Victorian era houses, lead to a veranda which then seemed to lead to another set of rooms and what not. The one striking feature inside the Bungalow was a huge hand painted portrait of a young Richmond and Lily Mary in much happier times. While Lily Mary looked demure in a Burgundy evening gown with a large marigold broach, a necklace of pearls with a golden pendant that seemed like a locket, the ones that were large enough to hold portraits; while Richmond looked suave in a neat white three piece with a darting red tie and a pocket handkerchief of the same color, hair neatly oiled and combed back with a thin parting line almost in the middle, a thin moustache and a faint smile, while the background of the painting was a maroon façade with a portion of a white framed French window, getting due notice.

“Well they say a picture speaks a 1000 words, your grandparents don’t look that they were living separate lives” Chavi remarked as she drew Peeya’s attention towards the portrait.

“I guess she would be on the first floor, I have often seen her sitting in the balcony” said Peeya.

“We have a very small window of time, Peeya; we got to search her now! Come back here” Chavi pulled Peeya towards her and they hid themselves behind the a huge mantelpiece, a tribal art work that Richmond had bought from his partners in *Devadutta*, as a maid with a tray that seemed to be carrying a

glass of plain milk, a ceramic bowl – probably some cereal, rice or some fruits and walk up the stairs towards a room on the left where the staircase ended.

Chavi & Peeya, retraced the maid's steps after she had come down and disappeared from the scene of the huge living room cum lobby and they found themselves in an old room that had the smell of a recently cleaned hospital ward room. There was no stench, but only the smell of floor disinfectant, the heavy odor of bathroom deodorants, the combination of smells of capsules and tablets and the smell of old people.

They see Lily Mary, dressed in an off white nightie with tiny blue daffodils and tiny pink doves making up for the lack of color on her dress. She had been sitting on of the comfortable arm chairs laid out in the balcony annexed to her room separated by sliding glass doors that spread from floor to ceiling, as was the trend in the construction of bungalows in Richmond's time. Lily Mary had not touched a morsel of food that had been placed; it was some sort of barley – oats porridge made with milk.

"Come in my dears" Lily Mary almost startled the two little wayfarers "Come sit with me" she said without turning back, as if she had been expecting them all this while.

Without uttering a word, Chavi & Peeya stepped out of the glass doors and they were soon in front of a frail old lady whose hair had all gone white save a few grey ones and the wrinkles on her face made her look like she had been soaked in cold water for a whole day, the bags under her eyes seemed to tell a million tales of pain & solitude and the constant twitching of her lips told the two girls that Lily Mary had a lot of things to tell and frankly she did not know how to start.

"*Naana!*" Peeya called out at the withering old lady saving on time that she might have needed to guess out her grandchild from the two.

"Why of course!" Lily's weak grey eyes were slowly being taken over by cataract, but she still held on "But my child! You must not be here, it's too dangerous, who is this with you? Is this your friend? How did you get past *Lucifer & Gabriel*? Did anyone see you both coming here?" Lily threw a volley of questions at her granddaughter as she was both happy and dreadfully concerned about her.

"It's ok *Naana*, the dogs have been taken care of, we came here to see you, we have a few things to ask you" spoke Peeya.

"*Naana*, it's me, Priscilla, your granddaughter, I study in that school over there" said Peeya pointing towards the large white & violet school building & the cream painted girls' hostel.

Peeya tried hard to convince her grandmother that she indeed was her granddaughter and had risked her life and that of her friend's just to come see her and talk to her. Peeya also talked to her grandmother about the rumors about Richmond and herself that had been doing the rounds in the village. She also explained how her father had been killed and how the family advocate Mr. Kailash had been taking care of her all this while. She also told her about her friends who had gone out of their way to help her out & how they had managed to sneak in without alerting anyone.

All this while, Lily Mary listened to the girl who claimed to be her granddaughter with a smile and with attentive ears.

"I know dear, I know all about you, I have known you since you were but a little child, barely able to stand. You haven't changed much, my eyes may be weak and old, but my memories of you are not. It has been a decade since I last saw your face so close" said Lily Mary recalling the incident during the school's foundation laying function, "I have been keeping a close watch over you, dear, why do you think? You got that room on the 4th floor of your school hostel" she asked while laughing mellow & pointing towards an

old, brass enameled vintage telescope that Richmond had bought her for one of her birthdays. The sheen on the brass had worn off but it had been serving its purpose.

“You mean, you are alright? You have known ever since? But why?” asked Peeya as if she was more hurt to realize that her grandmother had been sane all this while and she had been deprived of her love.

“It is for your own safety, child, there are some good people, who would take a bullet for our family, but there are many others who would fire one at us” said Lily Mary “Your granddad was a good man, he loved his family and took good care of it. He was a hardworking man and he easily trusted people, which was perhaps, his greatest mistake”

“A village boy making it big in a big city often draws the attention of hyenas and jackals, waiting to scavenge on his spoils” spoke Lily Mary in a metaphorical manner.

“Your granddad always kept himself surrounded with wrong company, they were not good people, they killed the *Kamat* family, your granddad, your parents and they have many times to kill me and you too” Lily Mary said.

“My identity is a secret, *naana*” said Peeya with confidence.

“Is it really my dear?” asked Lily Mary, rhetorically.

“What do you mean *naana*? Who could possibly know? Why would they remain silent all this time?” asked Peeya.

“They are very strong, they are organized & work like professionals, Mr. Kailash had sent me a message *for my eyes* only a few years back. He had written about you, coming into the school. I still do not know why he sent me that message, the whole world thought I had gone bonkers and I intended it to continue that way. That would give the trust some leverage on the management of the property, but maybe the father inside Kailash had urged him to alert your grandma about your arrival” explained Lily Mary “I made arrangements, through some trustworthy companions” referring to her nurse Shanti and her husband Mallesh, they both hailed from the village and Shanti had always been compassionate towards Lily & when Lily felt that Shanti had gained her trust, she had taken her help.

“Your hostel warden and her husband, the Talapatras, they are none other than Shanti and Mallesh. They joined the school immediately after you did and have since been watching over you like a shadow. She also paired you alongside dear Chavi” Lily said as she reached out her hand towards Chavi who bent over to have Lily’s wrinkled hand caress her soft cheeks.

“You mean it was all planned?” Chavi finally spoke “But why me?”

“Shanti, had read about you in the newspapers and when you came along with your parents, it was a blessing in disguise. You would be a perfect partner to Priscilla” came the reply from Lily & Peeya gave a hefty smile to Chavi.

“Well grandma” said Chavi, “Call me *naana* like your friend does” smiled Lily Mary.

“*Naana* we do not have much time, what do you know about the murders, any idea who could be behind all this? I think that both your and Peeya’s lives are in danger now. I think you are right, Peeya’s secret has been exposed” said Chavi.

“I am not sure honey, but I know for sure that they planted someone inside the school to watch over Priscilla’s activities just like I did, but to safeguard her” said Lily Mary “the trust operates as an

autonomous body, the profits from the business all go to the banks and of course for the salaries of the directors and others, but as long as I or any other heir of Richmond stays alive, the trust stays alive. Priscilla was dead to the world, until she grew up and decided to come here, and I, am a patient suffering chronic depression, not a threat, but a target nevertheless. Somehow, I am alive to this day, maybe to tell you all this, but I am not sure, how long I can put on this show” laughed Lily Mary.

“*Naana*” spoke Peeya, “what had happened the other day during the school’s foundation laying? The dogs had attacked but stopped, I don’t remember, but people say that you were there too”

“I came to see your father, Priscilla, Oh! It been so many years since he had left and I was dying to have a look at him, to touch him and to see **you**” Lily said, “but I was so naïve and stupid, that I forgot that there were people watching over all the time. It was me, who caused your father’s death. He reacted, there was a certain smile of affection. That! That little expression of joy cost him his life”

“The dogs, I didn’t know had followed me, but they were not attacking you my love, they had seen something, like I did, something no one else saw, as I came near the fence, there he was, my Richmond, right next to the fence in between you and me, smiling at the both of us” said Lily as Chavi widened her eyes as if to tell *I told you so!* and looked at Peeya, who just nodded her head with surprise and disbelief.

It was all clear to the both of them now, the book was telling them everything and it would reveal the truth.

“*Naana!* You wouldn’t believe this! It is this book that Chavi is reading! It’s story, it has a plot that is so much like yours and grandpa’s. In fact, we had to risk talking to you today only because the story has a chapter similar to what we are doing right now” Peeya might have sounded silly to her withering grandma, but perhaps the grandparents are the only ones who take the babble and the tales of fairies and spirits that the children so excitedly recite, seriously.

Peeya stood frozen as Chavi kneeled down and held Lily Mary’s cold hands. They were back. *Lucifer & Gabriel* or at least their doppelgangers. Their jowls hanging low, a dreadful gnarling sound from the both filled the air in the room, drool dripping and wetting the carpet in, nostrils hot with breath and eyes fixed on the two intruders.

Chapter 16 – Last Draw

“Good acting Ms. Sridevi” teased Disha as Praneethi had convincingly drawn the attention of the crowd and also had acted so good on the recovery, that the crowd actually felt happy & relieved to see the girl on her feet again.

“Maybe it is my destiny!” added Praneethi and the two had a good laugh “I guess the girls would have done their job by now, but it has been well over an hour now, shouldn’t they be back”

Meanwhile at the Principal’s office, “what was all the commotion about, Thapa?” asked Aadarsh Prasad to the security guard.

“A girl, saab, she had fainted, she, she is ok now” said Tej Bahadur Thapa, a Nepali Gurkha, known for their bravery and aggressiveness.

“Who is she? Did her parents take her away?” asked Aadarsh.

“Saabji, I don’t think so, all the children have left, except for these two”

“Two?, who is the other one?”

“Disha, Class 12, Praneethi Class 9”

“Well, where are they now?”

“They are both at the infirmary, Saabji, Ms. Sadhana took them there”

“Send Ms. Sadhana across, tell her I called her, on second thoughts, forget it, I will speak to her later, you go now” Aadarsh dismissed Thapa from the room.

Back at the infirmary, where Praneethi had been taken by the school staff for a checkup, the girls were getting tense, “they should be here as planned, something might have went wrong, what if Peeya was bluffing! Oh! We must never have trusted that loony” said Praneethi.

“No, Praneethi, Peeya is clean, tears don’t lie, something else is wrong, maybe the old lady is not Peeya’s grandma at all, maybe it was a trap” said Disha.

“Maybe that house **is** haunted after all! Oh! We shouldn’t have let them go by themselves, perhaps there was a better plan to slip past the security” Disha had gotten very tense.

“They are at the house, your mutts are useless” Aadarsh was speaking to someone over the phone in his office.

“It will be taken care of, you don’t have to worry, just like you haven’t all these days” the voice on the other side of the phone replied.

“Should we approach the police? What will we tell them? We will sound so stupid! Should we alert Ms. Sadhana or the principal?” asked Praneethi.

“Don’t be naïve, princi will rusticate us if he finds out what we have been doing, not to mention the drama our parents will enact, once they come to know, I will be in college this year, Praneethi, I can’t risk it” explained Disha “The Book! I guess the book is the key, we need to finish where Chavi has left”

“But the keys to their room, it would be locked, won’t it” asked Praneethi

“Not if I open it for you” said Ms. Sadhana who had been chatting with the nurse all this while, when the two girls had started talking about Chavi & Peeya.

The trio quickly dashed towards the hostel, where Ms. Sadhana retrieved a duplicate key to room no 417. They could not see any activity at the bungalow from the room’s window, but they could find the book lying over Chavi’s bed, Disha started from the page that Chavi had bookmarked.

“The vacations were finally knocking on the doors, it was time for Priscilla to step out of the school, to the city’s dark alleys, and an old shaman lay in wait for her arrival. It had been foreseen and foretold. Priscilla Schneider stepped out with the last ounce of energy left inside her and a force guided her to the shaman.

The place was expectedly dark, cold and dusty. There were vials and jars filled with the mummified carcasses of lizards, Gila monsters, bats, frogs, snakes, and thousands of dead maggots and locusts cramped in air tight glass jars. There were signs and symbols that the little girl could not understand. The atmosphere in the damp basement shop of the old Shaman was eerie and there was death all around the place.

The Shaman herself, an old wrinkly Hispanic woman, dressed in the traditional garb of native American Shamans, face painted in brilliant white streaks and blue & orange lines in between, giving her the resemblance of a brightly colored baboon. Her headgear made of flaming red Flamingo feathers tied together by a head band painted in native tribal patterns, the flowing gown was largely black, with streaks of yellow and orange, it was made with the wool of the mountain goats, and large beads at the tip of her dreadlocks and around her neck completed her look. A crude seasoned wood staff with a mummified ram’s head made up for her only accessory.

Priscilla was drawn to the evening sun filtering through the dust and the smoke that was coming from a recess in the shop. She could hear an old woman chanting hymns in Native American, a prayer was being offered for the invocation of the spirits to the world of the living. Priscilla’s father, Guss, was being summoned.

The shaman invoked the spirit into her own domain; Guss would speak to his daughter without hurting her.

“Why?” asked Priscilla, she was no more scared, it didn’t hurt anymore physically. It only pained her emotionally, it was still unclear to her, and if her family really deserved the end it met. Was it her father’s sins that the entire family was paying?

“Because, they were scared! They always were! Those maggots would gnaw on my corpse, tearing away the last inch of flesh left on me. I made me, they will pay!” the Shaman trembled and spoke in her own voice, but in riddles, though little Priscilla was making sense out of it.

Guss had always been over ambitious; he had even married Augustine to get instant fame and fortune. His quest for more, led him towards wrong company, his dealings in the arms business killed scores and he had the blood of the innocents on his hand. Augustine died; perhaps she turned a blind eye to her husband’s dangerous liaisons, her love overwhelming her rational thinking. Benjamin’s death however was unfortunate and he died a valiant death, trying to save an innocent’s life. Guss’s wealth had grown beyond his own control, he had taken on corrupt politicians and powerful industrialists and rival arms dealers. Anyone could have been his killers. But, he kept his enemies very close. He always was on guard. But he had the terrible mistake of trusting the wrong men. But Guss, was without regret, even in

his after life, he was miserable, his vast fortune being spilt into the gutters by people he did not care about, had created such a great unrest in him, that he was forced to rise from the dead. He narrated the truth behind his death to Priscilla. He was not particularly trying to redeem himself in her eyes. He wanted the people who had encroached upon his money to suffer. He could not do anything, without the help of his flesh and blood – Priscilla. Fate had favored him and Priscilla had survived the attempt on her life. She had joined the school and now Guss had manifested himself into something so greedy and dangerous, that would be satisfied only at the sight of death. Death of the trust board members. His soul would not rest, until he would see that his money would reach the hands of his daughter.

Priscilla learnt that Teddy Birmingham and Lt. Sam Perez were her family's killers and that Rory Medvev had masterminded the taking over of her parents' fortunes for his own benefits. She would have to avenge her mother & Uncle if not her father, whom she had begun to detest and she would have to stage the deaths of the trust board, Rory included in order to banish her father's greedy soul back to Hades' underworld.

“This book only says about how Priscilla gains strength and supernatural powers from the Shaman and how she defeats Teddy and Sam” said Disha disappointedly and goes on “Look here it says that Priscilla had a huge set erected that looked like her school and roped in actors who were disguised as Rory and other trust board members. The whole set was blown to pieces with the help of her mother's friends in LA and this is how Guss finally left Priscilla to live in peace”.

“What clues could you possibly get from this?” asked Praneethi.

“May be it is how we interpret it, Praneethi, the books talks about how Priscilla confronted Teddy and Sam and she defeated them both with the sheer resolve of avenging her mother and Uncle. The shaman had helped her though, may be her mother helped her in her quest too”

“Peeya has the resolve, her strengths are us, we will help her defeat her enemies, obviously the ghost stories are just the work of some mischief mongers” said Disha.

“How long have they been out?” asked Ms. Sadhana “Come on, don't hesitate, I know all about Peeya, I am here only to protect her” after seeing that the girls felt uneasy sharing their secret with her.

“Oh my God! Their lives might be in danger, we need to inform the police right now!” Ms. Sadhana turned towards the door and was stopped at the sight of her husband, Sandip Talapatra aka Mallesh, standing at the doorway.

“Good you are here! The girls are in grave danger, they are in the bungalow with *amma*” said Ms. Sadhana Talapatra aka Shanti.

“Relax, Shanti, the girls will be fine, I am sure they will receive the hospitality that they deserve” Mallesh's tone had made Shanti extremely anxious and she was now beginning to suspect her husband's integrity.

“How much do you know about this?” she asked

“Enough” he replied.

“Since when have you been playing this game, Mallesh” Shanti addressed him by his name, indicating that she was now aware of his schemes and she had to confront him now.

Meanwhile at *Ararat*, “How is this possible? The chloroform should have put them off for at least another hour!” cried Peeya all the while holding on tightly to Chavi's forearm, forming a red impression.

“Very clever and brave indeed girls, but you were foolish enough to think that no one was looking” came in Aadarsh Prasad behind the gnarling Rottweilers.

Chavi & Peeya were flabbergasted “SIR!” they cried out in unison.

“You, you girl, Chavi, you couldn’t keep your nose out of this, could ya?” the stout, bespectacled, school principal spoke and the girls were still in a state of shock.

“I tried to warn you many times, you wouldn’t listen, you Idiots” thundered Aadarsh.

“You! I had warned you against making any friends, not to speak to anyone, now why would you disobey your principal?” grinned, Aadarsh while addressing a hapless & scared Peeya.

“I did not, I swear, but then, they had found out somehow, about me” sobbed Peeya “And you thought, they could help you find the truth!” added Aadarsh.

“Well, I will give you the truth, if that is what you wanted! But I am afraid, you girls will take it to your graves” Aadarsh again gave a sadistic grin that was cold and scary.

“Let us go, Mallesh, the girls, they have to be saved, for God’s sake, don’t do this! It is *amma*, how can you do this to her?” she pleaded “Money, honey! Everything’s for money. What did you expect? That I would end up a poor nurse’s poor clerk husband? Richmond was from a village and so were we, he made it big and all I could think of at the end of the month was to buy some decent clothes to cover ourselves up! We did not have any babies, Shanti, we didn’t have the money for it, remember?” he justified.

“Do not cover your inabilities on my pretext, Mallesh, you had always been over ambitious, you could have achieved everything, if you had the skills to achieve them, one never gets more than what they deserve” Shanti tried to mollify her husband who had gone astray.

“Too late, Shanti, I have too much at stake to let them go, I have worked too hard to reach here and I won’t let you spoil the game for me” warned Mallesh and his eyes reflected his intentions. Greed makes a man desperate. He was ready to destroy the very life that he had struggled so hard to achieve.

“Were you involved in Richmond Master’s murder? Tell me!” screamed Shanti unable to withhold her emotions.

“He had to be cleared from the way, he had gotten suspicious, he somehow, came to know that I had murdered the Kamat family” Mallesh said.

“You are the devil himself! I lived with **you** all these years, I trusted you, I respected you, you don’t deserve to live” she yelled as she lunged towards him with all her strength but was no match for the gym instructor’s brute strength and raw resolve, one smack in her temple region, and Shanti was down on the ground, unconscious.

“Now, girls, I am sorry to do this” Mallesh approached Disha and Praneethi.

“That friend of yours, Pawan, yes, that’s his name, he was lucky, he would have been dead by now or in a coma, if not for you” smiled Aadarsh “the boy had the nerve to be a spy” he explained how he had retrieved the information, which Pawan had searched on the internet, from the computer’s cache.

“You survived too, darling, while the horse should have stomped you to pulp, if only that drunkard of a trainer had not snorted coke and tortured the animal, bloody junkie” he confessed without an iota of shame.

“And you killed my granddad and my parents too?” asked Peeya

“I don’t do the dirty work myself, my child, I am the brain, my arms and legs are many” he boasted.

“The Kamat family, Richmond, Russell, your mother, they were all mere pawns, now that I have taken them off my path, I only needed to smoke **you**, Richmond’s heir, out of your hiding hole and I let this delusional old hag to live, only in anticipation to this day. It wouldn’t be difficult for me, to take over the entire D’Costa business, sell it for a whistle and leave this country for good! How is the plan? Pretty good huh?” Aadarsh praised himself.

“Please don’t do anything to us, we won’t say a word, It’s my last year in school, you won’t even see me after the exams are over” Disha pleaded “and I will leave the school immediately” cried Praneethi.

“I will save you all the trouble girls, you see this here, it’s my trusty old friend” Malleth wore a sinister smug face while he drew a sharp blade from his sports jacket.

The window panes in the room had been banging the iron grills and the wind outside was growing strong. It seemed like a storm was brewing outside and the room was thrown under a pail of darkness while the clouds covered the evening sun.

A sudden gust of wind from the window pushed the light plywood door towards Malleth who had all the while standing on the threshold. The sudden movement of the door shocked him and in his bid to recover, he tipped over Shanti who had fallen unconscious on the floor, the soft lower back of his skull hitting hard on the concrete parapet wall, immediately knocking him out cold.

“What just happened? Sadhana Madam, Sadhana Ma’am” the two girls shouted in unison, while Praneethi attended to Shanti, Disha ran down towards Sadhana aka Shanti’s office room and immediately dialed up the police.

Sadhana slowly came to herself and Praneethi explained what had happened.

“I think it is Richmond Master himself, coming to save you girls, quick, we must rush to the Bungalow, you stay here, I will take Thapa” Shanti stormed towards the main gate and Thapa and she made a dash towards the bungalow.

“You ungrateful dog! Richmond brought you from his village, he sponsored your education, and he made you a learned man. You are what you are today, because of him” Lily Mary exploded in a fit of rage, no longer able to hold on.

“Well, you are not loony after all, nice act you had put Lily, you had us fooled all this time, not bad for a village girl” Aadarsh teased Lily Mary and was unperturbed by the turn of events, as if he had known everything all the while. It did not matter to him anymore, he had lured Peeya out into the ‘haunted’ house, and no one would suspect a thing.

“Shame on you, you bastard, you deserve a horrible death” cursed Lily Mary.

“More horrible than that of Richmond?” laughed Aadarsh as he patted the Rottweilers on their heads “Thank the boys for that”.

“I suppose you would want to know, why?” said Aadarsh and Lily Mary just looked up at him.

“I respected Richmond like a father, he was everything to me, he was my hero and my role model, I always wanted to be like him, I saw in myself a son that he would have one day, until Russell came into your lives,

I was sent away, banished to a prison, I counted each and every holiday that I had to spend alone, every birthday that I had to celebrate in silence, every..” his speech was cut short by Lily as she screamed “You, wretch! You are Satan himself! How could you think that way? Richmond should have never saved you from the sewers you were born in, he named you Aadarsh which you have none. Your soul will forever rot in hell” Lily cursed again.

“That is enough talking Lily” Aadarsh offered no respect to her who had supported her husband’s decision to support his education and now she cried, with regret.

“Thapa, be very careful, those dogs are trained and extremely dangerous, we must save the lady and the girls at any cost, don’t worry I will be right behind and the police should be on their way” Shanti instructed Thapa as they hunched their backs and bent down with one knee on the ground.

Thapa was an expert climber and he used the cover of darkness to climb the water pipes crawling on the bungalow’s stone walls. *Lucifer and Gabriel* or their imposters, smelled the intruder and immediately started howling and barking in the direction where Thapa was headed, just beside the balcony.

Aadarsh drew his pistol and aimed straight at Thapa but Chavi had flung the tray resting on Lily’s balcony table at him. The tray found its mark and was successful in dislodging the pistol from him and it fell straight down on the lawn.

Thapa jumped onto the balcony only to be met by two ferocious Rottweilers that threatened to tear him apart.

Sadhana, still down below, threw up the pistol which Chavi skillfully caught. She had never before handled a gun, her palms sweating even in the cold evening as the clouds gathered and the wind blew with gusto. Thapa was struggling hard with the well - built dogs and their sharp fangs were digging deep into his skin with each bite. He could no longer hold and Aadarsh was recovering from his shock.

“Lucifer, attack!” Aadarsh shouted and the Rottweiler leapt towards Peeya who stood closest to Thapa.

BANG.

Chavi had fired and Lucifer was down. “Call off the mongrel or I will shoot!” Chavi screamed shivering with fear and the adrenalin pumping her up.

“It’s over sir, give it up” screamed Sadhana from behind Aadarsh holding a hollow steel pipe that she had found on the lawn.

“Stay, Gabriel” ordered Aadarsh and the Rottweiler just backed off and Thapa sighed with relief.

“The police are on their way, you have nowhere to go, you have ashamed yourself and your family” Sadhana told him.

“Attack Gabriel” shouted Aadarsh. Chavi had not anticipated this move, she stood frozen. Peeya, seized the pistol from her hand, and fired three rounds in quick succession.

The first one, pierced Gabriel’s heart and the mighty Rottweiler collapsed in a pool of blood, inches short from Chavi’s feet. The other two had missed their mark and had hit the aluminium frames of the sliding glass doors.

“I have nothing to lose!” cried Aadarsh and turned towards Sadhana in a desperate attempt to escape. Peeya fired again and this time, the bullet found its mark. It lodged itself in Aadarsh’s neck, puncturing his skin and boring a 0.32 mm hole on his spinal cord.

The fiend was down, though not in the manner, that Lily had wanted. But Richmond & Russell had been avenged nevertheless. It was not poetic justice that had been delivered. But it was justice nevertheless.

Maybe, Richmond had been watching all this happen and he was happy, not because he was avenged, but he now had no reason to stay on, his dear wife had a reason to live and his granddaughter had found her true identity. In a dramatic manner, the clouds that had gathered up a storm slowly cleared away, allowing the warmth of sunlight to brighten up everyone’s lives.

It was perhaps fate’s way of showing that no matter how dark the situation may seem; light always finds a way to penetrate the gloom.

The police had arrived, had arrested a still unconscious Mallesh aka Sandip Talapatra, an ambulance had been called along with the forensics, photographers, fingerprint experts and the whole Crime Scene Investigation team.

Lily Mary, Peeya, Chavi, Disha, Praneethi, Shanti and Thapa narrated the entire chain of events and a few days later, Mallesh would also confess to all of his crimes. The police were relieved that they were able to solve a decade old case.

The entire village had come down to *Ararat* estate to pay homage to a misunderstood gentleman. This was a sensational case and this had rocked an entire state.

The girls, Shanti and Thapa were all hailed as heroes. But, Peeya gave Chavi the real credit. It was the recognition of her friend that mattered most to Chavi. She was once again a hero and this time, she had saved two lives, reunited lost family members and perhaps even had shown an unhappy soul, the path to emancipation.

“**Local girl Chavi Kumar, helps police crack decade old case**” Sunil read on in utter disbelief and wonder, while Chavi slept, in her cozy room with an awesome view.

The Saga Continues.