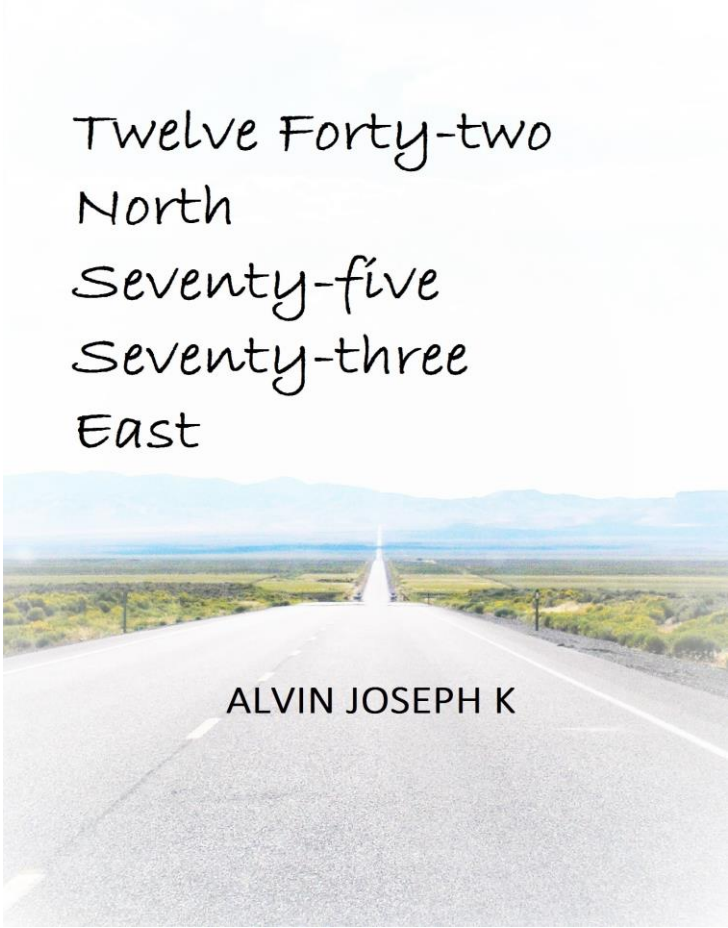


Twelve Forty-two North Seventy-five Seventy-three East

Twelve Forty-two
North
Seventy-five
Seventy-three
East



ALVIN JOSEPH K

Twelve Forty-two North Seventy-five Seventy-three East

Twelve Forty-two

North

Seventy-five Seventy-three

East

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To my beloved nephews

Evan and Ethan

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“Ask, and it will be given to you. Seek, and you will find. Knock, and it shall be opened for you.”

Mathew 7:7

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CHAPTER 1

THE MEETING

JOE drove through numerous hairpin curves before he found the signboard that said ST. Thomas church is 200 m to the right. That was the place in Lisa's mail. . It was rather strange. She had called him to a church. He wondered why she had chosen a church. Wasn't there any other place they could meet? He had found it hard to accept the fact he was meeting her in a church. He eventually convinced himself to consider that she would bear a proper reason for selecting a church. It wasn't long after that he saw an old church with a creepy looking gate. He had been riding for hours now, but he did not feel tired. He liked driving and he often went on long road trips. Also, his excitement to meet her suppressed any feeling of exhaustion.

His car entered the gate, but he didn't find any other vehicles. He suspected whether it was the right place. He parked the car and

walked towards the church. It was not a very big church, but seemed to be very old. Google said it was Neo-Gothic architecture. And he believed Google. It was mostly made of stone. Very tall. He stepped inside the church walking through a small veranda. At the far end of the church, he saw a young woman kneeling in front of the altar. That very instant he realized it was her. It was his Lisa. The person he came to meet driving all the way.

Joe walked towards her. He was happy like never before. He was living his dream. It was all completely unexpected for him. He never, even in his wildest dreams imagined her to reach out to him.

Joe knelt beside her. He couldn't take his eyes off her. Her small brown eyes, thin eyebrows, broad forehead and silky smooth, bouncy hair, It was all as it was. Seeing her, he even forgot that he was in a holy place. Lisa was praying with her eyes closed and hands folded. He felt she had become more beautiful. She was wearing a Blue jeans and a white top with a scarf around her neck. . Strands of hair covered part of her face like it used to.

"Stop staring me and thank God for this moment," said Lisa without even opening her eyes but moving the hair on her face to the back of her ear. It was then it struck Joe that he was in a church. Without any more hesitation, he closed his eyes and thanked God for making him be with her again. God had made his biggest wish come true. Why wouldn't he pray??

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When he opened his eyes again, she was not there. He was breathless for a moment.

"Was I imagining all that ", he said to himself.

He was back on his feet instantly and paced toward the door. To his relief, he found her sitting on the steps of the veranda having dairy milk

"You thought I was gone?" Asked Lisa without turning back

"Obviously, yes. Who Wouldn't?"

"Come sit. You would have a lot of questions"

"I sure do. But I want the answer to only one question now." Joe said as he sat down beside Lisa.

"Go on". Lisa said without looking at him.

"When?"

"Thought you might ask that. Well....Convocation day"

"You are seriously telling me that you actually got that?". Joe was absolutely taken aback. "But how? I saw it falling into the water"

"You didn't see what happened after that. Did you? "

"No"

"I came back for it. I had seen you throwing it" said Lisa giving Joe rest of the chocolate.

"I had understood your feelings for me long before. I know you became friends with me just because of that." Lisa paused to wipe off the chocolate. "Why did you wait for the last minute? Why didn't you do it earlier? ". Lisa's eyes met with Joe's eyes for the first time since the convocation day a year ago.

"I.....uh!!!!" Joe never thought she would ask that question.

"By the time I realized what I had for you was love it was too late. And I didn't want it to be a talk in the campus like with all those pass time lovers. Besides You were always surrounded either by your friends gang or boys who were flirting with you whenever I want to tell you how I felt about you . Do you how difficult it was for me to keep myself from punching them. Plus, I didn't know how you would react. Unlike you I was not able to recognize your feelings for me. I had assumed the convocation day to be a perfect time, but it didn't turn out as I had planned. That Shruthi ruined everything."

"You know, why don't we get to my place and talk. It's getting dark. We have to go. "Lisa interrupted Joe's narrative and stood up.

Joe also stood up eating the last bite of the chocolate and searched the area for a place to dispose of the cover. He found a waste bin

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not far from where he stood. He dumped the cover in it, took the car key out of his pocket and walked towards the car.

"May I" Lisa broke the silence.

"Sure" said Joe tossing the key to her with a pleasant smile on his face.

"Be nice with my car, Lisa. It's new"

"I know, I know." Said Lisa as she started the car and drove away

CHAPTER 2

THE INVITE

Earlier that morning.....

It was a warm October morning. Joe woke up hearing the annoying sound of the alarm on his phone. He took the phone and switched off the alarm. Joe sat on the bed half asleep. His eyes were heavy with sleep. He found it hard to keep his eyes open. He looked at the phone for the time. It was 4:30 in the morning. He realized with regret that he had once again forgotten to turn off his daily alarm on a holiday. He was having a beautiful dream about someone he had not seen or heard for a long time. He fell back on the bed hoping to go back to sleep again and continue with the same dream. But he couldn't go back to sleep. He got out of his bed cursing himself. He washed his face with some cold water. That made him feel so much better.

Joe now sat on the chair in his room and wondered what he would do now. He couldn't help thinking about the dream. It felt so real. He tried to recall the dream that he had. It was rather unusual. He could remember every little detail.

She was in front of the hospital waiting for him. She dressed herself in black like marvel's black widow. Her hair was cut from the shoulder level. Together they entered the hospital. He saw their reflection in the glass door. He wore a white shirt. They walked around in the hospital. His arm was around her all the time. She told something with her hand pointed at an old man and a child. But it was not clear to him.

He now ran alone through a dark tunnel. Cars came against him in groups. Whenever the cars came, he moved to the side of the tunnel and would go back to running in the middle of the road till the next Wave of cars came.

Another wave of cars came against him. But this time a car broke out of formation and hit the other cars creating a chain reaction which ended with an explosion. He raced backwards to protect himself from the detonation. There was a phone in his hands, which started ringing and he woke up.

It was too early for anything in his To-do list for the day. As he didn't have anything else to do., He thought maybe he would take a look at the To-do list. Joe took his phone and searched for the list. It was then he saw a notification from Gmail. He opened Gmail

app on his phone. He was startled by what he saw there. It was from someone, whom he thought, he would never hear from again. He froze for a moment. The phone almost dropped from his hands. He read the name again. It was Lisa Maria John. He was completely awestruck. She was the last person that he expected to get a mail from. Days after the convocation day, she had disappeared from both Facebook and WhatsApp.

After a minute, he became normal. He opened the mail, but he was disappointed. The mail which he supposed to be a love letter turned out to be lots of random numbers save an N and an E. He felt as if someone took him to the zenith of happiness and pushed him down from there. He said to himself, 'Why would she mail me these numbers after all this time?' He figured it must have some significance. He knew that Lisa is not someone who likes to pull pranks.

Joe looked at the numbers again. But this time he saw it like a puzzle. She loved puzzles. He observed that each of numbers had even number of digits. If each set is further divided into sets of two, each set was a two digit number between 65 and 90, both inclusive.

"Holy shit, its ASCII." Joe cried, jumping out of the chair... Like all those who have studied a computer programming language, he also knew what ASCII is. A set of numbers that represent text in computers.

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He searched for a pen and paper. He started decoding the message. When he finished, there was a small paragraph on the paper in front of him which went like this.

*HAI I ASSUME THAT YOU HAVE NOT FORGOTTEN ME IF I
STILL OCCUPY A PLACE IN YOUR HEART I WANT YOU
TO COME FIND ME AT ST THOMAS CHURCH*

Joe understood that the last eight digits were not part of the code because it had an N and an E written as alphabets itself and the numbers were outside the 65-90 range.

1242N7573E

This was that last part of Lisa's mail. It gave Joe some trouble initially, but suddenly the thought came to his mind. He typed it into Google, but the result seemed too absurd. He figured there must be something wrong in what he typed. So he searched for examples of latitude and longitude. Then he realized if there are dots after 12 and 75 and also degree sign before N & E. But he couldn't find the degree sign on the keyboard so he added the dots and Googled it. This time the result showed a map with Madikeri written on it. He searched for that in Google. It was a small hill station town, also known as Mercara, the district headquarters of Kodaguss. He now knew where to find her. He was on cloud 9.

He did not have to think much as he had already decided to go find her. He immediately wrote a reply informing Lisa that he is

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starting right away. He started making preparations for the long journey ahead of him. Being born into a rich family, he was not exactly used to packing all by himself. But that day it didn't matter.

CHAPTER 3

JOY FILLED HEART

THE curtains of the day had fallen, but Joe and Lisa were still on the road en route to the place no one but Lisa knew.

"Why the church?" Joe asked

"The place we are going cannot be found on any map. It is very remote. The only famous place close by is the church. "

"By the way, Why the ASCII and the Latitude and Longitude"

"I just wanted to make sure you came because you wanted to come and not because you couldn't turn down my request. From what I know about you wouldn't have cared to decode the message if you were not interested with me anymore... Am I not right? "

"Yeah, absolutely, " Joe corroborated her observation.

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Lisa pulled over the car and said, pointing at a building farther down the hill, " That's our destination ".

Within a few minutes Joe's car rushed through the gates of the two storied villa with the name Jolly Villa engraved on the compound wall.

"You must be tired. Take a shower. I'll make dinner for us in the meantime. "

"Alright...Where's the bathroom?"

"Oh, I forgot. The room on the left is yours and there is an attached bathroom."

"Okay ".

Joe didn't realize that he had been in the shower for more than half an hour until Lisa knocked at the doors asking if it was going to take him forever. Dinner was ready when he came out wearing a black pants and T- shirt.

"You have changed, huh" asked Lisa kind of teasing him.

"I thought was a good idea to pack some clothes."

"Come sit. I did know about your taste of food, so I haven't prepared anything special. "

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"It's okay. I can go with any food ". But that's not the matter. You didn't tell me anything about you, Lisa"

"Today's your day. You tell me everything today. I will answer all your queries tomorrow. Today is just not right for it"

"You were the one who stopped me, remember?"

"Hey, did it make you feel bad. I'm sorry. It's because we had to get here early" said Lisa placing her hand over his hand. "

"OK, like I was saying, I had figured the convocation day to be a perfect day for confessing my feelings for you. I still remember everything. It was a very proud day for all. All most everyone's parents were there.

When the official function was done and dusted, I started to search for a reason to get away from my parents. I was confident that I could find a moment to talk to you alone. Luckily my parents found Manu's parents and got busy talking. I excused myself pretending to let them have parents to parents chat.

Almost around this time you walked away from your parents for some reason unknown to me. It felt like God had showered his blessing upon me. But that belief didn't last for long. I had almost started walking towards you when Shruthi and her gang surrounded me and began flirting with me. I don't know whether

you had noticed, but she had a big crush on me. Though I had made it clear to her that I was not interested, she wouldn't quit.

By the time I managed to get away from them, you were not there. It was like being on the final level of a game and the system crashed. I started searching for you everywhere. When I found you, you were walking towards your car. I don't know how that thought came into my mind and I didn't think twice about it in that panic. I tore a paper from a book I found lying on the ground. I wrote what I had to tell you on that made a rocket and flew it towards you. But it got caught in the wind and fell into the water and you were gone. "

Joe ended his long narration with a sigh. Now it was Lisa's turn or rather that's what Joe expected. But that was not quite what happened.

"Hmm. I always wondered what made you use a paper rocket. That isn't quite like you. "

"Wasn't "Joe corrected Lisa.

"Wasn't?"

"Yeah, things have changed a lot after that. It made me realize, I have to do what my mind tells me without further hesitation or I'll suffer"

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“Then it’s nice that you didn't have that day as you planned. It changed you in a good way. ”

“I told this much about me. When are you going to unwind your string of mysteries? ”

“Patience, Joe... Patience. You waited this long. Just one more night. Please... ”

“Okay, okay. But it shouldn’t change to day after tomorrow ”.

“No, it won't. I give you my word”

“By the way, why are you not on Facebook and WhatsApp anymore?” He had tried many times to reach her on Facebook and WhatsApp as her number no longer existed but only to be disappointed.

Lisa became serious again. “I’ll tell you that too tomorrow”

Joe and Lisa continued this conversation talking about irrelevant things till their eyes were so heavy with sleep that they couldn't stay awake any longer. Lisa showed Joe to his room where he slept with a joy filled heart.

CHAPTER 4

UNTOLD

THE next morning Joe woke up not hearing his alarm, but with the sunlight falling on his face. He had more sleep than usual and it was very peaceful too. He called out for Lisa twice. But there was no answer. Lisa is not up yet??!He was surprised. He almost got off the bed when he saw a note on the side table written in red ink. It was Lisa's note.

Going to Holy Mass. Will be back soon.

Make breakfast plzzz :)

"She called me here to make breakfast?" Joe said to himself. He did his morning chores and walked to the kitchen. There was nothing like he feared. There was only a bundle of bread and some eggs.

Joe had only finished making the omelettes when the front door opened and Lisa stepped inside. He could see her from the kitchen.

"Couldn't you use the car Lisa?"

"I usually walk"

"That long?" asked Joe with his mouth wide open.

"No, no. There is a short cut through the forest. Maximum 15 minutes' walk to the church. "

"Shortcut? Good. Breakfast is ready, by the way. "

"Oh, you saw that. Nice, I was afraid you might not see it. I'll change and come. 5 minutes. "

"You still go to church every day or is there something special today?" Joe asked as they sat down for the breakfast at the small dining table

"I still try to go to Holy Mass everyday like old times." It was evident that she was proud that she had not distanced herself from religion, from the way she said it

“That’s wonderful. So what's the plan? Is the time ripe yet? Are you going to tell me something? I think I have been in dark long enough”

A sorrow came upon Lisa’s face when Joe said it. Joe assumed that it was something unpleasant that she had to share with him and that is why she is hesitating to speak about it.

“Yeah, it’s time that I told you everything. Finish the breakfast. We'll talk outside. ”

Lisa left the table saying this. That went rather harsher than Joe wanted.

Joe opened the front door and found Lisa sitting on the metal chair outside the house. He went and beside her. Her face was still sad. He took a minute to look at the villa where he spent last night. As it had been dark when they arrived there, he couldn’t get a good look. It was a single storied building made with bright red unplaster interlock bricks. It had a lot of white painted windows. Medium size. It seemed as if the space around the villa was once a beautiful garden. Clearly the garden lost its grandeur due to lack of care. Still, there were remnants of the old garden here and there.

“Joe, I want you to promise me that what I am going to tell you now will stay between us.”

Joe felt that the situation was more serious than he anticipated...

"You can trust me Lisa. It will stay between us. "

"I'll start from the convocation day. That day I had a feeling that you would tell what I craved to hear from you. That's why when I saw you moving away from your parents, I also moved away from my parents. But when you didn't come I was disappointed because I had seen you staring at me. I didn't know about the Shruthi then.

But I saw you standing in the corridor. I pretended to not have seen you, in that rage. We were leaving. I saw you flying that paper rocket through the rear view mirror. I was sure that it had something for me. So I lied to parents that I left my phone at the college. Pretending to go to the college, I went and picked up the paper. I looked for you, but you weren't there and I didn't have the time to wait. But my eyes were filled tears of joy. I was so happy. I wanted to call you initially. But then I thought I should wait do that you don't feel that I was desperate for you"

A naughty smile was on Joe's face when Lisa said that. She continued. "Few days passed, I was alone in my house. My parents were away on a work trip. I thought I would call you. Just as I took the phone in my hand, I got a call from an unknown number. It said..... It said....."

Tears started flowing from Lisa's eyes. This time it was not tears of joy. There was a spark in Joe's mind about what she was about to say.

Lisa wiped the tears with her hand and continued with tears flowing eyes and a shivering voice.

"It was a police officer. He.... He wanted me to identify two dead bodies. He said that he got my number from their phone. He asked me to reach as soon as possible. It was very short, like he was not telling me everything. I don't know how I got the strength to get to the hospital. The officer took me to the mortuary. There, covered in white cloth I found... My parents. . My Papa and Mamma"

Lisa broke into tears again. Joe didn't know what to tell her. How to pacify her? But he was a good listener, allowing Lisa to share her grievances with him.

"Oh shit. I'm sorry Lisa, I didn't know. I always inquired about you, but this news never reached me. I'm sorry.

"That's because I didn't spread that news much. I didn't want to talk to people about it. Still, some of my friends came to know. I told them not to spread it because I was sick of hearing condolences at the funeral.

The world I lived in just collapsed in front of me. I didn't know what I was supposed to do. My parents were my life. They were

my world. I was happy with the life I had. I spent days alone in my home not being able to think of a life without Papa and Mamma.

Days passed, I got out of the house only to buy supplies. I confined myself to the four walls of the compound. Life was full of emptiness. Nothing interested me. Neither TV nor books. I couldn't handle social networking anymore, so I deactivated both Facebook and WhatsApp. I realized that I had no life without my parents. Those days I realized how precious parents are. Like it's said you don't realize the value of something until the day comes when you don't have it.

I thought I should call you, but I couldn't get myself to do it. Something kept me from doing it. I still don't know what that was that pulled me back.

It was when life was dragging like that something happened completely out of the blue. I was arranging the books and other stuff in their shelf and I found an album that I had never ever seen in my life. It was a small one with only a few photos. You know, like the ones we get for cheap. I first thought it was their honeymoon photos. All of the photos had dad and mom in their youth posing for photos from different angles with the same house in the background"

"And that's how you came to know about this house? "

"Exactly. You took that right out of my mouth... That is how I came to know about this house. "Lisa paused for a moment. She took out her handkerchief and wiped out all the tears left in her eyes and moved her shiny, silky hair to the back of her ears. This reminded Joe that Lisa always loved to leave her hair free than using hairpins or something else to keep her hair unmoved. Back in college, this earned her a lot of scolding from the teachers, which was the only opportunity teachers got to scold her.

"Well, go on then"

"So impatient?"

"Nobody likes a break in a narrative."

"Okay then. Come with me "

CHAPTER 5

JOLLY VILLA

LISA took Joe back inside the villa. From a wooden cupboard in her room, she took out a small album, like the one she told Joe and started to turn through the pages.

“I had thought this was some vacation pics until I saw this picture.” She placed the album on the table and pointed to a photo on the right side. That photo did not have her parents like all other photos. It was a full view of the villa alone.

“See the engraving on the compound wall”

“I saw that when we came here yesterday. It says Jolly Villa”.

“Now see this “, said Lisa after giving her phone to Joe.

“That’s the villa I grew up. See the name on the compound wall. It also says ‘Jolly villa ‘. And the name Jolly is a combination of my Papa and mamma’s name. ‘John’ and ‘Molly’.

“Great, but how did you find the location and the keys?”

“See, if the house belonged to my parents, then they would certainly have its sale deed. Right? Luckily I was able to find it in the bedroom locker. I got the location from that. It was super hard to understand the location from that.

Now the keysI got them from the items police recovered from the accident site”.

“Why do you want to keep this a secret? What’s the big deal with the house”.

“I haven’t told you everything yet. Hear me out before you jump to conclusions”. Lisa said it like a punch line in an action movie

“Enlighten me then”.

Lisa sat down, keeping her elbows on her thighs creating a triangle with her hands. The expression on her face said that she was not really sure how Joe would react to what she was about to say.

“Joe, I am going to put it bluntly.”

“Come on. No need for formalities with me. ”

“I think..... I think... I think my parents were murdered”.

“What?” Joe was shocked to hear that. ‘Murdered’, he was surely familiar with that word. He had heard it a thousand times in the news and movies. But to hear that someone you knew was murdered is a different game. He was dumbfounded for a minute. Suddenly it struck him she had said that she thought that her parents were murdered not that they were murdered.

“Wait, you said you think your parents were murdered? You say ‘I think’ when you believe something, but you are not confident that you can convince others of the same”.

“You are right. I said I think because I believe that’s exactly what happened, but for everybody else, including the police, it’s just another accident. Right now you and I are the only ones aware of this possibility.”

“Even when the police think it’s an accident what makes you think otherwise? What triggered this thought?”

Lisa stood up, walked towards those cupboards again. She gently opened the door and took out a plastic bag. Inside it there was a partially burned book. It seemed to be a personal diary. She took the diary out and carefully placed it beside Joe on the bed. She slowly turned the burned pages until reached a page which was only half burned.

“I found this diary inside the hearth the day I came here. Fortunately, it was not completely burned. I guess the fire died out before the diary was completely burned. This one page is the spark that triggered the thought. When I came to the villa the first time, it looked like someone had searched the whole place .Everything was out of place.” She moved the book closer to Joe. “Here, read it”.

The writing was in black ink. The handwriting looked similar to that of Lisa. So he guessed it must have been one of her parents’ diary.

If she had found someone .I am worried for her .The enemy’s blade is upon our throat. I wonder how long till it cuts the throat. If it happens now, she will be all alone. What if they

“Is there something on the other side of paper?”

“I’m afraid that’s it”

“Whose diary is this?”

“It’s my mother’s”

“How can you say that? There is no name on it and all it says is that someone is in danger. ”He was trying to understand how much she believed it.

“That is my mother’s handwriting .Don’t tell me you didn’t notice the similarity to my handwriting. You see, this is why I didn’t go to the police. Even you, whom I thought would believe me more than anyone else in this world is asking these kind of questions ,what do you think the police would have to say?. They would make a mockery out of me”

Lisa had left the bed while saying it. She walked to the wall and leaned against it. Joe could understand that she felt that he didn’t trust her. That he didn’t share her view. He wasn’t entirely convinced by what she said and he thought the diary wasn’t enough to believe that her parents had been murdered. Even if it is her mother’s diary, the lines are indirect .They could mean anything. But he couldn’t say that to her. She called him here for support, thinking that he would be there for her no matter what. He had to stand by her. Because that is supposed to do. How can he say he loves her if he cannot be there for her when she needed him the most?

“Lisa, don’t take it the wrong way. I’ll be there with you .No matter what.”

“But I thought you would share my view. How foolish of me?”
Lisa tried to smile, but he could see that she was sad.

“It doesn’t matter. We will clear all your suspicions. I’ll see to that. I promise”

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“Do you really mean that?”

“You know me. I always mean what I say. Don’t I?”

“Yep. That is one of the reasons why I fell for you”.

This time she had a real smile on her face. One that lit up her face like a chandelier.

“I should probably get to the kitchen. We are going to need some lunch right?”

“I’ll help you”

“Okay!!”

CHAPTER 6

THE UNEXPECTED

JOE and Lisa walked through the woods, making their way through the knee high shrubs. It was evening, almost sunset. The sunlight made its way through the thick canopy. And once again in two days Joe didn't have a clue where they were going. He was just following Lisa's lead. She had promised him to show her special place in the wilderness.

"Are we there yet?" Asked Joe, who is not exactly used to hanging out in the wilderness.

"Will 'be. Patience, Joe, patience"

“Why do you like to keep me in the dark so much? I thought we agreed that it would be for the benefit of both of us, if we didn’t keep any secrets from each other”

“Yeah we did and that’s why I am taking you to this special place of mine.”

“Why do you call this your special place?” Asked Joe making double inverted commas in the air as he said special place.

“Because this is the only place that brought me some happiness, some peace or relief after..... My parents went away”

Lisa still couldn’t talk about her parents without watery eyes. Joe felt bad for making that question he was in fact trying to take her mind away from her parents for some time, to make her happy. But it just backfired.

“We’re here Joe.”

Joe found himself in a relatively treeless area covered with short grass and tiny yellow flowers. It was at the edge of a mountain so high that if you fall from there can be no hope even finding your body. There was a fallen tree trunk which was covered with moss all over except for a small area where it looked like the moss was scrapped off.

“I come and sit on this tree trunk when I feel sad. This place gives me some relief. It’s beautiful, isn’t it?”

“It sure is. This place, that shortcut. How do find these places?”

“I like to go on long walks through uncharted places without the knowledge of where I will end up”

“Don’t you fear getting lost?”

“I never got lost. I have a good sense of direction. Come sit.” Said Lisa scrapping off some more moss that covered the tree and sat on it. Joe sat beside her.

“Great view. Reminds me of a movie I saw recently”

“Hmm, it’s been a while since I have seen a movie”

“I can understand Lisa. But, you know what? Life is like a chess board and we are the pawns on it. Like the black and white columns on the chess board, there is a mixture of joy and sorrow. We may lose important people, but all what we can do is move forward and hope to reach our destiny”

“Wow, when did you become a philosopher?”

“I don’t know”

That night, Joe had another dream about Lisa. It was night. They were walking by the road hand in hand. The road was practically empty. Lisa seemed happy. Suddenly her parents called out her name from across the road.

“Lisa, sweetie come to us”

She couldn't resist their call. She broke off his hold and rushed across the road to her parents. Suddenly, out of the blue, there came a truck with a persistent horn and it sent her flying across the street

Joe cried out, “Lisa”.

He opened his eyes to realize it was only a dream .He tried to convince himself that he had that dream because he thought of her and her parents before he went to bed. There was heavy rain outside It was then he heard a faint roaring of bike engines. Though not an expert on bikes he could recognize the sound of one anywhere, anytime. He jumped off the bed and rushed to the large white window and peeked through the hole in the curtain. It was indeed bikes. Two of them. He couldn't make out the face of the riders. But he could understand they were not friends. He switched on the Lights in the room to let them know someone's awake. When the lights came on, the bikers turned off and went back in a hurry as if they didn't want to be seen. But it wasn't a panic run. It seemed they were not afraid of being spotted, but they didn't want a confrontation.

Joe walked to Lisa's room after using the bathroom. He knocked on the door. There was no answer. It was when he raised his hand to knock for a third time that door opened. Lisa came out rubbing her eyes.

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“What is it Joe?” Asked Lisa with half opened eyes.

“Get fresh. Something important came up. We need to talk”

“Okay, Just a minute” Lisa seemed to understand that it was serious.

When she came out in less than a minute, she seemed ready to hear what he had to say. She put up her hair which was all over her face.

“Okay, tell me”

Lisa listened calmly and carefully as he filled her in what had seen, but only to remain speechless when he had finished. It was clear she had not heard or seen anything that day or before that.

“From your silence, I gather that you were of any such activity in the nights before”

She still didn't say anything but only nodded.

“They were not here for a direct confrontation. They were just watching us. Why?”

Lisa finally opened her mouth, “Do you remember what I said about someone searching this place? What if they didn't get what they wanted?”

It was Joe who completed her sentence, “And when I came here, they probably thought you found something. But that would mean they always had eyes on you”

“Good Lord! What were Papa and mama into? May be these are the people that she wrote about in her diary”. Joe had thought she would freak out. On the contrary, she saw it appeared as if she saw it as an opportunity to pursue her parents’ killer. Hiding the amazement, Joe suggested.

“Only one way to find out. We find what they are looking for before them. “

“And how are we going to do that?” Lisa was serious like never before.

“How about we start by searching this place?”

Lisa was not at all pleased by the idea.” Joe, I practically put everything back in order here and I didn’t find anything that could get my parents killed. So I don’t think there is anything”

“May be you missed something”

That gave way to an argument between the two. Finally, seeing that Joe wasn’t going to back out, Lisa agreed to search the villa. She also complied with his suggestion that they should leave the place, whether they find something or not as it was dangerous to stay there anymore.

Just as they stood up, there was lighting, so bright that for a moment it looked like it was daytime. Followed by the lighting came the obvious, the thunder. But it was so loud that it left even Joe a little shaken. Lisa had already covered her ear with her hands shortly after the lighting. That very moment the Lights went off with sparks coming out of many.

“Oh Great “cried out Joe, with sheer disappointment.

“So I guess we’ll have to call it a night and do whatever we have to do tomorrow. I don’t think the electricity is coming back tonight”. Lisa spoke from somewhere in the dark.

“Okay, but first thing tomorrow morning”

“Sure thing”. Joe felt a brief hug from the back, which faded away before he could respond.

The next morning, both Joe and Lisa woke up late owing to the late night discussions. After all waking up early would not have done them any good as the electricity was still out. Lisa didn’t go to church that morning. When Joe asked her about it, she said that it was not because she had overslept. She had already decided not to go to church as she did feel the journey through the forest was safe anymore after yesterday’s incident. . Joe didn’t ask her about last day’s hug, thinking she might not want to talk about it .It could have been an overflow of emotion. After having some coffee made from Lisa’s favourite brand of milk powder and a bread and butter

breakfast, they started their work. Not being able to find anything after searching for some time Joe asked

“Did you check for false panels?”

“False panels? Why would they have false panels in a villa that is in such a stranded location?”

“I don’t think I am the one you should be asking that question. Just look. Let’s not ignore any possibility”. Saying this Joe pulled out a drawer and tried to move the base. Nothing happened. With a teasing smile, Lisa pulled out the next drawer, only to be startled.

“Oh my God! Joe “

Joe turned towards her. She was moving away from the drawer with her hands covering her mouth and nose.

“What happened?”

Joe looked in the drawer and saw a gun. It was not the first time that he had seen a gun for real. There was a 45 mm Swiss made back in his home, perks of being rich. No one had ever used it though. So he wasn’t so terrified like Lisa to see a gun, but he never expected to find one there. He picked it up to see whether it was loaded. It was fully loaded. He put the gun back in its place and looked for Lisa. She was sitting at the dining table with an emotion less face. He sat opposite to her.

“You okay?”

“Am I okay? I thought my parents were school teachers. What kind of school teachers has a gun? It turns out my parents were not what not what I thought them to be. Am I okay?” Saying this Lisa pounded the table hard. Right after that they heard a sound, Like Plastic hitting the floor. It came from under the table. Both of them peeked under the table. They were both surprised to see it. And that too under the dining table, of all the places.

“Okay, what do we have here? A Floppy?” Said Joe while taking out the floppy from under the table, which had a piece of double tape on it.

“Seriously! Who uses floppies now –a-days? Lisa couldn’t help wondering. “Even the computers don’t have floppy drives now. How are going to find out what’s on this”

“Well, we can find an old computer. Not like that’s going to be easy. Or....”.It just popped into his mind and his face lit up. “Or we could buy a portable Floppy drive. It can be connected to the USB port. I’ll order it online right away” Joe took out his phone to see something that had rarely came across.

“What the hell is this?”

“Let me guess .No coverage?”

“Not even a single bar.”

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“There is no coverage here, ever”

“Oh great”

“You know I called my special place ‘special place’” Lisa made inverted commas in the air with her fingers.” Not only because it gave me relief, but also there is full coverage there. Thanks to the service provider for placing a tower on the hill right across it “

“Then that’s where we are going” said Joe

“I’ll stay here .You go”

“Not at all. I am not leaving you alone. We go together or not at all”.

“Okay.”

CHAPTER 7

THE CAT AND MOUSE GAME

JOE and Lisa had left the hairpins and the highlands of Madikeri. They were approaching the Mysore-Mangalore highway .For the first time in their journey together, Lisa was the one who didn't have a clue where they were going. Joe was taking her some place safe, but he wouldn't tell her where. A sweet and harmless revenge.

The sunset was approaching and once again Joe found himself in his car with Lisa. Except for some random comments on traffic, Lisa didn't talk much. What happened earlier in the day had really shaken her. A long ride with her was always his dream. But not like this. He had pictured it happier .Lisa sitting beside him with her enchanting smile. It was her smile that attracted him to her .The thought about ride together made him take a ride down the memory lane. Their first real interaction.

Joe was walking past the college Library. It was his first year in college and it had only been a few days since the classes started. A sweet voice calling out his name brought him back from the world of thoughts.

“Joe, Joe one minute”. It was Lisa. She came running towards him from the library.” Can I use your library card to borrow a book? I have already borrowed two books and I need this book”. She paused for a moment. ”Only if it’s okay with you”

“It’s not been two weeks since we got our library card and you have already taken two books? Asked Joe with absolute amazement

“Well, books are kind of my thing. Do you mind?”

“Oh no, here take it”. Joe held out his library card.”

“Thanks, I’ll return it right away”.

Lisa almost started walking and Joe said” you can give it back tomorrow or sometime else I really have to get going”

“Yeah, sure thing”.

And that was it .A brief meeting. It was after this that Joe started having feelings for her.

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Putting an end to the silence, Lisa finally spoke .But she sounded troubled.

“Joe, could you go slower”

Joe looked at the odometer. He was only approaching ninety kilometres per hour and there was not much traffic on the highway. Releasing the accelerator he asked

“What happened?”

“I ...Uh...Am mildly Dystychiphobic. No big deal”

“What phobic?” Joe’s eyebrows arched upwards.

“Dystychiphobia means fear of accidents.”

“There is a phobia for accidents?” His eyebrows arched again.

After a pause, he asked,” How did it start?”

“That’s a story”

“I like stories. Mind sharing? We’ll be spending some more time on the road.”

“Okay, if you insist” Lisa took a deep breath and continued “Papa and I were going to his colleague’s daughter’s wedding or that’s what he said. Anyway, I was maybe 10.we were to rendezvous with the wedding convoy midway because we didn’t know the rest

of the route. But we started out late, so drove fast, very fast. Everything happened so quickly. Bus stop at a blind curve. He hit the brakes hard, but it wasn't good enough. Into the back of the bus. I thought I was dead.

“Anything serious?”

“No. Not really, I was keeping my hands on the dashboard so I fractured them. But the trauma never left. Ever since that I have been afraid of speed.”

“But you do drive well”

“Well, I don't go above fifty”

“Good driving is not always about crossing hundred. Anyone with a fast car and a good road in front of him can do that .It's about how you handle your car, your presence of mind and how comfortable the people sitting beside you and outside the car are when you are at the wheel. I think you do that well and if you didn't have this problem, I'm sure that you would have been good at speeds too.”

“Flattering me will do you little good”

“I was serious about that.” Joe's gaze fell upon the rear view mirror. “What the...”A black customized SUV with vinyl all over it was making its way through the traffic with one half in one lane

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and the other in the adjacent lane almost ramming the other vehicles.

“What?” Lisa was suddenly alarmed.

“Look back. See the black SUV?”

“What’s with this guy?” “She paused to observe the SUV. “Jesus! He is coming right at us, Joe. Do something”

The SUV came right at them like he had the intension to ram them. Joe swiftly switched the lane and stepped on the accelerator. But the SUV had no intention of leaving them. Joe made his way, dodging the vehicles, but the SUV was right on his tail. Lisa was starting to have the effects of Dystychiphobia. Short breaths and shivering. But he could not slow down. Not now. They came upon a bus on the left lane and a truck on right lane ahead of the bus such that there is enough space between them for a car to just overtake the bus. Joe overtook the bus at the first opportunity. But before the SUV could make a move as the truck driver slowed down preparing for the U-turn, he was going to make leaving the SUV boxed inside. Though it didn’t last long, it gave Joe enough time to get a good distance ahead of the SUV.

“You okay Lisa?” Joe slipped in a question in the little time he got.

“Water... Water” Lisa managed to get two words out. Joe checked for the bottle of water that he had bought on his journey to meet

her at St Thomas church in the storage space on the door on his side .He found the bottle with one-fourth of water in it. It was never going to be enough. He handed it over to her thinking better than nothing. She finished it in one go.

“Shit, it’s back again” grieved Joe spotting the SUV once again in the rear view mirror. But still there was a good distance between them, but it was catching up. “Ah, great!” He whined seeing that they were coming upon a signal with less than ten seconds and counting down before it turns red.

“We’re.... Not.... Going to... get through” Lisa uttered in spite of her condition.

“We have to. We’re not left to the luxury of choosing. So close your eyes and hang on tight. I am going to get us through.” Saying this Joe turned on the headlamps and floored the accelerator. “God, I always wanted to do this”. Joe exclaimed. Like it’s said ‘be careful what you wish for’

The sun had almost disappeared. The sky appeared pale orange and the birds were flying home. When the whole nature was preparing for the impending night, Joe was trying to get himself and the love of his life out of the hold of whoever that was in the black SUV. His car raced through highway with the intention of getting through that signal without seeing a red light. Lisa probably understanding there was no space for an argument and also owing to the condition that her phobia put her in, remained silent with her

eyes forced shut and holding onto the set as tightly as she could .As the red LED display changed 8...7...6..., Joe's heart beat quickened but all he could hear was the roaring of the engine and the persistent sound of the horn.

The moment the light turned yellow, the car crossed the signal. But the SUV couldn't get through. Courtesy of the impatient traffic. Joe hit the brakes to bring his car to a safe speed and let out a huge sigh.

"Lisa its okay now .We have earned ourselves 40 seconds. We need to get off the highway. You good? "

"I'll be okay. Do what you have to do "saying this she sunk deeper into her seat.

Moments later, Lisa raised her hand to point at the road that let them out of the highway. It was not a major road. Joe would have missed it if she had not spotted it. It merged with the surroundings so much that to someone who is not familiar with it would certainly remain unseen. Joe quickly responded and managed to get turn the car. Both of them didn't know where it would take them. But they had to take it if they wanted to get rid of the SUV.

It was a narrow road. There were grass and shrubs on both sides of the road. After they traversed some distance houses started showing up on either side of the road. But they had to travel almost another kilometre before they could find someplace where Joe

could get Lisa something to drink. Joe stopped the car at the first sight of a supply store. When he returned to the car after buying two bottles of mineral water, Lisa was not in the car. He found her leaning on the back of the car. He handed out a bottle to her.

"Just catching some fresh air. "Said Lisa before she drank half the bottle in a go.

"Lisa, considering what just happened, I don't think it would be a good idea for us to continue our journey tonight. I think we should stay in some hotel and continue tomorrow early morning. What do you say?"

"I don't mind. I think it's a good idea". After a pause, she added, "Tell me something Joe. Are you regretting? "

"Regretting what?"

"Coming for me?"

"What? Why don't we get inside and talk? "She complied with it." Why do you think I regret. Is it because of what just happened? Whatever it is I want you to know that coming here was the best decision that I have made in my life. I'm actually happy that you called me when needed someone. Like you said earlier, I wouldn't be here if I didn't want to be here. So don't even think like that again. I'm happy to be with you no matter what the circumstance is.

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Now that we have settled that, why don't you find a place for us to get through the night while I drive?" Joe offered her his phone, "here, use my phone"

"The password is..." Lisa asked, seeing the lock screen." Wait a minute" She typed something. "Not my name?" She asked a bit surprised. Joe laughed and said, "Close, your name in the reverse order."

"Not sticking to the obvious. Nice"

CHAPTER 8

SAFE HAVEN

JOE took a breath of relief as he stepped into the hotel room, their shelter for the night. It had two cots separated by a side stand. They decided to keep a low profile and ordered the food to be delivered to their room. Both of them were exhausted, so they went to bed without further ado.

But Joe couldn't sleep. He feared that the people who chased them today would show up. He didn't want Lisa to panic even more, so he didn't tell her anything.

"You awake, Joe?" Lisa's voice broke him out of his thought world,

"Yeah, didn't you go to sleep yet?"

"Tell me something, Joe. Have you lost someone close?"

“Yeah, my grandparents. It was so sad. I can’t imagine what you are going through”

“You know, I didn’t cry that day. I was so numb. I didn’t cry until I gave them the final kiss. When I felt the cold on the face I just couldn’t hold anymore. I felt so lonely. I don’t know how I lived through those days”

Joe stretched out his hand to feel her hand. “You are not alone anymore. I’m with you. Together we will figure out all this. Get some sleep. I have a feeling that it is going to be sleepless nights ahead. Ah! Where am I going? Leave all that .Get some sleep”

Although Joe tried to talk Lisa into going asleep, he knew that he had to be vigilant. The people who chased them are still out there in the hunt for them. But he was determined to protect Lisa from any harm’s way.

Next morning, once again Joe found himself in his car with Lisa on his side. But this time she was the one at the wheel. Joe had felt that Lisa needs to take her mind of all the worries for a while. He thought putting her behind the wheel might take her mind off things. It did take him a while to convince her to take the wheel. Lisa was afraid something like last day might happen. He knew if something like what happened yesterday happens today, it was not going to end like yesterday. The almost vacant highways gave her

the confidence to go faster than her, self-set speed limit. From the time he learned to drive he had never been in the passenger seat until a couple of days ago. But there he was sitting beside the love of his life as she drove to the place which he believed to be a safe haven.

“Take the next left. We are here.” Joe gave Lisa the direction of their last turn. The road led them to the beautiful contemporary villa, as they approached the gate, Joe asked Lisa to honk twice. Without keeping waiting for long, a man came running and opened the gate. He was in his forties. He had a thick moustache and a shabby beard. It seemed like he was working in the garden. There was dirt on his lungi.

“At least tell me now. What is this place?” Asked Lisa as she stopped the car in the porch. Her eyes spoke out her curiosity. She had such expressive eyes. Taking a moment to enjoy the look on her face, Joe answered “This is one of my family’s rest houses”. Just as he said it, his eyes caught the silver bracelet on her right hand with a cross on it.

“Hey, you still have this?” Asked Joe reaching for her hand.

“Yeah, it was a gift from my parents”.

Lisa wanted to talk more about it, but then she noticed the man from the man who opened the gate was waiting for them. When they got out of the car, the man greeted Joe

“Welcome Joe sir”.

“Hello Mohan. This is Lisa and Lisa this is Mohan. He and his wife Lakshmi takes care of this place”. Both of them exchanged smiles.

“Lisa, come on. Let’s go to inside”. Lakshmi was at the front door by then.

“Lisa, Lakshmi.” Joe turned to Lakshmi and said “Take her to her room.” He turned to Lisa again “Get fresh. We’ll talk after that. I also desperately need a shower. Lisa followed Lakshmi to the room upstairs. Joe had asked Mohan the night before to get a room ready for guests. This villa was one of his special places.

After almost half an hour, Lisa came down all refreshed to find in front of his laptop.

“Busy Joe?” She asked as she came down.

“Hey, nothing I was just checking upon the delivery of the portable floppy drive that we ordered.” Joe closed his laptop and walked towards a shelf. “It will be here today. Hey, would you like some wine? There is some French wine here.”

“Wine? Don’t you have anything steamy?”

Joe didn't expect that. Coming from Lisa, that question seemed like a major twist in a movie. His face clearly reflected his thoughts.

Trying to hide it, he said "Sure. What would you like?" And he opened the shelf to showcase some Liquor bottles.

"You should have seen how your face changed. I'll have that French wine,"

"What?"

"I just wanted to see the look on your face when I said that." Saying this she laughed. Joe saw her laughing from her heart for the first time in the past few days.

"Well, you can't blame me for that. Coming from you it seemed like a twist in the movie". He sat down again and poured the wine into two glasses.

"So you were telling me about this place". Lisa changed the topic of discussion.

"Yeah, about this place. Huh, we, that is my family owns villas like this in places which we quite often visit and great places like these".

"You are telling you have more places like this! That sounds crazy. How do you take care of these places?"

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“We have caretakers at each villa like Mohan and Lakshmi”.

“Madness of rich people!”

“Ha ha, I thought you might say that. The way I see it, we made the previous owners of this house rich. Created a flow of money.”
Said Joe taking another sip of the wine.

“Maybe I won’t understand, like you never understood why I used to be sad, even when I got marks that you thought were good. And you used to tease me all the time”

“Since you mentioned that, fill me in.”

She put down the wine glass and made herself comfortable in the chair.

“Tell me this. Have you felt that the outcome of something on which you put a lot of effort wasn’t as good as it should have been because you made a careless silly mistake?”

“Yeah, it feels so bad”

“By the way, I never came to know what family business is.” Lisa popped question completely out of the blue.

“You know, you just sounded like a father interrogating his daughter’s boyfriend.”

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“You can’t blame me. I don’t have anyone to do it for me”

Realizing that he should not have made that comment, Joe tried to shift her focus by answering her question.

“Well, we do a lot of things. Real estate, construction, seafood exporting and my personal favourite car distribution companies. Ever heard of KMK motors?”

“That is yours?” Lisa had another sip of the wine.

“Yep”

Interrupting their little conversation, the calling bell rang twice.

“Mohan get the door”. Joe called out

Mohan came running almost immediately. He opened the door. After exchanging few words with the person at the door, he cried out.

“It is a delivery guy, sir. He says you ordered something online.”

Joe and Lisa looked at each other. It was the floppy drive they were expecting. “I’ll get the laptop, you deal with him. “Said Lisa getting off her chair.

Joe took the parcel and paid him. Unwrapped the cover and skimmed through the instructions. By that time Lisa came with the laptop.

“What took you so long? Joe asked without looking at her. Before she could reply, he looked at her only to be surprised. She was wearing glasses.

“Wait a minute. When did you start using glasses”.

“Very recently. I just use it when I using laptops or when spend long hours with the phone.”

Joe looked at the glasses in detail. The frame was rectangular in shape and was mostly white.

“Anyways, it suits you”

“Flattering me will do you little help. Why don’t you focus on the task at hand”. Lisa frowned.

“As you wish, my lady”

Joe plugged in the drive to the laptop, installed the necessary software. Finally, it was all ready for unveiling the secrets in the floppy.

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“Here we go”, said Joe inserting the floppy into the drive. Both of them anxiously waited to see what new knowledge were they going to get from the floppy they found at Jolly villa.

Joe double clicked the floppy icon. It opened up. What they found was nothing like what they were anticipating. They stared at each other astonished.

CHAPTER 9

WALKING IN THE SUNLIGHT

IT was a new moon night. Joe rolled on his bed back and forth trying to get some sleep but in vain. His mind was too troubled to get a good and easy sleep. He decided to let go of the attempt to sleep and switched on the bed lamp. His mind was in a vague state. He was happy to have been with Lisa but he was sad that the times were so troubled. Things seemed to be getting worse day by day. He wanted to end it all as quickly as possible. He was convinced that opening the floppy that they got from Jolly villa would mark an end to all the mysteries that shrouded them and he would have the life with Lisa that he always dreamed of. It opened new doors, raised new questions but one thing it didn't do was answer any of their questions. The opening of the floppy replayed in his mind.

The floppy contained a text document. What was strange about it was that there was no text in it. It had only dots and slashes. They

felt cheated like someone who went on a treasure hunt only to find fake diamonds. After they both stared at it for a minute, it was Lisa who was struck with the idea that it could be a code of some sort, upon which Joe commented

“Like father, like daughter.”

Joe didn't have any objection to the idea that it could be a code because no sane person would a floppy with nothing taped under a table .Now they put their effort on finding a way to decipher the code. It was Joe who brought the breakthrough this time.

“It is a binary code.”

“You mean like a Morse code with slashes instead of dashes. A dot-slash version of the dot-dash Morse code?”

“It's indeed a twisted version of the Morse code but it's not dots and slashes rather dots and spaces.”

“Then what is the function of the slashes?”

“Their usual function, separation.”

“Wow! That makes perfect sense. When space is part of the code, there needs to be something to take its place which the slash does.”

“Exactly”

“Do you know Morse code?”

“No, but the internet does”

Joe was brought back to the present by sound of gunshots and shattering of windows. Multiple shots were fired. He quick to get on his feet and paced towards Lisa’s room. On his way he found Mohan and Lakshmi coming up the stairs with panic stricken faces.

“Sir, there’s...”

“I know.” Joe cut off Mohan. “Lakshmi get Lisa .we need to get out and Mohan you know what needs to be done. “Another window shattered as they spoke. After taking a moment to brace himself, Mohan nodded in understanding and rushed down the stairs. Joe went back to his room to get the laptop, floppy drive and the floppy.

When Joe came down the stairs, he found Lisa and Lakshmi waiting for him. Lisa was unusually well dressed for that time of the night but it wasn’t the time for pleasantries. So he kept mum. Mohan tossed him the car keys.

“How are we going to make to out of here? They are right at the gate”, asked Lisa with a curious face as they walked towards the back door.

“Luckily, we may have a way out .There is no time for explanation. Just trust me on this”

They got out through the back door. Mohan was waiting for them there. Lakshmi joined him.

“Lisa, we have to get to the car without being spotted. Mohan we will drag them with us. Go hide somewhere. Wait until everything is clear and leave this place. You have to do one more thing for me. When I give you the signal, pull the fuse. Lisa come on.”

Joe and Lisa sneaked towards the car. They sat down behind the car. Joe took out the car keys and signalled Mohan who had already positioned himself by the fuse box. Joe pressed the unlock button and Mohan pulled the fuse in unison. The electricity went off and the car unlocked at the same instant. The car did not make any sound .Just the indicator lights flashed. But the thugs were distracted by the lights going out to notice that. They were standing at least 10 meters from where Joe and Lisa. Both of them slowly sneaked into the car. The lights inside the car came on when they opened the doors. It invited attention. Unwanted attention

One of the thugs jumped the compound wall .He had a gun .His first shot broke the rear view mirror by Joe’s side. Before he fired the second. Joe got the car started .Surprising everyone but Joe the car went backwards. The second shot took out a headlamp. Lisa gazed at him completely dazzled. Joe saw it.

“I’ll explain later. “Said Joe as the car went through an already open back gate and drifted onto the wet road. He hit the brakes, shifted the gear and the car raced forward splashing water all over.

“I can’t believe this is happening again”, Lisa regretted.

“Neither did me. But hey, things don’t always happen the way we want”. Joe tried to smile.

“I don’t think this is a good time for philosophy. You might want to focus on how to get off this mess”.

“Good point. Speaking of which, I don’t see them on the rear view mirror.”

“Did we lose them?” said Lisa looking back.

“I don’t think so. They tracked us here. I don’t think they will quit that easily”.

The car paced through the lonely road, killing the silence of the night. There were hardly any Street lights on that part of the road. Both of them kept looking at the rear view mirror. But nothing showed up. Joe couldn’t resist the feeling that something bad waiting for them. It sickened his mind. They were approaching a sharp curve towards right. Suddenly, completely out of the blue a speeding car came at them from the opposite direction. In a frantic attempt to avoid colliding head on, Joe’s car skidded off the road and went down the inclined path. Before he could regain control

over the car, it collided with a tree and the air bags deployed. The driver on the other car didn't even bother to stop and take a look.

"Lisa, are you okay?"

There was no answer but he could hear her desperately trying to catch her breath. He realized that her fear of accidents was setting in. He found bottle of water that he had bought earlier lying on the back seat. He got out of the car after grabbing the bottle, reached the door on Lisa's side, opened the door and helped her out of the car. They sat down by the door, leaning on the car.

"It's okay Lisa. Everything is going to be fine. Here just drink this and relax".

While Lisa was drinking the water, a car whizzed past them in the direction they were heading. A shudder passed through him. But it wasn't the people that were chasing them.

"Scared the hell out of me, pooh!" He took a sigh of relief. It was then he noticed that his car had come so far off the road that no one would easily see it unless they are looking for it. He was quick to run up to the steering wheel and turn off the lights.

"What are you doing?" asked Lisa getting back on her feet. She splashed some water onto her and wiped it off with her hand.

"I think we should leave the car here and start walking."

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“Walk? Are you kidding? They will catch us in seconds.”

“I wasn’t talking about walking on the road. I was talking taking a hike through these woods.”

“Oh! That sounds great.” After a pause she added “Let’s not waste time. Come on let’s go.”

They started walking through the woods with the light from the mobile cam flash, not knowing where it would take them. It was vast than they thought. After they walked for an hour, Joe’s phone beeped. It said

Low battery. Plug in your charger

“My phone is going to be dead soon”. He informed Lisa.

“Then we better find a place to settle down”.

“Here?” He frowned.

“Yeah. You haven’t spent a night in the forest. Have you?”

“No, but I’m thinking you have.”

“Yeah, during a nature camp 2 years ago. It’s fun. Besides, there is a first time for everything.”

“Okay then. As you wish”.

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“We are going to need a fire to keep us warm. Find some dry leaves and branches.”

After they made a pile Joe asked “Now how are you going to light it”

“Simple. We use the oldest method known”. Saying this she took two stones and started rubbing them against each other. Soon there were sparks which lit up the pile of dry wood.

“Wow, I’m officially impressed.”

“Oh its nothing.” she smiled.

They sat down next to each other leaning on some thick old tree. It was cold despite of having a fire blazing aside them. Joe took a moment to enjoy the sky and the stars.

“Joe?”

“Yeah”

“Can I ask you something?”

“Of course. You can ask me anything”

“Have you been mad at me?”

Joe couldn’t help laughing. “This is your big question?”

“Don’t laugh, answer it.”

“Yeah. But it wasn’t your fault.”

“Go on”

“Whenever there was a celebration or fest in our college, I used to dream of spending some time with you, to get a picture with you. But you, you would be busy with one or the other thing. You would be volunteering from some club or you would have a performance. Was there a club in college that you were not a part of? Like I said earlier, it wasn’t your fault. After all, that is what makes you you.”

“Sometimes I also feel I was into a lot. I’m glad you said it honestly. “She wrapped her arms around his and rested her head on his shoulder.

The warm rays of the sun hit the earth and once again it was morning. Joe felt the warmth of the sun, the coldness in the air, her arm around his and the weight of her head on his shoulders as they walked along the lonely mud path.

“It feels good to be walking in the sunlight once again”, Lisa spoke without lifting her head from his shoulder.

“Yeah. Hey look, we have reached a highway”

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“Maybe we can get a lift”, said Lisa raising her head to get a better look.

“Wait a minute. I think I know this place” .After a pause he added “What are the odds?”

“What is it?”

“We have found ourselves a ride”

“Really, that’s great. By the way you never told me why there was a rear entrance to your villa.”

“Walk with me. I’ll tell you on the way”

CHAPTER 10

FRIENDS AND FOES

“**SO?**” Lisa spoke with a tired voice as they walked along the highway where there was indeed decent traffic already. That ‘so’ was a product of her growing impatience?

“Okay okay, I will tell you. The reason there was a rear entrance to the villa is nothing so mysterious. When we bought the villa, it was not there though there was a road at the backside too. But the problem is that while coming to the villa, you may have noticed, there are two roads to the right.”

“Yeah”

“Most of the people who come to the villa wrongly take the first one as the right one is not easily visible. So many times people have come at back of the villa. When this continued, we decided to

put a gate there too. Guess it turned out to be more useful than we thought.” Joe couldn’t help smiling. Lisa nodded in understanding.

There was a long silence after that. Neither of them spoke anything. Joe wondered why Lisa didn’t ask anything about what he said earlier. ‘Maybe she wanted some space’, he thought. After all a lot was happening. He felt furious at the person who was causing all this madness. He spoke to the unknown, unseen and unheard enemy, in his mind

‘Whoever you may be. Whatever you be capable of, you will not hurt Lisa anymore. I will not let you take away the life I dreamed of all these years. A Life with Lisa.’

“So that is the ride you have been talking about?”

Lisa’s sudden question broke the bubble that encased his world of thoughts and brought him back to the real world. He followed her gaze to a large building with huge glass walls and a writing on the top right that read ‘KMK Motors’ in big bold letters.

“Oh yeah”, his face lightened up. “But I haven’t been here after the inauguration. I don’t know if anyone recognizes me”

They walked into the building opening a big glass door. A young man dressed in blue shirt, a dull red tie and an ID tag around his neck with the card tucked into his chest pocket addressed them.

“Good morning sir, good morning ma’am. I am George. Welcome.”. His face suggested he knew them.

“Good morning. I assume you know me”.

“Why would I not sir? I see you every day”. He turned his face towards a photo frame on the reception desk which showed with his family during the inauguration of the showroom. Lisa moved closer to get a better look. By the time, everyone working there, gathered around.

“What can I do for you, sir?”

“Yeah, coming to that, George right?”

“Yes sir”

“Well George, I am in bit of a situation here. My car was stolen last night and all my cash was it. So I am in need of one of the cars here and as you can see both of us need a change of clothes. Also I need this phone charged.”

“Okay sir, I’ll see what I can do. Please take a seat” Said George taking the phone from Joe.

“That went smooth. Is there a ‘Do what you are told without any questions’ policy here?” Lisa asked as walked towards him.

“What? I gave him a good story.”

“You do know that you are not so good at lying”

“Like you are a fat Liar”

“I am definitely better at lying than you. Do you know how many times I have helped my friends to bunk classes lying to the teachers?”

“The last part, I know”, he said as they sat down.

“Good chance for some gossip, huh? You worried Joe?”

“Isn’t that obvious? Young boss walks in, improperly dressed, with a beautiful girl. Worried? Not really. Are you?”

“I’m worried why you are not worried? I have nothing to lose to be worried of gossip. But you do”

“I’m not worried about being gossiped with you.”

Before Lisa could reply to that, George approached them along with a young women. “Excuse me sir.”

“Yeah George”

“Sir, this is Maria. We will go out and get clothes for you. And by then you select which car you want”

“Good, I like the sound of that”.

Getting into their new ride in their new outfit, Lisa asked, “Are you sure you want to take this brand new car considering we have targets painted on our backs?”

“If you are going to fear the future too much, there isn’t going to be a life. Have hope. Do we not go to bed every night hoping to wake up next morning? Relax Lisa”

“I was just saying .As you wish. So where to now? Don’t tell me ‘Ride with me, you’ll see’.

“We are going to meet a friend. You know him, Sam. He lives half an hour away. He may be able to get us some safe place to stay.”

“Sam? Should we bring him into this? Why put him in harm’s way.”

“That is why we are not going to tell him anything.”

Joe’s phone which was fully charged now started ringing. “Oh shit, it’s Dad.” Joe said as he pulled over. “Don’t make noise” .He answered the phone.” Hey Dad”

“Hello Joe. Thank God you picked up the phone. I have trying since yesterday night.”

“Phone was out of charge Dad. Sorry.”

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“Joe where are you? Have you forgotten? We have a Dubai trip tomorrow“

“Oh shit, sorry dad I completely forgot.”

“When are you coming home?”

“I can’t come dad. I’m taking care of something important”

“What do mean you are not coming? You know I need somebody to help me with the paperwork”

“Dad I can’t I really can’t. This is the most important thing of life. I can’t walk away. Take Mom. She used to come with you earlier.”

“Most important thing of your life? Is this about that Girl? What was her name?”

“It’s Lisa and yes this is about her. I’ll tell you everything when I get home”, Lisa who staring at the busy road all time suddenly snapped towards him with an utterly surprised face.

“Alright son, I hope you know what you are doing. I’ll take Mom .Come back soon Joe.”

“I will dad. I promise”

“Bye”

“Bye Dad”. Joe put down the phone and took a sigh of relief.

“Your dad knows about me?”

“I was forced to tell.”

“And he is cool with it?”

“That is why I told him I will explain when I get home. Like you said I am not a good liar. I needed time to cook up a story. He can’t know about all this. We better get going. Connect the phone to the car’s Bluetooth.”

Joe hit the calling bell twice. There was no response. “May be he is still mad at me” Joe said

“Why would he be mad at you?”

“Let’s just say I didn’t show up when he needed me.” Joe smirked

“Wow! Great place to come asking for help”

The Door opened and guy in specs revealed himself to them. He wasn’t exactly happy to see Joe and it clearly showed on his face.

“Hey, Sam.”, Said Joe, waving his hand.

“Don’t except say Hai to you.” Sam said with a stern face.

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“What about me Sam? Won’t you say Hai to me? “Lisa whose was not in Sam’s Frame of vision stepped inside it.

That left him open jawed. You got to be kidding me? Lisa, Lisa Maria.”

“There is a John at the end”. Lisa pointed out. But completely ignoring that, he continued.

“You, you guys are.”

“Together”, Joe completed his sentence...”Can we come inside”

“Sure .I have nothing against her.” Sam stepped aside and closed the door after they entered his apartment.

“Can I use your restroom?” Lisa asked.

“Sure it’s over there “

When Lisa disappeared into the restroom, before Sam even asked anything Joe spoke out judging from his expression. “Long story short she called me. She knew everything”

“When did this happen?” It seemed like Sam forgot that he was mad at Joe.

“Couple of days ago. “

“Jesus Christ! “

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“Look Sam, Let me cut to the chase. We are here for your help”

“You two running away or what?”

The flush started running and Lisa came out.” You could say that, in a way” Joe said.

“We need a place to stay”. It was Lisa who spoke.

“But not here.” Joe made it clearer.

“Why not?”

“It’s not safe .Do you know some place where people won’t look for us.”

“This seems pretty serious”

“It is. The less you know the better”

“There is someone else who may be able to help you. But you are going to like hearing that name Joe”

“No not her. Isn’t there anyone else?”

“Wait, wait who are you talking about?” Lisa asked

“I don’t want to hear her name again Lisa”

“Who? Who is it Sam,”

“Shruthi Manohar”

“Shruthi from the convocation Day?” Lisa asked. Joe nodded.

“How will she help us?” Lisa asked Sam.

“Her family runs a construction company. She is in charge of it now and her office is nearby. Joe knows. She may be able to get you into one of her model apartments”. Sam answered.

“That is great.”

“Oh come on Lisa. I’m not asking her for help.”

“This is not the time for old feud Joe. We don’t have a choice.”

“Fine”, though his face clearly showed he was not.

“Bye Sam.”

“You guys are leaving?”

“We are in a bit of hurry. I will call you” Joe said “And Thanks”.

“You told everyone about your feelings for me but me?” Lisa asked on route to Shruthi office.

“I don’t tell them they find out”

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Before Lisa replied to that, Joe's phone which was now synced with the stereo's Bluetooth rang.

"Hello"

"Can I take to Lisa?" A Strong Male voice asked.

"Who's this?" Lisa answered instead of Joe.

"That's the question isn't it? I'm the guy that had your parents killed"

CHAPTER 11

THE SECRET OF THE CROSS

‘I’m the guy that had your parents killed. ‘

IT felt like a bombshell. Those words echoed inside the car. Dead silence followed. Neither of them spoke, not even the guy on the phone. Joe and Lisa stared into each other’s eyes. He saw sheer terror in her eyes. By this time his mind had become a rainforest of thoughts, jumping from one tree to another like a monkey. ‘What is the purpose of this call? Is this a trap? He couldn’t concentrate on the road. He pulled over the car.

With a trembling voice and shocked face Lisa asked, “What did you say?”

“Come on Lisa. We both know you heard me. I gave it enough time to sink into your veins.”

“What do you want?” Joe asked with a calm but firm voice.

“That, my girl, is the question you should be asking. I’m starting to like your boyfriend. Were you too having romantic moment? So sorry...”

Joe cut him off. “Why don’t you quit stalling and get to business?”

“Boy, don’t you get bossy on me. You think you are alive because of you outsmarted me? You are alive and well because I am letting you be. Don’t make me to have your loved ones put flowers on your grave. So listen carefully. I know you have something that belongs to me. You give that to me and I disappear from your life.”

“Why? I want to know why. Why did you kill them?” Lisa spoke.

“Why should I tell you that? I’m not calling to make a confession. I just thought I would give you a chance. After all my boys here tell me that you are the angel raised by demons. Now, I leave you guys in control. You call me when you are ready for the exchange. Be quick. Don’t test my patience and don’t waste time trying to trace this number. You will not succeed.”

“What makes you think we will call?” Joe asked.

A laugh broke out on the other side of the phone. “Trust me, you will. And kid, a little free advice. Love is a fantasy and only children believe in fantasies.”

“May be that is why Jesus said ‘Unless you change and become like children, you will not enter the kingdom of heaven.’”, Joe said with sheer pride in his voice and looking Lisa in the eyes.

“May your faith save you?” And the caller hung up after speaking that last line with absolute disdain in his voice.

Lisa sunk back into her seat. Her eyes became a pool of tears. Looking out of the window she said, “At least now we know that papa and mamma were indeed killed.” After a pause she continued “Angel raised by demons!!” she smirked with pity, shaking her head.

Joe held her. “Everything is going to be okay”.

Lisa leaned on to Joe’s shoulder, held her arms tight around his arms. “I don’t want to lose you too, Joe.”

“Hey, chill nothing is going to happen. He is just bluffing. He can’t just kill me like that. The repercussions will be big and he knows that.” He wasn’t sure of what he was saying but anyway he said it for her sake. He had something to ask Lisa but he buried it in his mind to dig up another time.

“Wait here”, Joe told Lisa as he walked into Shruthi’s office cabin leaving her at the reception.

“May I come in?” he said peeking into the office through half opened door.

Shruthi was at her desk scanning through some documents wearing a black structured shirt. Without taking her eyes off it, she said “Please come in and have a seat.” Once again without bothering to check if he had taken a seat she asked, “How can I help you sir?”

“You can start by looking at me”

That certainly grabbed her attention. She took a moment to look at the handsome guy in front of her, “Oh my God, Joe? What a pleasant surprise!” Her face lit up. “When was the last time we met? Convocation day?”

Something about her seemed different. It wasn't that old nagging, arrogant Shruthi who ruined Joe's plans on the convocation day.

“Yeah convocation day”, He replied without much excitement in his voice. “You gave me a huge headache that day”.

“So sorry. You were going to talk to Lisa weren't you?”

A bomb exploded in Joe's mind. ‘What? How did she? She knew?’ His eyes almost fell off his face. “What?”

“Oh come on Joe. Don't lie to me. I have seen the way you look at her, the way you talked to her and the way she watched you walk away...Hell, half the class knew.”

“You are kidding”

“Really?” she made a face. “You think so?”

“Okay whatever”

“So you guys together now?” She seemed very eager to know..

Joe took a moment to decide what answer he should give her. It didn't look like was into him anymore. Actually she was eager to know about him and Lisa. May be telling her about Lisa isn't such a bad idea.

“Actually she is outside”

“What? Why would you?” she passed as if she realized something. “I get it. You thought I would be jealous, huh? Can't really blame you. But you are going to be happy to know that I got engaged.” Shruthi said showing off the ring on her left hand.

“Oh that is great news. Congrats.” Joe was so relieved.

“Thank you”. She said and then spoke through the intercom on her desk. “There is someone named Lisa waiting outside. Send her in.”

Within seconds, the receptionist escorted Lisa into the office. She seemed a little surprised to be called in like that.

“Hai,” Shruthi spoke to Lisa as she sat down.

“Hello”.

“I am so happy that you guys are together.”

Lisa gave Joe a confused look which was like asking what the heck just happened.

“So what brings you guys here? Looking for a nice apartment?”

“Yeah, coming to that. We need a place to stay for a few days. Somewhere we will not be tracked. We were hoping that you might have a model apartment that we could use.” The pace of his speech reduced towards the end of the sentence.

“You two don’t happen to be running away from home. Are you?”

“Why does everyone has to ask this question?” Lisa grieved.

“Everyone?” Joe was surprised.

“I heard Sam.”

“Sam? He sent you here?”

“Yeah. Is there a problem.” Joe enquired.

“No, no. I was wondering why you think of coming to me for help given our history. Sam and I had met recently. He was here with one of his relatives to book an apartment.”

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“Well he didn’t mention that part. Did he?” “Said Lisa giving Joe a sideways glance.

“No. He skipped that part out?”

“But actually I don’t have any model apartments at this point?”

“Oh”, Joe and Lisa said in unison. They turned to each other.

“That’s bad news”, Joe expressed his disappointment.

“Still I may be able to help you guys.”

“You can?” Lisa asked.

“Like I told you earlier”, Shruthi said pointing Joe. “I got engaged. My fiancée is on a foreign tour and I happen to have the keys to his apartment.”

Joe was happy with the offer. But the Lisa’s face said she wasn’t.

“Is that a good idea, considering our situation?”

“It is. There is no way they are going to get there. How would they know about her? I’m not even friends with her on Facebook.”

“You’re not?”

“He unfriended me after the convocation day mess”, Shruthi answered for Joe. “By the way, you didn’t tell what the problem is.” She complained.

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“I will tell you this much. We want to hide from someone for some time. The less you know the better. Don’t worry you are not going to be in any trouble.”

“Fine. Glad I could be of help.”

Joe found himself in a posh apartment on the 10th floor of a 24 story building along with Lisa and Shruthi. Everything in the apartment screamed art. Right from the flooring to the bedroom cupboards and wall hangings were work of art.

“Your fiancée has got a good taste.” said Joe admiring the apartment.

Shruthi smiled and said “He is an interior designer.”

“Well, that explains”

“You haven’t still told me what your problem is.”, not letting Joe and Lisa say anything she continued. “But it’s you two, so cool. If there is anything else I can do, just give me a call.” She left her business card on the table.

“Sure thing”, Joe said.

“I’ll be off now. I have a meeting to attend.” On her way out she paused, turned to Lisa and said “You are blessed to have him. Don’t ever lose him.”

Lisa was out in the river view balcony, resting her arms on the railings and letting her hair free allowing it to dance with the wind. She seemed to be lost in the word of thoughts. Joe walked out to the balcony with two glasses of red wine in his hands and stood beside her on her right side.

“I found some wine”, Joe offered her a glass which she accepted with a plain face. “Everything is going okay Lisa.”

“And you know this how?”

“Because that’s how things happen in this world. Problems and solutions are two sides of the same coin. The solution is right behind the problem. You just have to flip the coin. And we will flip It.” .Joe took a sip of the wine.

“But flipping the coin is not that easy in this case”.

“True that”.

Lisa took another sip. It was then that Joe once again noticed the cross hanging bracelet on her right hand. “You wear this always?”

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“Always. This is the last gift they give me. It’s their memory. It makes me feel like they are with me”.

Joe ran his fingers over the bracelet and held on to the bottom of the cross. He had only seen it twice before. First, on the convocation day and then when they arrived at his rest house. It stood out because of the size of that cross. Joe hardened his grip on the cross when he tried to picture him in her situation. Not noticing his grip on the cross, Lisa suddenly turned around. A chill went down his throat when he realized that a part of the cross was in his hands. It was hollow and it didn’t look like it broke off.

“Lisa “, Joe called out and held up the piece.

Lisa was quick to check the cross. Both of them froze when saw the tip of the cross. It was actually a pen drive.

CHAPTER 12

THE CONFESSION

JOE and Lisa positioned themselves in front the laptop, with the pen drive plugged into the fastest port. The tension in the room was impalpable. Lisa kept staring at the cross shaped pen drive as if she was looking at a piece of puzzle yet to be solved. She wore it all this time but never realized what it really was, Joe thought. He also was anxious to know what it would reveal. He, like always hoped that it would be for the best.

The pen drive contained a video file by the name confession. As he moved the cursor toward the file, Lisa clutched his hand. Clearing her throat she said “Before we see what is in this video, there is something that I have to tell you.”

“What is it?”

“There’s something that I have kept from you and I don’t want you to know it from anyone else.”

His heartbeat quickened, anxiety grew.

“I’m an adopted child. They adopted me when I was 6 months old. ”She paused and added. “I never told you because I had never, not even for moment had thought that they weren’t my own.” Noticing that he wasn’t so surprised, she asked, “You don’t seem so surprised?”

“I kind of had my suspicions when that guy said ‘angel raised by demons’ and not angel born to demons. I was actually going to ask you but I glad you told it yourself. It’s okay. I can understand. Don’t worry.”

“How can you be so calm about this, Joe? I have given you nothing but troubles ever since I called you here.”

“None of this is your fault. Stop blaming yourself. And don’t even for a think that you put me in harm’s way. I am happy to be here with you. This is my chance to make up for the time that we could have spent together if I had mustered the courage to tell you how I felt.

Nothing is going to change the way I feel for you. Whatever that video might say, I am never going to let you go. I have only loved you and I always will no matter what, against all the odds.”

Lisa leaned forward and hugged Joe. He also wrapped his arms around her.

“Now shall we find out?” asked Joe, still hugging Lisa.

“Yeah, we better.” Said Lisa, breaking off the hug.

Joe looked at Lisa. Her eyes were intense, mind probably steaming up. He wondered what would be going through her mind.

He double clicked on the file. Without further ado it opened up to be what he already been expecting. Hopefully, the answer to everything, their ticket out of this mess. After all it was named confession.

“Hello sweetie”, Lisa’s father spoke with a strong masculine voice, her mother right beside him. They seemed like the made for each other couple. They had that teacher’s look. The kind of teachers that become everyone’s favourite. But clearly and unfortunately, they were more than that.

The video was made in the Jolly villa and her parents were at the same dining table, from the bottom of which they got the floppy. Though they had already cracked the coded message in it, it made no sense to them, leaving them shrouded in mystery.

He turned to Lisa to see her reaction. He was expecting teary eyes. But she was numb. That scared him. He had never seen her like that. She is of course strong girl but ever since he had met her at

the church, tears flowed from her eyes even at the mention of her parents. He couldn't help wondering what changed.

Lisa's father continued. "You would probably wondering what is all this? Unless our plan works, we would be dead already when you are seeing this video. If so this is the answer to all the questions you may have related to our death, which most likely is a road accident."

"Whether alive or dead, this is our confession to you. "This time it was her mother who spoke and she continued. "We are making a video because we cannot do this looking at your face and we are going to give it to you in disguise because we couldn't reach a decision whether to tell you this or not. So we have decided to let God make that decision. If it is his will that you should see this, only then shall you see it. If not, the truth dies with us."

"We know you love us a lot .But you may not after hearing what we are about to tell you. I hope there would be some love left in your heart to forgive us. "She couldn't continue. Tears fell from the corner of her eyes. Lisa's father took over.

"I don't know how to break this to you. We have been lying to you your whole life. In fact you don't know the real John and Molly. We are not model teachers like you and the rest of the world thinks. That is just a cover for the dirty work that we do. We are probably the worst kind of teachers around." he took a moment to breathe.

“Lisa, “, he paused.” We are part of a drug cartel.”

“We were.” , her mother corrected. “We were part of a drug cartel. We used our teaching position as a cover as well as aide to our dark side. We used our students, even without their knowledge as our carriers. We also used the school buses to our advantage. Our first home at Mercara became our base of operations.

We have been doing this since before we got you. You are the gem we got after whining for years for not having children. We didn’t want you to be a part of this and we didn’t want to quit. So we lied to you every day, kept you in the dark.

But recently we decided to quit because we realized we couldn’t keep lying to you for long. That is when the tables turned against us. They wouldn’t let us. And couple of days ago we received word from a friend that they plan to kill us because they fear we might tell the world about everything one day.”

Her father told the rest of the story.” We are going to try and blackmail our way out of this. We have come into possession of a floppy that has information that could bring the entire network down overnight. But there is no guarantee that it will save us. You probably would already know if we succeeded or not.”

Lisa mother spoke once again. “We don’t have any justification for what we did. We did what we did and now we are paying its price. Your heart would be full of hatred for us. You have every right.

May be you will be able to forgive us one day. We may not be alive to see that day. Take care. Find someone who will love you better than us. Have a good life.”

“Goodbye”, they both said in unison and the video ended.

After sitting lifeless for a minute Lisa paced out of the room into the balcony. Joe followed her

“Lisa, talk to me. At least cry it out.”

“Talk about what Joe? What? About my parents being drug dealers? About them lying to me all my life? Or about how dumb I was not to see it? What do you what talk about?” Lisa was furious like never before. She was finally exploding.

“Lisa, look at me”, he said griping her shoulders and repeated, “Look at me. I won’t say I can understand what you are going through because I don’t. I cannot even begin to imagine. The only thing I can tell you is that I’m here for you. You are not alone. You can talk to me about anything you want.”

“I cannot tell you what I am feeling right now. I don’t know how to. You know that my parents were my life and they lied to me all my life. That is what makes me more furious than the fact that they dealt with drugs. They were my models for good honest people.”

“They lied to you because they didn’t want you on the dark path they walked. Why are you not seeing that?”

“I don’t know”

“Besides, they couldn’t be that bad”

“What do you mean?”

“I mean they made you. You may not be there blood but you are what they made you to be. They raised an angel. The people who brought you up couldn’t have been that bad. Speaking of which, who is good in this world Lisa? You? Me? Don’t we all have our bag of lies? Aren’t we all selfish at some point? The only reason we get to call ourselves good is that there are worse people out there. Your parents did what they did and paid the price for it.”

The dusk was fading into a night. While the nature made preparations for the impending night, Joe and Lisa were trying to cope with recently unveiled truth. Joe was worried about Lisa. He remained by her side all night until the hard day’s fatigue took a toll on him and he dozed off.

The next morning he woke upon the couch in Lisa’s room. The first thing he did was to look for Lisa. But he couldn’t find her anywhere. It was when he was pacing to and fro through the apartment trying to figure out what to do that he found his laptop kept opened on the table with a flower beside it. He took the flower in his hand and tapped on the mouse pad. The laptop screen came to life and showed a word document. Reading through the document he ranted.

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“What have you done Lisa?”

CHAPTER 13

THINGS I NEVER TOLD HER

SHE was in her wedding gown. She knew she looked beautiful in it. Walking down the aisle beside him holding a red rose bouquet, she was having the time of her life. She looked around searching for familiar faces. But there weren't any. She was on her own. She turned to him realizing he is all what she has. The next moment all the people disappeared. In sheer panic she turned towards him but she was terror stricken. He was gone too. Suddenly a coffin appeared in the middle of the church. There he was, lying motionless inside that coffin.

Lisa opened her eyes opened her eyes to see Joe sleeping on the couch beside her bed by the window. The moonlight lit up his face

along with half of the room. She kept looking at him, reassuring herself he was fine and it was only a nightmare. All day he had been right alongside her fearing she might do something stupid, though she had no such intension. She couldn't do that to him. She wouldn't end her own life and put him in pain.

Joe was special. He always cared for her like her parents did. When he is around her, the void that the death of her parents left in her heart seems to disappear. He is different from all those guys who wanted to strike a relationship with her. He never did anything that he normally wouldn't just to impress her. He was always keen to show the real Joe to her even if it meant tarnishing his own image in front of her and he knew when to give her space. He has always been there for her when she needs someone. He is like a silent guardian. Someone, who might go on loving her even if she hadn't loved him, and now she has put him in the face of danger, No matter what he says.

She couldn't go back to sleep anymore. She rubbed her face and got off the bed making sure she didn't wake him. Just as she walked past him, she was startled by the sound of something hitting the floor. She turned to direction where she heard the sound. It was Joe's phone on the floor. But Joe seemed to have not been aware of that fact. Lisa quickly grabbed the phone and walked out of the room.

She switched on the lights in the balcony and settled down on the easy chair. The sky looked beautiful. The full moon stole show.

She glanced at Joe's phone. Not a scratch. It seems he cares for everything and everyone that is dear to him. She thought maybe she should take a peek inside. Joe wouldn't mind. After all he had told her his password.

Asil, Lisa in reverse.

To her surprise it opened into a text document. She was intrigued by the title.

Things I never told her

It covered a whole page. Lisa was at first curious to find out what it was. She knew that the 'her' was indeed herself. But then she started having second thoughts. Is it the right thing to do? How would he feel? But in end her curiosity beat it all. She scrolled down.

But she was wrong .It was not something that was written for her. It was a story. She didn't know he wrote. Pages into the story she realized something. The female lead of the story was indeed her. Sure the name was different. But she saw herself in those pages, things that she had said, things that she did, conversations that she had with Joe. It was not something written for her but it was about her. Joe had written a story about her!

She read the whole write up. It was not yet finished but the last line touched her heart. She wished he had said it to her in person. It went like this

I know you see me, but you pretend you don't. I know you hear me but you pretend you don't. I don't know if you don't love me but I know this much, I love you. I always have and always will.

Shruthi's words replayed in her mind. 'You are blessed to have him. Don't ever lose him'

That moment she decided something. He had done so much for her .It's time that she did something for his well-being. He will no longer put his life on the line for the sins of her parents. What needs to be done now, she will do it herself.

Lisa sat in front of Joe's laptop staring at a blank page. She closed her eyes and thought of all those joyous moments that she spent with him. All of it flashed across her mind like a motion picture. She opened her eyes and started typing.

Joe,

You are the only person left for me in this world. And you have done more than what I could ever ask for. I know you love me

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enough to sacrifice your life for me, which is exactly why I can't let you do that. I am leaving, Joe. I will end this myself.

But I want you to promise me something .if I don't return alive, don't waste your life. Move on. Find someone else. Live your life.

I love you. I always have and always will.

Yours and yours only

Lisa.

P.S: I am taking your phone and the car.

She took a flower from the flower pot and placed it beside the Laptop. She walked to the room where Joe was sleeping. She slowly opened the door, stayed there watching him until tears blurred her vision. Wiping the tears, she gave him a flying kiss and closed the door.

CHAPTER 14

SHOULD HAVE SEEN THAT COMING

“WHAT have you done, Lisa?” Joe spoke out loud as he fell into the chair. “What have you done?” He sat there with his eyes closed, head resting on his fist. He was mad, not at Lisa but at himself. He should not have given her the chance to leave. He should have seen that coming. He should have known. Lisa still continues to surprise him every day.

Joe looked up and saw the blue sky through the glass door that led to the balcony. It was virtually cloudless. He could see the yellow sun staring to take over the blue sky with its majestic rays. The sky was calm and pleasant unlike his mind which was now turbulent as a sea upon a storm.

He couldn't find peace with the fact that she was going to take on a drug cartel all alone. He could understand why she made such a choice but just like Lisa couldn't see him get harmed, he also couldn't sit idle while she puts her life on the line. He was not going to sit on the side-lines, even if that is what she wants. As much as he would love to let it be the way she wants it to be, the thought of something bad happening to her curbs him from allowing that. He will not give her what she wants this once. Just this once.

He got off the chair banging the table hard and started walking to and fro trying to answer the questions that was lurking in his mind. What her next move would be, where she would go, what her end game would be. He had no intension of dissuading her from her endeavours. He just wanted to be part of it.

His dream had finally come true, though not the way wanted it to be, a life with Lisa. But it would be taken away from him if she doesn't succeed. So he had to ensure her efforts yielded fruits. All those moments he spent with her, pleasant and sad flashed through mind like a movie trailer. The first time they talked in front of the library, Recurring dreams about her, her mail, that moment she said she also felt for him what he felt for her. All those opportunities he had to confess his love to her, which he wasted. Had he been there to open the door when those opportunities knocked at his door, this could have been an entirely different

story. That is when he realized opportunities don't always knock at your door, but when they do, be there to open the door.

Now he has to find a way to locate Lisa. What was her plan? Where did she go? All of a sudden it popped into his mind that he could just call her. May be she would tell him, at least he might be able to get some clues off the conversation. It's possible that she may not talk long enough for him to trick her into giving up her location. Nevertheless he could know if she is safe.

Joe looked for a landline. He doubted if there would be a landline. Who uses a landline these days? Everyone has a mobile. Fortunately, he found one without ransacking the whole place. A black cordless phone. He was relieved to hear the dialler tone. It was working. He took a sigh and dialled his own phone number. But he was disappointed. A recorded female voice said 'The number you have dialled is out of coverage area'.

"Shit". He couldn't help his disappointment taking verbal form. He dialled the number again and again. The same line was repeated over and over. After trying for almost fifteen minutes, Joe abandoned the endeavour. He almost smashed the receiver after the last attempt. Just as he raised his hand to throw it on the floor, it occurred to him that it wasn't his to break. He had never felt so helpless, so disappointed.

He had almost lost hope, when it suddenly came to his mind that there is one place that is out of coverage area that no one knew

better than Lisa. A place where she had full access. Where all of this mess started. The Jolly villa.

Joe couldn't believe himself. "Jesus", he yelled. Why didn't he think of this earlier? He lost so much time. It was so obvious. He should have known and he would have if his mind wasn't so clouded. Lisa had gone to Jolly villa. Joe had no doubt of that now. There was no time to waste he had to hurry.

That is when another problem presented itself. And that was a very big one, He didn't have a vehicle. Taking a taxi wasn't exactly a bright idea at the moment, given the people Joe and Lisa were dealing with. And bus wasn't even an option. It has been so long since he took a bus that he had forgotten what was it like. He was left with no option but to find a car.

Thinking about various option, Joe stumbled upon the fact that the solution was somewhere ten floors beneath him. Shruthi's fiancée's car! He didn't know the guy's name. Now he felt like he should have asked, now that he might be of immense help. Shruthi's fiancée was away on a business trip but Joe didn't know where. Unless he made the trip on his car, it could be there. Shrouded in dust, probably requiring a wash. Joe was a person who was adamant on the cleanliness of his vehicles.

Joe left no scrap of paper unturned as he searched for the keys. Yet it took him a good half an hour to get his hands on the keys. The

trip down to the underground parking lot alone in the lift seemed to take forever. It took him another fifteen minutes to locate the car.

He was quick to hit the road. He went as fast as the roads would let him, driving wildly than ever before. Just as he was racing through the highway a black SUV whizzed past him. In a quick move it changed the lane and started riding in front of him. Seconds later another vehicle, a sedan this time, appeared in his rear view mirror. It rode side by side him. All of a sudden Joe found himself boxed inside, surrounded by vehicles on three sides and barricade on one side. He was stuck. The vehicles closed in on him. His car banged with the sedan many times. Metal bashing metal. All his efforts to break loose were futile. That is when he saw the left indicators of all three vehicles that surrounded him were blinking. He realized he was not being assaulted rather he was being kidnapped.

CHAPTER 15

A NAME AND A FACE

ALL Joe could see was pitch black. The shroud that his captivators put on his face after dragging him out of his car at gunpoint, was serving its intended purpose very well. His feet touched the ground firmly, although his hands were above his head hanging from a thick rope. He couldn't tell exactly how long had it been since a group of vehicles surrounded his car and forced him out of the highway into a pocket road where they moved him into one of their vehicles, but he knew it had been hours.

Joe's hands and knees were starting to hurt. Stomach growling. He had neither eaten nor drunk anything since yesterday's light dinner which he shared with Lisa. He couldn't help but wonder if it would be his last supper but hoped it wouldn't be. He had ceased all efforts to break loose long ago understanding it was not going to happen. He was no Rambo.

Joe had no doubt whatsoever about his kidnappers. Obviously, they were muscle for money to the anonymous voice who introduced himself as the man behind Lisa's parents' murder. May be a mastermind but cocky. May he would show up. May be it's a she. Who knows?

The shrill sound of a metal door opening caught his attention. It was followed by the sound of footsteps, one of which walked hurriedly towards him. It stopped beside him. He was stripped of the shroud. Joe found himself in a large room, dimly lit by the sunlight, coming through a small overhead window on his left side. A stout, six foot tall man was standing in front of him. It took him a few seconds to spot that it was same man who shoved him into the back of the SUV. He rotated his head anticlockwise for a good view of the room. But before Joe could get a good view, he was served with a tight slap across his face. It hurt. Joe had never been slapped before.

“Don't start already”, a voice spoke out from the dark, “You will have your chance”.

The voice felt familiar, a heavy manly voice. He didn't have to do much brainstorming to identify the person. That voice which no one easily forgets, belonged to anonymous man over the phone. A dark silhouette walked out from the shadows. As he walked towards Joe, the sunlight revealed, first his white boots, then his white pants and black shirt. When his face came into view, Joe wondered if he chose his attire to match his face. His long face was

covered by a thick white beard over which his right hand was hovering. The white beard meet with his still black hair above the ears. His black eyes positioned themselves at Joe. The anonymous voice now had a face.

The overhead rope to which hands were tied to, suddenly loosened. The thug who stood beside Joe kicked him at the back of his knees forcing Joe to fall on his knees and the grip tightened once again. Another thug placed a wooden chair about a feet from him.

“Sorry I kept you waiting for so long.”, Said the man as he sat down on the chair laid for him. “Your visit, I should say was rather unexpected. The news of your arrival rather took me by surprise.” Though his words were polite like that of a great host to his guest, the mockery in his voice and the ridiculing look on his face was hard to miss.

He paused for some time, probably expecting Joe to say something. “My boys here tell me that you have been a good boy. Aren’t you going to ask me what I want?”

“What for? I already know what you want. You want to survive.”

“So you haven’t gone dump and you know what I want. That’s good. That’s very good.” He leaned towards Joe. Looking right into his eyes, he asked “Then why don’t we skip the pleasantries and move to the part where you tell me where to find your girlfriend?”

“That is funny, you know. We both want the answer to the same question.” Joe answered with a smile on his face.

That enraged the Interrogator. Reeling back he landed a punch right on Joe’s face, leaving him with a bleeding nose. “You want to play games with me now?” he paused and took a breath. With a much calmer demeanour, he continued, “See kid, let’s make this easy for both of us. There is no need for a brawl between us. Give me Lisa’s location so that I can get the disk from her and your love story can have it’s happily ever after. Else, I would have no choice but to write a tragic end to your love story. So what is it going to be?” Like how a mother reading a fairy-tale to her child would end it, he said “And they lived happily ever after”. After a pause he added, “Or”. He left the elongated ‘or’ looming in the air.

“Mister, whatever your name is, believe me I don’t know. She left a note saying she will take care of everything herself. I’m trying to locate her myself.” He wasn’t lying but he wasn’t exactly telling the truth either. It was somewhere in between. A cocktail of truth and lies. Like Lisa once said, he was not good at lying, he had to be careful. That is why he mixed the lies with truth.

“You expect me to believe that? You should have come up with something more convincing than that if you were trying to fool me.”

“No, I’m telling the truth. You have to believe me on this.” Joe tried desperately to persuade his interrogator. He was going to get

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beat up real bad if he couldn't convince him that he didn't know anything and he was not going to give up her location to avoid that.

“Yeah, right.” The interrogator got off his chair saying “Bad move kid. I'm done reasoning with you.” He almost turned his back towards Joe when he paused all of a sudden, turned back said “And you can call me, Mr. K. Like my boys here does.”

Minutes ago Joe only knew the guy who had killed Lisa's parents as a voice on his phone. But now he had a name and a face. He was standing right in front of him and he called himself Mr. K!

“Shouldn't it be Mr. X?” Joe asked.

“Why not avoid the cliché?”

Mr. K eyed a thug who nodded in agreement. Joe knew what that meant. The moments to follow were going to be painful.

CHAPTER 16

LISA CALLING

JOE prepared himself for what was about to follow. He shut his eyes and tried to picture Lisa. The image of Lisa kneeling before the altar came flooding into his mind. That sight had brought him more joy than any world wonder ever brought him. If he was going to die he wanted that image to be in his mind when death grabbed him.

The thug grabbed a wooden log and walked towards Joe. Standing at an arm's length from Joe, the thug swung the log hard. Joe felt the wind from the swinging log when Mr. K yelled "Wait!" the log stopped inches from Joe's face. Joe could hear the sound of a phone ringing. He opened his eyes to see Mr. K standing in front of him holding out a ringing phone.

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“You were literally saved by the bell” he said with a cocky smile on his face.”

Who would that be? Joe wondered.

“Recognize this number?”

Mr. K showed his phone to Joe.

John’s daughter

Could it be Lisa? Her father’s name was also John. He glanced at the phone number beneath the writing. The realization shocked him. That was his number. It was indeed Lisa calling. What the hell was she doing? Joe knew he should be grateful to her for saving him from the torture. The timing of her call, though a fluke, was so impeccable. But he was mad at her. When she said she would take care of it herself, he didn’t even imagine she would go for a direct confrontation with these people. It was so dangerous.

“Hello my dear, I guess this day is full of surprises.” Mr. K attended the call and started walking around Joe. “That is a very good decision. If you had thought of this earlier, it would have been easier for both of us.”

Joe figured Lisa must have agreed to deliver the floppy. It was unlikely that she would let go of her parents’ murder just like that. May she got tired of the cat and mouse game? Heaven had come

crashing down on her when she came to know that her parents' teaching job was just a cover for their involvement with the drug cartel. May be she thought they got what they deserved.

“A catch?”

Just what was missing, Joe thought.

“I’m all ears. Uh... Huh... Why Lisa, don’t trust me?” silence followed “Okay, as you wish.” He finally said. “But I also have a catch to add. I also have something of yours.”

Mr. K walked towards Joe, switched the phone to speaker and held it towards Joe.

“I’m sorry, Lisa”

“Joe?” Joe could feel the trembling in her voice as she said it. That hurt him. When he left for Jolly villa earlier that day he was convinced he was going to help Lisa, but instead he has plunged her more into the darkness.

“I hope you realize that now the game has been balanced”

Joe couldn’t agree more. If it was possible to weigh how much leverage each side had, the scales would be balanced. If only it doesn’t tip over in Mr. K’s favour.

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“So Girl, Where do you want the exchange to happen?” The phone was still in speaker mode.

“Where a girl knelt at twelve forty-two north seventy-five seventy-three east.”

“What? Where? ” Mr. K was absolutely bewildered.

Joe felt like Lisa had read his mind. He had just pictured her there. The church once again was chosen as a meeting place.

“A little something to ensure you deliver Joe unharmed.”

Mr. K turned the speaker mode off and took the phone away from Joe.

“How many more tricks do you have up your sleeve? Keep them there if you want him back. And about the time. No time. I’ll get there when I get there. You will wait for me. Remember, nothing foolish.”

The call ended and silence once again took its place. Thugs backed away and Joe was once again alone in the room.

CHAPTER 17

THE FALL

ONCE again climbing up the hairpins of Madikeri Joe felt like Déjà vu. He was travelling long distance to meet Lisa in a church, again. Like then, this time also he wondered why she chose a church. Joe had never thought that a church would be such an important part of the most crucial moments of his life. But such is life. The most important moments of life often happen unannounced and often in places unanticipated.

Last time Joe made this journey, he was driving his favourite sedan, listening to his favourite mix. Unlike this time, hands tied, sandwiched between two oversized thugs in a poorly maintained SUV and followed by another. Mr. K who was sitting in the front seat was not a man of many words. He did not speak anything other than asking directions.

The kidnappers were not harsh on him but they weren't exactly nice either. They didn't give him any food not even water. But Mr. K honoured his agreement with Lisa and left Joe in one piece. He must need the disk so desperately. Joe and Lisa had managed crack the code that protected the contents of the disk but at that time they didn't know what to make out of the information they had acquired. After hearing Lisa's parents' confession, Joe was confident that he would be able to understand it. But fortunately or unfortunately it was not going to happen.

"Turn Right" Joe said once again glancing at the signboard that said St. Thomas church 200 meters to the right.

"I'm not blind. I can see the signboard."

Mr. K has figured it out. Joe didn't know if he was supposed to be happy about it or sad.

Joe watched the church standing tall as they entered through the gates. His eyes spotted his dark blue sedan parked in the compound. That was a bit odd considering Lisa always walked from Jolly villa to the church. Didn't she go to the villa? No wonder if she didn't, Joe figured. Things have been far from normal. With abnormal times comes abnormal actions.

The SUV came to a standstill, facing the church entrance. Joe found himself caught between the past and the present. It all started here at the church, exactly seven days before. Perhaps these seven

days would be the most unforgettable seven days of his life. It had romance, it had mystery, and it had action. In short it was a cocktail of genres.

Mr. K took out a gun and checked if it loaded. “Let’s go”, He said.

“I thought this was a truce.” Joe spoke out.

“Well that, my boy, depends on what your lady love has in mind”

“She called this truce. Didn’t she?” Asked Joe after they alighted.

“Don’t take me for a fool, boy. I won’t be fooled by her sweet voice.” He turned to his men and said “check the surroundings”.

That is when Joe saw how many men Mr. K had brought with him. There were at least ten men. All of them armed. All but two of them walked away. Walking at gunpoint to the church entrance, he told himself ‘it all began here, it might as well end here.’

Through the large door, he saw her once again at the far end of the church. She wasn’t kneeling this time, rather she was sitting. At the left end of the first bench on the left side.

“We meet, finally”, Lisa spoke out without turning around.

How does she do it? Joe wondered. Before he could say something Mr. K spoke out. “Too afraid to show me your face, girl?”

“It is not me who is afraid. It is you, of me” Lisa stood up and turned around.

“Really?”

Lisa started walking. “You are here as I demanded. Doesn’t that say something?”

Lisa stopped at the end of the aisle. She had the floppy disk on one hand and on the other..... Joe was stunned to see it. She was holding a gun, with finger on the trigger. It must be the one he saw at the villa. Her eyes met with Joe.

Mr. K did not flinch. He pressed the gun against Joe’s face. “You don’t listen to warnings, do you? Now drop the gun and hand over the disk to me.”

“I’m sorry, Lisa”

“No, no, no. I am the one who should apologize. Not you. You are in this situation because of me.”

“Shut up you love birds. I don’t have time for your nonsense. Give me the disk, Lisa.”

“I’ll do you one better. I’ll put a hole in it”. Lisa stretched her hands forward and pressed the gun to the disk.

“No, no”. Mr. K yelled.

“What?” Joe was absolutely baffled. Lisa said she would destroy the disk contained evidence against him and he said no? What is happening?

“This is both the key to your salvation and your damnation. Isn’t it. If it’s with you it’s your salvation. But in the wrong hands it is your damnation.”

From the look on Mr. K’s face Joe could see that Lisa was telling the truth. But how does she know all this? Someone else put his thoughts into words.

“How do you know all this, girl?”

“Now that, is the question. Isn’t it? But before I answer that, I need some answers. Why did you kill my parents? ”

“Why are you stalling?”

“I’m not stalling. I want to know. I have asked you before. Answer me or I blow a hole in this thing.”

“It seems you are out of options.” Joe interjected.

“Shut up boy. You want to hear it, girl? Then hear it. But I warn you. You are going to regret asking this of me.

Your father and mother. They were no saints. They worked for me. One of my oldest and best. One fine day they came to me and tell

me they want to quit. They said their daughter will know the truth about them if they continue. They even promised me they would cause me no trouble.

But come on, I couldn't allow that. They wanted to quit. What if one day they decide they want to come clean? So I had them killed. You know what? You are the reason they are dead. You. You happy now?"

Lisa remained mum. She walked to the nearest bench and sat down. Joe was confused. Lisa was acting like she just heard it all for the first time. But she already knew all of it. She had heard it from her parents.

That is when it dawned upon him that Lisa is doing it for Mr. K. She is playing him. She is indeed stalling him. But for what exactly.

"I did warn you", and he was falling for it. "Now give me the disk"

"Joe first". Lisa stood up stone faced.

"Okay kid, walk to your girlfriend." He commanded Joe. "Go on"

Joe walked with quick strides.

"Forgive me". Lisa said as and when Joe approached her. Joe felt her palm on his cheeks. She shifted her gaze to the disk in her hand

and tossed it to Mr. K who caught it effortlessly. Then she began untying Joe.

Mr. K put the disk in his jacket pocket. “Thank you Lisa. When I came here, I was actually thinking of a truce but you dug your graves when you asked me for the confession. Nice meeting you. But I’m afraid it’s time to bid adieu.”

Three guns pointed at Joe and Lisa by the time he was finished. Joe swiftly snatched the gun from Lisa and aimed at Mr. K.

“Don’t be a schmuck, Joe. You know this place is surrounded by my men. We both outnumber you and outgun you.”

“Do you know what happens to people remain unchallenged at the top for long. They become overconfident and sloppy. So have you.”

“Drop your weapons. Hands in the air. You have been surrounded.” Police officers marched in through doors of the church. In seconds the place was swarming with cops.

“You were right. I was stalling you. For them. Now you will rot in prison, answering for your crimes including killing my parents.”

Mr. K took out the disk and broke it into two halves. “You don’t have any evidence that I killed your parents and I just destroyed what you had against me and it was impossible to copy it.”

Lisa stood there unflinchingly.

“Oh, don’t bother yourself with that it was just a decoy. And this whole place is bugged.” The officer who seemed to be in charge announced.

“I will make you suffer for this.” Mr. K and his men dropped their weapons. The officers stepped forth and cuffed them.

“You continue to surprise me” Joe whispered in her ears as they started walking outside.

“You must be mad at me. Will you ever forgive me?”

“Mad? Yeah. But shouldn’t I be the one who should be apologizing. I mean, I messed up your plans.”

“You didn’t mess up anything. You actually became the cornerstone. ”

“Really?”

“Yeah”

“How so?”

Before Lisa could answer to that she was interrupted by the sound of a gunfire. The next thing she sees is Joe lying on the floor with blood coming out of him.

CHAPTER 18

IT'S NEVER THE END

LISA stepped on the accelerator as Joe's favourite dark blue sedan gained on the weary old truck that struggled to make the uphill journey. She was now more at ease driving the sedan than she was the first time she drove it from the church to Jolly villa, with Joe right beside. Her head shot towards the empty passenger seat. It had been four months and four days since that dreadful day. Everything else fell out so perfect that day. She would have loved an icing on the cake. But she didn't know the icing would have the taste of blood.

Lisa felt responsible. She realized she made a mistake when she left him at the apartment the night she learned the truth about her

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parents. She should have known that he would come after her. She should not have tried to keep him in the dark.

That night when she left the apartment she really didn't have any idea on what she was going to do next. Even though she wrote she would take care of everything, she didn't have anything in mind at that time but a confidence that it was possible.

“If you really want to do something, you will definitely find a way to do it.” Her father used to say.

The one thing that she was certain that day was that she was going to Jolly villa. All of this had begun there. May be she would be able find a way to end it there as well. May be there was something they overlooked. She had hope, a lot of it.

Like a mad woman, she ripped apart the whole place. She had remembered that they had abandoned the search after they had found the floppy disk. She had hoped to find something, anything and she did. Stashed inside an old torn file, a photograph of a man. A random shot taken without his knowledge. In an unknown urge, she flipped it.

Shankar Nath

New anti-narcotics squad chief

Watch out for him

Something crossed her mind at that point. She could actually go to the police now. Earlier, when she speculated her parents' death was a murder, she had thought they would only consider it as the fantasies of an orphaned girl. But now, she had enough evidence to interest the police. And that is what she did. She went to the police.

“We were in of a new lead that could help us with the investigation into the drug mafia in the area, and this is just what we needed.” The narcotics officer said after he examined the disk. “You see the contents of this disk is not only evidence against the person who is after you but also what he needs to run his business. The person who is responsible for all drug activities in the area calls himself Mr. K. We really don't have much on him. No photo, not even his real name.”

It was the officer's idea to use the disk to lure him. It was as per his instructions Lisa called Mr. K and made a deal. When Mr. K said he had Joe, the only thing she could do was go forward with the plan and hope it Joe remains unharmed. But, that didn't happen. The image of Joe lying on the floor bathed in blood horrified her once again. One of Mr. K's men outside the church, who was still breathing had tried please his master.

“Joe, wake up. We are almost there.”

“Thank you my dear.” Joe said as he sat upright on the back seat.

“You could have slept some more if you had told me where we are going.”

“You do realize how surprise works, Right? How am I supposed to surprise you on your birthday, if I tell you where we are going? I would have drove myself if that kid had stopped crying and let me sleep on the flight. Stop the car now. I am not sitting at the back.”

“Do you want to drive?”

“I’ll leave that to you, for the time being.”

That journey to the hospital in the back of a police van with Joe lying on her lap was probably the only time in her life she had ever asked, “Couldn’t we go any faster?” Standing in front of the operation theatre waiting for the doctors to come out and give some pleasant news seemed to take forever.

“Are you going to wash it or are you planning on keeping that as a souvenir?” Joe asked looking at Lisa’s blood stained kurti while she stood beside his bed in the ICU.

“I might” She answered, trying to laugh with tears already flowing from her eyes.

“Okay, stop now”

“What is there to surprise me here?”

“We are not there yet. We need to take a little hike.”

“Okay, now I get it. This is revenge, isn’t it? For making you all that way to my special place”

“Oops” Joe made a face.

“What”

“Nothing. You are free to think of anything, as long as you are walking.”

Joe and Lisa walked through the woods, making their way through the knee high shrubs. It was evening, almost sunset.

“Where are we going, Joe?” Lisa felt the place familiar. Very familiar. But she had not been there before.

“Patience, Lisa, patience”

Lisa shot a ‘not so funny’ look at him.

Lisa could not believe what she was seeing. “Oh, my God” Lisa found herself in a relatively tree less area with short grass and tiny yellow flowers. In the corner of her eye she saw a fallen tree trunk. She was at her special place. What amazed her more was that she arrived there through a whole different route.

“How did you...”

“Ask, and it will be given to you. Seek, and you will find. Knock, and it shall be opened for you.”

“Mathew 7:7”. Lisa added

“That I don’t know”

Once again they sat on the fallen tree trunk gazing at the setting sun.

“Did you plan the timing too?” Lisa asked.

“No, that is just a coincidence.”

“You really surprised me”

“I’m not exactly finished.”

“Well, what are you waiting for?”

Joe fished into his jacket pocket and took out a colourfully wrapped gift and handed it to Lisa.

“Happy Birthday”

“Thank you, my dear”

Lisa gently unwrapped it. It was a book. Her face lit up as she read the title.

Things I never told her

JOE MARTIN

“You finished it, huh?” Lisa said admiring the cover. She never told him she had seen the manuscript.

“What?”

“I must confess. I had read some part of the manuscript. You should not have told me your password if you were planning on keeping this secret.”

“Yeah, why didn’t you say anything?”

“I was waiting for you to tell me. At least this time you told me before it was too late.” Lisa giggled.

“Very funny. Go on, open it. That is the first printed copy. I had my publisher make sure I get the very first copy.”

Lisa opened the book. She skimmed through most of the front matter, publisher’s name and address, copy right information, ISBN, edition notice and finally reached the dedication.

This is for you, Lisa.

If it wasn't for you, this book would not have been written. I promise to love you till my heart stops and if possible, beyond that.

"It's beautiful. Thank you" Lisa said.

They looked each other in the eye and slowly the gap between their faces evaporated into a kiss as the setting sun shone upon them.

Twelve Forty-two North Seventy-five Seventy-three East

The End

Twelve Forty-two North Seventy-five Seventy-three East

Send feedback to

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