

THEY SAY LOVE HURTS...BUT DOES IT REALLY?

Dear Love
I know
it hurts



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Dear Love,
I Know It Hurts...

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- *They say Love Hurts, but does it?*

Prologue

Surprise!!

“First Love hurts right?” I asked. “Love, in itself hurts, be it the first, second, third or the nth” my best friend replied.

“Why do you think so?” I asked her again. “That’s because my dear, once a great man said, there’s no true love, without true pain,” she replied.

Do you remember *your first love*? The first time you fell for someone? Not for their beauty though, although they may be as beautiful as a Daisy, or perhaps like the morning star, but falling for their true self, their true image. How did it feel? I am sure it was beautiful as though you’ve been taken into a place filled with rosebuds and lavender scent filling your heart, soul and eventually your whole being. You see, that’s the beauty about First Love, it always ignites, a kind of energy within you, an energy that is hidden somewhere deep within the roots of your heart, all it takes for it to burst forth is the right pair of heart to connect with, and once it happens it’s like as though you’ve been born again with a new heart to love and to be loved. But the question here is, are you willing? Are you willing to love? Or I should say are you willing to be loved? Or is should say are you willing to be loved again, like you have been loved the first time?

It was the mid-summer with the scorching sun, spreading his wide wings across the horizons of the deep blue skies, the clouds floating like cotton candies far above this chaos of the earth; Stacy took a break from her work(it was a much needed one), the last project we’ve done was a clutter(I mean there was too much of stress, but yeah we’ve chosen this job and we

need to strive, there's no other choice); however, we had completed it successfully(the client was happy though), and that's it, we decided to take a pause, at least for a few days.

Stacy and I graduated from the same college and work in the same company (unfortunately, psst), despite being opposite of each other we are the best of friends (opposites attract!), and yeah we aren't couples(Hey! You guys are dating? Nah man! We are just friends! I'm fed up of explaining it to each and every one, why don't you guys understand! hmm).

We sat on the couch in Stacy's living room; the hot breeze from the windows, wrapping our skin. After the work we had done recently in the office, as I've already said (and now with a total conviction we've decided) that we need a pause and go on some vacation at least for a couple of days (perhaps a week or so, maybe a road-trip or such).

"So, where shall we go?" I asked munching the cookies that Stacy had placed upon the table.

"Wherever peaceful," Stacy said her chocolate eyes glued to the laptop screen and her long fingers slowly pulling her hair behind her ear, which made her look attractive and that baby like face, immersed in innocence, depicting her as some princess.

"Do you have anything in mind?" I asked.

"I don't know Kevin, you decide something. I badly wanna come out of that robot factory at least for a couple of days," Stacy said referring to the organization we work for. *"Yeah me too,"* I said bursting out a chuckle.

The notification tone from Stacy's mobile interrupted our conversation *"I guess it's from mom,"* Stacy said placing the laptop on the sofa and walked towards the phone, her hair bouncing like ribbons with every step she took.

As she was looking at the screen, tears began to roll down her cheeks,(What happened!), sparkling as the sunshine fell on her face, her hands were trembling, and perspiration ran down her forehead.(she seemed tensed).

I wondered what the reason was, and walked towards her, “*Stacy what happened?*” I asked, but she wouldn’t spill out a word, (didn’t she hear me?), she started sobbing so vulnerably that I wasn’t able to control her, immediately I snatched the phone from her hand and began to read the message.

It was from Richard (what on earth made him text her now?) the message read like this: “*I miss you, Stacy. I want you back. I am sorry for whatever has happened between us*”. “I still love you,” “*Please give me a second chance,*” (That’s it, nothing more nothing less, precise and to the point, like he was always).

6 years ago...

Chapter 1

The First Glance

Stacy and I graduated from our senior high (with a good score obviously); we were agitated to go to college to pursue engineering (I mean, who wouldn't, that too in a renowned institution) many people said that engineering is a bit tough and it takes a lot of effort to complete it, but we(Stacy and I) pressed on, it is our dream to graduate as computer engineers, although we were a bit confused about the step we are about to take, we just went with the flow, and gave out our entrance exam.(and we cleared that!!)

Despite of doing our schooling in different institutes, surprisingly we got admitted into the same university (Surprise!! Stacy said as soon as she found out that we both are gonna be in the same university for four years-unfortunately).

Stacy and i lived just a few blocks away and we would meet quite often, either to binge-watch a show or to have a chat. We were and still are diverse in terms of our mentality (and almost in everything to be honest), she loves staying at home, and I love traveling, she loves spending time binge-watching and I am an avid reader (but she always makes me sit and watch some romantic dramas which only she likes, and if I would say no, you know what happens next, either she would hit me or she would put a silly face, most of the time it's the first, so to avoid all of these, I simply say a yes. Things we do for friendship).

Sometimes I still wonder how did we even become friends? (As a matter of fact, best-friends). Even with all the diversities in our thinking? Then I remembered, the famous theory of science which says, "Opposites always attract". And this friendship was so unexpected and unplanned that we never thought we would be the most important persons for each other in the course of time.

Sometimes the most unexpected friendships are the best ones, do you know why? Because you never know when and how you'll fall in friendship with each other; but when it happens, that'll be one of the best things that you would never want to let go of, there will be laughs, smiles, tears, mis

understandings but the friendship remains same. And if you found that friendship; never, I say, never let it go.

Anyway, the college bus stalled at the bus stop, and without wasting another moment we hurried towards it (Who wants to be late on the very first day of their college though!). There are quite a few of us from different departments in the bus, like Mechanical Engineering, Electronic Engineering, Computer Science, and a few more we were going to come across in our life out here (I saw their id cards so I could tell which branch they belonged to, P.S I am not a mind reader though).

The morning sun was hitting the windows like a ray of fire, As soon as the bus zoomed, people around began to mutter endlessly, how come people become so close with each other on the very first ride to their college? I wondered. I mean am a half- introvert and a half-extrovert (what's the exact term for that? Um...yeah...ambivert) yes am an ambivert, that doesn't mean I hate being around people, it depends upon my mood you know, and man! Am totally un-predictable (you can call me moody perhaps). At times I would be the most excited person in the room and other times I would be the most silent one (so silent that you would never notice my presence too, and sometimes I like being that way). Anyway, I put my Air Pods on and immersed myself in the soothing music fillings my ears (it feels like heaven!! And what else do you need beside a window seat!! A good music and the chilling air as your company and of course your BFF), Stacy sat beside me scrolling through her phone (busy girl) a smile sticking onto her lips and gradually adjusting her silky smooth hair that fell off due to the cold breeze that kissed her from the window.

The bus came to a halt after reaching a certain distance (no, we didn't reach the college yet); a band of musicians began to enter the bus, they looked sturdy and handsome and were carrying different musical instruments; I guess there's a mini piano, two guitars (is that a Fender! By the way, Fender is a guitar brand, in case you don't know), and a flute along with the entire equipment to set it up.

Amidst them was a person who would probably be in his 20's, he was tall and with a neat jaw-line, his fingers running between his sandy black hair and a slight smile curving his lips, his eyes were dusky and piercing that twinkled like crystals, he wore a black shirt, with sleeves folded till his elbows and chocolate brown trousers, his shirt neatly tucked and a black wrist-watch matching his outfit.

From the back-seat of the bus a person yelled at him and tossed something at him, it was his ID card, it fluttered and fell on Stacy. She didn't seem to bother, instead, she took the ID holding it between her finger tips and returned it to him, their eyes met (only for a few seconds maybe one or two ? or maybe more than that) neither of them spoke, it was just a casual *glance*, "Thanks" he said, in his low tone. Stacy didn't reply, the card still resting between her finger tips (that was so awkward), placing the card in his hand, from the corner of her eye, she read the name on the ID it read: *Richard Stephen- 2nd year, Computer Science.*

Present-Day...

Chapter 2

A Hidden Smile

'Do you know the irony of us-humans? We expect and crave to heal from the scars that hurt us badly enough to give us pain and still love those scars with all our heart, do you know why? Because those scars act as memories- bitter and painful, which neither you nor I could erase, although those scars don't appear on our physical body, but our soul and our heart weep deeply in silence, a silence that's much painful than words itself.'

Stacy still kept her gaze at the message that came moments ago from her Ex-Boyfriend (What a weird term right! A term, that reminds you of your past, a painful or perhaps a heart-wrenching past. Not only that, it takes you on a journey that you would never wanna go again). Her eyes depicted a kind of pain, or perhaps it's more than that (yes it was); it seemed as though there are a few (or perhaps a lot of) questions hiding behind those eyes, questions that were left un-answered, or maybe un-heard.

It has been six years since she encountered that heartbreak, six long years to be honest, that heartbreak which left a scar upon her soul and maybe her heart too, and perhaps also taught her how to live with that pain, although it hurts her deeply.

I guess some part of her that wanted and still wants to meet and talk to Richard, and not only that, but that part perhaps still loves him; but maybe she is afraid and perhaps isn't ready to face him; maybe she did not expect that there would come a day or a moment where she had to think before meeting or talking to him.(I mean who would).

For the past three years, there wasn't any kind of contact between them (neither a single text nor a call). She portrayed (or I should say pretended) as though she didn't miss him, only the damp pillow and those sleepless nights knew the truth, but her heart wouldn't spill that out. Have you ever missed someone you love, so badly that your heart began to whisper something into you? An advice maybe? Or maybe have you ever fallen in love with someone so dearly that you never thought or I should say you never imagined or maybe you weren't prepared to miss them, but it happened, how would you feel, you feel like you've been left alone in a dungeon full of hopelessness and misery. Am I right?

I quivered Stacy who stood frozen, her eyes wide and the flow of tears wouldn't cease; on spur of a moment she collapsed onto the ground, lying unconscious (Thank God she wasn't hurt). My mind went blank, my heart raced like a mighty storm.(What happened!!)

I tried waking her up (Stace! Wake up! I said patting her cheek) but she didn't respond, I took some water and sprinkled them onto her face (perhaps this would help), No, It didn't, there wasn't any response; immediately I took out my phone and called for an ambulance, as it arrived we made our way towards the hospital.

As soon as we entered the hospital, in no time, Stacy was taken towards the emergency ward (still the demon called nausea holding onto her), meanwhile I completed the formalities at the reception (my hands were shaking like hell, I couldn't fathom what's happening around, everything felt as if it stopped, like as if the earth itself had stopped spinning, leaving me alone, the voices around me began to vanish as if someone had hushed them off).

After what felt like an eternity, a doctor came towards me. I jumped up from my seat immediately. His appearance said he would probably be in his late 50s, with silver hair and moustache, he smiled at me and introduced himself as *Dr. Stanley*; we shook hands and introduced myself. It was a firm handshake, but that didn't bother me, all I wanted was to see Stacy, to talk to her.

"Please step in Mr. Kevin," he said, leading me towards his cabin(the sweetness in his voice didn't work either).

The office was well furnished, with various kinds of indoor plants and a sweet fragrance of jasmine enveloping the room, his desk was neat and well arranged (but that didn't help me to calm down, I wanted to see Stacy, what happened to her, where is she?) Dr. Stanley sensed the tension in my eyes and motioned me to take a seat, I did as said, my heart was racing, I don't know what to expect, (or what not to). Dr Stanley sat before me holding a green file in his hand *"Did this happen before Mr. Kevin?"* he asked, with his eyes still sticking onto the file. I didn't give heed to him at first; my mind ran back to Stacy, her weary face and the way she buckled onto the ground those pictures flashed in front of me; he repeated his question, this time looking straight into my eyes. I realized I was in a world of my own, *"No doctor, I guess this is the first time, but*

may I know what happened to her?" i asked. (I'm losing my cool, shouldn't i?).

"She had an emotional breakdown, but don't worry she's alright now, okay?" he replied sternly. (Hearing that, my heart calmed down). I nodded. *"This happens to most of the young people, either due to over-stress or anxiety about some-thing. Is she bothered about something at the work-place or anything like that?"* He asked.

Yes! it's not *something*, but its *someone*, I wanted to tell, but my conscience wouldn't let me do that, I couldn't speak to him about Richard or the message he sent (which is the reason for her being here, obviously) and what would I tell him though? I thought (I don't have an answer; there are few questions for which not only Stacy, but also I need answers for). So I just nodded my head, informing him that she was working on a project and she didn't have enough sleep lately. Some part of that, being the truth.

Dr. Stanley nodded, his thumb running over his eye-brow. *"Okay, It's quite common for people who work in a stressful environment, there's nothing to worry I guess, but yeah we can't take a chance,"* he said and began to scribble something on the paper; after he finished writing, he placed the note in my hand and told me to keep her on that medication for a week. I nodded in agreement (wondering are these meds really gonna help her?) we both started to leave the room and headed towards the room where Stacy was resting.

As we made our way towards her room, *Dr. Stanley* said with a smile on his face : *"Take good care of your friend, more than any medication I think she needs someone to look after and care for her, and I'm sure you would do that"*, *"Yeah,"* I said for which he just shot back a gentle smile, his eyes depicting a genuine concern.

We stepped in, the room illuminated with the afternoon sun shining brighter; Stacy woke up slowly, her eyes which always were enlightened with a kind of spark, now looked weary, as if something had sucked away all the energy from them. *Dr.*

Stanley looked at her with a delightful smile, for which Stacy gave out a slight grin in response.

I walked towards Stacy and took a seat beside her; she sat up on the bed, her feeble eyes diving into mine, there were no words between us, except for an unwelcoming silence having its way. I held her arm and pressed her knuckles gently, giving her the “I am-with-you” gesture (but, I can’t see her like this, it hurts me a lot and to be precise I miss her- the real her; a lot).

Glancing towards Dr. Stanley, I enquired regarding her discharge, “*You can take her home right away, but make sure she follows the medication that I’ll give you on time, okay?*” he replied.

I assured *Dr. Stanley* that I will take care of her and give her the medication on the dot, I helped Stacy to get up; she went towards the wash basin and splashed a handful of water upon her face, not uttering a single word. A while later she returned towards us, suddenly a nurse came in, she looked towards Dr. Stanley, “*I’ll come, just give me a minute,*” Dr. Stanley said, motioning her to leave, nodding her head the nurse walked away closing the door behind her. “*Look Stacy, there’s nothing to worry, okay, you’ll be alright in a day or two, take care and if there’s any problem drop me a call, okay*” Dr. Stanley said. (How many “okay’s” will he say by the way, never-mind) “*Yeah sure, thank you so much,*” Stacy said, (it was more like a whisper) and before we started leaving towards the reception *Dr. Stanley* pulled out his visiting card and placed it in my hand, “*Don’t hesitate to call me, if you need any help, gimme a call, okay?*” He said. “*Sure, thank you so much,*” I said and walked towards the pharmacy and bought the medicine that he had prescribed for Stacy.

Stacy was waiting in the lobby. I thought of informing this to Stacy’s parents but didn’t want to upset them by telling this news, (let me do it later). Stacy was sitting on that steel chair, with her eyes closed, and her silky hair hanging loose (she seemed weak). I walked towards her and took a seat beside, “*Don’t worry, the doctor said animals will get well soon,*” I

said, trying to lighten the mood. She gave out a slight grin, ignoring the sarcasm in my statement (Effort in vain).

“Kevin, Can we stay for a while?” Stacy said her voice crackling. I nodded, putting my arm around her and sat in silence. Sometimes you know, being a best friend doesn't only mean having endless chats and making memories, it's *staying* with each other in the highs and lows. And as we were sitting, we came across a man who looked frazzled and nervous, pacing rapidly across the corridor. He seemed tensed (or perhaps worried).

In the meantime, a nurse came to him *“Don't you worry sir, your wife will be alright,”* she said with a smile. I wonder how they can beam, at such chaotic conditions.

After the nurse left, he walked over (with that expression of worry or perhaps excitement) and sat down beside me, I smiled at him and asked what happened to his wife (trying to make a new friend!) and why was he so tensed, , *“My wife is going to have a baby and I'm a bit tensed about it. Nothing too serious, it's just that this is my first child, you know,”* he said, smiling to himself. I could see the sparks of joy in his eyes as he spilled those words. As we were chatting, a nurse arrived (not the one who left though), announcing him that his baby has been born and it is a girl, his eyes bloomed like a rosebud hearing the news, he jumped up from his seat and hurried towards the room leaving all his agitation behind him.

Watching that man's joy over his first child, Stacy's eyes lit up, as though someone had just woke up the memory that's been dozed off, somewhere in the back of her mind. A tiny smile curved upon her lips, It seemed as though her mind or maybe her heart had reminded her of that very first time she spoke to Richard glancing straight into his pitch black eyes, and what a delight it is.

“The Joy of first times will always have a special place reserved in our hearts right?” Stacy said, bursting forth that *hidden smile* of her.

The beginning...

Chapter 3

A New Acquaintance

I stepped down from the bus and hung on for Stacy who was getting her stuff (Come on man! Be quick), the students were in a hurry; there was an endless chatter all around, along with the morning tunes of the tiny birds filling the atmosphere. As Stacy stepped down from the bus, we made our way towards the entrance; she wore a dark blue frock, with her hair tied in a pony-tail that surged as she took her steps, and a cute light pink back-pack, hanging onto her shoulders which added unto her elegance.

The college was filled with students in vibrant informal outfits (as though we are having a colour party), some were having chats with their parents and others just glancing around the college premises (while others taking selfies).

There were welcome invitations all over the college to us fresher's, with the trees dancing around to the music of the gentle breeze, as if an orchestra playing a welcome melody to everyone who steps in.

We came across the Computer Science block (there were bold letters printed out saying "CS Block") we made our way towards it, as we were walking we saw few people standing and having conversations, some were wearing blazers and few people were in informal outfits with students standing beside them, some parents got themselves busy giving instructions to their children, and the children got busy in ignoring them.

As I was checking out the college, there seemed a banner painted out in white and blue with bold letters printed upon it,

which read: *WELCOME TO THE ORIENTATION DAY!!!* I recollected that the college management had sent me an email regarding this, probably a week ago; but unfortunately, I didn't inform this to mom and dad, (screw me!) Should I inform this to mom now? If I tell her now, she's definitely gonna yell at me.(come on Kevin be a daredevil)

However I called mom without wasting another second; but she did not answer (thank goodness), I opened the SMS app, "*Hello mom, call me ASAP*" I typed in and added a smiley emoji, before hitting the send button (the emoji will do its thing, hopefully).

As we continued our pace towards the block, a person walked towards us, with his dress sense i could tell he was a lecturer; his hair looked precise, his light blue formal shirt neatly pressed and tucked into the black trousers depicted a wave of decency. "*To which department do you belong to?*" He asked his eyes directly gazing at us.(the voice sounded authoritative)

"*Computer Science*" we replied in unison.

"*What about your parents, aren't they coming?*" he asked.

"*Oh, We are sorry sir, I mean we didn't know that today is an Orientation Day*" I replied.

"*I informed them just now sir,*" I said and assured him that they will come in a short while. Nodding his head, he walked away without dropping another word.

"*When did you tell mom and dad about this?*" Stacy asked.

"*Just now when you were checking out all the boys around,*" I said sarcastically.

"*I wasn't checking anyone!*" Stacy protested.

"*See there someone's glancing at you,*" I said.

"*Kevin, It's enough,*" Stacy said, making a poker face.

"*OK wait, I'll just come,*" I said and took out my phone.

I called Mom knowing (surely) that she didn't see my text message, I knew that she will be in school at this hour since

she is a teacher, and that she will be angry at me for not informing about this earlier.(too many conclusions at once right! but being her son, I know her).

After a series of dials, mom answered my call.

"Yes Kevin!" she said.

"Mom, are you busy?" I asked.

"Yeah, kind of, but what's the matter?" she asked.

"Mom, there's an Orientation Day in our college," I said.

"So what do you want me to do now?" Mom asked, she sounded a bit distracted. *"Can you come over, like right now?"* I asked. There was a long silence. *"I guess, no"* she replied. *"Why don't you ask dad about that?"* mom said.

"Mom, you know right, Dad will be busy at this time?" I said.(actually i was afraid to call him, i mean i already know that he would say No! and in spite of knowing that and still I call him, I would be the biggest dumbass ever, who would want to be that, do you? no, right)

"Yeah and so am i, and I've already told you if there is anything of this sort you need to first inform me, how careless you are" She screeched at me.

"Sorry mom, I forgot" I replied.

An ocean of tantrums made their way towards me. (You deserve this Kevin, my mind shot back).

"Mom please, can you come or not," I said, trying to sound as polite as possible. (have you noticed something ? that, whenever we need something from our parents, especially mother's, we become sort of extra-polite right? Don't you think that, what do you say?).

"No, I can't make it now; I have a plethora of classes to take. Moreover, now we don't need to come, because you're a responsible son I guess" she said pressing on the last part.

"Yeah, mom," I said.

“So there you go, now bye; enjoy your day and take care” she said. *“And one more thing, come right back to home after college, don’t try to roam the whole city like you used to do in your school days,”* she said(you see that’s how mothers are, even in those tantrums they shot at us, there’ll be that care always hidden inside, and you can’t escape from it).

“OK mom, sure. Bye” I said and the line went dead.

I told Stacy about the conversation I had with mom, that they couldn’t be able to make it to college and all that other jazz (including the tantrums). She too said pretty much the same thing; that her parents are busy and are not able to come. And now, here we are the two responsible children, on the very first day of our college, with dreams, plans, visions, goals and of course the sudden surprises that are waiting in there for us.

The sound from the speakers resonated across the ground informing all the students and parents to assemble in the college auditorium, as the Orientation Day will begin in a few moments.

We followed the faculty members who were ushering us towards the auditorium, as we kept our pace, Stacy pulled me towards the college canteen to have some snacks, unleashing the food monster in her.

“We didn’t come here to eat. This is our first day here man!” I said.

“It doesn’t matter if we just take a bite or two, anyways we don’t have any lecture today,” she replied.

“Fine, I’ll come don’t drag me.” I said rolling my eyes.

The food was good, although not too delicious, but it was worth a try. (Stacy ordered a pack of fries and I too ordered pretty much the same, except as for me, I ordered a mini sized burger along with the fries, i guess now you got to know who the “food monster” is).

After having those snacks, we stepped into the auditorium filled with students and their parents. As we hunted for empty seats, we found few in the middle row. As we sat and made

ourselves comfortable, a person came onto the stage and asked all the parents to occupy the first rows, and the students to sit at the remaining back rows. We arranged ourselves in the seats again, after a while the faculty separated girls in one row and boys in the other as there are three rows in the auditorium. Stacy went and sat with the girls and I sat in the boys row.

I introduced myself to the students sitting next to me and began to have some small talk. I looked around for Stacy and found her chatting with some girl next to her. Then a person stepped onto the stage and informed us to put our phones on silent mode, as the dean of the college will be speaking shortly, I didn't give heed to him, suddenly my phone rang noisily; bringing everyone's attention towards me, which I obviously hate, they eyed me as if looking at an alien.

Immediately I put my phone on silent mode and gave an angry stare at Stacy, as she was the one who called me.

The speech begun by the Dean introducing himself, he began by telling about the college, the courses they offered, and the merit percentage in the college. He also spoke about the different firms and companies that came in the campus placements and how most of the students from various departments got placed in those companies and are now living a fancy life. I bet half of the congregation except parents weren't listening to it, because almost everyone's head was immersed into their smartphones.

As the speech concluded, everyone bolted towards the college canteen. I took a seat and held on for Stacy, she came after a while and started to cackle at me.

"What's so funny?" I asked.

"Someone seemed interested in you lately," she said, raising her eyebrows.

"Oh! Really !Nice joke" I said sarcastically

"Yes, there was a girl who sat next to me during the session and she was asking about you." She said, taking a seat before me.

“And she looks cute” Stacy whispered.

“How does she know me?” I asked.

“Um, that when I called you, your phone rang loudly in the auditorium and you stood up awkwardly right?” She said.

“Yeah,” I said rolling my eyes.

“So at that time she saw you,” She said and laughed at me.

“So what’s so funny in that?” I replied.

“You know what she said?” she said.

“What?” I asked.

“She was telling me that you look cute,” she said with a giggle. *“You and cute! She desperately needs an eye check-up dude whoever she was,”* she said.

“Very funny,” I said and started having my sandwich, ignoring her sarcasm.

After completing our snacks, we went on an orientation of the college. The labs were well equipped and so were the classrooms. I loved the college library, it had the aroma of old books, I felt nostalgic, as if the books seducing me to have a look at them; it was large with numerous books in different genres, like fiction, non-fiction, contemporary, historical, self-help and probably academic books, which I wouldn’t care about.

We came to the computer laboratory, it was bright, and the equipment looked brand new. Stacy was thrilled with her eyes wide open as if she saw an angel; she loves technical stuff, especially computers.

We ended our day, with the faculty informing us about the upcoming classes, *“You guys will be notified before-hand about the classes, so for today just enjoy yourselves. You people can leave”* one of the lecturers said and dismissed the crowd.

After that, we just took a walk around the college enjoying the fresh air soothing our skin, as well as getting an idea about its

whereabouts.

“So where’s this girl who was “asking” about me,” I asked looking at Stacy, we were walking around the basketball ground, some students were having a match.

“Don’t know I just saw her in the auditorium. Maybe she went off,” Stacy said.

“I guess so,” I said.

After a while, we boarded the bus and headed back home, wondering who this “cute girl” would be. *A new acquaintance* ? Perhaps, I don’t know.

Chapter 4

Love @ First Sight

Days went on like passing clouds, with each day having its own gift to shower, the people I met here, the mentors and most importantly my BFF, Stacy; Although I met her at a young age, an age of innocence, this journey of life with her felt(and still feels) beautiful. I don’t know what would I’ve been and I would have done without her presence in my life, yeah I agree we fight a lot; but those silly fights are the reason

why we stick and hold on to each other, and that's the most beautiful part about us, I mean although there were a few, or perhaps a lot of mis-understandings between us, but neither she nor I left each other's presence.

"Come soon Stacy! Else we'll be late!" I said glancing towards Stacy, *"Yeah, coming"* Stacy replied, with a childish voice. *"By the way what were you doing?"* I asked. *"Look what I've found"* Stacy said, flashing her mobile screen to me, her eyes glittering like stars, the screen flashed the picture of pups, feeding around their mother with their innocent little eyes shining like crystals. *"They're cute!"* I exclaimed. *"Okay, let's go and sorry, you know right I love animals"* Stacy said apologetically. *"Yeah it's quite natural, animals love animals we can't do anything about that"* I said adding a chuckle. *"Shall we go in Mr. Kevin?"* she asked ignoring my comment (and plastering a slight slap upon my cheek, and by the way it hurts, ouch!).

Entering in, we could see quite a lot of students muddled in conversations, greeting and introducing each other. Some of them were involved busily playing games on their mobiles, and few clicking pictures (or God knows what they are doing). We fished around for an empty bench, almost the whole classroom looked pre-occupied, a while later we found one in the middle row, we went and arranged ourselves (comfortably)

Later on, a person stepped in (I guess he's one of our lecturers); at once silence swept through the room. We all stood up to greet him; he greeted us back and motioned us to take our seats. His greeting sounded as if a robot that was pre-programmed to greet, rather than a welcoming one. He wore a brown shirt and white pants with a serious look plastering upon his face and his brown eyes scanning the whole room (are you a detective!); there wasn't a shadow of a smile visible upon his face (not even a slight one). We all sat down without blurting out a word. Unfortunately, that wasn't a good start for the first day of college.

"My name is Henry, and I will be taking Engineering Drawing for y'all". He said and explained to us that we need to get the

drawing equipment from the next class without which he wouldn't allow us in.

“And most importantly, No one should come late to my class.” He said and started erasing the board.

As soon as he said that, a girl arrived at the door, *“May I come in sir”* she said with a hasty voice. It was Julie; she looked amazing, with her shoulder length short hair, and those shiny eyes blinking like fairy lights, I thought. (That's the first time I've seen her, although she didn't notice me, I felt like there's a kind of connection between us, it felt like time had stopped running just for us, the voices around me began to vanish, and so were the people around, leaving us both alone in a world of magic, I know I sound a bit childish, but that's what love does to us right! It plays with our feelings and emotions, we become a totally different person when our love whom we call a “crush” walks in, but there is that beauty hidden in that innocence somewhere deep within and that is the most purest form of love. Perhaps this is what is called “Love at first sight”).

“You are late to the first class?” Mr Henry bawled at her, and obviously, bringing me back to the present.

“I am sorry sir; I was a bit lost.” She replied, with an innocent voice like a kid. (Oh! how cute she is).

After giving her an angry stare, he let her in *“Okay, you can come in, but don't repeat”* he said with that frown still sticking onto his face.

She seemed tensed (who wouldn't by the way, after that “mini lecture”), she was looking for a place to sit, her glittery eyes scanning the whole classroom, she came towards Stacy and sat beside her (man! I was just a few feet away from her, my heart began to drum, I couldn't look at her, I wanted to but I couldn't, they both were laughing by themselves silently though, and yeah, that smile was pure and beautiful).

Julie whispered something into Stacy's ears, her flowery lips parting slowly like waves; Stacy giggled a bit and introduced

me to her.

“Meet Kevin, my best friend,” she said.

“What the ...” Julie blurted out loudly.(damn!)

The entire classroom heard her, including Mr Henry (yeah he did), and without any deferment, he demanded us to stand up and leave the class. His eyes filled with anger. We tried to convince him to forgive us, but it was a futile effort. So giving up our efforts we left the class, silently, without saying a word. (Another. Great. Start. Wow!).

“Shall we go to the canteen?” I asked glancing Stacy, she shot back an angry stare (And by that she means it was a strict NO! You ask me how I know that? C’mon man, we are best friends, I just know).

“Nah! Let’s wait here till the class gets over,” Stacy said and was staring towards the wall, while Julie stood beside Stacy (her Daisy flavoured perfume filling the air). The class finished after a few minutes (Actually after a long time) and Mr.Henry warned us not to repeat this. As he was about to make a move a person walked towards him, they exchanged handshakes,(he’s one of the faculty members) and as he saw us *“You’re fresher’s, and you are standing outside the class?”* he said (as though it was a crime). We wouldn’t say a word but remained silent.

He motioned us to get in, with a welcoming smile(Wait a second he was joking with us! Man!!)

He introduced himself saying *“Hello students, my name is Clinton, and I’ll be taking C Language and maybe other subject too, don’t worry I’m not gonna bore you in beginning itself, today is just an introductory class,”* he said.

Mr. Clinton was friendly with us, and he looked young, maybe 25 or 30, more than a lecturer he looked like one of our seniors, his words were captivating, he began telling us about the subjects we will be encountering in this semester, he also said that there will be technical and non-technical clubs that’ll conducted soon (now, that’s something interesting), and the

official circular for that will be released mostly the next week (probably, he added at the end, it was like “the official circular will be released next week proolly”). He also said that every student must enrol themselves in any of those clubs. He also informed us that there will be a voting system to select the Class Representative(who cares!), and whoever will be selected among us for that position, their responsibility is to take information about who all will be participating in the clubs and other programs soon.

“There’s no need to hurry you will be here for four years, I’ll explain to you what all you will come across in these four years,” he said.

“We have a semester system in our college, which means you will have your main exams every six months. In those six months, the first five months will be allocated for syllabus completion, and the other one month you’ll be having the semester exams. Is that clear?” he said.

We agreed and all the students started asking about what all the different kinds of clubs we are going to have (ignoring about the exams).

“Shall we enrol into the non-technical clubs?” I said looking at Stacy.

“Ah No, you know right, I’m interested into Tech, let’s go into that” said Stacy.

“Actually you’re right” I said.

“Told you,” Stacy said.

“What would I do without you,” I said glancing at her.

“Now if you’re done with your appreciation, shall we concentrate on the class?” Stacy said, her eyes glued towards the board. She’s always like that, a Picasso at hiding her emotions, but I believe there would come a day, a magical day, where all the emotions which she’s trying to hide would detonate like streams of the mighty oceans, which none in the world or not even her-self would be able to restrain. And when that happens it would be illuminating.

“What kind of clubs we can expect in Non-technical?” Julie asked the lecturer.

“There are a vast number of choices from which you can opt, I’ll give you the details regarding that, there are people allocated for that from whom you can get the information regarding non-tech clubs,” he said.

“Sir, could you please tell us more about the technical clubs?” Stacy asked.

Then he spoke about the diverse Technical Clubs that the management offers. *“Students rarely choose technical clubs and most often everyone will be choosing Non-technical, but if you want to join in tech clubs I’ll help you out coz I’m one of the co-ordinators of the tech club”*.

“Sure sir, thank you so much” Stacy replied.

“And if anyone else is interested, meet me after the class I’ll introduce you to the student co-ordinators, with whom you can catch up later,” he said.

Mr.Clinton’s class wasn’t that boring; we had laughs and talks about our dreams and plans we have for our future. Although the beginning wasn’t flowery, at least the end wasn’t bad.

Present Day...

Chapter 5

The Unexpected News

We returned home from the hospital, none of us spoke for a while. I mean what would we speak, even if we did so, that would eventually break Stacy's heart (again) and that's the thing I'm keeping Stacy away from. She had gone through a lot and I don't want to add anything onto it, so I remained silent (that's the best thing I can do, at least for now) "*Stace ... Why don't you get yourself dressed up,*" I said. She hesitated at first, but eventually she got up at once as though a robot and walked straight towards her room and shut the door(bang!!). After a while, Stacy came towards the living room. She wore a light yellow coloured Tee and a white long frock, her hair now neatly brushed, but her eyes were still the same, weary. She looked a bit energetic (only a bit), with a golden glow on her baby-like face and a light spark in her marble eyes. Its weird right, how we, humans try to cover up the gloom and pain on the inside by trying to add a little bit more make up(so it is called) to our outward self, and faking a smile while our soul still lies in pain. "*Take some rest Stace, I'll have a word with mom and dad,*" I said.(I meant her mom and dad)

"No Kevin, please don't do that, I don't wanna upset them," she said abruptly and went away.

But I wouldn't listen, while she went in, I took her phone that was placed on the table, thank goodness, I know her password;

I copied her mom's phone number and informed Stacy's mom about what had happened to her, and asked her to call on Stacy's number. Moments later her phone rang, Stacy came out and I answered it and put it on speaker.

"Hello mom!" she said trying to sound energetic.

"What happened Honey! Kevin told you were in the hospital" mom asked.

"No mom, nothing happened to me I am fine. Don't worry" she replied giving me an angry stare.

"What do you mean by don't worry. You were in the hospital, and you didn't even inform us!" Her mom said, her voice clearly resonating anger.

"Nothing to worry mom, the doctor said it's just due to over-stress." She said.

"Why do you stress yourself honey? Can't you take some rest?" mom said.

"I worked late at night mom, there was a client meeting and I was preparing for that, it's just the effect of that I guess". Stacy replied, obviously it was a lie.

"Hon, I know you work hard, but you also need to take care of yourself right," Her mom said, with concern in her voice.

"Yeah mom, I am sorry; I was just...um...I got involved into too many things, you know, so..." Stacy said.

"It's okay dear; I can understand, but don't strain yourself too much, take a break if possible," mom said.

"Sure," Stacy replied and remained silent. *"Mom,"* she said breaking the bar of silence. *"Yes dear? Is everything okay?"* mom asked, catching the weariness in Stacy's voice. *"Yeah, I just miss you guys,"* Stacy replied holding back her tears.

"We miss you too honey, I feel so empty without you. Why don't you come home for a few days?" Mom asked.

"Yeah mom will try; say my hello to dad," Stacy said.

“Sure sweetheart, you have no idea how much he miss you daily” Mom said. “I miss him too mom,” Stacy replied. “Isn’t he home?” Stacy asked. “He went to meet one of his friends I guess,” Mom said. “You know right he have a whole bunch of friends”. “Yeah” Stacy replied. There was silence on the both ends.

“Anyways take care of yourself,” Mom said. “Yeah mom you too,” Stacy replied.

“Love you,” Mom said.

“Love you too mom,” Stacy replied and the line went dead.

“I guess you had a good conversation?” I asked. Stacy nodded in response, she seemed a lot calmer now, maybe that’s what a small conversation with our loved ones does, it fills our soul with a kind of peace, a peace that lasts forever and a peace that can never be robbed, until we allow the thief called worry to do so.

After the call, Stacy was still reading that message, silently, perhaps all those memories shot back at her. Hoping to take Stacy’s mind off that message, I took the TV remote and switched it on. As I was surfing through the channels, I stopped at a news channel, the face flashed on the screen seemed familiar, it was our company’s Chief (what happened now!); as I increased the volume to look into the story, a wave of shock ran through our body, by seeing the headline.

It read: “Well-known IT firm, Alpha Corporation’s C.E.O Mr. Williams had a major accident while traveling by air. The sources said , he was returning to India after successfully collaborating a project with one of the largest corporations in Singapore. This came as a major shock for people working at Alpha Corporation,”

Stacy and I stood in an utter shock. I turned the TV off and immediately called one of our colleagues to confirm if it. And she agreed with us. Without any deferment we rushed to the office.

We reached the office in no time. The office was filled with sombre faces, all of this happened in the blink of an eye. Everyone looked perturbed, some were talking about the projects that will be on hold, and some were worried that this might be the end of the company.(and others some other thing)

It looked as if an ocean of opinions swirling around from here to there and there to here and they were all bad opinions. Later on, Alex, our manager walked towards us, he is very fond of our C.E.O, we hoped that he would be a bearer of some good news; Alex spoke up, motioning us to stay calm. But that wouldn't happen, eventually the people around stilled themselves, when Alex raised his voice screeching: "Quite!"

"Guys, why you look dejected!" he began, lowering his voice. *"What has happened, has happened; but we need to focus on the now,"* he said sounding practical.

We remained silent.

"But Alex, what about us; the projects have been clogged, some clients left us after knowing this news, don't you think there is a question regarding our job security?" Someone among the crowd debated.

Alex sighed. Pressure began to wrap not only upon Alex, but also upon us, everyone's heart filled with gloom, their eyes with doubt and questions written upon each ones face *"Is this the end of my career?" "What am I gonna do now?"*.

The company's revenue began to fall, and the share-holders began to dread and worry, demanding us to return whatever they have invested into this. And there came the question which would change our lives forever, *Is my job secured?* for which no one knows the answer.

"Everyone, please assemble in the meeting hall; real quick," Alex said, running his index finger upon his forehead. He seemed troubled. And so were every one of us.

Stacy seemed little bit dull, maybe the effect of meds; but still she sat there, without speaking a word. The meeting was more like a muddle with everyone being in an uproar, there was the

stream of tension swirling around, everyone had some or the other thing to say, both good and bad, and mostly bad. *“What are we gonna do now? Just sit here like nothing has happened!”* Someone said. Alex tried to bring down the heat, but it wouldn't work out (instead it blazed).

“We need someone to fill out the position of Mr. Williams at least for a period of time, we can't take risks at this moment,” one of the employees said as the discussion was going on.

Alex remained silent, as if processing everyone's opinions.

“Okay, I'll have a word with Mr. Williams soon, but I am afraid it's not possible right now, not at this moment because as y'all know, he's in the hospital, and we don't know in what situation he's in. I hope he'll be in a good position. And guys please try to co-operate with me. I'll go as soon as possible to have a word with him; you guys don't worry I assure you that none of you will lose your jobs, Okay,” Alex said, his voice sounding authoritative.

With that word from Alex, everyone seemed serene that at least their jobs are secured.

In the midst of this, Alex's phone rang, he answered it immediately.

“Guys, I need to go to the hospital, and believe me, none of you will be in a position to leave the company, that's my final word, but if anyone among you wants to leave, it's up to you. Am not gonna stop you, the decision is yours; and the rest, please stay here until I come,” Alex said and went away without speaking another word.

Alex came from the hospital almost after 2 hours, after what he said, few people indeed left and the rest of us stayed back, hoping that there would be some good news for us.

Alex looked sick, by seeing the decreased number of employees, but he never spoke a word, instead he motioned us to come to the meeting hall; as we settled down he began by

informing us about the conversation he had with Mr. Williams at the hospital.

Chapter 6

The Sudden Surprise

Alex reached the hospital in no time and was at the reception, he enquired about Mr. Williams then one of the nurses led him towards the ICU, through the silent corridor. Outside the ICU were Mr. Williams' family members (his wife and perhaps his mom) sitting, with agony written all over their faces; Alex entered inside, ignoring any kind of small talk.(I

mean although Williams' family members knew Alex, what would he speak with them though, words were far from his reach).

As he stepped in, the creaking sound of the metal door woke up Williams. He opened his eyes and motioned Alex to come near him, his eyes looked tired and weary, with the strings of that oxi-meter attached to Williams' hand, and the beep-beep sound resonating across the room. There was a strange smell in the room, perhaps due the meds, there was a white bandage, tied across Williams' head, he was in the hospital gown.

The silence never left the room, it was like a dense forest, no-one spoke, except for the rhythmic ticks of the wall clock travelling across the room, "*I am sorry for what has happened sir,*" Alex said, in a sorrowful voice. "*Its fine Alex,*" Williams replied his voice a bit lower. "*but now the thing ain't about me,*" he said, Williams was one of the most energetic person's I've ever come across, although he was our boss(I mean big boss) he seemed to get along with every employee, in a fun way. Williams is young, just two or three years older than us, (but he doesn't look that way, every time we come across him, we get an elderly feeling about him, but one thing is for sure, there's a kind of charisma about him, his passion towards his work, and towards us, perhaps that's the reason which made Alpha Corporation one of the leading I.T solutions provider across the country, although he started small, the growth was rapid, with just a thousand employees in the beginning, this corporation which is actually a start-up, grew immensely.

"I have the faith that I'll get well soon probably, all am worried about now, is the company," Williams said getting up. "*The company is my dream, you already know it right? And I can't take risk at this moment, there are thousands of lives at stake*" Williams said, with drops of tears dripping from in his eyes.

"I know sir," Alex said. "*What do you want me to do sir?"* he asked.

Williams exhaled sharply before answering. *“Would you take over until I return?”* he said. Alex fell silent. *“What happened Alex?”* Williams asked.

“Sir, I don’t wanna hurt you in any way by saying this, but I don’t think I can do this; am already screwed up and I don’t wanna take this responsibility totally upon myself, I hope you understand,” Alex said. *“I’m sorry”*. He said and fell silent.

Williams didn’t speak, it seemed as if his whole dream collapsed, all his efforts seemed vain, there seemed no way, except to succumb to the situation. The silence between them was deadly and painful, that’s what unexpected things do to us right! Although we dream big, but once the dream collapses, we think that everything we have worked (so hard) for has come to an end and again it seems like we’ve been pulled back to that starting point, where you need to run this race again from the beginning. Or perhaps there is a way out, but is that way right? Does that way help us to re-build the dream? May be? May be not.

“So, is there any alternative?” Williams asked.

Alex thought for a while.

“Yes sir I have a plan, but I don’t think that’ll be possible,” Alex said. *“It’s okay go ahead”* Williams said. *“It would be better if someone takes your place to run the company for some-time until you recover,”* Alex said.

Williams thought for a while and said *“Sounds good, but who will take such a huge responsibility at this moment?”*

“Can’t your family members take care of it?” Alex asked.

“No, already they are carrying a drain because of the situation which I’m in, and I don’t want to add another burden to them,” Williams said.

“Then what can we do sir?” Alex asked.

Williams thought for a moment.

“There’s a friend of mine, we know each other for quite a long time; he would help us, hopefully,” Williams said, with

drowsiness still taking shelter in his voice.

Then Williams gave the details regarding his friend to Alex. *"These are the details, get in touch with him,"* Williams said.

"Sure sir," Alex said.

Mr. Williams asked Alex to arrange a meeting and inform this to all the employees. Alex did as said.

After returning from the hospital Alex discussed with us and informed that someone close to Mr. Williams will be taking over the company in his absence for some-time.

The meeting went well, we reached home into that unwelcoming silence; we crashed onto the sofa and started contemplating the security of our jobs, especially because of what Alex said regarding the changes. *"We never expected this right?"* Stacy said. *"Yeah, who would,"* I replied. *"I wonder who this "friend" is going to be and how much does he know about the workings of our company. Does he even have an idea of how this works? How come we never heard of him? Who is this guy?"* I asked glancing towards Stacy.

"I'm pretty sure it must be someone really old, totally boring, and dis-interested only here for the sake of being, let's see" she replied. *"Yeah"* I said. (Let's see)

Next day...

Alex informed us that the person who would be taking over in the absence of *Mr. Williams* would be coming today and told us to be in the office a little early. All of us were curious to know who this person is,(we weren't that curious but there was a question) after a while a person entered the office. He had a neatly trimmed beard, with a decent hairstyle, he wore a light blue shirt with a dark blue blazer and a matching trouser for it and a metal wristwatch that added more elegance, although I couldn't see his face, due to the crowd that was pouring around him, I could say he was around 5'6 or maybe a

little taller than that. As he came forward Alex shook his hands after that Alex turned to us and introduced him to us saying: *“Guys please welcome Mr. Richard Stephen; as informed before, he will be filling the place of C.E.O for this company for a certain period,”* Alex said.

It was him!! Richard, I couldn't believe my eyes for a second, and Stacy, she stood astound or perhaps shocked, she wasn't happy neither was she sad, but her face expression resembled a kind of shock, or you can call it a sudden surprise.

In the college...

Chapter 7

Love or Attraction ?

After Mr. Clinton dismissed the class, Stacy, I and the rest of the students who opted for Technical Clubs went to him as he instructed, he directed us towards the computer lab and instructed us on the further proceedings.(instructions like : not to touch anything without his approval, not to write anything on the desk blah! blah! Blah!)

As we stood at the door we can see that the room was filled with a bunch people (I mean students along with lecturers) busily working on their laptops and few others on the desktops. It seemed that the seniors were teaching juniors from different branches who wanted to code about the basics of programming that are required and few the related things (That's something cool).

Stacy, Julie and I went inside, and the room was filled with cabins that separated each individual, a bright light illuminating the elegant ceiling, and the morning sun rays directly hitting towards us. There were few electronic models they seemed old, I should say ancient (the dust upon them was the proof), perhaps it was a mini-project kind of thing which the past students have done. Why don't the institution doesn't return the projects we've done to us? (Yeah I know I haven't done this project, but from schooling it happens right, you do a practical project and present it for a day or two and then it's over what would they do with those? Except to show put-up) "Yes! How may I help you?" a voice said, interrupting my thoughts. We turned around startled.

"Hello sir we would like to join this club," Julie said with a huge smile, curving her lips.

"Hello, I am Sid," he said and introduced himself.

We shook hands and he led us towards an empty cabin with a white round table and four chairs arranged at each end of the table, "Do sit down, and give me a moment and I'll be right back," he said and walked back into a room.

We took our seats and sat in a circle, with Stacy sitting in front of me and Julie beside me, I could feel the aroma of her scent filling my nostrils, it felt beautiful (why the hell I feel nervous

whenever am around Julie?) Sid came with a set of papers in his hands and arranged himself beside us, pulling a chair.

“So, how did you got to know about these clubs?” he asked, placing those papers on the table.

“One of our lecturers informed us,” I said.

“I see, and which branch you belong to by the way?” Sid asked. *“Computer science,”* Stacy replied. *“That’s good, okay I’ll come straight to the point,”* Sid said. *“The reason we started these clubs is because, to provide a pre technical experience to students from an early stage of their college, which in turn will help them in the campus placements,”* Sid said. *“And we don’t expect any prior knowledge from you regarding any club, you can be a complete beginner. All we need is your time, and your willingness to learn,”*

“So are you interested to join this particular club?” Sid asked.

“Yeah we are,” Stacy said, almost immediately.

“Wonderful, I’ll enrol you; so you guys can join from the next week, clear?” Sid said.

We nodded in agreement.

A week later, Stacy, Julie and i went to Sid, there was no class today; he was sitting on a chair and was scribbling something on the paper, his thumb clicking the pen endlessly. Glancing at us, he motioned us to take a seat, he seemed a bit distracted. We didn’t speak for a while, it seemed as if we are in a library rather than a computer lab (There were quite less number of students now, than the last time we’ve come here) *“Before I speak anything, I wanna say something to you guys, I’m terribly sorry,”* Sid said.

“Sorry for what?” i asked.

“I know you three wanted to join this club, but unfortunately, one of you cannot join, I know it’s a little odd, but we had to filter out few students from the list, I hope it didn’t offend anyone,” Sid said with an abject smile.

“Can we know who’s it?” I asked. *“It’s Julie”* Sid said, eyeing towards her. The beam in Julie’s eyes lowered, I guess she truly felt bad (and so did I, but why? Am I falling for her? No! No! I just met her weeks ago, I shouldn’t feel this way, but I couldn’t stop that feeling); she never spoke up regarding her disapproval, instead she chose to remain silent. *“It’s okay”* Julie said.

Once we stepped out, i could see that Julie seemed upset. And before I could say a thing, she disappeared into the pouring crowd.

“At least i should have spoken to her,” I said.

“You should have done that,” Stacy said.

“What now?” I asked.

“Don’t worry, I’ll have a word with her, and why are you so obsessed with this chick? Do you like her?” Stacy said. *“If yes, I’ll help you out in sharing your feelings,”* she said.

“No! She just seems...nice, I mean a nice friend” I said.(I lied. I don’t know. Do I like her? Or is it just attraction? I know I’ve fallen for her, but is this love? I don’t know)

Stacy nodded.

Chapter 8

An Awkward Exchange

For the next couple of days, Stacy and I got engrossed into learning and practicing every single bit about web-development, I wondered what Julie was doing because I haven't seen her around the campus for quite a long time. I have texted her several times, but she didn't reply. (Don't ask me when did we exchange our numbers, it just happened so suddenly, that it was so awkward, one day my phone was lost maybe during a class or during the break, I was worried, tensed; even Stacy wasn't with me at that time, I didn't know where she was, perhaps gone on a break or something like that. I started to search for my phone in the whole room, I was alone, everyone went on a break, maybe lunch? Whatever! I wasn't feeling hungry (how could I though?) So I started searching, then suddenly someone walked into the room, it was Julie, (damn I was on my knees), she did look at me, and I at her, but we never spoke until she asked with her child-like voice: *"Lost something?"* *"um...yeah, i...lost my phone"* I said, trying not to sound foolish. *"Tell me your contact number; I'll give it a dial, if that's okay for you,"* Julie said. *"Yeah sure...um...thanks,"* I said and fell silent. *"Number?"* Julie asked. *"Yeah...yeah"* I said, clearly showing forth my nervousness. I shared my number, and guess what? My phone was beneath a pile of huge bags, vibrating like hell. *"Thanks,"* I said. *"You're welcome,"* Julie replied with a smile).

Once reaching home, I called Stacy and after a series of dials, she answered.

“Hey, Stace where are you ?” I asked.

“I’m at home. What happened?” she replied.

“Nothing i was just wondering, have you seen Julie lately, I’ve not seen her on the campus for a while,” I said her.

“Oh! Yeah, even I haven’t meet her, since we joined the club” she said.

“Have you spoken to her? You said you’ll be speaking to her right?” I asked Stacy.

“Man! I forgot, you know right, how busy we were, and upon that they have given us assignments to complete,” Stacy said.

I realized that after joining the club we became too involved into it that we didn’t have time for Julie. Since she was not selected for it and was a little upset at that time (perhaps a lot upset). I don’t even know which club she has joined. Immediately I hung up with Stacy and called Julie, but she didn’t answer.

I called Stacy again, *“Hey, I guess she’s a bit upset,” I said.*

“Yeah, she seemed so, when I last met her” Stacy replied.

“Why don’t you ask her to join for a drink?” Stacy said.

“I don’t think she drinks alcohol,” I said.

“Damn you! I was talking about coffee,” Stacy said, bursting out a chuckle.

“Oh! Yeah sounds like a good idea,” I said and thought of the coffee shop that is near to the college.

“There is a coffee shop right behind our college, why don’t you take her out there,” Stacy said as if reading my thoughts.

“Gosh! I was thinking the same” I said to her.

“Yeah, and remember, first of all apologize to her,” Stacy said.

“Yeah sure mom,” I said.

“Why the hell do you call me mom!” Stacy blurted out.

“Because....um...I don’t know, you sound like my mom sometimes, always telling me what to do and what not to do, you know,” I said.

“You’ve gone crazy; anyways call her, and bye, get lost,” Stacy said.

“Yup” I said and hung up.

I called Julie, but still, there was no answer, so I sent her a text message saying:

“Hey Julie, I’m sorry, I was a bit busy and didn’t have time to catch up with you, and I know you are upset with me, so I was hoping we could catch up for coffee tomorrow, at ‘CUP & CODE’ that’s right behind our college” I typed and hit the send button.

After a few moments, my phone chimed. Julie replied, with a thumbs up emoji.

Chapter 9

Finding Love

The coffee shop seemed ambient and well furnished, with modern designs on the walls which made it more attractive and ambient; no wonder why every student from our college likes to spend time here. The welcoming aroma of the brewing coffee was enough to make you sit a little longer. I took a seat near the window, the cold breeze kissing my skin and was waiting for Julie's arrival, my fingers drummed upon the wooden table (I do this whenever I'm tensed or you can call restless) I was tensed all the way, because I don't know what made Julie so upset and why wasn't she replying to my texts all these days. Did I hurt her in anyway?

I took that thought off from my mind, and why am I thinking so much about her? She's just a friend.(is she?)

People around me were immersed in chatting endlessly, some about work maybe and others just the normal chat and then there were people like us who were busily involved in scrolling their phones taking full advantage of the free Wi-Fi (Have you ever noticed? People nowadays are more attached to their phones rather than to their environment, I mean there's nothing wrong in that, but we miss a lot when we dive our eyes into that "glowing box". Moments later the bell above the entrance chimed with a melody enveloping the room and I saw Julie stepping in; she was wearing a white frock and was carrying a small handbag hanging onto the right shoulder. She looked attractive, with her curly hairs bouncing like ribbons and her eyes glittering like stars, quite obvious with the ones in the café stopped what they were doing just to give her a gaze.

As soon as she entered, she walked towards me, (she stood so close to me, may be an inch or two away, my heart began to race, if you lock me in a silent room, maybe you would hear the rhythmic sound its making) I extended my hand towards her but she didn't care to give a handshake and took a seat before me, with the evening sun kissing her face and very

oblivious to the interest she had created. Our eyes met, her brown eyes diving into mine; my heart still racing like a roadster, but why?

"I think you are happy now," She said.

"What! Why will I be happy?" I said adding a slight chuckle.

"You got rid of me between you both right," she said and looked away.

"Both?" I said, *"About whom you are talking?"*

"You don't know whom I'm talking about? Fine," She said and turned away. (Man! She looked cute when she was angry).

"How can I know without you telling me," I said.

"Stacy - your so-called Best friend," Julie said, stressing on the latter part.

I laughed out loud, thank God there was not much public in the café.

"Why are you laughing? Does this sound funny to you?" she said with annoyance.

"No Julie, you have misunderstood, Stacy and I are best friends. Nothing more than that" I said her.

"I know what you people are and I can see it, the day I saw you in the auditorium she said that you look not so good. I should have understood that day itself that she didn't want me to come in between both of you," she said angrily.

"Julie please, you have a huge misunderstanding. There is nothing as such as what you are thinking; it's just your misconception. And why are you taking this so seriously?" I said to her.

"So, you say this is my fault right?" she said.

"I didn't mean it that way Julie," I said to her. (What fault is she talking about by the way?)

"You know what. You are right it was my fault loving you, all these days I thought you loved me, but no, it was only me who

loved you, but you never loved me. Never.” she said and fell silent.

Hearing those words, I sat there shocked. I fell silent, trying to process what Julie said.(Is this a proposal? Huh!)

“Julie, honestly...I mean...I didn’t know you felt it that way regarding me, to be honest, I loved you since the day I first saw you, I tried telling you many times but was afraid, that you might reject me and I might lose your friendship as well, and I never wanted that to happen; so I kept it to myself, but to be honest that killed me on the inside, even though it’s been only a few days since I met you, every single moment we shared felt like a gift, a gift that has been specially curated for me, I love you, Julie,” I said looking into her eyes.

Julie didn’t speak for a moment, except for her eyes studying mine *“Oh! Kevin I too loved you the first time I saw you. But I thought you and Stacy were dating and didn’t want to interfere between both of you. I felt so bad seeing you and Stacy together, I was unable to control myself, I felt jealous”* Julie said holding my hands. *“I want both of us to be together;”* Julie said, with eyes directly gazing into mine.

“I promise we will be together forever, no matter what,” I said.

“Yeah, and by the way, why don’t you join our club we will talk to the seniors regarding it?” I said.

“I really want to join with you, but I’m really sorry, I have already enrolled myself in another club the other day,” Julie said.

“Oh! That’s fine” I said hiding my disagreement.

“By the way which club did you join?” I asked.

“Arts club,” she said.

“Oh! Great and who’s the co-ordinator?” I asked her.

“Someone named Richard, from 2nd year I guess, he seemed a nice guy,” Julie Replied.

Present Day...

Chapter 10

Mind vs Heart

'Do you know what is the most difficult task? You don't? its pretending, we humans pretend a lot, pretend like we are happy, pretend like we are enjoying life, and sometimes we even pretend like we don't love the person whom we love the most, I mean we all pretend something or the other, but when it comes to love, it feels a lot different; pretending to love feels beautiful but pretending to un-love is heart-wrenching'.

Stacy had never imagined in her wildest dreams that she would be meeting Richard in a moment like this (who would by the way). Her mind is filled with questions, questions that were left unanswered, or perhaps unseen.

Why Richard sent her that text message after all these years?

Where had he been for this long?

Did Richard know all along where Stacy was?

If he knew why didn't he come before?

These questions began to scream in her mind. The voices were heavy. She need answers for these but didn't know where to find them, or how to find them. (not even her own heart knows the answers)

Stacy's thoughts were interrupted by Alex's voice. He called all of us to introduce to Richard, (you can call it a team meet perhaps). Alex began by introducing every one of us and giving Richard an overview of how everything works here (it was just a normal introduction, there weren't any smiles, it felt a way lot- formal). Then Richard began to shake hands with everyone in the team (he looked a bit sad, I guess sad isn't the right word, maybe pre-occupied you can call? Or maybe something else).

He shook hands with Stacy; it was a long touch, as if that one simple touch brought back memories to life, those memories which were buried deep within their souls, with their eyes diving into each other. Stacy gave out a stern look, it wasn't that 'butterflies-in my-stomach-look' rather it was like a kind of 'why-are-you-here-look' it seemed as though her hazel eyes were looking for answers that were perhaps hidden somewhere deep in his eyes; an answer for leaving her suddenly (she hates when people do that, I mean when someone whom you love with all your heart, soul and mind, you tend to believe that's they would stay forever, but life isn't a rosy ride all the time right? Some or the other day people leave, and you know it creates a void inside you, which perhaps wouldn't be filled with anything else, except that person).

Our work came to an end and mostly everyone left early, Stacy and I were getting ready to leave, then as we were leaving, Stacy sat on her chair.

"What's wrong with you?" I asked her.

"I don't know Kevin," She said.

"What do you mean by that?" I asked.

“I can’t stay here anymore Kevin. I wanna quit this job, and flee to a place where no one knows me, somewhere far from everything,” Stacy said, her voice strained.

“Stacy, can I ask you something?” I said after a long silence.

“Yeah,” Stacy said.

“You still love him right?” I asked.

“I don’t know, my mind says no, but my heart says yes, I feel like I’m being pulled from both the directions, and its hurts a lot Kevin, I’m unable to take this, this battle; a battle in which I know I will eventually lose,” Stacy said, her eyes filled with pain. I took the seat beside her, placing an arm around her shoulder gently. *“Some battles are worth fighting Stacy, I know it’s hard with all the traffic in your head, but you gotta try; this is your life Stacy, and no one, I mean no one not even me, your best friend can fight this for you, and in the end it’s not about who won, it’s about who endured,”* I said. *“Trust your heart Stacy, its capable and strong enough to give you victory,”* I said.

“Yeah Kevin, thanks for that,” Stacy said holding my arm.

“Now stop being formal with me okay, and please take off that gloomy face of yours” I said.

“Is this okay,” Stacy said with a light smile.

“Better,” I said rubbing off the tear rolling down her cheek.

Chapter 11

The Busyness Deal

“You proposed her!” Stacy exclaimed. I am at Stacy’s place; and where else would I go after doing such a daring task! I mean although I met Julie as a friend, I just couldn’t resist falling in love with her (maybe it was pre-destined!). And to be frank, I never planned this- falling in love with Julie (no I never did, and who would by the way plan how they would fall in love) it just happens so suddenly or you could say magically. And you know now-a-days we got so busy in planning things or i should say planning our life, that sometimes we forget to live the moment as it comes; for me love was never a plan, it just happened in the right time. Have you ever wondered why, unplanned trips, unplanned meet-up or as a matter of fact unplanned friendships feels beautiful and special? Because they are the moments where you’d be filled with joy; a kind of joy that is real and innocent as that of child. That joy which can never be stolen from you.

“Yeah but it wasn’t much of a proposal I’d say, it just happened spontaneously,” I said.

“You mean magically?” Stacy asked, as if correcting me.

“Uh... Yeah... I mean it was magical...um...i don’t know man, you know I never felt something like this before, it was and it still so fresh and beautiful, I feel so fulfilled, you know” I said, with specks of joy infilling my eyes (I was being honest, although I was out of words but yeah I never felt anything like this before, I mean yeah I did had crushes, a lot to be honest and I thought or at least I felt that was love. I was wrong, until I met Julie, I mean like Julie is a wonderful girl, and I feel she

like completes me, as though we are one). And many of us now-a-days go after love and relationships, but if we dig deeper, we never want that in the first place, the only reason people now-a-days, mostly young ones like us wants to have a girl-friend or a boy-friend is just not to be “left-outs”, but love, isn’t about having a partner, it’s totally different, for me real love is both the hearts beating as one *“Fulfilled is the word I guess,”* Stacy said.

Julie and I enjoyed every moment together, although we maintained our relationship secretive in the class(except for Stacy), we did went on dates, or sometimes a show or something like that, but more than anything else we loved each other with our whole hearts. I feel like when we are in a serious relationship, going on dates, special days and all of them are secondary, the primary thing always remains love, true love and obviously loyalty.

And then it happened- the busyness of life hit us, we rarely met after joining the clubs, I don’t say we totally distanced each other, but yeah I kinda’ miss her(I guess she too feels the same) we started our relationship just recently and I don’t know although in the class we were together, but we seldom spoke to each other(as I said before, we maintained our relationship a bit secretive) *“Why don’t you talk to me in public?”* Julie asked me one day, I don’t know! I wanted to say, but as you know I couldn’t do that, so I just gave out a smile, obviously that didn’t work. *“I am serious K !”* she said. *“K”* that’s what she calls me, whenever she’s um...whenever she feels comfortable with me and of course whenever she’s angry with me. I don’t know why, but it seems um...cute (even when she’s angry? Yeah). *“Hey, there’s nothing like that, I guess I like it this way,”* I said. *“You’re the most unpredictable person, I’ve ever come across K,”* she said (a bit annoyed, maybe). *“I take it as a compliment sweetheart,”* I said, placing my arm upon her’s, she didn’t resist, and that was the last time I spoke to her (in real life at least). Gradually, the exams were coming up soon and I was busy (and probably she

too was) preparing for them, I say that because we used to chat, thanks to social media, but now-a-days neither she nor I texted each-other, I never wanted to be a disturbance in her life, and probably she too wished the same. Upon that our lecturers asked (actually they told, there's a slight difference you know) us to spend time (preparing) with our seniors so that they would help us cover the syllabus a little early.(I wonder how much would they help us).

Since the exams are coming up I thought to have a group study (maybe that would help). Formerly, I thought it will be only Stacy and i who will be having a combined study, but I wanted to invite Julie too.

I asked Stacy about inviting Julie to our study, she didn't want someone else in between us since our childhood.(you can call it possessive too, or maybe not)

But this time Stacy said yes.

"Okay, let her come," Stacy said.

"Are you sure?" I asked.

"Yeah, there's no problem for me. From childhood I'm bored of seeing your stupid face, let's invite her. At least I can concentrate on my studies instead of explaining each and everything to you" She said with a giggle. (I wasn't that dumb though, but yeah I kind of irritated her a lot during our time of study).

Ignoring her sarcasm I called Julie, but she didn't answer my call, after some time I called her again, this time it showed busy. I sent her a text telling her to meet up. The tick marks turned blue but she didn't respond.

"Why is Julie not replying to my texts?" I said to myself aloud.

"Relax mate, maybe she's busy. She'll call you when her work gets done" Stacy said. *"Forget about her and start studying now, we need to cover a whole lotta syllabus,"* she said.

"Yeah," I said and started practicing, all the while keeping Julie in the back of my mind.

Present Day...

Chapter 12

A Flood of Emotions

Even after speaking a lot and throwing in some motivation into her so much about not to quit her job, Stacy wouldn't listen. I don't know what came upon her.(I really don't, I mean it's totally fine to be angry, but that doesn't mean we need to give up on what we love, we don't do that right? Do we? I agree we humans are emotional, and perhaps it's quite natural and it's okay to depict emotions, and you *have* to depict them, but sometimes it's out of those emotions burst forth feelings of anxiety, fear and heart-ache too).

"But Stace, you can't leave just because some ex-boyfriend of your's is your boss," I said. (I shouldn't have said that, that "ex-boyfriend" thing, oh boy I'm an idiot).

“You don’t understand Kevin, I can’t stay here; I feel so uncomfortable, it feels suffocating here, as if someone’s choking me to death...you...you don’t get it,” Stacy said, sniffing away her tears.(or you can say, pretending to be strong, which she obviously isn’t, no, at least for now).

“From when did comforts started to bother you Stace?” I said. She fell silent (but her eyes were speaking or maybe portraying something, something painful I guess).

“I don’t know Kevin” Stacy said. *“Nothing seems valuable or worthy anymore, I just wanna quit...quit everything”* she replied after a moment’s pause.

“Everything’s the same Stacy, except your thinking. You just need to control your emotions and...” I began, but Stacy cut me short. *“I can’t. I just want to quit, don’t you get that!”* she said abruptly.

“I can understand, but you don’t give up on your dreams just because he is around,” I said. *“And what will you tell your parents about the reason to quit the job? You owe them an explanation”* I said. *“Remember Stace, you said that this is your dream job. Prove it”* I said(I yelled actually), losing my cool. (That was a mistake, man I’m screwed up now!)

“Oh! So now you’re worried about my parents! Huh! Does anyone, have any concern about me? About, what I’m going through? No! Everyone, including you, yeah you too, wants me to behave and pretend as if everything’s normal! I can’t do that! I’m done pretending!!” Stacy said. *“Please leave me alone,”* Stacy said.

“But Stace...” I said.

“I said leave. Now” Stacy said loudly.

“Ok, listen I’m..,” I said.

“I beg you Mr. Kevin please leave me alone for a while,” Stacy said irritably.

I left without spilling a single word.

After a while, I tried calling her to apologize (I need to do that! She's my best friend, man! And as a best-friend it's my responsibility, and by saying that I don't mean that I'm an ideal best-friend, i still have my flaws and short-comings too, but they doesn't have to hinder our friendship) so yeah, I gave her a call but as expected she didn't answer(why would she by the way, after how I've behaved? So you see it's my fault). After a hundreds (or probably more than that) of text messages and several calls, finally she replied to this text message:

"Stacy I'm sorry for my behaviour. It's just that I was concerned about you. And I didn't wanna hurt you. Please forgive me this time, I'm a dumb".

After a few moments, she replied: *'it's okay'*. I could feel the anger in those words, yeah agree that it's a text message, but I know she's upset, you ask me how? We are best-friends man! I know her. To sum up all this in a word, I would say um... experience, being with her for almost fifteen years, had taught me a lot about her, her likes, her dislikes, and most importantly her mood swings, I believe none can handle her crazy mood swings like I do, I'm not over-emphasising , but yeah it's the truth.

Immediately I called her, she answered the call but didn't speak until I spoke.(Dramatic!!)

"Listen, I'm sorry," I said.

Silence.

"I didn't want to hurt you Stace; I'm worried about you that's it, why don't you get it," I said.

Silence.

"I know you are still angry with me, but please forgive me," I said.

"Okay; it's fine. I'm staying, and don't call me, we'll have a talk once I come to the office, okay?" she said.

"Yeah, and I'm really sorry man," I said apologetically.

"It's okay, bye now. I'm a bit tired" Stacy said.

“Yeah bye take care, I hate you” I said.

“I hate you too,” Stacy said with a tired voice, before hanging up the call.

Chapter 13

Like A Still Storm

Weeks went by, but there weren't any words between Julie and I, (the only thing that rested between us was silence and perhaps distance too, probably a long one). Even when she came to the class, she sat in a different place ignoring Stacy and me. (why is she doing this? I don't know, but I couldn't handle this between us, I never felt this way, this heart-wrenching feeling, I don't know what it's called and probably I don't wanna know too, but somewhere beneath me, there is this kind of void, or maybe a hollow, which is filled with emptiness, a type of emptiness that could only be filled with, perhaps love ? maybe yes). To be honest, with myself, I don't know what's happening to her and maybe me too. And then I couldn't hold it any longer, I decided to have a talk with her and texted her to meet me after the class.

‘Hi Julie, shall we meet after the class?’ I typed and hit the send button. Again the same thing repeated. The tick marks turned blue, but there wasn't any reply. The class finished, everyone is getting ready to leave, I saw Julie she too was packing her stuff. Without wasting a moment of time I walked towards her.

“Someone seems a lot busy nowadays,” I said standing behind her.(I wasn't loud, I don't want people to gaze at me..um at us

I mean, I hate that you know!)

"Oh! Hi Kevin" Julie said with a startled expression on her face.

"So you remember me," I said.

"Yeah of course," Julie said patting my shoulder.(I hope no one noticed that)

"Then why didn't you...." I said, but before I could speak a thing, she cut me short saying, *"Okay bye Kevin I have some work. Catch up with you later"* she said and walked away. Before I could spill out a thing she was gone, disappearing into the mumbling crowd, in a split second, I could see her no more.

I went home not knowing why Julie was ignoring me (maybe she isn't, but that's what I feel, I can't do a thing about it). I took out my phone to call her but my self-respect or maybe my ego stopped me from doing so. I put back the phone in its usual place, and went back to my room. I didn't know what to do, the girl who said that she loves me just a few weeks ago, is now ignoring me, I felt a sting of loneliness leaping over me, I wanted to cry, but I couldn't, (am I over-reacting? maybe I am, but man, it really hurts you know) I felt like as if someone's forcefully holding my tears back, my room felt like an abyss, an abyss of loneliness.

My thoughts were interrupted by the ringing of my phone at a distance, it was from Stacy, I answered it.

"Hey, Kevin, what's up?" Stacy said, with a lively voice.

"Nothing," I said

"Hey, are you alright? You sound a bit odd, what happened?" Stacy asked, her voice a little low.

"Nothing, I just feel...nothing no problem I'm fine" I said holding back my tears.

"Kevin, are you alright?" Stacy asked concerned.

"Yeah I'm fine, what happened to me?" I said.(I lied, but the tear drop wouldn't).

"You sound kinda' weird," Stacy said. *"Wait I'm coming,"*

"I told you right, I'm fine!" I screeched at her.

"Kevin, why are you so frustrated? Has anything happened?" Stacy asked.

"I don't know Stace, it's just that I feel.. I don't know man; I feel so lonely, it seems like everyone around me left at once, leaving me alone," I said. Stacy remained silent.

"Talk to me, I'll listen" Stacy said.

"There's nothing actually," I said. *"So..shall I hang up?"* Stacy asked. *"No! No! Please don't, but stay with me "* I replied. She didn't say a thing. We didn't talk, there was just silence, but this time the silence felt beautiful. I could hear the clock ticking. You know sometimes the best things-the best moments I should say, happens , not during great talks or endless chats but during those moments of quietness and stillness, where there's no disturbance either in your heart or in your soul, with your favourite person around. It feels like a river, a river that refreshes and revives your troubled heart, what else do you need, it's *like a Still Storm*.

Present-Day...

Chapter 14

Strangers with a Familiar touch

Finally, after pleading and explaining a lot to Stacy, she decided to stay back instead of quitting the job. Stacy also promised me that she will be emotionally strong. Or at least she'll try to be. (I hope she does, but it didn't happen).

"Stacy this isn't working, you gotta stop this!" I said. *"I know it's painful but... try to stay um... calm, you know like you used to be before, before all this happened"*. She remained silent, (am I making sense?). Finally she spoke up, her voice low I didn't even hear her properly except her lips making some movement. *"Don't worry I'll be fine"* She said after a slight pause.

We went to the office, it was maybe ten O clock in the morning, (I was relieved I wasn't late). I swiped my key card and entered in and so did Stacy. As soon as we stepped in, we could hear endless clicks of keyboards from different corners, some were talking on the phones and others partly working and their other part maybe somewhere else (their fantasy world maybe? Who knows).

"Stace remember what I said?" I asked as we walked towards our cubicle, she didn't reply. (didn't she hear me?).

"Yes, of course, I will," Stacy said a moment later, her eyes darting around. there wasn't any ebullience in those words and perhaps in her eyes too.

As we are talking, Alex came to us. *"Hello guys what's going on, is everything fine?"* he said.

"All good Alex," I said.

"Are you sure?" he asked eyeing Stacy.

“Yup,” Stacy said, faking a smile.

“Cool. Is the project report ready?” Alex asked.

“What project...” Stacy began to ask, but I cut her short.

“Yes Alex it’s almost ready,” I said to him.

“Almost ? You know the situation right? Please make it quick” Alex said, he seemed a bit startled by my sudden interference.

“Yeah, I mean we just need to give some finishing points to it,” I said, *“Make it quick Kevin, we have whole lot of projects to do,”* he said adjusting his watch. I nodded, as though assuring him. He left without dropping another word.

“What project report was he talking about?” Stacy asked, as soon as he left.

“Look I’m so sorry Stacy; I forgot to tell you about the project. The thing is we need to complete the project report and submit it to Richard,” I said, running my index upon my forehead.

I could see a sense of hesitation on Stacy’s face as I mentioned his name *“We need to submit it today and you are telling me now?”* Stacy said.

“Yup, I tried telling you, but you weren’t in a position to listen to me,” I said.

“Okay... so what do we do now?” Stacy asked.

“Um...we need to meet him and submit the report,” I said, glancing towards Richard’s cabin.

“Can’t we just mail it?” Stacy asked. *“I guess no,”* I said. She exhaled sharply before speaking, her hands resting upon her hips. (I know what she’s feeling, she don’t wanna do this, her eyes clearly states that...that hesitation and perhaps lack of interest too but she never spoke regarding that, she usually doesn’t speak her feelings out, not even with me and I hate that in her) *“Are you done with it?”* she asked. *“Partly yes,”* I said.

“Okay, let’s do the remaining,” Stacy said, and we began our work.

After toiling for nearly three hours, we finally completed the report without any errors.

A while later Stacy and I made our way towards Richard's cabin.(he was still in there).

I knocked on the door, Stacy standing behind me, holding the laptop in her hand. Her dark hairs were tied up like a pony tail hanging loose.

"Come in," Richard said without looking at us.

Suddenly droplets of tears began to hit the ground, Stacy's eyes were damp, but she didn't burst out, instead she took her hanky and rinsed off those tears as though they were just a speckle; her heart was pounding, perhaps it was even weeping too. And without a moment's delay we entered in.

Don't you like to hug your Love tightly, if you meet them after a long time? You do right? Even Stacy wanted to, but she couldn't, it seemed like a battle's going on, a conflict rather, between her logic and her emotions, emotions said "Go give him a hug" but logic said "why should you? He left you so obscurely, by doing so do you wanna break your heart again?" it was indeed a battle, more than that it was a war, a war between emotions and logic, feelings and intellects, heart and mind.

And now, like always, the mind conquered; crushing the heart beneath.

We sat in silence for a moment, except for the rattling papers being the only noise. None of us spoke, I felt like I was in a library instead a software firm. Both of their eyes locked with each other's. I don't know what's going on in their minds, or rather in their hearts, I felt like I'm not a right place for now as though an extra piece of a jigsaw puzzle; lost its way into another box, where it doesn't belong. I wanted to leave, but I can't leave Stacy alone, not when she's in an emotional roller coaster ride, I have to be with her, as a support maybe.

“Please listen to me Stacy, I can explain,” Richard said, breaking the silence and my thoughts too. Stacy didn’t respond and neither did I (I couldn’t. I mean, I’m in a room with two of the most important people in my life, one being my best-friend and other being her Ex, and that’s the most awkward place you would ever want to be in).

“Can we talk about the project, Mr. CEO?” Stacy said sounding stern. The look on Richard’s face said he was offended by the way Stacy spoke to him. He didn’t speak a word, none of us did, you know the strangest things about broken relationships and friendships too if we consider them, is it keeps you in a place of awkwardness and a kind of uneasiness too, where there will be words, but they’ll be dead ones, there will be smiles, but they’ll be fake and there will be looks, small glances we can say, but those will be lifeless and perhaps emotionless too.

A while later we began the discussion about the project, all the while Richard looking into Stacy’s eyes. (It felt like as we were robots pre-programmed to speak, there wasn’t any kind of relationship between us, like as though we were strangers, like *strangers with a familiar touch*.)

We completed our project discussion; and as we were about to leave, Richard asked me to stay in his cabin. But Stacy went away without giving a stare.

“Wanna have some coffee, Kevin?” Richard asked.

“No I’m fine,” I replied.

“Please feel comfortable,” He said. *“Kevin I wanted to ask you something,”* he said, his voice was a bit low, like a hush probably.

“Yes,” I said.

“Do you remember Julie?” Richard asked.

That question brought back all the memories that were left somewhere deep within my soul, memories that were sweet.

“Yeah I do,” I said.

Chapter 15

A Love so weird

After some time my doorbell rang, the ding-dong sound filling the room, it was Stacy, wrapped in a plain purple coloured frock, her long hair hanging loose as always, she seemed angry or perhaps concerned too(I don't exactly know how to judge that look upon her face).

"Is mom at home?" Stacy asked, as she stepped in.

"No, she isn't, I guess she went to meet one of her friends," I said.

"Okay," Stacy said and we walked towards my room.

"So now, tell me what happened?" Stacy asked, sitting on the bean bag that's at the corner.

"What happened?" I asked, with a light chuckle (obviously it was fake).

"Don't you think you're hiding something from me Mr. Kevin?" Stacy said shooting me an angry stare.(I don't know how she always gets to know about my feelings, perhaps my face says them ? maybe I guess, and being best-friends, I shouldn't be shocked, you know sometimes our best-friends play "the know-it-all" role in our lives, and to be honest you can never fake yourself before them, I tried it and I failed).

There was a dense silence between us, *“I don’t think Julie loves me,”* I said.

“What? Why do you say that?” Stacy asked, totally bewildered.

“I don’t know Stace; she doesn’t reply to my texts and doesn’t talk to me in the class. Don’t know what came upon her,” I said.

“Kevin, there’s nothing as such, you are just over-thinking stuff, and ... maybe she’s busy,” Stacy said.

“Do I look like I’m over-thinking?” I said, clearly with anger.

“Yeah, you do” Stacy said at once. I fell silent.(maybe I look as if I was over thinking, but I’m not, it’s just ... maybe ... um yeah I guess I’m overthinking! Maybe my heart accepts that, but my mind wouldn’t do that).

“Calm yourself down Kevin, I know you love her a lot, but don’t screw yourself pondering upon her. You just met her, like what, a few months ago?” Stacy said. *“And this is your life man! Why are you allowing her take over it, people come and go Kevin, it’s their job. And you don’t need to beg anyone to stay, if they are truly meant for you, they will definitely stay, if not let them go, don’t hold onto them, at least you’ll set them free,”* she said and fell silent, as though giving me space to let those words to sink in me, and perhaps they did. (I glanced into her eyes, which were filled with light in them .Those words were real, real as life itself , I feel lighter perhaps more sane too, you know sometimes we humans behave *stupid* over tiny little things, things which shouldn’t be taken that seriously, yeah I know I love Julie, and maybe because of that I’m afraid of losing her I guess, love does weird things to us, sometimes we feel everyone’s right except us and the other times we feel everyone’s wrong except us, you see there are two sides of a coin and I don’t know on which I’m standing on).

“Hey! You’re a gem, okay!” Stacy said, and gave me a light hug as though reading my thoughts. (That moment felt

beautiful; I wanted to cry. Not out of grief, but out of joy, a joy that's everlasting and I did, those droplets couldn't wait longer to escape my eyes, as though a prisoner broken loose, they left my eyes as if someone had set them free, little did they know that, that "someone" is the one and only best-friend of my life).

Next day after I went to college, I decided to meet Julie. On the way to college, my mind was racing with different kinds of thoughts.

What if Julie didn't love me?

Was it my misconception?

And those questions didn't cease, they kept coming back, like past wounds reminding me of a kind of pain which I've never experienced before (perhaps this is love? Maybe it is)

I went to class, still my mind filled with thoughts, doubts and obviously questions.

Entering in, I saw Julie sitting in her usual seat, her face sticking into that mobile, smiling, her eyes glowing, (is that due to the light? I don't know, but there was a sparkle in those eyes, which always makes my heart to fall for her again and again, I couldn't stop myself from doing that, it's so weird right how when you're in love those little things matter to you, more than anything else). I didn't want to freak her out by going and asking her why she didn't reply or what was the reason for her ignoring me. (I decided to stay calm, at least I'll try to and I don't wanna make myself a dumb idiot doing this). The lecturer entered and started his class.

Let me ask her after class. I thought to myself.

The class went on for almost fifty minutes or perhaps more than that. My mind still filled with questions all the while. All of us started leaving for the break with people around chattering and muttering to each other, I saw Julie; she is

dressed in a blue frock, her hair tied like a bun and red lipstick that added beauty.

I walked towards her, she was standing right in front of me, her lavender perfume filled my nostrils, I gazed directly into her eyes, they...they were beautiful like pearls. Before I spoke a word, Julie held my hand and pulled me towards the canteen.

"Julie we need to talk," I said. But she ignored me.

"Julie, are you listening?" I asked again.

She didn't speak a word.

"Kevin, can you please be quiet for a while?" Julie said.

"What! You ignore me for all these days. And now you tell me to be silent?" I said still controlling my anger.

"Kevin, please," Julie said.

"Okay," I said and freed my hand from hers.

We took a seat in the canteen where no one can disturb us. Even though the canteen was noisy I can feel the silence between us.

"Will you speak?" I asked, *"I've seen you with some guy the other day, do you have any answer for that?"* I said.

"Were you stalking me?" Julie asked.

"No it's not called stalking, you are my girl-friend, I was checking up on you," I said.

"Stop it. What a wrong perception you have. You just saw me with a guy and started judging me!" Julie said.

"I'm not judging you," I said.

"So what's this called?" Julie asked. *"You know what Kevin; let's stop this here, I'm done with you. Enough of embarrassment"* Julie said furiously.

"But..." I said.

"Goodbye, Mr. Kevin. Never again try to come into my life. Go to your Stacy" Julie said.

“Stacy is my best friend, I’ve already told you many times,” I said.

“Whom are you tryna’ fool? I know what you both are. You just pretend to be best friends, everyone knows that you people are dating, but neither of you accepts that!” Julie said.

“This is the final time I’m asking Kevin, me or her? The choice is yours” Julie said.

Anger rose inside me,(or maybe it wasn’t anger at all, I just don’t know what that feeling is, that question was inappropriate,

“Julie, just get lost,” I said without looking at her.

Julie left without uttering a word.

I stood there in silence, the voices around began to vanish, as if they were being pulled into a dungeon, I felt as if I’m in a desert a desert of loneliness filled with pain and more pain, what’s the way out? Is there a way? Perhaps yes, I don’t know. This love feels so weird.

Next day...

Chapter 16

Like a Magical Spell

I felt bad (or maybe even a lil bit broken too) regarding the way I behaved with Julie. I love her, but yesterday the way she behaved and the way she spoke, broke me, those words are still ringing in my ears, never again I'm going back to her, I promised myself. Maybe giving too much importance to Julie was the mistake I made, I told this to Stacy, but didn't tell her the reason why I was angry at Julie.(I couldn't do that, I mean I wanted to, but somewhere beneath my heart I didn't wanted to hurt her in any way).

"Are you gone nuts! How could you do that?" Stacy said.

"I did whatever I felt right Stacy," I said.

"No, you didn't. You did that out of anger" Stacy said.

"But whatever she said, that hurt me," I said.

"What did she tell?" Stacy asked *"And you never told me the reason for your argument,"* she said.

"Just forget it," I .

"Kevin, tell me now, what did she tell?" Stacy asked.

I remained silent.

"Kevin speak up, look at me and answer," Stacy said.

Finally I told Stacy about the argument Julie and I had.(I had to do that, I couldn't hold that longer anymore).

"Kevin! seriously?" Stacy asked.

"What?" I asked.

“You know it’s her misunderstanding right?” Stacy said.

“Yeah, I know,” I said. (to be honest I don’t know, if that’s her mis-understanding or something else, sometimes we humans judge each other easily, not knowing their back story, not knowing their actual feelings too).

“Then why didn’t you tell her?” Stacy asked.

“I tried telling her, but she wasn’t in a position to listen to me, what should I do?” I said.

“Okay, forget telling her, why didn’t you tell me? i could have sorted this out, or at least I could’ve tried” Stacy asked.

“I didn’t want you to feel bad about this,” I said.

“Feel bad about what?” Stacy asked, with utter confusion.

“I didn’t want you to feel like, you are someone who is hindering my relationship with Julie, and honestly I didn’t want our friendship to be ruined just because some person was thinking wrongly about us, she put a choice before me and I chose what I felt was right,” I said.

“Kevin what an idiot you are, why would I feel bad, we are best friends and I can understand you, but seriously I didn’t like you to sacrifice your love for Julie just because she had a misunderstanding, regarding us,” Stacy said.

“What shall I do now?” I asked, calming myself down.

“Don’t worry, I’ll figure out something,” Stacy said.(What would she do? I don’t know, maybe something magical? Something like a magical spell perhaps).

Present Day...

Chapter 17

A Memorable Night-mare

Don't you think there are few things and moments in life that we want to cherish and remember forever, and there will be those tiny little moments in each and every one of our lives, which we can never forget, but...why don't we see heartbreaks with the same perspective? I mean even they are to be seen as memories right? Yeah I agree, it'll be painful, but within that pain lies a kind of beauty, a beauty of memories, don't you know that our whole lives we live in memories, every moment is a memory to cherish and so is heart-break too, but how you see that heart break is what really counts and what really matters, so... what is your heart-break to you? A *memory*, or a *nightmare*? Or perhaps both?

"Kevin I don't want you to talk with Richard," Stacy said.

"What? Are you crazy?" I asked, with a chuckle (what does she even mean ? Don't talk to him!).

"You are my friend, not his; do you understand?" Stacy said.

"Stacy please, stop being childish," I said. *"We work in the same office and he's our boss now,"* I said. (I meant that, she sounded totally childish, I mean I can understand what she's going through, and perhaps she don't know what she's talking, and yeah ,sometimes heart-breaks are also kind of weird, we say they make us strong, but along with that, sometimes heart-breaks also put us in a position of uncertainty and maybe in a place of innocence too).

"I don't care about what you wanna say, but you must not talk with him," Stacy said.

"Stace, we aren't kids anymore, don't be silly," I said. *"I know how you are feeling, but...try to understand Stace,"* I said,

holding her arm gently.

“And you need to understand, things aren’t the same anymore they have changed. And people change too Stace. Think from a different perspective” I continued. *“You helped me to get myself right with Julie. Remember those days they were wonderful”* I said.

“And do you remember the first time you and Richard were together, no one to disturb you, all by yourself, how independent were you,” I said. *“The first time you spoke and when you said your feelings to him. It was wonderful Stacy”* I said.

“Yeah, that trip right? I remember; that was one of the best moments of my life” Stacy said with tears rolling in her eyes and a slight smile curving in her lips.

Chapter 18

Like A Guest Arrives.

I was so harsh on Julie,(I shouldn't have spoken that way) and honestly I felt sorry about that but I was unable to talk to her after that argument (was that even an argument? Maybe it was, that's what people call it right). As Stacy had said, she went to have a chat with Julie.(I don't know what she has in mind, to be honest to myself at least, I didn't want Stacy to meet her. I don't know why, maybe I was afraid, afraid of what? Afraid that my fears would come true, that I might not be able to face the outcome perhaps. Perhaps I might lose Julie forever. And man! That thought's very disturbing and heart-wrenching too. As I was thinking these, my phone rang at a distance, as though pulling me into the present, but still somewhere at the back of my mind I kept Julie.

"Hey, Kevin," Stacy said, as I answered.(for a split second, I thought it was Julie, am I obsessed with her? Maybe I am, but I won't be accepting that, for me that's not obsession. That's love, pure and real love.)

"Hello, Julie?" I said. (Why the hell did I say that)

"Julie?" She said with a chuckle.

"Um...sorry I was thinking something else," I said.

"Something or someone?" she asked.

"It doesn't matter, what's up, did you meet her?" I asked.

"No, I didn't," Stacy said.

"But...but you said you are gonna meet her," I said.

"Wait calm down, first listen to me" Stacy said.

"Okay...tell me," I said

“Someone called me lately,” Stacy said.

“Okay and?” I asked.

“He was asking about you,” Stacy said.

“About me? Um...Who’s he by the way? And why didn’t he call me?” I asked.

“He said he already called you, but you didn’t answer his call” Stacy said.

(Yeah maybe he did call me, and maybe I didn’t answer).

“Okay, where did he get our numbers from?” I asked.

“Someone close to you shared with him,” Stacy said.

“What? Who?” I asked.

“Your girl-friend shared with him,” Stacy said.

“Who? Julie?” I asked.

“Yes, Julie shared our numbers with him,” Stacy said.

“So what did he say?” I asked, trying not to focus on Julie but it wouldn’t happen, somehow my mind pulled towards the direction, which I couldn’t visit, but I tried pushing away that thought. It was a try, and semi-succeeded in that hopefully.

“He wants to meet me,” Stacy said.

“You! But why?” I asked.

“To talk about your love story and settle it,” Stacy said.

(What’s in that to settle, I guess it’s done, maybe it was a wrong decision? Or maybe not? I don’t know, right now I’ve been pulled in two or maybe more directions, I don’t know which one to choose, so I kind of gave up on that, sometimes that’s the best thing you know is- not trying hard to fight those internal battles, but letting them go, perhaps that would help? Maybe it does. I hope it does. *“So, are you meeting him?”* I asked. (trying to put Julie off my mind).

“Of course I am,” Stacy said.

“Seriously Stace! But why?” I asked.

“Yup I’m damn serious,” Stacy said.

“No more explanation. I’ll go and settle your matter if you won’t allow, do remember I will never talk to you again. Mind it” Stacy said.

“Okay, but...” I said.

“There are no ifs and buts. I’ll go speak to him settle your matter. And come. Understand?” Stacy said.

“Okay, then I’ll also come,” I said.

“NO, no need. If you come you’ll never allow me to speak, I have to listen to all your rubbish and childish talk. So you don’t need to come” Stacy said.

“But, who is he? Do you know him?” I asked.

“Um...Not exactly but he said he will meet me, I just need to go to the place,” Stacy said.

“How will you recognize him then?” I said.

“I don’t know! Why are you interrogating me?” Stacy said a bit irritated. “Look if you are planning to stop me from going, forget it. I’m gonna go that’s it.” Stacy said.

“Okay do whatever you want,” I said.

“Fine, bye,” Stacy said and hung up.

Stacy came to my home after some time, she seemed excited.

“What happened?” I asked.

“You have a surprise,” Stacy said.

“What?” I said.

“I said you have a surprise,” Stacy said.

“Okay, but what happened to the talk you went to have?” I asked.

“I’ll tell you, hold on, but I’m so excited,” Stacy said.

“But why? Will you please tell me?” I asked

Then Stacy began telling the conversation she had with Richard.

Chapter 19

Nice to meet you

Stacy went to *Cup & Code* the coffee shop that was behind our college. It was ambient. Some of the students (not some of them, but perhaps a whole lot of them) were talking about this coffee shop, they were saying that this shop was sponsored by some of our super-seniors and most of the students from our college hang out here after their classes were completed, I guess mostly the “Love Birds” of the college hang out here. (I thought to bring Julie here, I don’t know when it’ll happen or will it ever happen? I don’t know; I hope it will, let’s see).

It is 5 PM, usually, most of the students would be here, but today as it was a holiday, only the students who stay in the nearby hostels and few others were present. So Stacy went to meet the person who called her. Stacy took a seat at a corner, beside a window, and was waiting for him, she wore a black top and a Blue Denim, with her hair tied like a bun, and her

elbows resting upon the table, with her mobile hanging between her hands. There was a kind of beautiful aroma of that brewing coffee enveloping the room, perhaps this was the reason for the students hanging out here. While Stacy was checking her phone, a person came towards her holding a notepad and a pen in his hand. (he looked young, perhaps our age? Maybe yes)

“Hello, mam, may I know your order please?” He said, with a smile.

“I’m expecting someone, so after he comes I’ll order,” Stacy said. *“Sure mam,”* he said and went away, placing a menu card on the table.

After a few minutes, a person entered the coffee shop. He was tall and wore a red jacket upon a white t-shirt and a blue trouser, with dark eyes behind his white specs. As he came he took out his phone and called someone, Stacy’s phone rang and they looked at each other, he walked towards her and introduced himself.

“Stacy Parker?” he asked pointing towards her.

“Yes,” Stacy said, trying not to concentrate on the aroma of his chocolate-flavored perfume.

“Hi, I’m Richard Stephen,” he said and took a seat.

“Hello,” Stacy said, trying to remember where she saw him, and why she felt so familiar with him and his dusky eyes, that were diving deep into her.

“Hello,” he said as he sat. *“So, shall we order something?”* Richard said, interrupting her thoughts.

“Yeah, sure,” Stacy said.

They ordered black coffee and a few cookies.

“So, you know what happened right?” Stacy said, taking a bite of cookie.

“Yeah, I know she said that, as you know she thinks something’s going on between you and Kevin, and...” Richard

said.(so he knows me. Perhaps Julie would have said him about me, maybe. I don't know).

"We are best friends," Stacy said abruptly.

"Okay, Can you prove it?" Richard said.(I don't know why he asked that, man! Who would "prove" someone's friendship and, how would anyone do that!).

"There's no need to prove I think," Stacy said.

"Why not?" Richard asked.

"Why should I?" Stacy said.

Richard fell silent.

"Look, just because a boy and girl are always together doesn't mean they are lovers. I know Kevin from childhood. I hope you understand what that means" Stacy said. *"We need to change that thought pattern of people. And there's no need to prove anything to anyone"* she said.

"I agree, but Julie doesn't think you both as 'just friends'," Richard said, emphasizing on the latter part.

"That's her misunderstanding. I can't help it. It's all about trust, you know. And I hope that's why you are here, to clear her misunderstanding right!" Stacy said.

"Yeah, I trust whatever you have said, that you are best friends and know each other from childhood and all that stuff. And I understand it" Richard said.

"Thanks," Stacy said sipping her coffee.

"So what you are gonna do now?" Richard asked.

"What do you mean?" Stacy said.

"Look Stacy, I'll be honest with you, now I know that nothing is going on between you and Kevin. But there's a problem" Richard said.

"And what's that?" Stacy asked.

"Julie doesn't trust you, and Kevin and Julie love each other, but she seems to have a wrong impression upon you, and you"

being around Kevin bothers her, a lot” Richard said.

Stacy sat back and thought for a moment, staring at the coffee cup.

“I have an idea,” Stacy said.

“What?” Richard asked.

“Well, I’ll plan a trip for the three of us Kevin, Julie and me. Then when she sees, and hopefully understands our friendship she will get clarified that nothing is going on between me and Kevin. What do you say?” Stacy said. (she always loved travelling, it gives us a fresh start she says, perhaps it will).

“Sounds good but why do you think Julie will agree to come? That too when you will be around Kevin, don’t you think it will make her feel uncomfortable?” Richard said.

“True though, then why don’t you join us! I know it’s a li’l awkward, a junior asking a senior to come on a trip. But you know why I’m asking you to come right?, you are the one who’s close to Julie and I guess she trusts you more than me” Stacy said.

Richard nodded.

“So what do you say?” Stacy asked.

Richard spoke up a few moments later.

“Yeah I’ll come, but after the exams,” he said.

“Really?” Stacy asked.

“Yeah,” Richard said with a smile.

“Thank you so much,” Stacy said and was about to shake his hands, but somehow she held back. “Nice meeting you,” she said.

“Nice meeting you too,” Richard said and started to leave.

“Shall I drop you?” He asked.

“Um...no its fine. I can go” Stacy said awkwardly.

“No please, I’ll drop you,” Richard said.

“Okay, if you insist,” Stacy said after giving a thought.

Present Day...

Chapter 20

Not So Normal

“Do you have a dream? I’m sure you do. Even I have a dream, many to be honest. You know dreams are the ones which give us hope and illuminate our paths to move forward, erasing the darkness. Even if everyone else leaves us; our dreams never. These dreams give us a direction. But some dreams remain unfulfilled, even if we try to fulfil them with our whole strength and our whole heart; they just lie there like old rags, filthy and perhaps untouchable. What do we do with those dreams? Let

*them go ? Or perhaps we can hold on? What would you do?
What would be your choice ? ”*

Stacy seemed okay, at least for some time she didn't bother about Richard. And I too was minding my work, coming to office, completing my work, and returning home.(The daily routine as we call it). Everything seemed normal and busy as usual.

But there was some kind of change in Stacy, although she seemed normal (was she? Or else she's just pretending ?) there was a deep pain inside her, a pain which she's trying to hide, (we all do that right? Hiding our pain with a fake smile, thinking that no one will notice it, but pain, my friend doesn't work like that, it always shows itself, no matter how hard we try to suppress it, it pops up again and again hoping to find an answer for that one question: *why*; for which neither of us know the answer).

I tried to find out about what happened to Richard after he left college (I mean we didn't even meet each other for ages I feel, there was a dis-connection, until now, when he suddenly showed up. And by the way what would be the reason behind leaving Stacy all of a sudden, and breaking up with her? I tried asking him but he never considered that discussion, there is a radical change in Richard's attitude, I don't know what caused it or who caused it. It remained a mystery).

During our college life, Richard never portrayed himself as a senior, although he was, but rather he was like a friend. I should say an elder brother more than a friend, he was always supportive towards us. By "us" I mean Julie, I and obviously Stacy, whom he loved, more than anything else.

My phone beeped a message illuminating the screen and interrupting my thoughts.

"Kevin come into my cabin" Richard sent.

I looked at it and glanced towards Richard, he seemed busy or maybe not; let's see , I thought pocketing my phone and walked towards his cabin.

Chapter 21

A Walk into the Uncertainty

I have never thought or imagined that I would spend such a long time not having a single word with Julie. But yeah I didn't concentrate on her, not now I thought(I tried not to, but I couldn't do that, my mind jumped back to her, as though someone's pulling it). Since our exams are about to start in a few days, I didn't want to disturb or get disturbed. Our preparation holidays will be starting from tomorrow, so Stacy and I have decided to do combined studies.(perhaps it will help me to ... to take my mind off from Julie ? maybe it will).

"Shall we invite Julie also to study with us?" Stacy asked.

"No ... No," I said abruptly.

"But, Why ?" Stacy asked.

"I said don't want," I said furiously.

Stacy fell silent.

I looked at her. (She was hurt).

"Okay I'm sorry, I didn't mean to yell at you," I said apologetically. (What am I doing? Am I alright? Why is Julie bothering me a lot?).

"It's fine. Now study" Stacy said without giving me a glance.

We prepared our study plan and decided how we will be studying for exams, thanks to Mr Clinton; he had given us a few previous year question papers so that we can get an idea from it. (will those help ? Maybe they will).

We started practicing them in silence (a silence like never before), usually when Stacy and I have combined studies, it eventually turns out to be a mini get together kind of thing, but today there was nothing; except for a dense and an unwelcoming silence, and honestly I hate this between us, I

feel like as if I'm trying to balance things. I mean I can't put my friendship with Stacy at stake, but after Julie came into my life, I feel like as if I'm being pulled in two different directions and both those directions are important to me. And it's not about my choice, I can't choose between both of them, I can't do that man. I tried focusing my mind upon studying, but as I already knew, my thoughts, as usual, drifted back to Julie, but I disciplined myself to focus on exams right now and give her a second thought. (Can I do that? I don't exactly know, but I'll try to).

Finally, our preparation holidays came to an end. Stacy and I have worked hard for the exams and I was a bit tensed in the beginning, but Stacy had encouraged me. I always wonder how she will stay cool and calm all the time.

Our exams started and lasted for almost ten days, every day I gave my best(at least I tried to give my best), however, there was a fear somewhere inside me but I didn't allow it to take over me.

"So how were your exams?" Stacy asked.

"Good I guess," I said having my chocolate milkshake. We were in the dairy parlor that was near our college.

"So, are you ready now?" Stacy asked.

"For what?" I asked surprised.

"You forgot right? I knew you would forget" Stacy said.

Forgot what? I was thinking.

"Don't think too much, I'm asking about the trip that I said we'll be going," Stacy said.

"Oh! Yeah, I remember" I said reminding myself how Julie ignored me even though we crossed each- other's path many times during the exams.

"So, did you ask your parents?" Stacy asked.

I didn't react, instead I drank that chocolate milkshake in silence.

"You forgot that also right," Stacy asked.

I shot out a sarcastic smile.

"Idiot! Okay, I'll ask them don't worry. Let's go to your home now" Stacy said.

"Yeah you just fresh up and come in an hour, I'll be at home," I said.

"I said now," Stacy said.

"Now?" I said awkwardly.

"Yup, now," Stacy said.

"OK, as you say," I said.

So we started towards my home, first, we went to Stacy's place, as she said she wanted to freshen herself a bit. From there we started off, taking a walk from Stacy's place to mine, the climate seemed pleasant and peaceful, with the little birds chirping around, and the trees swaying to the light hugs of the gentle breeze, a few kids playing around with innocent smiles on their faces and happiness in their eyes. I felt jealous watching them, I miss those moments, and that age too, an age of innocence and joy and yeah mischief too, if we count that.

"Have a seat Stacy. Seeing you after a long time" mom said, as we stepped in.

"Yeah aunty, exams were going on right, so" Stacy said, sitting on the couch.

"Yeah, how did you write them?" mom asked.

"Very well aunty," Stacy said.

"Good to hear," mom said beaming out a smile.

There was an awkward silence.

"Stacy, you wanted to say something to mom right?" I said signalling her to talk to mom.

“Oh, Yeah, aunty as our exams are completed we planned to go on a trip” Stacy said.

“Oh! Really, Kevin never told this” mom said eyeing me a stare, not the angry one though, but it was more like a confused one.

“By the way, who all are going?” mom asked.

“Kevin, I and one of our classmates,” Stacy said.

“And one of our seniors also,” I said as if correcting Stacy.

“I see, for how many days you are planning to go? And what place did you plan?” mom asked. (I already expected these questions, I mean parents usually ask these right? And sometimes we feel as if they are questioning us a lot, like as if they are putting a burden upon us by asking those questions, but dude there's nothing as such, they are just concerned, once you get to know that, that's it, you never feel that as a burden, but more as a responsibility).

“Just a few days, maybe three or four;” I said.

“Don't know aunty, we still didn't decide the place,” Stacy said.

Mom thought for a moment and allowed us to go.

“Thanks, mom,” I said.

“Stacy, take care of this idiot, and don't eat anything unhealthy!” mom said

“Sure aunty,” Stacy said with a chuckle.

Finally! A green signal. But honestly speaking I don't exactly know what to expect from this trip, I've heard people say that ... most of the trips usually transform us, so I wonder how this trip will be, will it be a normal one? Or it will be a memory? Or maybe something more than a memory? These thoughts ran through my mind, but among these one thing I know is, this trip is gonna be a walk into the uncertainty.

Present Day...

Chapter 22

A Step Ahead

"May I come in sir?" I asked as I stood at the door.

"Come in," Richard said and I entered in. *"Have a seat Kevin"* he said.

I sat facing Richard, the cabin looked nice and well furnished, with a large chair and a well-designed table and a laptop upon it with a small décor plant on the right side of the table. The wall behind the chair was filled with awards and few pictures mostly of Mr. Williams. There was an aroma of roses (perhaps a room spray) enveloping the room, filling it with a soulful fragrance. It felt good.

"So Mr. Kevin," Richard said.

"Yes sir," I said.

"How's the work going on?" Richard asked, shutting his laptop.

"Good ... I guess, I hope it will be completed within two days or so," I said.

"Nice" Richard replied. He sounded stern. (What happened to him? This isn't that Richard whom I have known, he was different. That Richard was more ... um active and what's that

word ? energetic. But now he isn't the same, now he seems more hushed and I shouldn't say this but he seems more aphonic and inarticulate. What would have caused this? Is this due to his break up with Stacy ? Has that brought this change in him? Maybe yes, or maybe something else ? If yes, then what's that ?)

"By the way, how many are working on this project right now?" Richard asked, disturbing my flow of thoughts.

"Four," I said immediately.

"But every team should have atleast five people right?" Richard said.

"Yes sir, but everyone got evenly and we are the only team left with four members," I said.

"I see...and why didn't anyone inform this to me?" Richard asked.

"I thought it was a small issue, so," I said.

"Okay...but who is doing the other person's job?" Richard asked.

"Sir, we are exchanging our works daily like once I'll do coding and the other person does debugging and rest database management and vice versa," I said. (and the other times, none of us do a thing, we just relax, you can call us lazy, but we aren't lazy; maybe a little bit, but more than that, every one of us are passionate about what we do).

"Put that project on a hold for some-time, I'll have a word with Will" Richard said.

"But, why?" I said. (What does he mean! ? We've worked a lot on this, and now he says to hold this! Man! What does he have in mind).

"I want you to be a team manager Kevin," Richard said, as though reading my thoughts. (What! Is that what he really wants me to do ? I ... I ... um I don't know if I'm ready or not).

“But Sir I...I don’t have much experience,” I said, trying to calm the chain of thoughts running in my mind.

“Experience doesn’t matter Kevin. I see the potential in you, and you seem responsible and hard-working too,” he said.

“Okay... I guess, partly its true. Thank you so much, sir. I never thought I will lead a team in this short period” I said.

“You earned it Kevin; probably the junior developers will be arriving tomorrow. I will mail you the details regarding the project so you can have a look at it. Is that fine?” Richard said.

“Yes sir, sure. Thank you so much,” I said.

“Congratulations Kevin, and make sure you complete the work in time, okay?” he said. I nodded. *“And Williams will be joining us soon, I hope”* he said, more to himself than to me.

I left without dropping another word. As soon as I reached home I called Stacy. (she left the office soon, that too without informing me, she does this when she’s upset either with me or someone else; and now-a-days she’s being “upset” a lot, and the reason for that – according to me, is maybe she’s being hunted down by that past, a past which she would never want to visit again).

“Hey Stacy you have a surprise,” I said as soon as she answered the call.

“And what’s that” Stacy said, in a dizzy voice. (was she asleep ? who cares!).

“I’m a Team Manager now,” I said with excitement filling my voice.

“What? Are you serious?” Stacy asked. (by the way she said it, I could imagine her getting up from her bed furiously).

“Yeah Stacy, I can’t believe it,” I said.

“Neither can I,” Stacy said with a chuckle.

“Stop,” I said.

“Okay, I’m sorry. But by the way, who are your team-mates, only a few are there in your team right?” Stacy said.

“Yeah few more people will be joining me soon,” I said.

“Oh, I see,” Stacy said.

“And tomorrow Richard said he’ll introduce them to me,” I said

“Okay, and anyways congrats,” Stacy said, as though pretending to ignore the first part.

“Yeah thanks, even am eager to know who they are”, I said.

“So am I,” Stacy said.

Honestly speaking, I did have that desire to increase my position in the company, but I guess I wasn’t ready, or so did I feel. But now it seems like as though I’m a *step ahead*.

Chapter 23

The Perfect Imperfections

‘Journey...what’s so cool about it ? For a few of us it’s just a ride, and for few, it’s an escape from the busyness of this

world, hoping to find rest in a distant place. And then there will be few of us I should say very few to whom, a journey is a lifetime memory. Why is it so? Because that journey not only gives us relief but also few experiences, memories and few people; whom we can never forget even if we try to. Even though we forget, they come back like a beautiful aroma, filling our hearts and refreshing our soul.'

"You know, I'm very excited about this trip," Stacy said as she sat before me.

"Yeah me too," I said munching a sandwich that I bought.

We came to a bakery that is near my home.

"So when are you gonna tell this to Julie," Stacy asked.

"Right now," I said.

"How?" Stacy asked.

"I've asked her to come here," I said.

"What! Are you crazy?" Stacy said. *"First thing she doesn't want to see us together upon that you invited her here!"* She continued.

"Relax, I've told her that you're also here," I said.

"Okay, so is she coming now?" Stacy asked.(this time a little bit calmer).

"Yup, she must be here in a few moments," I said.

As we were having our conversation Julie stepped in, wrapped in a shiny dark blue frock with her hazel eyes darting around, and her glossy hair hanging loose (man ! she looked beautiful, I caught her eye, but immediately I looked back) she walked towards us and took a seat facing me. Stacy and Julie glanced at each other, without uttering a word.

We allowed the silence to take over for a moment, until Julie spoke up.

"Look, Stacy, I'm sorry for whatever had happened, I guess I overreacted a li'l bit. And I was wrong about you until Richard

spoke to me regarding you,” Julie said, breaking the silence.

“Its fine Julie, forget it,” Stacy said.

“So you knew Richard beforehand?” I asked.

“Yeah, we stay in the same colony. I too discovered it recently” Julie said adding slight chuckle.

“Oh! I see” I said.

“Hey J,” I said. *“I’m sorry, that I’ve hurt you ... I didn’t mean to honestly ... but it just happened. I’m an idiot. I’m so sorry”* I said. *“I...”* I began, but Julie cut me short saying: *“ Its okay and I love you too,”* *“Wh ... What?”* I said, (What did I just hear, am I dreaming? Nah! This is real). *“I mean, that’s what you wanted to tell right?”* Julie said. *“ Maybe”* I said with a light smile.

“So...are you ready for the trip ?” Stacy asked.

“Yeah,” Julie replied.

I wonder what would have happened if I never met Julie, I mean everything would be normal, but meeting her wasn’t an accident, although we are imperfect as individuals(I guess all of us are, individually imperfect, but when that imperfections combine together as one, that’s when they become *the perfect imperfections.*

Present Day...

Chapter 24

A Pain So Beautiful

When Richard said that I should be the team-manager, honestly I was tensed, it's been only a while I joined *Alpha Corporation* and I love the company as an employee, but now being a team lead, means more responsibilities and as well more stress. And upon that; unfamiliar team members; whom I've never met in my life.

I called mom and told her about my promotion.

"That's a piece of great news, Kevin!" mom said, filled with excitement.

"Thanks, mom," I said.

"Now you have to work hard, I guess?" mom said.

"Yeah, mom. Not too much though but...yeah, a li'l bit stress" I said.

"Take care, don't stress yourself too much," mom said.

"Okay, mom sure," I said.

"Okay bye, have a nice day," mom said.

"Bye mom," I said and hung up.

It took me fifteen minutes more than the usual time to reach the office, as soon as I reached, I went straight into my cabin and arranged my belongings; Stacy's seat seemed empty, (maybe she'll come later ?) I'm still tensed regarding the team lead position. *You can do it.* I said to myself. (Man! Where's Stacey! BFFs are always like this, not available in the time of need) While I was thinking this, Richard walked towards me.

"Hi Kevin, Good morning, what happened are you alright?" Richard asked, glancing at me.

"Uh ... nothing, just a bit nervous" I said. *"Don't worry, you can do it,"* Richard replied.

While I was talking to Richard, employees began to come, Stacy was among them, we looked at each other, she was

about to wave her hand but backed off noticing Richard standing beside me. But instead, I waved my hand and she just gave me a stare and went straight into her cabin. Richard glanced towards Stacy and trailed off into his cabin. Silently.

I went towards Stacy. *“So what’s up Stace, good morning,”* I said as I took a seat beside her.

“Hello Mr. Team Lead, where’s your team?” Stacy asked.

“Even am waiting for them; he said that they will be here in a few moments,” I said.

While we were chatting, Richard called me into his cabin.

“Go! I guess your “ new boss” is calling you,” Stacy said in a sarcastic way. (gosh I am fed up with these dramas, why don’t they talk to each other and settle the thing ? What’s stopping either of them, distance? I don’t know why people do this to themselves, although they are still in love with the person that hurt them, they don’t accept that, but the irony here is they don’t even deny that! People love to live in that pain, not because they got used to it, but because at some point it has become a pain that’s beautiful).

I entered into Richard’s cabin and took a seat facing him.

“Kevin I just spoke to the person who will be joining you, they will be here in like maybe in a few moments, I want you to explain the project that you are doing. Not too much description but just give an overview” Richard said.

“Sure,” I said.

As we were having the chat a person entered the cabin.

“May I come in?” the voice said. (the voice sounded familiar though).

I turned to see who it is, I was unable to believe my eyes. It was Julie! She stood astound looking at Richard and me, and so did i.

Chapter 25

A Few Prerequisites

Stacy, Julie, and I decided to go for a little bit of shopping for the trip, to a nearby mall. (I mean it's not a huge shopping, but a little bit, perhaps a pair of tees and shoe, I guess). The mall's a couple of kilometres away from my place, (I don't exactly know that, but that's what Stacy said). After getting dressed up, I gave them both a call (a con-call, to be precise).

"Where are you?" Stacy asked, as soon as the call connected.

"On my way," I said.

"Be quick!" Julie said.

“You guys carry on and send me the location of the mall. I’ll join you people in a while,” I said.

“You didn’t start, did you?” Stacy asked.

“Um...actually mom gave me some work to do, so I’ll finish that and will join you, okay?” I said.

“Okay, but try to come early,” Stacy said.

“Sure. I’ll be there in no time” I said and hung up the call.

After completing the work, I booked a bike taxi and went to the shopping mall, I was late as expected and I know both of them would be angry at me. (obviously they’ll be, no doubt in that).

Where are you I texted Stacy. *At the Café,* came the reply after a few moments. *Okay, I’ll be there* I sent and slipped the phone back into my pocket.

I walked straight into the cafe and saw Stacy and Julie sitting and chatting while having their coffee. As I went closer to them, Julie noticed me and gave me a hug, letting her fresh perfume fill me. (Whoa! I didn’t expect this, and honestly speaking, it felt beautiful) She was wearing a white T-shirt and blue jeans, her hair tied in a ponytail; she looked attractive and cute too.

“Thanks for coming in time,” Julie said sarcastically as I took my seat beside her.

“I’m sorry Julie,” I said, apologetically

“Okay, it’s fine,” Stacy said as if reminding to acknowledge her presence too. She looked great, long hair left loose, a black tee with a golden yellow overcoat upon it, and obviously that baby like smile. I eyed a sorry, for which she just gave out a smile. We are the best at communicating with gestures. (A kind of code language I guess).

“So shall we begin?” Julie said.

“Yeah let’s go,” I said and went to the clothing section, Julie and Stacy shopped nearly for two hours going from shop to

shop in the mall. I completed my shopping in approximately thirty minutes I guess. (as I told before I bought only a pair of sneakers and a pair of tees, it took me thirty minutes because I suck at making choices).

“I’ll wait in the coffee shop, you guys give me a call once it’s done,” I said. *“Alright”* Stacy replied. *“Cool, see you in a moment”* I said and made my way back to the café.

I guess they didn’t give heed(I’m sure they didn’t) and disappeared into the pouring crowd. I started having my coffee, the hot caffeine pouring down my throat felt wonderful, the café seemed filled, I mean totally occupied, great business huh! Some were having their drinks, others working on their laptops and few kids playing around, while their parents trying to control them, as I was glancing around, I found someone familiar in a formal outfit, a relative perhaps? Or maybe a friend, I guess. Unable to digest the suspense of who’s that person, I walked towards him. As I came close, I found out that it’s Richard.

“Hello,” I said standing beside him.

He turned towards me (a little bit startled by my sudden entry) *“Hey, Kevin what’s up. Have a seat”* he said.

I sat before him. He wore a white shirt and dark blue denim; with a few light blue shadings upon that. *“So what’s up?”* He asked.

“Ah! I just completed my shopping but the girls are continuing. So here I am waiting for them,” I said.

“I see. Tough job” He said with a smirk, *“It is,”* I said with a smile. Meanwhile a waiter walked towards us and placed a cup upon the table. *“Your coffee sir,”* he said turning to Richard. *“Coffee?”* Richard asked, glancing towards me. *“I just had,”* I replied with a smile.

We spoke for a while, Richard told me about how he is excited about this whole trip and how even he too was planning for a break, and all that stuff. My phone rang, it was from Julie *“Where are you?”* Julie asked, as soon as I answered it.

“Hey honey, I’m in the cafe; where are you?” I said.

“We are done with the shopping, will be there in few minutes,” Julie said.

“Okay, I’ll be here, come quickly,” I said.

“Okay,” Julie said and hung up.

Julie and Stacy came after a few minutes; they noticed Richard and greeted him. *“How are you?”* Richard asked.

“Doing well,” Stacy said. She seemed nervous, I don’t know why.

“I hope the misunderstanding between you people got solved,” Richard said.

“Yeah,” Julie replied with a smile.

“That’s great to hear,” Richard said with a smile.

“Thanks to you Richard, it’s because of you this all happened. Else we would still be fighting” Stacy said. *“Like kids”* I added. *“Yeah like kids”* Stacy said with a smile.

“It’s nothing I just did my part. Julie came to me for help and I’ve done it, that’s it” Richard said.

“So done with your shopping?” I asked.

“Yeah, kind of,” he said.

“How are we gonna plan this trip and when are we going? We haven’t decided the date still,” Julie said, taking her seat and placing the shopping bags beside her.

“Before asking when, we need to decide where we are gonna go,” Stacy said.

“Yeah,” I said. *“Have any place in mind?”* I asked, glancing towards Stacy.

“Nope,” she replied.

“Why don’t we go somewhere, peaceful and calm,” Stacy said.

“You mean a library?” I asked. *“Shut up,”* She replied.

Richard gave out a smile.

“So, what are you trying to suggest?” I asked.

“What I mean is, if we go to some place far from this chaos of the city and somewhere peaceful, it would be much better,” Stacy said.

“Sounds good, but where we will go, and even if we go somewhere, staying, finding a hotel and all that stuff takes a lotta time,” I said.

“Guys, don’t worry, I have a plan,” Richard said.

“What’s that?” I asked.

“My uncle owns a farmhouse, so we can go there. Its located in the city outskirts, what do you guys say?” Richard said.

“Very well, but will he let us stay?” Stacy asked.

“You people don’t worry about that, I’ll sort it out,” Richard said.

“That’s great!” Stacy exclaimed. “Thanks Richard,” she said.

“It’s fine Stacy. We are friends right” Richard said with a smile on his face.

Stacy smiled at his way of adding sweetness to his voice while speaking to her.

“Finally we are going. I’m excited,” Julie said.

“Yeah, me too sweetheart,” I said.

“So, we are leaving,” I said.

“Where are you going?” Stacy asked.

“We both planned a movie date today so.,” I said.

“Now?” Stacy asked.

“Yeah, like in thirty minutes the show’s gonna start,” I said.

“So we are leaving now bye,” I said.

“But...” Stacy said.

“What?” I said.

“Who will drop me home?” Stacy said.

“Hey, don’t worry Stacy, I’ll drop you home,” Richard said.

“Are you sure?” Stacy asked.

“Yeah sure; There’s no problem for me,” Richard said.

“Cool. So we are leaving then,” I said putting my arm around Julie.

“Yeah, we too,” Richard said.

“Shall we leave now, Stacy?” Richard said.

“Yeah,” Stacy said.

Present Day...

Chapter 26

A Game Called Pretending

“What are you doing here?” I asked Julie, sitting in the office cafeteria. We ordered two black coffee and few cookies too.

“That should be my question I guess,” Julie said, taking a sip, her fingers clutching around the coffee cup.

“I work here J,” I said.

“Oh, Is it ? I never know that!” Julie said with excitement.

“Yeah,” I said. (Firstly, I did tell her, that I work in a software firm, but I never mentioned that’s its Alpha Corporation).

“But honestly, I never knew that you worked here. You never told me,” Julie said.

“You didn’t ask me about that. So I never told you” I said.

“Yeah, I admit it,” Julie said and took a sip.

“But why did you leave your job? It was a nice one” I asked, Julie works as a system administrator for a start-up, whose name I exactly don’t know.

"Who told you that I left my job?" Julie said.

"You didn't?" I asked.

"No. I didn't, they just transferred me here for the sake of some project. My job now is to just look after the project and after that's done, I'll leave" Julie said. *"Yeah, I'll stay if my boss wants to, but that's the other side of the coin."*

"I want you to stay with me Julie," I said. (I meant that, I mean although I'll be pre occupied with work daily, I do miss her a lot).

"Me too Kevin, I missed you a lot," Julie said (as though reading my mind).

"I missed you too J," I said clutching her hand gently.

"But wait a minute. What the hell is Richard doing here?" Julie asked, almost immediately.

"He's our boss," I said, taking a sip.

"What! Really?" Julie asked, surprised.

"Yeah," I said and explained everything about the accident of Williams and Richard's temporary position as CEO and Stacy's reaction towards it.

"By the way; where is she?" Julie asked, after a couple of moments as if trying to digest whatever I have said her.

"Maybe she's doing some work. She's turned herself into an enthusiastic workaholic nowadays," I said.

Julie gave a smile.

"So, how's she doing; Did Richard spoke to her?" Julie asked.

"Um...he tried to, but Stace never allowed. You know right what happened between them" I said.

"Yeah," Julie said.

"But I think he wants to get back to Stacy," I said.

"And why do you think that?" Julie asked.

Then I told her about Richard's message to Stacy, saying that he wants to get her back and maybe start over again, and how she had those panic attacks, and about Dr. Stanley's words.

"And you know what, while I was talking to him, I saw a genuine sense of loss in his eyes; he was staring at Stacy like he wanted to tell her something. But he never did. And upon that Stacy's avoiding him" I said. (Or perhaps she's pretending to do so. I sometimes wonder how we are so good or I should say that we are masters at pretending, pretending as though everything is good, when it isn't, pretending as though we are happy, when we aren't, pretending to be whole, but deep inside we are broken or perhaps shattered into a million pieces, and pretending to hate, but somewhere deep inside we love, we love with our whole heart, but we don't accept that, Why? Why can't we accept that? Because of ego? Or perhaps a fear? What do you think it is?)

"Yeah, But whatever he did, it was wrong," Julie said.

"What do you mean?" I asked.

"Like leaving Stacy suddenly and never again contacting her, or at least one of us for such a long time. It isn't the right thing to do" Julie said.

"Yeah, I agree" I said.

While we were talking Stacy came and sat beside Julie.

"Hey, Julie how you? It's been a long time." Stacy said. And they both exchanged a light hug.

"I'm well, how about you?" Julie asked.

"Yup I'm doing good too thanks," Stacy said with a smile. (a fake one probably).

"How are you now? Kevin told me that you were in the hospital" Julie said.

"Yup, better. Thanks" Stacy said and fell silent her eyes darting away.

“Stacy I don’t wanna upset you by telling you this. But why don’t you speak to Richard?” Julie asked.

“There’s nothing to speak. It’s over. And I’m done” Stacy said.

“But...” I said.

“He never wanted me. Or else he would have stayed or at least...” Stacy began but she chose not to spill much.

“But he came back right?” Julie said.

“For what ! To break my heart again?,” Stacy said.

“Broken things can be fixed Stacy,” I said.

“My heart ain’t a thing. I hope you get it” Stacy said and started leaving.

“And please never again bring up this topic. Once I said I’m done. I’m done. That’s it” Stacy said and left silently.

“It’s okay Kevin. She’s not in a position to listen to us. Leave her alone for some time. She’ll be alright” Julie said.

“Yeah, okay,” I said glancing back to Stacy who walked back towards the lobby.

I don’t understand for how long this game of pretending lasts. Forever? No! Will they open up to each other ? Will they talk ? And most importantly will Stacy love him again?

Chapter 27

See You Soon!

'There's always a reason why you meet people. Either they enlighten your true self, whom you have left behind or you enlighten their true self, who they haven't discovered yet'

Our movie night went fabulous and we spent a great time together laughing, smiling, and most importantly, loving each other. After the show's done, we dropped by a roadside restaurant, it seemed empty, maybe they'll shut it down in a few moments? I glanced at my watch, it struck 11:50 PM. The glittery moon shining ablaze in the dense sky, with those tiny little droplets called stars keeping his company, In a few minutes we'll be entering into a new day, anyway we entered into the restaurant, I marvelled at its beauty, the golden bulbs hanging loose to the ceiling, and a low lighting hitting the ground as though setting up a romantic environment especially for us, I felt ... um ... special (I surely did, I mean am with one of my favourite persons, Julie, whom I love with my whole heart. I guess it's absolutely a special moment, a moment to cherish).

We sat facing each other, her face glowing, her eyes glittering, she let her hair loose, (I didn't observe properly but she have a shoulder length hair, with curls like ribbons).

We didn't speak for a while, we usually don't speak much, I guess I love the silence between us; it's not actually a silence, but probably a kind of peace you can say, a heavenly peace. I placed my arm on the table and suddenly she held my arm gently, her fingers locking with mine, I felt as though an electric wave passing through my whole system, it felt great, her soft hands upon mine. "I love you," Julie whispered, with her eyes diving into mine, my heart raced, I couldn't spill a word, I wanted to shout at the top of my lungs that I love her with my whole heart, but I couldn't do that (I feel awkward sometimes). She didn't say a thing, except to chuckle at my awkwardness.

Over dinner, that beautiful silence between us was replaced by endless talks, laughs, we spoke about us, our plans, our dreams, I seemed like there are too many common points between us, we talked about books, she loves reading! You name the genre, we talked about every genre and every author, whom we have read until now. The time passed like a wave of breeze, quick yet fulfilling.

I dropped Julie at her home, it was past mid-night, perhaps 2 AM ? I guess so; we took a ride from the restaurant to her home (thank God, cabs were available). We got off a few blocks away from Julie's home and began to walk, holding hands with the cold breeze hitting us, along with the tunes of crickets and other insects perhaps, giving us company in this silent night, we reached Julie's home a while later, "So..." I said. "Take care," I said. "You too," she replied, her arms still holding mine, we stood facing each other, perhaps a few feet apart and in a moment we wrapped around each other, our bodies pressing against each other, our hearts rhythmic beats pounding against each other, it felt as though the earth stopped spinning as the moon stood still, just for us. it felt beautiful, I closed my eyes to feel this moment, this moment of love, "see you soon" I whispered, "see you soon," she replied and walked away, she towards her home and me to mine. As I was walking, I got a call, I hope it is not from mom, taking my phone out, I relieved myself, the screen flashed Stacy's name.

“So Mr. Busy bee; done with your romance?” Stacy asked, as soon as I answered the call

“I’m sorry Stacy; I was with Julie right, so I forgot to call you,” I said apologetically.

“No its okay, you got a new friend, uh sorry girl-friend,” Stacy said.

“Come on man, I said I’m sorry right!” I said.

“It’s okay,” Stacy said with a chuckle.

“When did you reach home?” I asked.

“Just a while ago,” Stacy said.

“But you left with us right, why so late?” I asked.

“Yeah I was with my new friend,” Stacy said.

“Oh! And who’s that?” I asked.

“Why do you care? You have your Julie right!” Stacy said.

“Come on man. Not again” I said.

“Okay. I was with Richard and we went to a nearby restaurant” Stacy said.

“Oh! You too went on a date?” I asked.

“Shut up! It’s not a date. We just went to have some food that’s it” Stacy said.

“Okay, what am I saying?” I said.

“You think I’m falling for Richard?” Stacy asked.

“I never told that!” I said.

“Okay bye, I’m sleeping now. Get lost” Stacy said.

“Oh! I think your new “friend” is calling you. Have a talk bye. I don’t wanna disturb you guys.” I said.

“Stop it! And where are you?” Stacy asked.

“On the way, Why?” I asked.

“You still didn’t reach home?” Stacy asked.

“No, I said you right! I was with Julie,” I said.

“Yeah, and I was thinking to tell all of this to mom, what do you say?” Stacy asked loaded with sarcasm.

“Hey, Stace, don’t do that man! When the time is right, I will tell her, you don’t worry, okay!” I said.

“I am not worrying, I’m just fulfilling my responsibility,” Stacy said.

“What responsibility?” I asked utterly confused.

“Remember, your mom said to me to take care of you? I am just doing that” Stacy said.

“Thanks, for your concern, but no thanks,” I said, for which she chuckled a bit.

“Okay, by the way, how was Richard? You liked him?” I asked.

“I think you’re getting late, go home,” Stacy said ignoring my question.

“But, listen,” I said.

“What?” Stacy asked.

“You both look lovely as a pair,” I said.

“Thanks, Stacy said.

“By the way, what did he say?” I asked.

“What will he say!!” Stacy asked confused.

“I mean what did he tell in the end ? ” I asked.

“Um... see you soon,” Stacy said.

“What ?” I asked.

“He said ... See you soon,” Stacy said.

Present-Day...

Chapter 28

Up in the Air

I pondered upon having a word with Richard, but what should I speak about? Should I ask him why he left Stacy so abruptly? Or should I ask him about what is the reason for him to come back again if he left her? Was he feeling guilty for leaving Stacy all of a sudden and wanted to get back to her and start it over again? These questions swarmed through my mind, making me restless and perhaps anxious too, I know it's kind of odd, worrying upon your bff's love-life, and I don't think I have the right to do so. But honestly, I miss her, I miss her true self, which is perhaps hidden somewhere, trying to break loose and all it needs is a spark, to enlighten it. (But what or who, will ignite that spark is the question).

“Okay, first we need to find out why he sent that message,” Julie said. We sat in the office cafeteria, Stacy isn’t with us, the last time I saw her is in this same café; she seemed angry, confused, broken and dejected. I tried speaking to her, but she wouldn’t talk with neither of us.

“Right,” I said.

“But how can we do it. Will he tell us?” Julie asked.

“I don’t think so,” I said.

“But, why?” Julie asked.

“Why? What do you mean by that?” I asked.

“Look, now Stacy is not in a position, or, to be frank, she doesn’t wanna talk to him. Not now, but eventually she will” Julie said.

“Yeah, I hope so” I said.

“So, let’s ask him first and let’s see, but if he really wanted to tell us or Stacy about his sudden disappearance from Stacy’s life, he would have done it long time ago, but I don’t think he wants to tell us the reasons behind his sudden disappearance and now trying to reconnect again. Let’s give them some time” Julie said.

“Yeah let’s give them some time,” I said wondering, how much time it’s going to take for either of them to open up.

Are they ever gonna talk ?

Will they ever gonna open up?

These questions remained unanswered as though somewhere left out to float up in the air.

Chapter 29

Off To a Road of Surprises

Finally, the day has arrived, a trip we've been planning,(to be honest we didn't plan this. It happened spontaneously, a sudden decision you can call I don't exactly know what this trip has in store for us, but somewhere i believe it would re-generate. Re-ignite. And re-fuel us, along with some new experiences, some new adventures, and some beautiful memories too. Memories to cherish).

You know, we expect a lot from life right! And yeah expectations are good, we need to expect stuff, but sometimes things don't go as expected or as planned, which obviously brings disappointment and sometimes frustration, sometimes instead of expecting try accepting life as it comes, let life surprise you. I am sure life has so many beautiful surprises stored for us somewhere safe, somewhere in a divine place perhaps? Maybe. So here I am waiting, for life to surprise me; A surprise, beyond my wildest dreams and imaginations.

I called Richard, He answered for the first ring *"Hey, where are you?"* I said.

"About to start; and where are you?" Richard replied.

"Starting in a moment; by the way how are we gonna go?" I asked.

"I have a car," Richard said.

"Really, but you never used it to college?" I asked.

"Yeah, actually it's dad's gift on my birthday, but I wanted to buy my own car, you know," Richard said.

"Yeah, I'm so eager to have a look at it. I love cars" I said. (I really do, I don't know why, but I kind of have a mini crush on cars).

"Is it? Dad loves them too, you have to meet him one day" Richard said.

"For sure," I said.

"Have you called Stacy?" Richard asked.

"Yeah, she'll be coming here any moment," I said.

"Okay, that's cool, instead of them coming let's go to their home. You know the address right?" Richard said.

"Yeah I do," I said.

"Send me your location," Richard said.

"Sure Just wait," I said and sent my location.

"Done," I said.

"Yeah it shows exactly twenty minutes from here," Richard said.

"Okay done see you," I said and hung up.

I called Julie immediately, after a series of dials she answered.

"Hey, sweetheart" Julie said.

"Hi honey, you ready?" I asked.

"Yeah just giving few finishing touches," Julie said.

"I heard that angels don't wear makeup!" I said.

"Few like me wear," Julie said.

"Good to know," I said and snickered.

"Have you called Stacy?" Julie asked.

"Nope, I'll call now," I said and added Stacy in a con-call.

"Yes, bark," Stacy said.

"Bark! It's Julie here" Julie said.

"Hey, Julie. I thought its Kev," Stacy said.

"Barked," I said.

"Where are you?" I asked.

"Home," Stacy said.

"Okay be ready we'll be there in 10 minutes," I said.

"Sure," Both of them said in unison.

I hung up the call as the doorbell rang, I went to answer it, as I opened the door I saw Richard standing, he wore a white T-shirt upon that a brown leather jacket and blue jeans, with a bright smile plastering his face and eyes as always, shining. I motioned him to come in.

Richard sat on the sofa. *“Need a drink?”* I asked.

“No I’m fine, shall we leave?” Richard asked.

“Give me a few moments,” I said and went to lock all the doors. *“Done, let’s go,”* I said taking my backpack and we started moving out, locking the door behind me.

“Is this your car?” I said wide-eyed looking at it.

“Yeah,” Richard said as he opened the car’s trunk.(the trunk was filled with bags and few other camping stuff I guess). He shut the trunk after placing my bag in it and walked towards the driver’s seat. It was a shiny black convertible.

“It’s awesome, the interior is lovely,” I said cupping my hands on the glass.

“So shall we go?” Richard asked.

“What....Yeah, I’m sorry” I said and sat in the front seat.

“Don’t mind, am a li’l bit obsessed with cars, you know,” I said, trying not to sound awkward.

“Can see that,” he replied with a chuckle.

We reached Stacy’s place and stalled at her entrance. A while later, Stacy and Julie appeared.

Stacy wore a white frock with black checks on it and upon that a salmon overcoat and matching to her shoes, she held a handbag in her right shoulder and was carrying a small brown backpack and Julie was wearing a white t-shirt printed with some animated character (spongebob perhaps) and a pink overcoat with light blue jeans, her hair was tied in a pony-tail whereas Stacy left her hair open which fell back up to her waist.

“You look amazing,” I whispered to Julie as she came near the car.

“As always,” Julie said with a click.

Julie and Stacy sat in the back seat. *“Why don’t you sit back Kevin?”* Richard said. *“Let Stacy come in the front seat”* he continued.

“Yeah it sounds better,” I said and exchanged seats with Stacy.

I sat beside Julie while Stacy sat with Richard and we started moving, off to a road of surprises.

Present Day...

Chapter 30

A Token to Hold On To

Stacy never agreed to talk to Richard, she didn’t even try to talk to him even after Julie and I pleaded her so much. (Although he tried a lot, at least one word, but no, she wouldn’t allow). She was always like that. Stubborn; I don’t know what’s going on in her mind, her attitude towards Richard tells that she doesn’t want him to invade her life, or she doesn’t want to get involved with him again or maybe she’s just pretending so. But there was something in her eyes that I observed while speaking to her about him, perhaps a kind of sparkle or a light. Some tears were held back forcefully. Tears that flow when you don’t want to lose someone or something you love the most. I saw that kind of tears when she told me about Richard’s proposal when we went on that trip.

I started for the office, and I’m already halfway. Usually, it takes me an hour or so to reach office but today there was less traffic and I reached a li’l early. Entering in, I was greeted by one of my co-workers, he works in a different department I

didn't know exactly which, but usually we meet in the café. I smiled at him and gave him a firm handshake and went on my way; And he on his. I reached my desk and arranged myself, looking for Stacy but she wasn't there.

As I arranged my stuff upon the desk i found a bouquet of red roses on Stacy's desk, who would have kept that? I wondered, as I looked around it there was a note stuffed in that bunch of roses, which read: *To Stacy Parker*, with a red heart symbol beside her name. A light smile curved my lips; (I know who would have sent these). I dialled Stacy's number and she answered almost immediately. *"Where are you?"* I asked.

"Coming, on the way I'll be there in a few moments," Stacy said.

"Come quickly. There's a surprise for you" I said.

"For me! And what's that?" Stacy asked.

"I said it's a surprise," I said.

"Okay coming," Stacy said and hung up.

Stacy arrived nearly after twenty minutes from the call. She wore a cream shirt tucked in a navy blue skirt with her hair tied up in a pony-tail and a not-so-small handbag on her left shoulder. She looked lovely, with a kind of elegance, and a sweet smell of perfume enveloping her body. She came and sat in her usual place, utterly confused by the flowers that sat on her desk.

"What's all this?" Stacy asked.

"I think it's for you," I said with a smirk.

"What? And who would have kept it here? That too for me! Seriously!" Stacy said.

"Maybe some secret admirer of yours," I said glancing towards Richard's cabin. He was busy speaking on the phone.

"Forget it," Stacy said with a frown and rolling her eyes.

"Man... Give it a try," I said.

“What do you mean by ‘give it a try’ Kevin!” Stacy said settling herself.

“Just talk to him, like why he sent that message. And settle it down” I said.

“It’s not about the message Kevin,” Stacy said.

“Then ?” I asked.

She fell silent.

“You know what...” Stacy began after a few seconds, but chose not to end the sentence.

“What?” I asked. It was a demand rather than just mere asking.

“I don’t know Kevin. Sometimes it seems like I still love him, but something on the inside says no, I don’t know dude, I’m confused. A lot” Stacy said.

I nodded and stayed silent.

“I mean i can’t decide now. I’m settled in life but things aren’t the same and to be honest, I’m not the old self. I have changed a lot, and maybe during that unknown process of changing I have built some ... boundaries around me, boundaries which perhaps I... don’t wanna break. And you have told it numerous times that I have changed, haven’t you? And I didn’t believe what you said, or perhaps I did believe but I ... um ... never accepted it” Stacy said, and fell silent.

“So what you are gonna do now. You say you can’t forget him,” I asked.

“I don’t have an answer for that. At least not at this moment” Stacy said.

“Do one thing. Just take a break, everything will be fine” I said.

“I can take, but not at this moment. I can’t leave my work just because of some emotional state I put myself in,” she said.

“Don’t worry, I’ll ... figure something out,” Stacy said faking a smile.

“Hope you do,” I said.

“But you know what, when I’m at home, alone, even that loneliness reminds me of him, and I do want to cry sometimes, but tears wouldn’t come, perhaps I’ve used them all,” she said and stopped as though trying to sink in those words she have spoken. “ And you know even after all these years, thinking of those moments that we spent together happily, and those promises we made each other fills me with both joy and pain, I just can’t erase them from my memory, even if try to, they come back again and again,” Stacy said.

“You still wear it?” I said glancing towards the locket that she wore.

“Oh, this! Yeah, I still do, It’s a part of the moments that we spent together happily, and even if I wanted to take it off from my sight. I can’t do it, somehow it became a part of me, as though a token, a token to hold on to,” Stacy said.

“Yeah, I know how you felt that day, the joy in your voice, and happiness in your eyes. Remember?” I said.

“Yeah, I do remember,” Stacy said, holding that locket between her fingers.

Chapter 31

A Lively Paradise

The road seemed busy with the vehicles zooming around rapidly and the vroom sound filling the air, the evening sun returned into the belly of the earth, folding back his majestic shiny arms, as if about to rest, painting the sky with salmon red and allowing his partner-the ruler of the night to take over his place, who was probably hiding somewhere behind that veil of clouds, as though an innocent child.

Julie and I sat at the back seat, our arms wrapped around each other,, while Stacy sat beside Richard, her silky hair swinging to the evening breeze; although they are just a few steps apart neither of them spoke to each other, allowing the silence between them to stay a little longer, except for their eyes darting around eventually to glance at each other just for a split second. And again look back as though nothing has ever happened. Amidst of this, Stacy's phone dinged a message.

What are you doing? I typed in and sent a message to Stacy.

What do you want me to do? She replied.

At least talk to him you dumb girl, I sent.

What should I talk? Came the reply

Something, anyways you love to chatter I sent adding a smiley emoji to it. She replied with an angry emoji.

Do it now!! I replied.

No! I can't, Stacy replied.

Coward I replied, but before she could read it, she turned the screen off placing the phone inside her purse.

"So where are we going?" I asked breaking the ice.

"I have a surprise for you guys" Richard said glancing into Stacy's eyes reflected in the rear view mirror, his hands resting upon the steering.

"Whoa, sounds cool" Stacy said.

"Indeed it is," Richard said.

Gradually the chaos of the busy city died out, and the bustling vehicles decreased as we pulled ourselves away from the busyness of our lives and entered into something peaceful, something less chaotic.

With the car coming to a halt, we saw the sky suffused with a host of sparrows fluttering around, spreading their tiny wings into the air, perhaps returning to their home while filling the salmon sky with their melodious strains and their angelic voices.

Stepping out we saw a lake. It was a little dark; the setting sunlight was glittering over the surface of the waters as they were stirring, with the gentle breeze hovering upon them. It appeared as though petals of crystals floating upon the rippling water. *"It's wonderful,"* Stacy exclaimed glancing over the lake, her eyes filled with excitement and her voice as though a child.

"Did you like the surprise?" Richard asked glancing towards Julie and me.

"We loved it," Julie said and I smiled at him.

"Stacy," a voice said, after a while. It was more like a whisper, than voice. She was busy eyeing the view.

Stacy turned towards that voice and saw Richard coming closer to her.

"I have something to say," Richard said, standing right in front of her maybe two or three inches apart, his eyes directly gazing into Stacy's. A moment of silence rested between them, except for the birds of the air singing like a little choir of kids.

"Yeah, Richard" Stacy said, her eyes glued into his.

He exhaled before speaking, as though preparing for something, perhaps something beautiful, he looked at her with child-like eyes before speaking.

"To be honest, I liked you the moment I saw you. But I thought you are not my type and my kind so I ignored you. Or else I thought I ignored you, but I was wrong; I couldn't do it."

There's something in you, which pulls me closer towards you, perhaps those eyes; there's a whole world hidden inside them, and I promise you I'll never let that world to be drowned. I don't just want a relationship. I want a lifetime with you. I wanna grow old with you. I'm not flattering, and I don't say I can't live without you. I can live, but I'll be void and empty without you. I love you, Stacy, I don't know if what I'm doing is the right thing or not, but I do know this, if I don't do this, it would be the greatest regret of my life, ... and let me ask you something : will you be the anchor of my heart? I promise I'll hold onto you, till the end of time," Richard said looking into her eyes.

Stacy stood still, bewildered. Her heart was racing, there came the moment which she never expected, or perhaps she did.

The look in her eyes said she was utterly shocked. She stood still, glancing deep into Richard's eyes which were still waiting for a response, They came closer to each other, now only a breath apart; silence enveloped the atmosphere, except for the rhythm of waves and the sound of crickets.

Stacy hugged him tightly, her arms around him, with eyes directly diving into his. He held her close, with his arms enveloping her, and resting in that embrace as if she would be vanished if he didn't, with his arms around her; he looked into her eyes which were glittering as the moonlight fell on them; her face seemed like an angel.

With an ardent voice, Stacy replied: *"I love you too Rich, I always did, from the moment I saw you I wanted you, to be with you; but I don't know if I was ever ready; every single time I came across you my heart raced rapidly, I wouldn't know the reason, maybe I failed to fathom that this is what called love is; Real love. I love you more than anything Richard"* she said giving him a tight hug, feeling the rhythm of his heartbeat upon her own, her fingers resting between his sandy hair. And her eyes closed.

She always wanted to say these words to him, perhaps in her mind this part had been played a numerous times, but she

never dared to spill them out, just because of a fear that she might lose him if she told him, but today, right now that fear had vanished, and is replaced with love, a love that was as real as life itself.

“You’re the greatest gift of my life,” Richard said, cupping her face in his arms, feeling the coldness of her buttery cheeks and the beauty of her smile.

I don’t know what to call this moment, this moment is filled with emotions bursting forth as though firecrackers lighting up the sky, and most importantly the emotion of love rising high above the altitudes, what shall I call this ? *A Lively Paradise?*

Present Day...

Chapter 32

As Though a Long Lost Treasure

Stacy seemed troubled and perturbed, I tried calling and texting her n number of times but she neither returned my calls and messages nor Julie's. However, I made my way towards the office hoping she would be there today. I sent a text message to Stacy saying: '*Coming to the office?*', she didn't see it, (perhaps she'll have a look at it later ?) thinking this I pocketed my phone.

I reached the office, Stacy's desk still empty; she didn't show up, I don't understand what's keeping her at home. (Is she alright ? Did she miss her medication which Dr Stanley prescribed ? No ... no ... don't think this, she's fine. Stop over-thinking) "*Hey, Kevin how are you!*" one of my colleagues said, pulling me back from my chain of thoughts. I waved at him faking a smile. (Mentally thanking him). Hoping to take my mind off these thoughts, I began setting up my desk, it is comprised of my laptop, a small coffee cup with a smiley sticker attached to it, a small notebook, which people mistake for a journal (it isn't exactly a journal, but ... um ... I do write things in that, like some prompts and a few poems I guess) and obviously a book to read (I guess a romance novel, which I have started probably a month ago, and still didn't yet finish it). While I was settling myself (and my desk), Julie walked in she wore a black shirt and a white blazer upon it with a light cream-colored trousers. I shot a slight smile at her, she too seemed upset, concerning Stacy.

"*Did she call you?*" Julie asked, taking her seat beside me, her lavender scent enveloping the space between us.

"*No. not so far,*" I said.

Julie nodded. *“Maybe she just wants to take rest, let her take some time off,”* she said.

“Yeah maybe,” I replied and fell silent. (Even I wanted her to take some break from all this, although it isn’t as easy as it sounds. You know many times we try to ... um ... forget few things, few bitter and throbbing memories I should call them, but somehow they bounce back at us, as though attached with some invisible emotional strings, those strings which pull our hearts and shatter them into a myriad million pieces ... But one question always pops up in my mind: will this temporary break help Stacy to put herself together emotionally? Or will it deteriorate her ?)

“Are you prepared for the meeting?” Julie asked, pulling me from my chain of thoughts.

“What meeting ?” I asked pondering about any upcoming meetings that I have. (To be honest, I don’t exactly remember any upcoming meetings I have).

“You didn’t receive the mail?” Julie asked surprised.

“No I didn’t, what mail?” I said with the same surprised look.

“Oh! Man, I guess you didn’t check. Wait I’ll show you” Julie said, and turned her laptop screen towards me so that I can read the contents on it.

“So, finally Mr. Williams has recovered, that’s great!” I said, reading the e-mail.

“Yeah,” Julie said.

“That’s a piece of great news!” I exclaimed.

“Yeah, it is,” Julie said.

“So is he coming now?” I asked.

“Well, yeah, I guess the meeting starts as soon as he arrives,” Julie said.

I nodded.

“Have you seen Richard?” I asked.

“No,” Julie said abruptly and turned away facing her laptop screen. She looked amazing, her curly hairs hanging loose like ribbons, and man! Her face looked much beautiful than the Julie whom I have seen a few years ago as a college student, childish. Innocent. And those tiny little curves which her smile puts upon her face. Nothing has changed between us, except now we don’t have those silly chats and those childish moments anymore like the way we used have back in college times, I guess that’s what life does, it places before us too many so called “important things” that we tend to lose the sight of the real important things like friends, happiness, joy, passion and most importantly love.

After a few moments, Alex came in and greeted us. “*Guys have you received the news?*” he asked.

“Yes,” We said.

“*Great; be prepared for the meeting. Mr. Williams will be here, in like thirty minutes I hope*” Alex said glancing at his watch and went off.

Mr. Williams arrived nearly forty-five minutes later, wearing a black suit, he looked healthy (or lively, if that’s what you can call) with a slight smile plastering upon on his face trying to cover up the worry that’s trying to burst forth from his eyes. He greeted us warmly, as though nothing has ever happened to him, that’s what I love in him, his cheerful smile despite the chaos around and in him. He motioned us to come into the meeting room. And so we did. Everyone arranged themselves, with cheerful smiles and a sense of joy in their eyes. And above all, a kind of hope, a hope that everything’s going to be alright and perhaps back to normal.

“*So guys, how are you all?*” He said as he took his seat.

“*All are well sir,*” Alex said.

“*Guess you guys didn’t miss me?*” Williams asked, with a smirk. (Although he was in pain, his eyes reflected a fruit of joy. A joy unfathomable, I don’t know how he does that).

“Yeah sir, we did miss you, but Mr. Richard arrival he never made us feel that way,” Someone in the crowd said.

“Oh! Is it?” Williams said glancing towards Richard who shot back a smile at him.

“That’s the reason I told him to take my position, for some-time,” Williams said and fell silent.

“Okay coming to the point, I’ve heard few people left, I mean resigned, after some clients have denied continuing their work with us. Is that right?” Williams said.

“Yeah sir, few people indeed left us, but we managed, working over-time,” I said.

“That’s great to hear and I’m happy for you guys, your hard work pays off,” Williams said. *“I have few plans, that I want you guys to take over, so in the coming days, you guys will get a li’l busy I guess, as you know there are very few of us right now. But no worries, I’ll take interviews and recruit new people, so that we can complete all the pending projects as early as possible. So please co-operate with me”* Williams said.

“Yes, sir,” We said in unison. The meeting ended after a few moments of discussion, we began to exit the room.

“Kevin, meet me in my cabin. Now” Williams said as he stood up to leave.

“Okay, sir. Coming” I said and started towards his cabin.

I entered into Williams’ cabin, he took his seat and asked me to do so. I sat before him, not knowing what he’s going to tell. His face clearly resonating tension and worry.

“Kevin. I just wanted to know a few things from you” Williams said.

“Yeah sir ?” I asked.

“Stacy and you know each other for quite a long time right?” Williams asked.

“Yeah we do, but why are you asking that?” I asked with a dubious face.

“Look, Stacy sent me a mail telling she’s resigning from this job. I don’t know what came on her,” Williams said.

“What!!” I asked clearly surprised. Why would she do that? I thought.

“Yeah, I don’t understand why people do this; she is a hard-worker;” Williams said pulling me away from my thoughts.

“Firstly there are very few people right now and upon that, if people started to leave all of a sudden, it’s gonna be hard, Did she tell you that she was planning to resign?” Williams asked.

“No sir, she never said anything like that,” I said.

Williams didn’t reply, instead just nodded seeing the shock upon my face.

“So, if possible ask her about the reason for her resignation, I need an explanation, she didn’t mention any. Just said that some urgent work came up at home and she doesn’t have any choice other than leaving the company” Williams said.

“Yeah sir I’ll notify you as soon as possible,” I said.

“Hope you will,” Williams said.

Assuring him I walked out of the cabin, silently.

Julie was utterly shocked by the news.

“Why would she do that!” Julie said.

“Who knows?” I said irritated.

“Kevin, don’t worry everything will be okay,” Julie said, clutching my hand and catching the sense of worry in my eyes.

After my work is done, I called Stacy to ask about her sudden decision to leave the company. The phone rang but she never answered any of those. *Let me go to her home* I thought.

Julie came to me.

“Hey, Kevin did you speak to Stacy?” Julie asked.

“No, I called but she didn’t answer,” I said.

“Oh! Even I tried but it’s of no use” Julie said.

“I’ll just go to her home,” I said.

“Is it? I’ll join you” Julie said.

“Yeah, let’s go in the evening,” I said.

After Julie and I completed our work we made our way straight towards Stacy’s home. The evening traffic was on a high, and the sluggish movements of the vehicles made me restless, tapping my fingers erratically on the accelerator, Julie held my shoulder gently, reminding me to stay calm. I tried to but I couldn’t.

However we reached Stacy’s place in nearly fifty minutes, her flat is on the 4th floor.

We took the elevator and reached her flat; the door was shut but wasn’t locked. *Is she home?* I thought. Julie rang the bell, the ding-dong sound resonated across the room, I heard footsteps coming closer, *she’s at home* I thought.

The door opened slowly revealing a woman in her late fifty’s, it was Stacy’s mother, firstly I was surprised to see her, and so was she. And secondly, Stacy would inform me whenever her mom would be visiting her. But this time she didn’t.

Stacy’s mom led us inside and motioned us to sit on the couch, she didn’t speak.

“Hello aunty, when did you come here?” I asked.

“Just a week ago,” She said.

“I see,” I said, with a slight smile. There was an awkward silence between us.

“So, Kevin how’s everything ?” She asked.

“I’m good, aunty. How are you doing?” I asked.

“Yeah, I’m good too. And you are Julie right?” she asked pointing towards Julie.

I wondered how she knew about her. And as if reading my thoughts she said: *“Stacy told about you”*.

“I’m fine aunty,” Julie said.

“So what do you do?” Stacy’s mom asked Julie.

“I work in the same company as Stacy and Kevin. I recently joined in. I have a project to look after” Julie said.

“So you are a project manager?” Stacy’s mom asked.

“Yeah can say that,” Julie said.

“Aunty, I just wanted to ask something,” I asked, interrupting their flow.

“Yeah Kevin, tell me,” Stacy’s mom said.

“Do you know why Stacy’s left the job?” I asked. Her expression changed rapidly, there was a sense of disappointment in her eyes.

“I don’t know Kevin; as soon as I got to know that she left her job I rushed here. It took me some time to reach though, and I asked her a lot of times, but she wouldn’t spill that out, neither to me nor her dad” Stacy’s mom said. *“I thought she told you,”* she said.

“No, she didn’t. I didn’t know that she left the job, I got to know about it a while ago,” I said.

“Yeah, I too was shocked by her sudden decision,” Stacy’s mom said.

“By the way where’s she now? Do you know anything aunty?” I asked.

“The thing is Kevin; Stacy didn’t say where she’s going but gave me a box to give you,” She said.

“A box?” I asked, wondering what box did she mean?

“Yeah let me bring it,” She said and walked inside towards the bedroom.

Julie and I exchanged looks of confusion. Later on, Stacy’s mom returned with a tiny box, which was the size of her fist. It

looked a bit old.

As she opened, she pulled out a chain with a red heart-shaped locket that was half cut, attached to it. I took it in my hand.

“Do you know it?” Julie asked.

“It looks familiar, but I can’t remember where I’ve seen it,” I said.

Meanwhile, the door-bell rang, Stacy’s mom went to answer it, as she opened the door I was shocked to see Richard. How did he come here! I wondered.

“Yes, who’s it?” Stacy’s mom asked.

“Aunty he’s our company’s Chief,” I said.

“Oh! Please come in” Stacy’s mom said.

Richard came in. *“I’m not a CEO anymore, I gave up that position,”* Richard said.

“What?” I said surprised.

“Can anyone tell me what’s going on here?” Stacy’s mom said.

Richard glanced at her.

“Hello mam, maybe you don’t know me, but I was the one responsible for your daughter getting admitted to the hospital a few days back,” Richard said.

“I don’t understand what you are saying,” Stacy’s mom said with utter surprise.

Richard looked at the locket that I held in my hand, as though looking at a lost treasure.

“Where did you get it?” Richard asked.

“It was in this box,” I said pointing towards that empty box.

“But why are you asking?” I asked.

“Because i gave it as a gift to Stacy” Richard said.

Chapter 33

Amidst the Woods and the Burning Star

Have you ever fallen in love, for the very first time in your whole life ? What was it like ? Did your heart race ? Did you feel like there's no better thing than that very moment which you've spent with your Love ? That feeling was beautiful right ? Beautiful like an early morning sun.

And What is Love ? Is it a feeling ? or rather is it more than that ?

What does Love mean to you ? And what do you mean to Love ?

The sky is immersed in red by the rising sun spreading his mighty arms; while silence enveloped the atmosphere except for the streams of water in the river flowing gracefully and the birds chirping melodiously. Last night we camped here at the riverside, the water looked like a bed of crystal petals as the morning sun glistened upon them. Stacy was already up, with the glowing sun kissing her wet face, the tiny water droplets escaping her face looked as though pearls tinkling down. I still couldn't believe what happened last night. Richard proposed Stacy; I was in an utter shock and so was Julie. (I mean I

don't say we were "shocked" exactly, but you know, i was in a kind of um ... surprised I guess).

From the time I knew Stacy, many people tried getting close to her (by that you know what I mean). But she would fall for none. Whenever I asked her why she didn't accept any of those proposals, she used to say that she was looking for the right one. I used to tease her that she will remain single for life. But i guess i was wrong.

Perhaps that's why love is compared with magic, we don't need to understand how it happens; all you have to do is accept it, the way it is - Magical and soul-filling.

Whenever she is with Richard, she became like a child, a child who got her most loved toy, with a child-like face and curious eyes, she would admire him, his words, his charm and above all his smile. She would be engrossed in it, and to be honest there weren't any words between them, from the time they knew each other (yes I agree they talked, but it felt...casual). But I believe love, isn't just about how much you talk, or how much you praise and admire each other, but it's something much greater than that, something marvellous and something worthy.

"I couldn't believe it, Kevin. That's a cool surprise" Julie said as we prepared the coffee.

"It was more like a shock than a surprise. Stacy was like born-to-be-single kind of girl," I said.

"Yeah, true-love is a surprise though," Julie said, stirring the black coffee her eyes glancing towards me.

"What was more shocking is; Stacy accepting. It's like the unexpected happening" i said.

"What has shocked you?" Stacy asked walking towards us, drying her wet face; she looked attractive, with her wet lips parting slowly as she spilled each and every word, and her eyes twinkling with a spark. No wonder why Richard would have fell in love with her.

We looked to Stacy at once. *“So here comes the secret keeper”*.

“What are you talking about?” Stacy asked.

“Richard proposed to you?” Julie asked.

“Um... Yeah,” Stacy said with a blush.

While we were talking, Richard came towards us and sat beside Stacy. He wore a white hoodie with a head cap and dark blue trousers that are folded to his knees.

“Good morning Richard. You both gave us a big surprise” I said, pressing on the word “surprise”.

“Very good morning Kevin,” Richard said with a smile.

He remained silent before saying: *“It happened unexpectedly,”* Richard said looking at Stacy, and gracefully holding her close.

“Be careful with her, and especially her mood swings, they are totally unpredictable,” I said, eyeing towards Stacy.

“No problem, I’ll get used,” he replied, wrapping his arms around Stacy and planting a kiss upon her forehead.

“So what’s up for today? Anything special?” I asked.

“Let’s go to our farmhouse,” Richard said.

“Yeah let’s go,” Stacy said glancing towards Richard, her eyes filled with love.

“So are we going there now?” Julie asked.

“Yeah, of course, we’ll be starting in an hour probably,” Richard said.

After an hour we are in Richard’s car.

“So, where’s this farmhouse of yours?” Stacy asked.

“Just 3 or 4 kilo-meters away,” Richard said, his arms resting on the steering wheel.

There was heavy traffic, the ocean of vehicles before us were moving sluggishly and so did we. After a while, the traffic began to clear and in no time we reached our destination.

We stood awestruck, a house made of wood, and greenery widespread all over, with the chirping of birds in that wonderful solitude that filled the atmosphere, there was a pleasing aroma around, that filled our nostrils, it seemed like we are in a totally different world, a world filled with peace, an everlasting peace and obviously a world filled with love, I looked around towards the gigantic trees, giving us fresh air as well as shade, swinging gracefully as if a beautiful woman swing dancing.

"This is amazing," Stacy said.

"You loved it?" Richard asked.

"You bet I loved it," Stacy said. *"Love you"* Stacy said, glancing towards the sea-blue sky.

"I love you too," Richard said, pulling Stacy closer, his hand resting upon her waist.

Suddenly Richard's phone rang.

"I need to take this, you guys get in," Richard said and tossed the keys towards me.

"I think you're enjoying," I said, opening the lock.

"Yeah, and so are you I guess," Stacy said glancing towards Julie who was busy clicking pictures.

"Let's take few pictures," Julie said, as she walked towards me.

"Yeah sure, Why not!" Stacy said, beaming out a smile towards the camera. *"Say cheese!"* Julie said with a huge smile curving her lips.

It feels wonderful right? Being around your best friends, the best friends who never leave a chance to irritate you and to embarrass you, and also to support you in the highs and the lows, very few people find these kind of idiots, and I feel so

lucky...nah...i feel so blessed, that I have them in my life.
Best Friends Forever.

"By the way, where is Richard?" Julie asked, entering in.

"Rich is on the phone," Stacy said.

"Sorry guys, mom called me so went to speak to her," Richard said, entering in.

"It's fine," I said.

"And she was asking about you," Richard said looking at Stacy.

"You told your parents about me!" Stacy asked, clearly shocked.

"Yeah," Richard said.

"What did you tell them?" Stacy asked.

"I told her that you're my Girl-friend," Richard said, placing his hand upon Stacy's cheek, feeling the warmth of her face.

"Seriously !!" Stacy asked.

"Yeah, but why is that a big deal," Richard asked.

"Nothing. But I'd love to meet your parents" Stacy said.

"Sure, even they want to meet you, I'll arrange for that hopefully after we get back home," Richard said.

"Is it? You're so good Rich" Stacy said.

"Hey...um...I got something for you" Richard said and took out a locket that was in a heart shape cut in half.

"It's beautiful," Stacy said holding it.

"And so are you," Richard said.

"Oh! Look who's flirting" Stacy said.

"I'm not flirting, I'm just being honest," Richard said.

"Okay, ten on ten for your honesty" Stacy said.

"And for my love?" Richard asked.

"It depends," Stacy said and giggled.

"Very funny," Richard said.

"And you know, I never thought I would meet someone like you," Richard said putting an arm around Stacy.

"Me too," Stacy said holding the locket in her hand.

"But, where is the other half of this locket?" Stacy asked.

"With me," Richard said. *"I'll keep this coz I want you to remember every time you look at it that your other half is with me"* he continued.

"I love you Rich," Stacy said.

"I love you too," Richard said cupping Stacy's face in his hands, and Stacy put her arms around him. They kissed passionately with closed eyes but revealing each other their true selves. *Amidst the woods and the burning star* bloomed a new beginning, with new hopes and new dreams.

A few hours later we set up a camp (as you know that was the plan, to spend time together, but this moment feels special). We put up our tents, we brought wooden logs and a few sticks, gathered them together. It was fun, we weren't tired, but we enjoyed it, we enjoyed the silence, we enjoyed the nature, the cool breeze kissing our skins; I felt like as though we were transferred or teleported to another dimension, a dimension of friendship, a dimension of peace, and most importantly a dimension of love.

Anyways, we lit up those logs and sat around it, the sparkling fire lighting our faces with a fiery glow and the blazing heat enveloping our skins along with the river water rippling to the gentle breeze. We sat in silence, enjoying this moment, this rare and precious moment, the sky grew dark and the moon wasn't visible anymore, perhaps he was somewhere hiding behind those cottony veils called clouds.

"It feels wonderful right," Stacy said. *"Yeah,"* Richard said, placing his arm gently upon her. They sat in silence for a

moment, until Stacy said, *“What do you think love is ? ”* (Honestly, I never expected this type of question from Stacy). Richard glanced into her eye and just gave out a smirk. *“I’m being serious, Rich, tell me what do you think love is,”* Stacy said, she looked serious. *“um...I don’t say it’s an emotion, but...for me Love is something divine, something beyond just our human intellect, you know, its I guess something unfathomable, i can’t really define love; but if I have to, then I would say...Real Love is something that rips our hearts completely and yet restores it back adding much beauty to it,”* Richard said.

Present Day...

Chapter 34

Pursuing Love

“Look Mr Richard I know nothing about you, but whatever I have heard, about Stacy having panic attacks and all the things she has gone through were all because of you!” Stacy’s mom said, furiously.

“And please don’t misunderstand me, I’m not blaming you, I’m just telling you the truth” She said and fell silent. (She seemed upset or perhaps angry too, but she chose not to resonate that anger upon her face. I don’t exactly know what’s going on in her mind, or maybe I know, she seemed gloomy).

“I agree with you ma’am,” Richard said, his voice a little dull (I didn’t even hear him clearly at first, it felt as though he said those words to himself). He seemed broken with grief and perhaps guilt, (his eyes clearly shot that feeling, that feeling of

pain, that feeling of guilt and perhaps brokenness too, but he didn't spill any word regarding that).

"I just wanna tell you something," she began, her voice now a bit lighter. "There is ... always a reason why you meet people, you know, not only you, every one of us. That's because either you need them at that particular moment and a particular time to change your life, or they are the ones who need you to change theirs," Stacy's mom said. "It's by no accident that you stumble across people, it's pre-destined that you meet them, but..." she said and exhaled sharply. "But it's our duty... no...I should say our choice either to hold onto them or let them go" she said.

Richard nodded silently as though letting those words to sink in, into his innermost being, his real self.

"But, I can see genuine love in your eyes for her. I hope wherever she is, she will return to you, and I mean it ... because if you love something or someone truly, it always comes back, no matter what. And I am not mad at you for what you've done, but I'm glad that you realized your mistake and chose the right thing to do," Stacy's mom said.

"I'm sorry," Richard said after a few moments of stillness. "No, dear don't be sorry, it's not your mistake, it's the generation that you're born into, people of your age nowadays forgot the value of love, it became just a feeling, but real love is much more than just feelings and emotions, it's something big, something greater," Stacy's mom said

We all fell silent. Richard's eyes were filled with tears. As though all the emotions he has hidden had burst forth at once. (Love is not only beautiful, sometimes love is painful too, you know when you first find love- that real and true love, you feel as though ... you found a treasure, a treasure kept aside especially for you, but as we all know treasures aren't that easy to be found, it's not something you find in your closet; but you go on a quest, an adventure to search, to find, to rightfully take what belongs to you, but that my friend isn't an easy journey. It takes patience, and most importantly a desire

to find it. But the question is are you capable enough to pursue after what you love ?).

“What shall we do now?” Julie asked.

I looked at Richard, who was still sad or I should say filled with guilt.

“Richard, you don’t feel bad, it’s not your mistake, neither Stacy’s. It’s just a phase we are in right now. And all things work for us if we have faith” I said, placing my hand gently on his shoulder. (he didn’t react, except shot a smile at me, which is obviously fake).

“Aunty, have you checked up with Stacy’s friends? Maybe there is a chance that she might have gone to any of her friend’s home,” Julie said.

“No, I didn’t call any of her friends, because I thought she was going on some office tour or something like that” Stacy’s mom said.

“Oh, Okay,” Julie said disappointed. *“And Kevin do you think there’s anyone to whom Stacy would have gone, I mean any of your mutual friends whom Stacy knows?”* Julie asked.

“Let me think,” I said and contemplated if there was anyone like that. Then a name flashed in my mind, *Claire*. Claire was our school-mate and also a good friend to Stacy. In fact Claire, Stacy and I were a trio of best-friends, but along the course of life we drifted apart, which was inevitable. But one question popped up in my mind, does Stacy remembers Claire to a point that she would have gone to her? Perhaps, but let’s try I thought.

“There is a girl from our school; Stacy must have gone to her. I can’t assure that, but it’s just a hunch that’s it” I said.

“Great, even if it’s a hunch there’s nothing wrong in just trying,” Richard said, as if agreeing with my mind voice.

“But how will you contact her, do you have her contact details?” Julie asked.

“Let me check,” I said and surfed through the contacts on my phone. *“I don’t think I have her contact number,”* I said after hunting through my contacts.

“Let’s try in any social media then,” Richard said.

“Yeah, I’ll see once,” I said and logged into my Facebook account and typed in the name *Claire*.

“I don’t know her full name,” I said.

“It doesn’t matter. Just check whatever the search results pop up. Maybe you can remember by going through them” Richard said.

“Sure I’ll do,” I said and started surfing through the profiles that came up after the search.

There were a vast number of profiles with the name *Claire*, it’s impossible to find her account in this ocean of profiles. After surfing through several profiles, I stopped at one profile in which my school name was listed in the bio.

“Guys, I found one profile, but I don’t know this is the one or not. I mean I can’t tell with a guarantee that this is the same girl. It’s just that my school name is mentioned here,” I said.

Richard came and checked the profile. *“There are no photos of this person. Are you sure this is the one?”* he said, looking into the screen.

I took a deep breath before saying: *“Look, I don’t know I just came in here because our school name was listed in her bio,”* Richard fell silent and so did I.

“Kevin, you said she is your schoolmate right?” Julie said.

“Yup,” I said.

“And she was your classmate?” Julie said.

“Yes. But what’s the point that you’re trying to make?” I asked.

“Do you have your tenth standard’s slam book with you now?” Julie asked.

"I think it's at home," I said.

"Oh," Julie said.

"No problem we can use Stacy's. You said you both went to the same school," Richard said.

I asked about Stacy's slam book to her mother. She went in to find it. After several minutes she came with a green colored book; a hard case, with smiling faces of little children printed upon the cover and dust sitting upon it. I cleaned off the dust and opened it; the pages were stuck together since it is opened after such a long time.

I separated each page carefully trying not to tear them; it took several minutes to complete the whole process. After that, I started searching prudently through the book for *Claire's* name.

I found her details and dialed the number that she wrote years ago. The voice said that number didn't exist. Disappointed I told to Richard.

"No problem, let's just send her a mail," Richard said.

"Mail?" I asked confused.

"This," Richard said, pointing towards the email id that was written in the slam book.

"What if this also didn't work, and nowadays who's using emails?" I asked.

He took a deep breath, *"I don't know, but there's nothing wrong in trying"* Richard said, with eyes gazing into mine.

There was silence for a few moments.

"Okay, let's try," I said breaking the silence and typed the email that's in the slam book and sent a message: *Hey Claire this is Kevin your school mate, hope you remember me please call me back at this number.* I typed in my number in the chat-box and clicked on send.

The waiting felt like hell,(it felt as though the clocks stopped ticking and the sun stood still, perhaps this is what happens when you wait for something you love, it seems as though the whole world is playing tricks on you, but waiting is worth when it's for something of value to you right ? So we began to wait, wait and wait. I don't exactly know how much time it takes for us to see Stacy, or will we ever see her ? Or will she ever return ?) it's been nearly three hours since I sent that email, but there was no response, Richard looked a bit tensed or I should say worried, he seemed like he was on the verge of weeping, he tried to control them but it was of no use, eventually tears flowed, bringing back all that grief and those thoughts of losing his first love, (people say men don't cry, but men do cry, and when they do it's *for* something and not *because* of something, something lovely and marvellous). The silence was disturbed when my phone rang, an unknown number flashed on the screen, I was hoping there will be something good, but no, my hope shattered when I answered the call, it wasn't the call which I was expecting, I hung up the phone and went back again into that unwelcoming silence.

Then suddenly a few moments later the phone rang again, another unknown number, I hope at least this one would be from Claire. A female voice spoke up as I answered the call, immediately I put the phone on speaker, it was indeed Claire. Without any delay, she told that Stacy's with her at her home. Quickly I noted down Claire's address. Richard looked at it. *"It takes us nearly two and a half hours I guess to get there. Let's go right away,"* Richard said.

Before I spoke anything else with Claire, the line went dead.

We got in Richard's car and made our way towards the address that Claire has shared with me. There was a stream of vehicles lying ahead of us. With lots of patience and persistence we got through it and headed on our way.

After nearly three hours we reached Claire's place by following the location that Claire has shared with me.

It was an independent house, looked as if it was painted recently, with the smell of paints still sitting on it. I walked towards the door and rang the bell, the ding-dong sound clearly resonating across the room. But there was no answer, and after a while, we heard a distant voice from inside telling: *“The door is open please come in”*.

Richard went to park the car while Julie and I stepped in, a woman walked towards us, I recognised it must be Claire; she wore a cream coloured T-shirt with salmon stripes upon it, and her hair tied like a bun, with a face like that of a child. No wonder why many of the boys from our school used to have a crush on her. She waved at me and gave me a friendly hug. Glancing at Julie’s face she moved away.

“Claire, this is my girl-friend Julie,” I said and introduced Julie to her.

“Nice to meet you Julie; and sorry for the hug, we met after such a long time right, so...hope you understand,” Claire said looking at Julie.

“Its fine” Julie said with a smile.

“Come in, sorry I kept you at the door,” Claire said and motioned us towards the living room.

“Can I just keep the door unlocked, because my friend is at the car so that he can come in?” I said.

“Yeah no problem, there aren’t any thieves in here,” Claire said with a wink.

I smiled. We went into the living room, I saw Stacy sitting on the couch. She looked at me with wide eyes.

“So tell me what happened between you guys again, that made you come away from your home” Claire said glancing towards Stacy.

Stacy was silent.

“Okay, you tell me, Kevin, what happened. Again you both argued or what?” Claire asked.

I faked a smile, not wanting to hurt her by telling her the whole story.

“Don’t scold him, Claire, it’s not his mistake,” Stacy said, keeping her gaze to the ground.

“Then whose mistake?” Claire blurted out; as soon as Claire asked this, Richard stepped into the living room. Stacy’s mouth fell open. Before she could utter a thing, Claire blurted out *“What the hell are you doing here!”* she said looking at Richard.

“Do you know him,” Stacy asked, shocked by the way Claire spoke to Richard.

“Yes, He’s my Ex-boyfriend,” Claire said.

Chapter 35

A Fresh Drop of Love

How strange it is right, that time flies too quickly when you are with your favourite people? When you are experiencing those moments of a new friendship, new love, or I should say that first love and feeling its beauty and charm and in that moments you feel as though Mr Time has set himself on a run, as though he's participating in a marathon, taking no time to stop, to let us enjoy or feel those moments. Do you feel the same ?

And in those moments Stacy, Richard, Julie, and I developed an unusual bond of friendship between us (a sense of family I should say). "After-college-hangouts" became a daily routine to us.(that's what Stacy calls it, she's a master at putting weird names to situations, like once Julie and I went on a coffee date and i asked Stacy to come over so that we can have a double-date or something at a small hotel, it's not exactly a hotel I guess, but the food was good, and you know what she called it ? "Double-date at Denkin's", sounds weird right? I got used, by the way "Denkin's" is the hotel's name, sounds weird right? Even I felt the same when I first heard it).

During those hangouts We not only just sit together and have a chat into the air (I mean we talk about things like um ... maybe cricket ? or um any reality show that we watch and perhaps about new films too, you see it was casual yet memorable, we not only just talk we crack jokes upon each other, that time will be filled with laughs, jokes, giggles and you name it). Although Richard was our senior and Stacy's first love, he never portrayed as though he was someone "superior", rather, he always has been supportive and showed his maturity, both in heart and mind.

Another unique thing about him is he never showed his love and care towards Stacy, by bringing gifts, going on numerous

dates, he never did all of those(yeah I agree love demands actions, and I know actions speak louder than words, but as the time passes, actions or words won't be required, all you need is a sense of love and a sense to be loved) even though he never did all of those but still, there was something in him that said he loved Stacy whole-heartedly. (I mean, love doesn't always have to expressed through words or gifts, but if you look deep it's something beyond words, something beyond actions, something mystical, perhaps something magical).

It so happened that, one day Stacy went to one of our classmate's birthday party(I don't exactly remember her name) she invited me, and Julie too, but unexpectedly at that time some work came up to me at home so I couldn't go, and neither did Julie.

That party lasted till late at night(perhaps past twelve AM like... maybe twelve forty-five or something)Stacy called me but I didn't answer since I guess I was asleep (I usually don't stay up till late at night, and in my home "late" means eleven PM, you get the picture right?). Anyway the same went with Julie, she called Julie but her phone was not reachable

That night, the rain poured down heavily, as though the clouds lightening down their heavy burdens upon the earth. Stacy was alone; the sweet smell of dirt filled the air. Stacy stood at some nearby stall, sheltering herself from the pouring rain. The roads were flowing like streams of a river. The sky rumbled loudly with strikes of lightning, painting the dark skies as though a war going on in the heavens. She looked at her phone, the screen flashed *low battery*, she cursed herself for that, I should have charged it, she thought. (it would last for a few moments maybe a couple of minutes).

Stacy tried to call her dad but was afraid he would scold her for her irresponsibility, but summing up some courage she did dial up his number, it rang for a few seconds and the ringing stopped. Wondering what happened Stacy looked at the screen, it didn't light up, indicating it's already dead.

Stacy thought to return to her friend's home, but now she had come a long way, and she has exhausted all her energy, upon that there were no cabs nearby that can drop her home.

Tension began to rise in her. No phone, in an unfamiliar place, rain pouring down heavily, and no cabs are seen around, it was as if the world shut itself down. Stacy felt alone.

Instead of standing and wasting time in a single place, Stacy decided to walk past hoping to find a taxi that can get her home. After walking for nearly fifteen or perhaps twenty minutes, she came to a store that had a payphone. Stacy relieved herself; it was as though a burden was lifted off.

Immediately she rushed to the payphone, and started hunting through her purse hoping to find some cash (perhaps a few couple of coins?), she found few, instantly she dropped a coin in the payphone and dialled a number.

Moments after calling, Richard came on his bike, wearing a black and blue leather jacket that was dripped in the wetness of the rain. He parked his bike aside and took off his helmet. Before Stacy could sit on his bike, Richard began to reprimand her.

"How careless you are!" he said clearly angered, he made her sit down on the nearby bench, and rinsed her hair and her face, with his hanky; drying the wetness off. Stacy smiled looking into his eyes, for even though he was angry at her, she could see his love and care for her, behind that anger. It happened in a split, like a lightning's strike; Stacy came closer and kissed him, closing her eyes, and placing her fingers between his hair and not letting go of this moment, this moment of love.

Richard pulled her closer, pressing each other's bodies together, with her hands caressing his wet hair, and he cupped her face with a gentle touch. Raindrops began to roll down their lips, starting from the head and meeting their soul, as though pouring out *a fresh drop of love*.

Present Day...

Chapter 36

Silent Situations

Everyone in the room were surprised when Claire said that Richard was her Ex-boyfriend (at first I couldn't believe the words she spilled but as you know that's what she said, by that I don't mean she lied, but the way she said it, felt kinda' off and her face perhaps seemed emotionless if that's the right word, and please don't mis understand me, it's just what I felt, perhaps I'm wrong or ... perhaps I'm right).

Silence leaped over the room, as though someone had hit that button called *pause*, until Stacy said: "*I'm done. I don't know what to say...*" she said; and if you ask me, even I don't know what to say; forget about words, I wasn't even able to think straight, as though my mind stopped working and as if someone had pulled off those strings which help me think. Stacy tried to calm herself down for a while as if she's trying to hold all those feelings and perhaps an internal pain (a pain that's I guess is ripping her heart and her soul), but as i already

guessed she couldn't hold it any longer, eventually those long held tears somehow did find their way to escape her marble eyes and hit the ground as though a heavy meteor hitting the deepest core of the earth. Stacy cried.

"Stacy please give me a chance to explain," Richard said trying to hold her, but he backed off looking her into the eye (those tear filled eyes).

"What you wanna explain? Huh! I don't see any point of explanation here," Stacy said with frown and of course with tear-filled eyes as she stumbled onto the couch.

"But..." Richard began but Stacy cut her shot.

"Richard, it's enough. Just leave me alone! I...I don't even know what to say," Stacy said clutching her hand tightly making it into a fist and showing her anger in the form of tears those tears which said, she still didn't want to let him go, that her heart still wants to hold on to him. But will she listen to her heart ?

"But Stace, why don't you listen to him once. Why are you over-reacting ?" I said. (But I didn't mean any of those words, to be honest what my heart was saying was to give her a tight hug, and hold her in my arms until ... I don't know, perhaps until her heart is made whole? But I didn't do that, I couldn't because perhaps somehow even I hurt her, and that guilt is killing me).

"Am I over-reacting! Am I! Yes I am overreacting and I've got a solid reason behind it" Stacy said, tears still flowing she turned herself away from us, facing an empty wall.

"I loved you so much, much more than I loved myself. And I imagined a beautiful future with you, for us. There was never "you" and "I" between us, everything that we had was "us" But now it all shattered! All those years when we weren't together, do you even know how I felt? Oh wait, how would you know by the way, you were enjoying your life with this new chick here!" Stacy turned almost immediately shooting a stare towards Claire (I don't call it an angry stare, but more like a

confused one). *“It felt as though someone ripped my heart, but I never shared this to you, do you know why? Because, I believed in you and in all those promises you made me, promises that said you would never leave me; But you proved me wrong! Thank you so much”* Stacy said with watery eyes. *“Now please do me a favour Mr. Richard Stephen. Leave me alone, for heaven’s sake. And don’t interfere with my life anymore! It’s over, please leave me alone, maybe forever,”* Stacy said and fell silent.

Richard stood still, as if letting those words to sink in; there was nothing except for silence, a hush, a painful and heart-breaking silence. Richard walked away, without saying a word. I went after him to stop him. He went near the car.

“Richard wait !” I screeched.

He stopped, without turning towards me, he held something in his hand, he was clutching it as though a little kid, holding his most precious toy. It was glittering, shining, as though a rare stone, it is the same locket that he gave to Stacy; as a gift, a memory or perhaps it holds something more than just that.

“What?” Richard said, his voice a little low.

“I know you loved her so much, but...” I said.

“Loved? I not only loved her, I still love her even now and until my last breathe I still do, that’s the reason I came back. I mean it and i can’t imagine my life without her,” Richard said turning towards me at once, with tears in his eyes. (I felt those tears and probably his grief too, I don’t exactly know what to call this, yes I know it’s the result of a heart break, but now I feel something else, something much bigger than heart-break itself, what could be much bigger than a heart-break? Do you know it? Even I didn’t know at first, but as I looked him into his watery eyes, I found my answer, his eyes reflected a feeling of loss or maybe a fear that he would lose his Love forever, and that broke me).

Suddenly we heard a scream, it came from the inside. Immediately I rushed not knowing what happened, Richard

came behind me.

“What happened?” I asked Julie who looked tensed (or maybe dazed, I couldn't exactly figure out that look on her face, but whatever it is, it's obviously not good).

I looked at Stacy; she is lying on the floor, unconscious. (What happened!!) I couldn't think straight, everything around me was silenced, I could hear mumbled voices and see shocked faces around but my mind couldn't swallow any of these. And then suddenly, as though an angelic voice speaking to me from above, Dr Stanley's words flashed in my mind : *It happens due to over-stress*, it felt as though someone has put those words inside my mind. *“Call the ambulance”* I demanded without a second thought.

“It takes a long time for the ambulance to reach here,” Claire said, clearly worried.

“Let's take her to the nearest hospital in my car,” Richard said, although he didn't understand anything that's happening around. *“Is there any hospital nearby?”* Richard asked, taking Stacy into his arms.

“There is a small clinic down the road,” Claire said.

Within no time we were on our way towards the hospital, Stacy still unconscious, and all our faces filled with gloom and perhaps fear.

In no time we reached the hospital. And as soon as we reached, Stacy was taken up towards the emergency section while we were told to wait.

We stalled in silence, (I guess I kind of got used to “silent situations,” that's what I call them, where there will be nothing except for silence and hush, a heart wrecking silence, where words aren't allowed and even if they did sneak in somehow, they wouldn't stay longer, they would vanish as early as they had come). I went to Claire, who stood near the window, facing towards it.

“Claire, will you please tell me, how Richard is your Ex. At least now ?” I asked.

She didn't react, for a moment I thought she didn't heard me, and a moment later she exhaled deeply and began to tell.

Chapter 37

A Promise to Hold On

Distance...Most of us don't like parting with our loved ones right. But life isn't always an easy-going ride in which we always have our favourite person with us. There comes a time where we need to part, or we need to allow ourselves to part. But as someone said 'Distance doesn't matter if the roots are strong'. But how long will it stays stable is the question.

"Are you sure?" Stacy asked, holding Richards hand. She seemed sad.

"Yes I am, Stacy," he said, locking his fingers with hers.

"But, I'll miss you," Stacy said.

"I'll miss you a lot, but I promise I'll stay in touch. Trust me"

Stacy, Julie, Richard, and I sat in *Cup and Code* which became our usual hangout spot over time. Richard is now about to complete his engineering, he is in the last semester and he

planned to do his Master's abroad (I don't exactly know which country, but yeah that was his decision).

"So what's your next plan? Master's?" Stacy asked.

"Yeah," Richard said.

"Can't you do it here?" Stacy asked.

"I'm afraid I can't," Richard said.

"It's fine, your dream" Stacy said.

"Our, It's our dream," Richard said.

"Yeah," Stacy said taking a sip and fell silent.

"Stacy, it's for our better future I'm doing this. If you want, you too can come with me, like after you complete your bachelor's, you know what I mean right?" Richard said.

"I get it, but what if I didn't want to continue for masters?" Stacy said. *"And what if I have different plans?"* Stacy said.

Richard fell silent.

"Then we can manage," Richard said.

"Manage what Rich?" Stacy asked. Richard didn't answer, but Stacy already knew the answer, which she obviously didn't like. *"Are you suggesting a long-distance relationship?"* Stacy asked.

"Maybe," Richard said.

"It's complicated Rich, most of the time it doesn't work," Stacy said.

"It's hard but not impossible right?" Richard said.

"Yeah, but..." Stacy said, with the looks of clear disapproval on her face.

"Look, Stacy, even though I'll be miles apart from you. Always remember I still love you, no matter what" Richard said.

Stacy smiled looking into his eyes.

“I don’t say you wouldn’t love me. But the thing is, I can’t bear it, with all these thoughts and fears and you being miles apart from me and this distance between us and not being able to meet you or see you, I just can’t do it Rich,” Stacy said.

“I understand you Stacy, but it’s just a matter of time,” Richard said.

Stacy was silent.

“Look here,” Richard said.

“I’m looking,” Stacy said diving into his eyes.

He took her face in his arms *“Listen Dear Miss Stacy Parker, I loved you the moment I saw you, and I’ll always do, till my last breath. Maybe this distance that’s about to come between us is to remind that our roots are connected deeply.”* Richard said. *“So, cheer up li’l one,”* he said stroking her hair.

Stacy just beamed out a smile without uttering a word.

“I love you,” Stacy said and hugged him closely.

“I love you too. And I promise I’ll never break your heart” Richard said holding Stacy even more close and eventually planting a kiss upon her forehead. Stacy beamed out a smile, but that didn’t feel real, i mean it was a smile but not exactly a genuine one, it was more a forced smile I guess. I don’t know what’s going on in her mind, but one thing I can assure is that she isn’t ready to let him go even if it is temporarily, but she never resonated those feelings instead, she just shot back a smile and trusted in that promise, a promise to love, a promise to stay and *a promise to hold on.*

Chapter 38

Surprise!!!

“So will you be here for my birthday?” Stacy asked.

“I’ll try to, coz you know right I’ll be a bit busy,” Richard said.

“So you’re telling me you can’t make it for my birthday. Fine” Stacy said irritated.

“Stacy I...I didn’t say I can’t make it. I said I’ll try, although I’m leaving a day after your birthday, I’ve got a few things to do before that,” Richard said.

Stacy stayed silent.

“Hey Look, Miss Parker, I’m sorry, it’s just I’m a bit stressed about that visa thing and all. Maybe I won’t be available at that time” Richard said.

“I understand it, but you don’t even have an idea of how this thing is gonna kill me. You being so far from me, I can’t Rich” Stacy said.

“I’m so sorry and i understand you Stacy, but I’ll be back soon,” Richard said.

Stacy was silent.

“Now take care, I got some work to do. Bye, love you” Richard said.

“Love you too,” Stacy said and the screen went blank.

The calendar showed 14th September. The clocked dinged 11:45 PM; I made my way towards Stacy's home knowing that she wasn't asleep. (she won't sleep till late at night for her "late" means at least two in the morning) Anyway, I walked in the cold September night, with the silver moon hiding somewhere behind the dense veil of clouds; it was indeed a silent night, with the little street lamps glowing here and there and a few vehicles moving either to or from home. However, I sent Stacy a text telling to come down to her apartment's basement. She came a few minutes later; she looked attractive even in her PJs, with her loosened hair that danced to the lightly blowing wind, and her marble eyes sparkling as twinkling stars.

"You look like a doll," I said. *"Like those creepy ones in Hollywood,"* I added and chuckled.

"So to tell this you've had to wake me up at this time?" Stacy said, half asleep.

"No, um...there's another reason, you go and get ready," I said.

"What's this Kevin; you know right I don't like surprises and all," Stacy said.

"Shut up and do what I say," I said.

"Okay...Okay fine; give me a moment" Stacy said.

"Wanna come up?" Stacy asked. *"No, you get ready and I'll wait here,"* I said, she nodded and walked back to her flat.

She returned probably after fifteen minutes, wearing a long yellow frock that danced with every step she took, with her dark silky hair left wide open for the wind to sway it adding more beauty and elegance. Her face was shining like gold as though someone had glittered it with stardust.

"So shall we leave?" I asked.

"Yeah, but will you tell me where are we heading?" Stacy asked.

"You'll know," I said and chuckled.

We walked a bit farther from Stacy's home, and there stood Richard's car, I sat in the driver's seat while Stacy sat beside me.

"Rich's car is here, so he didn't go?" Stacy asked. I didn't say a thing, but just nodded.

We entered the car and made our move, after going some distance, I clogged the car and we got down from it. We came to the mountain top that's near our locality; (it's a famous one, most of the people come here to "relax and chill" that's what they call it, I don't know its name, Mount Something, I doubt if this mountain has any name or not,) anyway we are here, in the solitude and a silence a beautiful and peaceful silence with the skies immersed in an ink of darkness as though a canvas painted with glowing stars hanging here and there, the view was wonderful or I should say heart-warming.

I motioned Stacy to take a seat at the bench. (by the way, we have a few benches too, they weren't in the beginning, but as the clock ticked, this place became famous and a kind of tourist attraction, you know what I mean right). She sat there silently gazing towards the star lit sky twinkling like pearls. Out of nowhere Julie came and sat beside Stacy. Stacy seemed startled by her sudden entry and eventually gave her a light hug.

"Do you know what's all these?" Stacy asked glancing over Julie.

"I'm sorry I don't have the right to spill that out," Julie said.

"What!" Stacy said.

Then suddenly Richard's voice came, and Stacy turned to it. She looked at the laptop screen, where Richard was on the video chat.

"Hello Miss Parker, I'm terribly sorry, I couldn't be there for your birthday," Richard said pretending to hold his ears. *"I know you are angry at me, and I deserve that, but will you please do something for me?"* Richard asked. Stacy raised her eyebrows indicating a question *what?* *"Can you please close*

you beautiful eyes for a moment?" Richard said. Stacy hesitated but eventually she shut her eyes, *"Please open your eyes Your Highness,"* the digital voice of Richard said after a moment's pause.

Opening her eyes she saw a little golden retriever, gazing towards her with shiny eyes, and wagging his little tail gracefully. *"Aww, he's so cute,"* Stacy said, taking the pup into her hands, the soft hair cuddling upon her palms. Holding him closer to her face, she planted a kiss on his forehead, and he too did the same but in his style, he licked her face innocently, confirming that he loves her.

"Thank you so much, Rich, I never expected this, you've made my day," Stacy said.

"That's coz I love you," Richard said.

"I love you too. And it's okay now, take your time to return," Stacy said.

"I badly want to be with you now," Richard said.

"With me, or with him?" Stacy asked, showing him towards the camera. *"With both of you!"* Richard replied.

"Come soon, else I'll tell him not to allow you into the house," Stacy said playing with the pup.

"I will. Soon; enjoy your day. And I miss you too" Richard said. *"Bye Miss. Parker, I've gotta go. Catch up with you soon, enjoy your day"* Richard said.

"Bye, Love you," Stacy said.

"Love you too, take care; both of you" Richard said.

"We will," Stacy said. *"By the way what's his name?"* she asked.

"Don't know, you decide something" Richard said.

"Such an Irresponsible kid," Stacy said in a motherly tone.

"Okay I will name him something," she said. *"Good girl,"* he replied.

“And, stay in touch,” Stacy said controlling her emotions.

“Sure,” Richard said.

“Enjoy your day Love,” Richard said.

“Yeah you too Love,” Stacy said, before the screen went black. Although she seemed happy, there was a tiny flicker of... um...grief, no, i don't exactly mean that it was grief, but you know there was an... emptiness you can say, an emptiness covered with a smile and of course this cute little surprise is the reason behind that smile.

Chapter 39

As Though A Family

With Max's entry into Stacy's life, she seemed a lot happier.(And by the way Max, is our new fur-friend, the surprise), that's what she has been calling him. His cute cuddles had kept Stacy occupied. Her day would be going like this: wake up, cuddle with Max and sleep. It seems as though she has found a best-friend, a best furry-friend.

After Richard went, video-chats became a daily routine to Stacy. They spoke for hours not considering the time, but immersing themselves in each other's presence (of course, digitally). Sometimes Max would jump right into her lap during the conversation and start to lick Richard's face that was behind the laptop screen, although Max couldn't see Richard physically, he would immediately recognise his voice whenever he would call Stacy. Those calls would be endless. The only time Stacy didn't call him is when she's in college, but once she gets home, she would either text him or a video chat, and the three of them would spend a wonderful time together, *as though a family*.

Some days she didn't even call him or neither did Richard, but still, their love for each other never went dry. Even though Stacy felt slightly alone without him, I guess Max helped her

out, in erasing that loneliness. And Stacy never portrayed before us or either mentioned to Richard that she misses him; and neither did he, perhaps both of them learned to adjust with the timings.

One day Julie and I went to Stacy's home just to hang out a bit and make sure that she's not feeling alone or isolated. We were having a good talk, all of a sudden Stacy's phone rang, and Max brought it to her holding it between his teeth, his tail wagging here and there. "*Good boy,*" Stacy said, rubbing his soft belly; it was from Richard, and she answered. It was in the evening time, where the evening sun was just about to set.

"Hey, Stace," Richard said.

"Hey honey, what's up," Stacy said.

"Assignments" Richard said rolling his eyes.

"Oh! Someone's working hard" Stacy said.

"I'm just doing my job," Richard said.

"Don't forget you've got another job also?" Stacy said playfully.

"And may I know what's that Your Highness," Richard said adding a bit of sarcasm.

"Babysitting me," Stacy said and chuckled.

"That anyways I'll do," Richard said.

"Then do now," Stacy said.

"What?" Richard asked.

"Baby-sitting," Stacy said and gave out a laugh.

"Sure, when I return, I'll take you in my arms and babysit your whole day is that okay?" Richard said.

"Okay enough now. Get back to your work" Stacy said, with a slight blush.

"Okay, but listen," Richard said.

"Yeah Rich" Stacy asked.

"I miss you a lot Stacy," Richard said sounding honest.

"I miss you too," Stacy said. Max blurted out a bark in the background.

"Hey, Maxie!" Richard said, as Stacy put her phone in speaker mode.

"How's he doing by the way?" Richard asked. *"Fantastic!"* Stacy replied.

"Is it?" Richard asked.

"He says he's missing you and wants you to come back as soon as possible," Stacy said.

"Is it? How come you understand him?" Richard asked.

"The same way I understand Kevin," Stacy said and they both gave out a giggle.

"Very funny" I said and took Max into my hands rubbing his belly gently. He enjoys it a lot.

"So, did you find someone interesting there?" Stacy asked.

"Yeah, quite a lot, I'm a bit confused about whom to choose, will you help me out?" Richard said.

"I'll kill you," Stacy said.

"Chill, Miss Parker, I was joking," Richard said while giving out a giggle.

"But I was serious," Stacy said sounding upset.

"Okay, I'm sorry, I was just teasing you. I loved you. I still love you and I'll always do that" Richard said.

"I love you too," Stacy said with a smile.

"Okay, I gotta go now. Bye. I miss you" Richard said.

"I miss you too," Stacy said in a baby like voice.

"And take care," Richard said.

"Yeah I will," Stacy said.

"Not you, I was talking 'bout max," Richard said.

“He’s mine, why do you care,” Stacy said, stroking Max’s head gently.

“Okay” Richard said giving out a chuckle. *“Anyways take care, will see you soon,”* he said.

“Yeah bye, love you” Stacy said.

“Love you too” he replied.

And that’s how two lovers began to enjoy the distance between them.

Chapter 40

You Got a Message

Everything was going well and good. Attending college, completing the assignments, and occasionally, sneaking out of some boring classes just to have a good coffee at the Café. (Although the coffee wasn’t that good, but in the course of time we got used to it). Not only that; but also hanging out in

each other's homes to binge watch some good stuff, it became a routine for us, I mean in spending time with each other, though one person among us is missing all the fun, I guess the bond of friendship between us grew a bit more and of course love too. Anyways Stacy, as usual, is nowadays busy talking to Richard, either over phone or having a video chat, and obviously playing with Max.(those two became like non-negotiable in her life).

Most of the time she talked at night, (remember ? she's a night owl) and sometimes we used to have conference calls just to talk for a while (you know what "just for a while" means right?), along with Max having his own jazz in the background and it went on until late at night.

But eventually, as the days went by, calls from Richard were reduced. Usually, he used to call at least twice a day,(like both of them would start and end their days with each other) but, nowadays he didn't even call. But Stacy was not shaken by this. (although I know that she's just pretending to be OK).

"Did he call?" I asked.

"No," Stacy said sounding casual. We sat in the coffee shop, with the evening sun getting ready to return to the belly of the earth and the hot brewing coffee filling our nostrils

"At least you didn't send a text?" Julie asked.

"No, why are you making it a big issue, maybe he's busy," Stacy said and looked away.

"Stacy, look at you, you're showing that on your face," I said.

"What?" Stacy asked.

"That you miss him," I said.

"I don't miss him, it's perfectly normal," Stacy said.

"Are you sure?" I asked.

"Absolutely sure, anyways I have Max with me," Stacy said.

We met frequently for some days, but one day Stacy didn't turn up. I called her, sent her a text, but she replied for neither of them. I was worried. At night, I called her again hoping she will answer my call.

After a series of rings, Stacy answered. Stacy was sobbing.

"What happened, Stace?" I asked totally confused.

Stacy didn't reply but I could hear her heavy sobs.

"I'll be there in a moment," I said.

"No, I don't wanna meet anyone," Stacy said.

"But-" before I said anything, she cut me short.

"I'll tell you everything tomorrow," she said now sounding normal.

"But what happened? Is everything okay with Max?" I asked concerned.

"I said, I'll tell you tomorrow. Now bye" Stacy said and hung up.

The next day Julie and I went to Stacy's home in the evening since she didn't show up in college. I called her many times but she didn't respond.

We went inside her home, greeted her mom who too looked worried. Max came running to me, he too looked sad, the spark in his eyes was missing. I took him into my hands, *"What happened Maxie? You look sad,"* I said, looking at him. He didn't do anything except stayed silent.

"What happened to Stacy, Kevin? She's not well" Stacy's mom asked.

"I too don't know aunty; I'll talk to her once," I said and went inside Stacy's room.

She was curled up in the bed; I went and woke her up.

"Stacy, get up it's me; Kevin," I said. Immediately Max jumped from my hands and rushed towards Stacy, and curled himself beside her.

She got up slowly, gently rubbing Max's head, but he didn't seem interested, there was something different about Stacy today, her eyes were damp.

"Why are you crying, what's the matter, Stacy?" I asked, sitting beside her

Sitting up, she began to cry, Max still curled up in her lap. I didn't know what to do.

"What's the matter, Stacy?" Julie said, giving me a stare.

"Don't know, she's not telling me either," I said.

Julie went near Stacy and put her arm around her. *"Stacy please tell what's the matter,"* I asked.

After a few moments of silence, Stacy spoke up.

"Why does the person whom we love the most always hurt us?" Stacy said.

"What do you mean?" I asked.

Then Stacy flashed her mobile screen before me. The screen showed her chat with Richard, the chat seemed normal, but as I scrolled down further, I was utterly shocked by reading the message. It read:

'It's all over between us Stacy. Let's break up'.

Chapter 41

An Enormous Grief

I was completely shocked and was kind of in a state of unbelief by reading Richard's message. I didn't believe it at first (even now I can't believe it to be honest). I told Stacy to call him, but she wouldn't do that, she seemed confused and perhaps broken, so was Max, and a tiny flicker of tears rolled in his eyes.

"But Stace, once try. Give him a call. I feel there's some misunderstanding" I said.

Stacy remained silent. A kind of silence which i have never seen from the time i knew her,

"Stacy, are you listening to me?" I asked.

I asked her again. This time she responded.

"I called him, but it was of no use," Stacy said.

"What do you mean by that?" I asked.

"I called him, but it shows the number doesn't exist," Stacy said.

A strange silence swept through the room.

"You know I loved him, I imagined a future, a beautiful future with him. And this is what I get?" Stacy said while tears flowed from her eyes.

“Stacy, don’t worry we’ll figure this out. Let’s talk to him” I said.

“There’s nothing to talk Kevin, can’t you see he made it clear? What will you figure out ? ” Stacy said controlling her tears.

“You can’t make those assumptions based on a text, Stacy,” I said.

“I don’t know Kevin; he never spoke to me after going,” Stacy said. *“And...i...i don’t know, I feel so different, broken, I feel so burdened, I can’t speak and please leave me alone for a moment”* she said.

“But Stace-” I began but she cut me short.

“I said please,” Stacy said.

“Okay,” I said. (Although, I wanted to stay with her so badly, but somehow I couldn’t do that, perhaps I too am in a state of shock, a state of God-knows-what) but eventually I left, before leaving I saw something, something which I have never seen in my life (I never imagined this, to be honest). Stacy wept, with grief, an enormous grief.

Chapter 42

In Search of Another Chance

Heart-break, broken heart, these are the words we use nowadays to refer to a person who lost their love, but do we really know what that person is going through ? No we don’t! Do we know their pain? No we don’t, and we can’t unless it happens to us. Nowadays people (most of them including us) take break-up’s casually, as though it never happened, But do you know something ? Real love leaves behind a mark, a scar upon that broken heart, a scar that never dries; it just stays

there waiting and looking expectantly for that true love hoping and praying that it will return one day. But when will it return ? Will it ever ?

After her break up, Stacy tried a lot to reach out to Richard, she tried contacting him through his social media accounts (you name them), but none of that worked, calls and messages were left un-answered. He never contacted her back, or I should say he never tried to contact her, at least not even a single text. She didn't even know the reason why he broke up all of a sudden. From that day forward, every night her pillow was damp with tears. Stacy became emotionally unstable. She didn't talk with either Julie or me for a couple of days, and with Max, she would fake a smile in front of him, not wanting to upset him, but I guess Max understands the pain (does he ?) behind her fake smile. (ofcourse he does!).

In a few days, we will be in our final year. Honestly, I didn't want Stacy to be emotionally down in her last days in college. Julie and I decided to talk to Stacy regarding this matter. (I don't know how to confront her, but as a friend, most importantly as a best-friend I will try, although it could never change the past).

Anyway, we sat in the college canteen filled with students and their various chats. Stacy was having her tea. None of us spoke except for the people chattering around us. It felt so different (and kinda' weird perhaps), you ask me why ? Man! The person who is super-active all the time has now gone silent, and obviously I didn't like that, so i decided to break the ice.

"Stacy," I said. But she didn't listen to me, or she pretended so.

I spoke to her again. This time Stacy spoke up.

"What Kevin," Stacy said with eyes filled with mixed emotions. There were questions, fear, anxiety, pain and God knows what in them, which she didn't know how to face.

"For how long will you continue like this?" I asked.

"What do you mean?" Stacy asked.

“Look, Stacy, life is not about people, you have your dreams and your goals to achieve. People come and leave. Let them go, if they are truly meant for you, some or the other day they will surely come back, no matter what,” I said. *“And I know it will be hard for you at this time, but you need to be strong, and we don’t know whether we’ll be in touch with each or not after our engineering, but I believe in you Stacy, you will have a great future ahead. Don’t waste your time living in the past. Just give yourself another chance. A chance, to overcome your emotions; and a chance to have a new start and a chance to change, I’m not telling you to overlook the past. But at least don’t dwell on it”* I said.

“Yeah Kevin, I’ll try,” Stacy said, after a slight pause.

“Good, need some more tea?” I asked.

“Nope, I’m fine, let’s go,” Stacy said.

We left for the classes. As we are in the final year, along with stress, the class timings were also increased. (Usually we would leave the college by i guess around four O clock or something like that, but nowadays I don’t know how the time is running, I mean sprinting) So we stayed the whole day in college; learning, as well as getting bored. Every subject lecturers gave us assignments to complete, notes to write and many more which were important but quite boring. Also in the coming days, we will be having our final practical exams, for which we need to focus hard. (at least we’ll try to).

“Guys, have you seen the notice?” I said. We are in the college bus, returning to our homes, after a long and a drowsy day.

“What?” Julie asked.

“This,” I said taking my phone out, the screen flashing our college website.

We got a notification that before our campus placements; we will be having an Industrial Visit. (which is kinda’ good, at least we’ll get a mini break for a day, right ?).

“That sounds cool right?” Julie said.

“Yeah,” I said.

“So, when is it?” Julie asked.

“It’s in ten days,” I said.

“And Stacy, I think this will help you a lot, not only academically but also emotionally, you know what I mean right?” I said, not exactly giving away the details with which I said it, but I guess she understood what I meant.

Stacy remained silent.

“Stacy, give a chance to your-self,” Julie said

After a few moments of silence, *“Yeah, what are the details?”* Stacy asked, exhaling deeply.

“That’s the spirit,” I said.

We surfed through the details and registered ourselves for the Industrial Visit (they didn’t ask much details, except for our name, phone number, email ID and um...I guess roll number too, which is mandatory).

“Done,” I said, eyeing Stacy, she didn’t talk much but remained silent, but eventually she smiled, although it wasn’t a genuine smile but yeah it was more like “Not-wanting-to-upset-you” kind of smile.

Although I encouraged Stacy, but I guess I’m a bit afraid, afraid of what? You may ask, I don’t know man, I feel like though I cheered Stacy about that “Another chance” thing, but there’s a small doubt, not exactly doubt but a kind of fear that will she get that “Another chance?” and even if she gets that “Chance” somehow, will she be ready to accept it?

Chapter 43

“It’s a game of trust”

“Time. It decides everything right. (Not exactly everything, but yeah almost everything). Have you ever wondered why people change after a certain phase of their life? For example...after a breakup ? Few people become emotionally...um...wobbly, letting their wrong emotions to take over (I don’t mean wrong emotions but...negative emotions), but few people make themselves emotionally resilient, gripping their instincts. And you know something ? It happens because of Time. Mr. Time, works the same for everyone, he doesn’t have emotions and favourites; everything depends on how you see him and how you approach him, making the most of what he gives you. He reveals your true self by showing your purpose and reminding you of your dreams, the dreams which make you restless.”

We are in the college auditorium. Our dean had decided to address all the final year students (and only final year students I guess, I say this because the auditorium looked a bit empty, except for us occupying the seats) as we will be graduating soon from college. And sooner or later there will be an industrial visit followed by the campus placements. (And Blah! Blah! Blah! You see a lot of work to do).

Anyway the auditorium is filled with all the final year students from various departments (you already know them right). We arranged ourselves, and after a while, the Dean began his speech. He started by introducing himself (again, man, why he does that all the time he speaks? Who knows) anyway he spoke about various companies that will be coming for the campus drives and also instructed us on how to approach the campus placements. (The three “golden rules” he said were : “prepare, practice and perform”, except for this everything else he spoke bounced from our heads) But prior to that (I mean before the placement interview), we would be having a

viva in college (here we go again, no peace at all). He instructed us to prepare well for it. (I hope we do).

“So, are you excited?” Julie asked.

“More than excited,” I said with a smile having my cold coffee. We are at *Cup & Code*, you know our usual hangout spot. Normally all the four chairs around our table would be full but today, one wasn't (and you know the reason). Stacy glued her gaze towards the empty chair where Richard used to sit, probably imagining him sitting there, her eyes filled with um...i don't exactly know how to judge that look, maybe grief? I guess so, and honestly I can't see her like this, the Stacy whom I have known from childhood is not the one sitting before me, she was different, special and um...unique I would say, but now all those traits vanished from her.

“So, what are you planning Stace?” I asked, hoping to take her mind off him.

“What?” Stacy asked.

“I mean after engineering what are you planning to do?” I asked.

“I don't know Kevin, in a moment all my dreams have shattered, and I feel aimless now,” Stacy said.

“Those weren't your dreams Stacy. You were made for something else, something great. Don't let your emotions decrease you to something ordinary” I said.

“Yeah Kevin,” Stacy said.

“Focus on your future. And follow your passion, everything will be alright,” I said, clutching her arm gently. She nodded. I hope she understands my concern.

The bus zoomed, with the trees and the cotton candies of the sky called clouds running backwards; finally, the day had come for the industrial visit. The company which we are going

to is a bit far from our college. Our faculty said it takes nearly three hours at least to reach there. So as a safe side I charged my phone, brought my power bank and also pocketed my headset. Stacy, Julie, and I sat together. Julie and I locked our arms with each-other putting the headset and enjoying the soulful music filling our hearts(and of course our ears too). She looked like an angel with her broad smile and her eyes blooming, I rested my head on her shoulder.

"You are the best thing that happened to me" I whispered to her taking her into an embrace.

Stacy coughed a little. *"I think we are not going on a Valentine's Day trip,"* she said sternly.

"Jealous kid," I said and teased her.

"Whatever" Stacy said and dozed off.

After some time we arrived at the company. There was a large arch inscribed with the company's name in silver-plated letters. As we walked through it, there was greenery swept all over the place, with people whom I guess are the employees walking hither and thither, talking among themselves and giving us an alien stare.

Moving our feet a little further, we halted at an enormous hall; the sound of machinery enveloping it. A woman who looked like she's in her 30's came towards us, tall with curly hair that bounced as she walked. She came and greeted us. *"Good morning students,"* she said, her voice sounded as energetic as a little child. *"My name is Katherine Hill. You can call me Kat"* she said. There was some kind of energy in her voice that filled the air, our boring faces enlightened as soon as she spoke up with a beautiful smile, plastering upon her lips. Her words were like energy drinks. The way she spoke, she could be a poet if she thought.

"I am the assistant head of the technical department in this organization," Kat said. *"I feel you guys got bored of the hardware stuff, as many of you came from computer's background"*. She said. We nodded. *"Cool no need to worry,*

in a few moments, we will be heading towards the computer lab, where you can get your hands dirty on some coding and that kind of stuff. Is that clear?" Kat said.

We nodded and followed Kat's lead; she gave a brief about when the company is established and what their agenda is, and how they will train students, with different kinds of training programs that they are conducting every year.

"So guys, before we move further, we will be having a small discussion with ya'll. It'll be held in the hall that's right around the corner, don't worry just the basic stuff regarding your subjects. Okay!" Kat said.

We nodded and followed her, after walking a bit further, we came to a room and stood at the door, Kat swiped her access card which unlocked the door with a beep sound and led us in. The hall looked large, with curtains hanging to the sliding windows that resisted the beam of sunlight from passing through. Kat switched on the lights, as the room was pitch-dark. There were almost a hundred seats in the room with writing pads attached to it. We arranged ourselves in the seats and after we have settled down, Kat began her lecture.

She told us about the technologies that they have implemented till now and how they have solved different problems and served various companies through their products. *"We mainly focus on Artificial Intelligence and Machine Learning; most of you already know that these days it's one of the emerging technologies which mostly every organization, as well as start-ups are following,"* Kat said. We nodded.

"I've got a question for you guys, how many of you agree that A.I will take-over human jobs?" Kat asked.

Most of the students agreed with her, except for a few students. Julie and I went with the first group.

Stacy remained silent the whole time, neither did she spoke up nor reacted, but Kat wouldn't leave; *"What are your views upon the discussion miss,"* Kat asked, glancing towards Stacy. Stacy hesitated, but eventually she spoke up telling about how

people can be benefited by using Artificial Intelligence and how she's planning to follow up on her future in this area.

Then Kat began to ask questions, for which Stacy has answered and sometimes she disagreed with Kat upon different aspects regarding A.I.

"So you say it is good that we implement A.I in every aspect of our lives," Kat said looking towards Stacy.

"Yes I do," Stacy said.

"So what will humans do, if every work is done by some robot?" Kat asked.

"Sit and rest," Stacy said instantly.

"Doesn't it make humans lazy, by just depending on some machine?" Kat asked.

"Not at all mam, it-" Stacy said. But Kat cut her short in the middle *"Kat. Call me Kat"* she said.

"Not at all Kat, it doesn't make humans lazy but much more productive I guess. You just need to change the perspective. Don't see it as something you depend on, we don't depend on machines so that we can become lazy, instead; we make machines so that it serves humanity. We are its boss. I think you watched Terminator movies a lot" Stacy said.

Kat gave a slight grin.

After the discussion had been adjourned we came out of the hall and so did every student. Stacy, Julie, and I were standing with the rest of the batch. Kat came to us. *"You are a pure savage!"* she said looking towards Stacy.

Stacy gave an awkward look. *"What are you looking at, I'm praising you,"* Kat said with a laugh.

"By the way, your good name?" Kat asked.

"Stacy, um Stacy Parker" Stacy said.

"Nice to meet you, miss. Parker" Kat said.

They both shook their hands.

“I think you don’t like people to call you by your last name right?” Kat asked.

“Yeah, there was a time when I used to like people who called me by my last name, but things always don’t remain the same right,” Stacy replied.

“ Yeah, Things change, and so does humans” Kat said. “You know what ? Even I don’t like people calling me with my last name,” Kat said, after a few seconds of silence.

“Because it’s your husband’s? ” Stacy asked.

“What?” Kat asked.

“I’m sorry, I just saw you ring finger, that there’s a mark of the ring but the ring is nowhere in sight, I didn’t mean to...” Stacy said.

“Oh, yeah we had a divorce. But It’s been a while,” Kat said.

“Oh, I’m sorry ‘bout that, must be hard I guess,” Stacy said. “Nah! In fact that’s what made me realise my true worth, you know, we think that love teaches us stuff, and it does really, but the greatest teacher is heartbreak and pain, they teach us a lot,” Kat replied.

“I too had a break up recently, and I’m unable to forget that incident or the person,” Stacy said.

“Oh, I’m sorry about that. But don’t worry in fact you need to be happy about that, at least you don’t need to stay up all night waiting for someone’s boring texts” Kat said.

Stacy chuckled. “It’s fine. He wasn’t that boring though, but I failed to understand him truly,” she said.

“Anyways, take care, and focus on your career. And one more thing I don’t mean that love in itself is bad, please don’t misunderstand me, love is a pure entity and we humans need love, but don’t punish yourself if you didn’t find that love, instead be cheerful if it is true and real love, it comes back, always, all you need is a tiny bit of hope,” Kat said. “If you need any help, feel free to contact me anytime, here’s my card,” she said and extended her visiting card to Stacy.

“Thank you, hope we’ll meet soon,” Stacy said.

“Yeah hopefully,” Kat said giving her a wink.

“Yeah sure,” Stacy said.

“And don’t worry, your heart knows what your deepest desires, just trust it,” Kat said. “It’s a game of trust” she said.

Chapter 44

Searching...

Last day of college. The day on which most of us enjoy, or else we try to enjoy. It seemed as though four years went off like a breeze. Four years of enjoyment with friends and torture

with lecturers. Not all the lecturers seemed to pressurize us, few were good to us, supporting us in our highs and lows, encouraging us and showing us our faults and correcting them.

You know most often, when we think of what did the college gave us for all these years, we usually focus on our friends and forget about the teachers who shaped us and made us into someone, whom we never know existed before. In our case, even though at times we didn't listen to them or didn't follow their instructions, they did reprimand us, but there was always a purpose behind that. It was to discipline us and give us a better future. A glorious future.

"To all the final years" Our dean began the speech. "Many of you came with dreams, and I hope all of you fulfilled them. For some of you, it is to get placed in a good company, which you will be doing soon, as you all know, the campus placements will be starting soon after your final exams. And for others, it may be some other dream. But whatever your dream is, work hard towards it, and have faith in yourself and see yourself as though you have achieved it. And remember no one can fulfill your dream for you. Not even your parents or your best friends, so be stubborn and work hard. Follow your conscience and achieve your dream, and all the best for your further endeavours," he said and ended the speech, and crowd went in a mighty applause.

We sat in the cafeteria. *"So what are you planning?"* Julie asked.

"What?" I asked

"I mean a job or higher studies?" Julie asked.

"Obviously job; I can't do those projects and assignments anymore. Enough, for four years I have done a lot" I said.

"You have done those?" Julie asked.

"Yeah, obviously," I said.

"Really?" Julie asked.

“Then who was the one that told the juniors to write your assignments?” Julie asked.

“Who?” I asked.

“I think I asked you that,” Julie said.

“Well, yeah I told the juniors to write my assignments, but how did you know that,” I asked.

“I told her,” Stacy said.

“But you said you’ll not tell her!” I said.

“Yeah, but sometimes there’s a kind of joy I get and an ego satisfaction in breaking my word,” Stacy said.

“Psychopath,” I said.

“Thanks, I take it as a compliment,” Stacy said and high-fived with Julie.

“But Kevin, honestly I didn’t like what you’ve done,” Julie said.

“Okay listen I’m sorry,” I said.

“No, tell sorry a hundred times,” Julie said.

“What! Are you kidding?” I said.

“Does my face look like I’m kidding?” Julie said.

“Okay, I’ll text you sorry a hundred times. That sounds a lot easier” I said.

“Nice try Mr.Kevin,” Julie said.

“Look at your face,” Stacy said and they both giggled.

“Okay, if you guys are done, I’m leaving,” I said and started to leave.

“What about those hundred sorry’s?” Stacy asked.

“I’ll do my lady; I’ll do a hundred for you and a hundred for her. Happy?” I said.

“More than happy,” Stacy said and high fived with Julie.

Even though Stacy looked happy, her eyes were shallow and um...void as though they were still searching for an answer to that question: Why?

Why did Richard have to leave her all of a sudden?

Didn't he love her?

And what made him do that?

Will she ever find answers for these questions ? I hope she does.

Present-Day...

Chapter 45

Like a Bomb Dropped

We returned from the hospital to Claire's home, I didn't tell Stacy what Claire had told me, (I decided to tell her later) not at that moment. I didn't want her to overstress (remember what Dr Stanley said ? you remember it right ?). However we gathered in the living room while Stacy was resting in the bedroom.

None of us spoke. It was as if we are sitting in a library, with a strict librarian, except for the sound of um...perhaps kids playing in the neighbourhood, maybe, along with a few vehicles zooming around. Then Stacy walked out of the

bedroom, perhaps she woke up due to the giggles of those kids, or the horn sounds of those vehicles.

Anyway, she took a seat opposite Claire who sat on the cushion. Their eyes, diving into each other, Stacy seemed... I don't know how to judge that look on her face, maybe she was muddled up in various thoughts, painful and heart-wrenching thoughts. A long silence rested amongst us, I don't exactly know what to call this. (Does this silence even have any name? Who knows).

"Stacy, I'm sorry for whatever you have gone through," Claire said after a pause.

"I don't need sympathy. You guys please leave me alone for some time" Stacy said and fell silent, her eyes damp.

"You always do this Stacy" I blurted out.

"Do what?" Stacy asked.

"This. Not letting your emotions to be cleared. And what do you mean by leave? Don't you understand we care for you?" I said.

"And I don't want to see you like this Stacy, why don't you get it," I said.

Stacy remained silent as though a rock.

"Look Stacy, I know how you are feeling, and I genuinely care for you," Claire said. *"And I'm sorry for whatever you have gone through,"* she said. *"I shouldn't have done that,"* she said silently, glancing towards me. I didn't react but just gave a nod. Although I know what she would be telling, I wanted those words to be flown from her own mouth.

"Done what?" Stacy asked sounding confused.

"This, everything you have gone through for such a long time, and the sacrifices you made, and losing your true self and your job as a matter of fact. Being down emotionally, and thinking it was all because of Richard, and in that period you developed a small hatred towards him unknowingly, and I feel I'm responsible for that" Claire said.

“But....but I don't understand how you are responsible for that” Stacy said with a lot of confusion in her voice.

Claire held Stacy's arm, *“I know I should have done this earlier but I couldn't, i couldn't do it, and now I understand what a big mistake I have done,”* she said. *“What the hell are you talking about? Will you be a bit clear?”* Stacy said irritated and confused.

“It's because of me, Richard broke up with you,” Claire said almost immediately as though dropping a bomb.

Chapter 46

Was it a Mistake ?

‘You know sometimes it's hard to forget someone who gave you a lot to remember right ? Those limitless and endless talks you had, those memorable moments you cherished with them, the time you spent, and obviously the memories you made although those moments were painful at times. But still, love is all about that right? although living apart from each other, but still recalling them in your prayers, and harking back yourself of them and their words, although memories are beautiful yet some memories are painful too’

As Richard has planned out, he got admitted into a well-known university for his master's. He seemed thrilled and excited, concerning this new phase of life, new friends, and obviously new experiences. Even Stacy looked happy for him, although she missed him and was distant from him. *"You know distance between loved ones makes the bond stronger,"* Stacy said, even though she didn't like the whole idea of this Long-distance relationship. He promised that he will never break her heart and her trust.

As the days went by one day Richard came across Claire, his classmate and gradually they became good friends; hanging out with each other had become a daily routine for them. They began to have good conversations filled with fun and shared almost everything with each other, their likes, their dislikes, and obviously Richard told her about Stacy (how couldn't he by the way).

"So, do you have any girl-friend?" Claire asked.

The evening sun sparkled, with the red paint spilling here and there upon the canvas called sky, along with the flock of birds flying above, their wings flapping mightily. They were at a restaurant that was near their college. (From what I know, it was a famous restaurant, famous for some specific dishes; I don't know which by the way).

"Yeah I do," Richard said, munching the food they have just ordered.

"Oh, she might be lucky enough to have you," Claire said.

Richard smiled. *"Thanks, but I don't think there is such phrase called 'lucky to have them' "* he said. *"It's all about how much want to be with the other person, and respect them, people stay when you respect them, Claire. That's all it is, so simple"* Richard said.

"I envy her, whoever she is," Claire said.

"Why so?" Richard asked, taking a bite.

“Because she got such a mature and an understanding boyfriend,” Claire said.

“I’m not any ideal boyfriend; even we both have conflicts and misunderstandings at times,” Richard said.

“You do?” Claire asked.

“Yeah of course we do. Look, Claire, no relationship is perfect. But accepting each other’s imperfections is what brews a perfect relationship,” Richard said.

Claire nodded, beaming out a smile.

“So, how come you never had anyone in your life?” Richard asked.

“What do you mean?” Claire asked.

“I mean someone special, you know,” Richard said.

“Because um...maybe...I never found someone like you,” Claire said.

“Oh! Come on man, stop kidding” Richard said with a chuckle.

“I’m serious Richard,” Claire said. “I have a huge crush on you, like for real, I don’t know why, but, um...I feel, I can be myself with you, you never judged me, and I know you never will. And since my childhood I never had anyone whom I can call as ... “someone special” in my life, except for my parents, and a few friends and um...I don’t even have siblings, and after I moved from my home to pursue my master’s here, I felt so lonely and kind of depressed you know, it felt as if I’m the only person left on this planet. Even though there were plenty of people around me I felt alone, until ... until I met you, your friendliness, your goodness and most importantly the way you care for me. I don’t even know when I fell in love with you, but yeah somehow I did. Yes, Richard, I love you,” She said.

Richard exhaled deeply, he looked surprised and perhaps shocked too, *“This isn’t what you call love Claire, this is the effect of your loneliness, and now all you need is a good*

friend, not some “mature person” to be in a relationship with,” Richard said.

“But I truly love you, Richard,” Claire said.

“That ain’t love, love needs commitment, and as I already told you I’m committed to someone else, and my future is with her only,” Richard said.

Claire fell silent for a moment.

“Okay, tell me something, how are you so sure that it’s true and real love?” Claire asked.

“I don’t know, I can’t explain, and few things are beyond our wildest imaginations, and I guess perhaps somewhere in the core of my being i have this feeling that true and genuine love need not to be proved, and to answer your question about how i know that its real love” Richard said and paused. “It’s because I know her, and I love her. I don’t owe you an explanation; now please, leave me alone” Richard said.

Claire left without uttering a word, her “special dish” left untouched.

From that moment on Richard avoided Claire, although at times they stumbled across each other, but she wouldn’t let go a chance to get closer to him, even after he said her not to try to get in touch with him, she never listened, instead, she was compelling him.

She tried to contact him (there would be hundreds of text messages and ‘n’ number of calls), but Richard responded to neither of them, after sometime Richard thought she would give up, but she never did, instead, she tried, even more desperately.

“Look, Claire, I don’t wanna hurt your feelings by saying this, but what you’re doing is wrong! Utterly wrong!” Richard said furiously.

“So, what are you tryin’ to say, loving you is wrong?” Claire said.

“Yes, it is wrong. If I didn’t have anyone in my life, that would be different, but now, I love Stacy and I don’t wanna hurt her,” Richard said, as though making it clear.

Claire stayed silent. As if trying to process what she had just heard.

“Fine, but at least can’t we be friends? I don’t want this to break our friendship” Claire said.

“Are you...I don’t want to talk about this, can you please leave me?” Richard said.

“But,” Claire said.

“Just leave me alone!” Richard screeched at her and walked away without turning back.

Claire stood still, not knowing what to do, perhaps this whole scenario broke her heart, she was angry and as a result of that anger, tears did rolled in her eyes, but she fought them back, perhaps in her perspective what she did was right, and what did she do ? Expecting someone to love her back was a mistake ? Was it ? Maybe yes, but she didn’t accept that.

Chapter 47

Just a Matter of Minutes

Richard didn’t intend to hurt Claire in any way, but after seeing how lonely she was, he was deeply moved and saddened. And moreover, he felt bad for yelling at her for no reason at all, so Richard decided to apologize to her.

Richard dialled up Claire's number, after a few moments she answered.

"Claire, I'm really sorry for behaving like that with you the other day," Richard said. *"I...i didn't do it intentionally, it was ... I felt a little angry for what you've said, but... pardon me for what I've done, please forgive me,"* he said.

After a long pause, Claire replied. *"It's fine, I guess it was my mistake too, I shouldn't have said that,"* she said.

"No, you did the right thing by expressing your feelings, else It would have burdened you a lot, and don't know till what extent they would have taken you," Richard said.

"Yeah, I think so," Claire said.

"You still sound upset; let's do one thing, why don't we meet up for a coffee?" Richard said, a little bit hesitantly.

"Are you okay with it?" Claire asked.

"Yeah...yeah totally, unless you don't have any problem," Richard said.

"I'm absolutely fine with it," Claire said.

"Great, then shall we meet tomorrow?" Richard asked.

"Yeah tomorrow is fine for me," Claire said.

"Okay, I'll inform you of the place and time," Richard said.

"Sure," Claire said.

"Bye," Richard said.

"Bye, take care," Claire said.

"Sure," Richard said and hung up the call.

The evening breeze filled the air; with the sun shining ablaze, his red face hiding behind those tiny clouds was a beautiful picture to behold, Richard and Claire sat in a nearby restaurant, facing each other. The only reason they are here even after that argument between them is because Richard

wanted to apologise her, for his wrong behaviour (that was in his sense though).

“Hope you’re not angry with me anymore,” Claire said.

“No, it’s alright now, and I’m sorry if I’ve hurt you in any way,” Richard said.

“No its fine, I guess I over-reacted a bit, my bad” Claire said, with a slight grin.

Richard nodded.

“So, shall we order something?” Richard asked.

“Yeah, I’ll have pasta,” Claire asked. Richard called the waiter and ordered their dish; he came after a few minutes.

“So, how did you guys meet?” Claire asked.

“Who?” Richard asked, placing his mobile on the table.

“You and your girl-friend,” Claire said.

“Oh! Yeah, we met in college, she is my junior,” Richard said.

“Ah, I see,” Claire said.

“Yeah,” Richard said.

“Do your parents know about your relationship?” Claire asked.

“Um...my mom knows, but I don’t know about Stace’s parents, but that’s not a big deal, she will handle,” Richard said.

“I’m sure she will,” Claire said and started munching her pasta.

Claire’s phone vibrated in her little purse, she took it out and answered. *“Yeah will do, thanks for reminding,”* she said.

“Yeah, yeah...sure, bye” she said and hung up.

“What’s the matter?” Richard asked. *“You look tensed?”*

“Nothing, I applied for an online internship, and I need to send an email attached with my documents,” Claire said.

“So, what’s the problem in that; do it,” Richard said.

“My phone’s battery is low and they asked me to send that email now, I don’t think I can do it, and it takes me forever to reach my home and send that email, oh! Man, I’m pissed off” Claire said.

“Calm down, why are you worrying?” Richard said.

“How can I not worry, there’s no time I need to send in fifteen minutes, or else the slots will be full,” Claire said.

“Okay, here take my phone login to your account and send that email,” Richard said.

She hesitated a bit, *“Thank you so much,”* Claire said and logged into her account.

“Hey, I just feel so hot, maybe it’s because of the spice, so I’ll get some drink, and do you want any?” Richard said.

“Yeah, I’ll have a strawberry milkshake,” Clare said, scrolling through the phone.

“Done, I’ll just come in five,” he said and rushed towards the counter.

After Claire had sent the email from Richard’s mobile, it popped up another email, it was from Stacy; She opened the mail, but she didn’t read through, after a while, she began to type something. Before hitting the send button, she looked at what she had typed it read: *It’s all over between us Stacy. Let’s break up.*

Immediately after hitting the send button she deleted the mail from Richard’s phone and sent Stacy’s email into spam box. Then she searched for Stacy’s number in the contact list, she found it and blocked that phone number. (How did she find that number, I don’t know, maybe name? I guess so).

Richard came after a while, *“Sorry for the delay, there was a huge queue out there, and they have self-service for the milkshakes thing, so weird,”* he said. *“So done with your email?”*

“Yeah, here’s your phone,” she said, handing it over to him faking a smile. *“And thanks, you helped me a lot,”* Claire said.

“No problem, you’re welcome,” Richard said, clueless about what had happened in *just a matter of minutes*.

A few days later...

Chapter 48

Saddled Heart

“What happened? You look so sad,” Claire asked Richard.

“Nothing,” he said.

They sat in the college canteen. *“Your face tells it all, tell me what’s wrong,”* Claire asked.

“I don’t know,” Richard said.

“What do you mean by ‘I don’t know’,” Claire asked.

“Please leave me alone for some-time Claire; I don’t wanna talk to anyone right now,” Richard said.

"I'm just tryina' help you out, that's it, and if you don't want to talk, it's fine," Claire said.

"It's nothing like that Claire, I just...leave it," Richard said.

"You just? What?" Claire asked. *"Fine, if don't wanna say, it's okay, let it be,"* she said.

"We broke up," Richard said after a few seconds.

"Wh-What, what do you mean broke up?" Claire asked.

"Stacy and I broke up," Richard said, with tears in his eyes.

"But how and why! Everything was going right, what happened all of a sudden?" Claire asked.

"I don't know!" Richard said.

"Did you try to call her?" Claire asked.

"Yeah, but it's of no use, she blocked me," Richard said.

"Did you try to call any of her friends?" Claire asked.

"No I don't have any of her friend's number, I used to have but that was in my old phone, and damn it! I don't remember any of their numbers," Richard said. *"I should've taken his number,"* he said.

"Richard don't worry, we'll figure out something, please calm down," Claire said.

"I can't, I don't understand how to be calm, I need some space, bye," Richard said.

"But Rich..." Claire said, *"I'm sorry Claire, just leave me alone for a while,"* Richard said.

"As you say," Claire said and left.

Claire didn't see Richard at the college for several days (some days he would come, but sit in a corner as though isolating himself from others). It went on for several days, he used to come quite rarely to the class and pretend to listen to the lecture, but only God knows where his mind was all the while.

Even after everyone left the room, he used to sit in the same place, looking at his phone, re-reading that last message from Stacy which said “I Love You”, heaven knows how many times he would have read it; Claire seemed worried (was she? who knows) she decided to meet him and made her way towards Richard’s home.

“Why didn’t you come to college today?” Claire asked.

“I didn’t feel like coming,” Richard said.

“What do you mean?” Claire asked.

“I don’t know,” Richard said.

“She still didn’t text you?” Claire asked.

“No, she didn’t, and I don’t understand why she’s doing this” Richard said.

“It’s okay, don’t worry” Claire said.

“It is not okay, don’t you understand?! From the last few days she didn’t call me or at least sent me a text, and upon that, she blocked my contact, how can you tell me that it’s okay,” Richard said.

“Richard you were the one who said that sometimes you had little fights and you people sorted that out, now what happened,” Claire said.

“I don’t think this is a small thing, not for me at least, she’s ignoring me on purpose dude! can’t you see!” Richard said. *“I can’t bear this, I feel like as if some part of me is missing,”* he said. *“Bye, please leave me alone,”* he said.

“But-” Claire began, but Richard cut her short.

“Please leave me alone!” He said.

Claire left without uttering a word, closing the door slowly behind her.

Richard wept bitterly. Thinking, remembering, reminding himself, of all those memories, moments and love they have cherished, the conversations they had begun to play in his

mind as though a record, his heart was weeping, wailing as though about to explode, there was a burden within him, a mighty burden which he denies to put down, like a saddle on the heart.

Chapter 49

Holding On

Months went by like shooting stars, days weren't days anymore and nights seemed endless with memories, (painful memories I should say) hitting hard as a rock. Richard couldn't take his mind off Stacy, the demon called depression took over him, placing him in its bondage and chains the keys to break through are far beyond his reach.

He wouldn't talk to anyone, even if people tried to have a word with him, he would avoid them because of a fear that someone would notice the pain abiding in his eyes, he wouldn't want that.

The only companions he have now are pain, heartbreak and loneliness which over the period of time, became his best-friends. Various questions began to take over his mind, questions of doubt, fear, anxiety and depression began to fill his being.

He could have never imagined that one day, Stacy, the woman whom he have considered as his world and for whom he was ready to go against the whole world would leave him so abruptly, that there's nothing else to look for.

The loneliness he felt, was indescribable, pain-filled and you name it. There was an ocean of emotions running inside him that choked him, plunging his heart, taking his breath away. He felt lifeless, void and empty as though in a desert, flashes of Stacy's face would appear before his eyes, but before he could get hold of her, they would vanish into the thin air, leaving him in that void again.

The love which he had imagined thinking that it would be with him forever left him in a single moment, a moment which perhaps he would have never imagined. Even Claire couldn't see him this way, so she decided to have a word with him.

"For how many days will this go on Richard?" Claire asked.

"What?" Richard said.

"Look at yourself Richard, what the hell has happened to you?" Claire asked.

"Then what else should I do?" Richard said, with frown.

Claire was silent.

"You know, I loved her so much; I thought we would spend our lives together, I imagined a future with her, but what have I got in the end? Nothing; some dreams can never be fulfilled, I don't know how I can survive the rest of my life," Richard said.

"You don't need to just survive, you need to live," Claire said.

"You wouldn't get it Claire; you don't know the pain of losing someone you love with all your heart," Richard said.

"How are you so sure, that I don't the pain of losing someone I love?" Claire asked.

Richard fell silent.

"Please, Richard I don't wanna see you like this and I definitely don't wanna lose you," Claire said.

"But Claire I can't, you know, I don't feel right about this," Richard said, catching her intentions.

“I know how you’d be feeling, and I totally understand it, but it’s for your own good I’m telling you, Richard, please give yourself a try,” Claire said.

“It isn’t that easy Claire,” Richard said. All of a sudden, Claire hugged Richard. *“I’ll be there for you, always,”* she said.

“Look into my eyes, we can start over again, trust me,” Claire said.

“But-” Richard began, but Claire stopped him.

“I love you, always, trust me” Claire whispered.

Richard remained silent, not knowing how to respond to her, perhaps some part of his heart was still *holding on* to Stacy.

Chapter 50

A Precarious Promise

Claire seemed happy since she was successful in her attempt to make Richard forget Stacy, she had manipulated his mind, by telling all sorts of negative things and instilling negative thoughts about Stacy, that made Richard doubt Stacy’s love(did he?) that eventually developed a kind of hatred in his heart towards Stacy unknowingly, just by allowing Claire to speak into his mind.

He seemed calm now, going to start a new beginning and a new relationship with Claire. They met often in college. Meetings became casual and dinner dates became a daily routine for them. Although Richard still kept holding on to Stacy.

As the days went by, Richard seemed to forget about what happened to him with Stacy. (Really? I don’t know, maybe); But one day he came across the locket that is in a half heart shape which he had given to Stacy. And it reminded him of Stacy and the moments they shared together.

Claire observed that he still didn't overlook Stacy, so one day she took a promise from Richard.

"What, Why?" Richard said.

"You first promise me that, you will never think about her again," Claire said.

"But..." Richard said.

"You need to move on Richard, it's over between you both, just forget it!" Claire said.

"Okay, but why are you over-reacting?" Richard asked.

"Over-reacting?, Okay tell me how will you feel if I'll be moody concerning my ex and I don't spend my time with you?" Claire said.

Richard stayed silent.

"It's okay Richard, I know you loved her a lot, but sometimes you need to let go of those things which you love," Claire said.

Richard nodded.

"It's fine, now let's focus on our careers, forget Stacy and promise me that you would do so," Claire said.

Richard hesitated a bit, perhaps he remembered another promise (you know it right?)

"Yeah, I promise," Richard said finally.

But will he be able to keep this promise ? Or will this be a Precarious Promise ?

Chapter 51

Hey! Buddy

A few days later there was a seminar in Richard's college, based on the concept of *start-ups*, (the name of the seminar

was something like *Get-up and Start-up*, different right?). Several students regardless of their technical background registered for the seminar and attended it; even Richard and Claire were among them.

The dark classroom was lit with grains of pixels from the projector falling on the small silver screen; students from different departments walked in and settled down. There was a huge clutter of voices chattering endlessly which went above the ceiling.

Richard and Claire sat together, with the seat's armrest acting as a gap between them, while some other students sitting beside Richard. The door opened, allowing the morning light to pass in to the room, a young person entered in, with some folders held in his right hand. He would probably be a year or two years old than the people in the hall, with black hair along with a white t-shirt on, and a blue cap sitting on his head.

Placing the folders and his cap upon the table, he introduced himself (I don't exactly know how to pronounce that name though, anyway leave that, you name him something) however after a while he began by giving an introduction on the program he was about to begin. He began by saying:

"Hello everyone" He said and introduced himself (again, dude you already told your name, lol), and so did the students. *"So, hope you guys are ready for the seminar; we'll start in a few moments, make sure you note down everything that's being said, I'm sure It will help you a lot,"* he said.

"And let's welcome our guest speaker, he started a food supply organization with the help of his friends and also business partners, now is consistently supplying food all over the country and is running successfully, so let's welcome him with a round of applause," he said. The whole room went into mighty applause, while a man, who was probably in his early 30's stepped onto the stage, he too introduced himself and began his speech.

The seminar went well, with all the students listening attentively and scribbling their notes swiftly. As an hour went

by, and the lights around were switched on, indicating the time for the seminar is up.

“I hope you guys learned something through this,” the speaker said. *“I wish you don’t just hear and forget it, but put it into action,”* he said.

“If anyone has any questions you guys can ask,” he asked.

Everyone began to shoot various questions at him, and among them was Williams, a huge man, with a neatly trimmed beard but a messed up hair (I guess he kind of looked like a rock-star) anyway he wore a light brown shirt and a denim, along with a white sports watch sticking onto his wrist. He stood up and began by asking this question:

“Hello sir, I just wanted to ask a thing, what does it require to establish a start-up? I mean do we need any special training for that?” he asked.

“Special training? No, but everyone who wants to start up a company needs skill and a desire to learn it, like real skill and that skill must be totally unique from others, and your idea must solve a problem in a creative way, and even if it sounds foolish to everyone around you believe in your idea, that’s all it takes, along with some time and a pinch of persistence, and also the guts to dream the impossible,” he replied. *“So focus on building yourself up,”* he said.

“Yes sir, thank you,” Williams said.

“You’re welcome,” he said.

“That was cool,” Richard said looking towards Williams.

“Thanks,” Williams said.

“Hi I’m Richard,” Richard said extending his hand.

“Hey buddy, I am Williams,” he said as they exchanged a handshake. (the way he said “hey buddy” was kinda’ different and unique, you know it was like an energetic and active child telling you “hey buddy!” something like that you know).

“So which department do you belong to?” Williams asked.

“To Computer Science, and you?” Richard said.

“Even I belong to Computer Science, but I’ haven’t seen you,” Williams said.

“I belong to the first shift,” Richard said.

“Ah! That’s why I guess” Williams said.

“Yeah,” Richard said. *“If you don’t mind can I ask you something?”* Richard said.

“Yeah sure, but after this seminar is done and first let’s drop something into our stomachs, I’m starving man!” Williams said.

“Sure,” Richard said with a smile.

After the seminar’s done they made their way towards a nearby bakery (they first planned to go to the college canteen, but after seeing the massive crowd, they altered their decision); the tables seemed occupied, except for one at the corner; immediately they walked towards it and arranged themselves in the seats. Williams ordered a mini cheese burger and a diet coke, so did Richard.

“So, now tell me what you wanted to speak?” Williams asked, munching the burger.

Then Richard explained to Williams about his start-up plan. They spoke for nearly an hour.

“That’s absolutely brilliant buddy!” Williams exclaimed, *“I will do what I can, the idea’s great,”* Williams said. *“Thank you so much!”* Richard exclaimed.

“So here you are,” Claire said glancing towards Richard. (Perhaps her sudden entry startled them).

“Oh! Hey Claire, I was about to call you” Richard said.

“Meet Williams, he’s my new friend”, Williams and Claire greeted each other and Claire took a seat beside Richard.

“Your friend ?” Williams asked. *“Girl-friend,”* Claire said as if correcting him, locking her arm with Richard’s. Richard’s expression changed, as though someone had put a pill of grief

into his heart, that word reminded him of Stacy, who was still somewhere beneath the back the back of his mind and most importantly in his heart.

“*Yeah,*” Richard said, taking his mind off her and faking a smile.

“*Nice to meet you,*” Williams said.

“*Nice to meet you too,*” Claire replied and beamed out a smile.

The rest of the time, Richard and Williams had their conversation, talking, planning (and heaven knows what), while Claire sat silently, looking at Richard, she saw something different in him, although he was talking with Williams, his mind seemed to be somewhere else, *hope this new buddy of his would help him to overlook Stacy*, Claire thought, but can he really help?

Chapter 52

Remembrance

As the days went by, Richard and Claire loved each other's company, (did they ?, maybe). Claire, being an introvert spent most of her time watching either movies or series, Richard loved her, or perhaps he thought so. He made sure that he would never make her feel alone, or left out. And whenever they got the time, they spent it on going to dates or going on little trips (and by the way, those trips were around just the city).

Some days they would meet in restaurants, or in a cafe, it went on for quite some time. Like a weekly routine.

One day Claire invited Richard to her apartment. He hesitated at first, but upon Claire's request he accepted.

"You live here?" Richard asked.

"I exist, Claire said.

"What's the difference?" Richard asked.

"Honestly a lot, staying together with your loved ones is called living, and staying alone, is nothing but just existing," Claire said, unlocking the door and stepping in. *"What about your parents ?"* Richard asked. *"They are at home, I'll visit them during the holidays,"* Claire said.

Nodding, Richard and Claire entered in. *"What happened ?"* Claire said, glancing at his face.

"Nothing I'm fine" Richard said curving a smile upon his lips as he entered in.

"Please have a seat," Claire said with an awkward voice. Without dropping another word, she walked towards her bedroom, closing the door behind her and cursing herself for being so dumb.

It was a one-bedroom flat, with a mini-sized hall and a kitchen, the hall was occupied with a bean bag, a sofa, and a small table in the centre. Richard sat on the light green couch

facing the television. A minute later, Claire arrived wearing a light yellow t shirt and a long frock.

“You make yourself comfortable and I’ll make us some drink or something,” Claire said. *“Sure,”* Richard replied. *“Yeah, will come in a moment,”* she said and made her way towards the kitchen.

A few moments later she arrived with a cup of tea in her hands.

“Yeah, Thank you,” Richard said, taking the cup into his hands.

“So, what’s the plan?” Claire asked, stumbling onto the bean bag beside Richard.

“Regarding what?” Richard asked.

“Your start-up thing,” Claire said.

“Oh! Yeah, I have a couple of things in my mind, but maybe it takes some time” Richard said.

“Oh, Cool” Claire said, sipping her tea. The ding dong tune of the door-bell enveloped the room and Claire went to answer it. As she opened the door she saw a man, he was tall, with his broad shoulders, and a lightly trimmed beard; he was Williams. Claire beamed out a smile and led him inside.

“How are you?” Claire asked.

“Doing well,” Williams said, giving Richard a brotherly embrace.

It was a long evening, Richard and Williams discussed regarding their start-up idea with the benefit it gives along with the challenges they would be facing, along with the required action steps in making this dream of theirs into a reality.

“So when are you guys gonna start your company?” Claire asked.

“Maybe soon after we graduate,” Richard said.

“I want you guys to be successful in whatever you do,” Claire said.

“Yeah, that’ll happen only if you stay with me,” Richard said.

“Where will I go ?” Claire said.

“I don’t know, I’ve seen people change,” Richard said.

“Oh! Come on Richard not again, it’s over, forget it” Claire said, catching the tone of his voice.

“Can anyone tell me what you guys are talking about?” Williams asked.

Then Claire told him about Stacy and Richard, and how *Stacy*, broke-up with Richard, obviously not telling him that it was *Claire* who was the reason for it to happen.

“Oh, I’m sorry about that bro, I didn’t know that” Williams said, placing his hand gently on Richard’s shoulder.

“It’s fine, forget it,” Richard said, and looked away towards the window, towards the swinging trees, and busy roads and a few people walking, the tiny birds of the air chirping, he smiled looking at them as though that tiny creature reminded him of something or perhaps someone.

Chapter 53

Tangled Within Flowery Chains

Time winged like a phoenix, and all the three - Richard, Williams, and Claire graduated from the college. Claire was excited about her future with Richard, she found him

determined and so was Williams, he wasn't only ambitious but also stood as a support to Richard and a best-friend to Claire.

Richard wanted to give Claire a future of hope where he can never hurt her emotionally or mentally, Stacy seemed out of Richard's mind for a while, (or else he thinks so); but the memories he made with her rooted deep within him, he couldn't forget them, (how could he by the way? It isn't that easy) she is his first love, the first woman whom he fell for; I guess never in his wildest dreams he would have thought that she will leave him, and after Stacy left, a void and a vacuum were created within him, that which neither Claire nor any other person would fill. That didn't mean he unloved Claire or took her lightly, he didn't want to break her heart just because of his emotions and feelings towards Stacy. He knows that Claire loves him, but he couldn't (or I should say, he wasn't in a position to return or give that love back to Claire).

We say love is hard, have you ever tried un-loving a person whom you have once loved with your whole heart ? Tell me which one is hard, (I don't mean that you hate them, you can't do that, and neither can I, just try to un-love, can you do that ? no you can't!!) That process seems like a battle, a war, a war that's never ending. There aren't any losers or winners in this battle; it goes on and on until you open your eyes in the eternity.

One day Richard was walking Claire back home, her apartment was probably a kilometre or so away from their college. The evening sky above them was filled with dazzling clouds, As they were walking, Claire looked at Richard and asked a question: *“Tell me something do you hate your Ex ?”*, Richard, after a moment of silence replied, *“No, I don't hate her, ... I'm not trying to upset you by saying this, but that's the truth Claire, I don't know why, I just can't hate her, for she was and still is the love of my life, though she left me abruptly, I think a part of me still loves her, and maybe that part of mine is still sticking onto her, you know, sometimes I think Stacy and I didn't have a proper good bye, perhaps that thing is the*

reason for me to stick to her although she isn't a part of my life anymore” Richard said. Claire nodded. *“And I hope to get another chance, just once, to say her...a proper... and a satisfying good bye,”* Richard said. *“I guess a part of me is still waiting for that moment to come true, but I don't know, will it ever happen,”* Richard said and fell silent *“and what do you think, will I ever get that chance ?”* Richard asked. *“Maybe,”* Claire replied. *“I hope so...”* Richard said glancing towards the empty road. *“Me too”* said Claire.

However, suppressing his emotions down, Richard focussed on the future that he decided to create, he did worked hard, in the dream he believed in. Richard and Williams met quite a number of people who had opened start-ups and some of Williams' friends had already started companies and are running successfully.

Every individual they met said some or the other thing, some said that they must be ready to take risks and make sacrifices, a lot of them to be honest.

And some discouraged them saying that start-ups won't last long, and they would soon go bankrupt; but none of them robbed Richard's courage, he was so convinced in opening a start-up, that he cared nothing about what people around him were saying; he just focussed in his dream.

Although Richard made himself busy, sometimes his mind would pull him back to his past, an unforgettable and a memorable past (will he ever forget her ?, I guess first love isn't that easy to forget, you know although we try with our whole strength to overcome that past, it always pulls us back, as though tangled with chains, the only variance here is, the chains with which we are tangled in, aren't chains made of metal, but they are what called as *flowery chains*).

Chapter 54

A Swift Verdict

As they had planned out, Richard and Williams did establish a company and they named it *Alpha Corporation*, (the reason they named it is because it was their new beginning and *Alpha* in some language means ‘first’). Nevertheless they recruited people who were qualified and as ambitious as them and who would not only work hard but also smart for the advance of the company, by contributing their skills and knowledge.

Alpha Corporation, although new in the market, sky-rocketed in its early stages, delivering the promised software solutions; and soon the company began to get famous among other leading corporations.

Everything was going well; their image in the market has been high, their financial growth seemed to increase, and their rate of delivering their results were fast, until Richard came up with a decision. A decision, that left Williams in an utter surprise.

“What the hell are you saying!!! You wanna quit the company?” Williams asked.

“I don’t say I’m quitting, but I feel like this is your dream and, you know, I feel like...I’m occupying your space,” Richard said.

“Have you gone nuts! What the hell has come upon you!” Williams said.

“I can’t stay here Williams, I don’t want to; please try to understand,” Richard said.

“Can you tell me at least one good reason for that?” Williams asked.

Richard remained silent.

“Come on man, speak up!” Williams asked.

“It’s because I don’t wanna deprive your dream,” Richard said.

“What do you tryin’ to say?” Williams asked.

“All of this is yours, it was your idea to have a start-up,” Richard said.

“It’s not just my idea alone Rich, you played a major part in bringing this to a reality and it is you who made that to grow, I mean all the clients we have now, is because of your skills Richard,” Williams said. *“And what made you make this sudden decision?”*

“I don’t know,” Richard said plainly.

“You’re totally out of your mind,” Williams said. *“Please talk to me, is there’s anything I need to know?”* he asked.

Richard didn't reply for that. *"Fine! If you don't wanna say it's okay,"* Williams said, taking Richard's silence as a response. But Richard's silence didn't vanish.

"What do you want me to do now?" Williams asked.

"Take over this company, please" Richard said as though it was a final verdict. Williams hesitated he didn't seem to understand what's going on in Richard's, (what made him behave this way?) But whatever it is, he's trying to hide, it isn't good. After a long moment of silence *"Okay I will,"* Williams said as though half-agreeing and not knowing what on earth made Richard to take this *Swift Verdict*.

Chapter 55

A Shadow That Never Fades

Past... We all have a past, there isn't a human being who is without a past, except for babies (you agree with me? You do right ?) for some of us it's a beautiful past, with moments that are unforgettable, and some of the moments from that past are treasured somewhere deep within the core of our heart, and to some of us it's memorable, we even make memories of that past (good and cheerful memories) which fills our hearts with joy and with a divine peace; but most of the time, we forget that we have another version for our past, which neither our family, our friends, our closest friends I should say, seldom

know about; the version of the past which we think we are done with, but no! That past still sticks onto us like a shadow, a shadow that never fades.'

"You left the company!" Claire asked (utterly shocked) she was angry, confused, and heaven knows what. But Richard didn't seem to be moved.

"Yeah," Richard said plainly.

"Why would anyone do that, Richard?" Claire asked, with fiery eyes.

"Because I wasn't the one who made it, it was him, Will," Richard shrieked.

"But you both are partners right?" Claire asked.

"Yeah, that's true but I didn't feel right about what I was doing," Richard said, his eyes darting around.

"Can you please explain what do you mean by that?" Claire asked.

Richard remained silent, as though he choose not to speak, and so did Claire as though waiting for an answer, finally Richard spoke up saying *"Okay, I'll tell you...the thing is i saw Stacy"* he said.

"What! When and Where?" Claire asked.

"She was one of the shortlisted people, I didn't know that because Williams said that he had chosen some of the engineering colleges so that he can recruit fresh candidates from those colleges," Richard said.

"So what? You don't even know whether she gets selected or not" Claire said.

"I know her Claire, she'll definitely get selected, and whatever the qualities Will is looking for in the candidates that he's gonna select, those are in her, and I don't want to boss a company in which my ex-girlfriend works, I don't mean that I hate her, but you know right, I can't stand her presence, after all these years I just can't do that," Richard said.

“Okay... Okay, if you don't wanna do, it's...it's fine, let's try something else” Claire said.

“Okay, but I need some time to figure that out,” Richard said.

“Yeah sure,” Claire said, hesitantly.

“And I'm sorry, please don't judge me for this,” Richard said.

“No, not at all Richard, I'm not judging you, because i know you,” Claire said.

“Thanks, Claire,” Richard said.

Suddenly Claire gave Richard a tight hug, and whispered, *“I love you,”* He didn't react perhaps those three words which he had just heard took him back into the past, a past sticks to him like a shadow.

Chapter 56

Consciously Guilty

After Richard left the company, he tried to get a living by working in some private firm, thanks to his master's degree though. Somehow after n number of interviews, finally he took the position of a developer in that private firm; but however that wouldn't last for long; he resigned in a week, this

continued with every job he did, he would get a job; but in no time, he would resign. And Claire obviously didn't want this. She decided to ask him out.

"Richard, you need to settle down," Claire said. They sat in a small restaurant nearby to Claire's apartment, facing each other. The only common thing between them now is silence. Claire had never seen Richard in this way; his eyes were red as if they have been sick and tired of weeping, as though someone had sucked away all the energy within them and Claire was unable to see him like this.

"I'm working on it Claire," Richard said after a pause not exactly looking at Claire.

"I know you are working on it, but for how long will this go on?" Claire frowned.

"I don't know," Richard replied. *"The one whom I have loved and still do, left me, without a reason, and I find her in the company that my friend and I had started and he claims that I should own the company,"* Richard said. *"I can't do that Claire, try to understand,"* he said. Claire fell silent not knowing what to say.

"Okay, I'm sorry I didn't mean to force you to get a job, I know you're mature enough to take your own decisions, but I just wanted to ... to help you out, I'm unable to see you like this Richard, try to understand you need to move on," Claire said clasping his hand gently.

"I will, and thanks for being there for me," Richard said.

"I will always be there for you," Claire said.

After a few days Richard applied for another job as a developer, and this time he got selected (although the pay wasn't that high, but yeah he managed, I guess). Things seemed back on track, Richard seemed to get along with the new job he had secured, although he didn't like it, he went for the job upon Claire's advice, he missed his best friend Williams though, but occasionally either Williams would call

him or they would meet up at some nearby café, while Claire settled down as a freelance designer.

Time flew, and one day as Claire returned to her apartment, an ambulance stood at the entry gate, the ee-aw sound of the ambulance filled the air, and people around were muttering to each other; curious to know what happened she went closer, and her eyes went wide, her neighbour was being taken on a stretcher! (She was almost the same age as Claire, perhaps an year or two younger). Claire was confused, *what happened to her ?* she thought; everyone said various things, some said it was an accident, and others said it was a suicide attempt.

The girl on the stretcher and Claire are good friends and she's the only person with whom Claire used to talk to or spend time with (as I already told she's an introvert, she usually either talks less or never talks). Claire's mind went baffled; *I need to see her* she decided.

Without a second thought the next morning, she went to the hospital where her neighbour had been taken to. As she reached the hospital, she immediately rushed to the emergency to see her, but unfortunately, the doctors wouldn't allow her inside; disappointed and distressed she returned to the reception and decided to wait there. Then an elderly couple walked in and sat beside her, with grief clearly flashing upon their faces, Claire recognized them as the girl's parents.

Unable to control her anticipation she asked them what happened to their daughter, they said that their had a boyfriend and were in a relationship for over a year, and suddenly he broke up with her, unable to take that in, she tried to commit suicide, by trying to cut herself. Claire felt very sad for her, suddenly Stacy's face flashed in her mind, even Stacy had lost Richard, and Claire didn't care about what happened to Stacy. A sting of guilt plunged through her heart. *What an idiot I was*, Claire thought to herself, *I shouldn't have done that*, guilt began to take over Claire's mind, she didn't break them apart unintentionally, it was all planned, because she desperately

wanted Richard, it wasn't love, it was desperation and in that desperation, she didn't realize what she was doing, until she broke them apart completely to the point that Richard forgot about Stacy, the one whom he loved with his whole heart. *"It was a mistake"* Claire said to herself. *"I shouldn't have done that,"* she said. *"Will I ever get a second chance to rectify this?"* Claire said to herself (will she?).

Chapter 57

Loudest Voices & Silent Whispers

'Sometimes the loudest voices aren't the right voices, and the right voices, are only silent whispers'

Claire's mind had been racing with feelings of guilt, *was I that cruel? To take away the joy of some other person whom I don't even know? How is she now? And in what position is she?* (By the way, Claire didn't know that it was the same Stacy who was her friend in childhood). Claire didn't understand what to do, she never said this to Richard, even if she wants to say, what will she tell him?, *I can't lie to him,* Claire thought, *but I can't even hide the truth, even if I try to, it comes to light some or the other day.* The only way Claire had, is to tell Richard what happened, but how will she tell him? She never thought

of a day like this, her heart was saying you have Richard, what else do you need? Let the girl go; but her brain was condemning her, telling that what she did was wrong, and Richard needs to know the truth, with these dubious thoughts and emotions inside her, a battle began between her intellect and her emotions. And Claire took the side of her intellect, even though it means Richard would hate her for what she had done, and eventually she would lose him, maybe forever.

Immediately Claire snatched her phone and typed in Richard's number with trembling hands but she couldn't place the call. *Can I do this?* She thought. *No! don't do that* screamed her mind, *Do it now*, whispered her heart. She called Richard, but he didn't answer her call, she tried again and again, but he didn't answer any of her calls.

Richard sat in his office, he was too stressed and perhaps broken, he didn't know what to do; he left the company, sacrificing his own dream for the benefit of his not only best-friend but also a brother.

Although he took this decision with much-needed courage, something was bothering him, as though a fire rising inside the depths of his troubled heart; perhaps it's the worry about his future, for the first time in his life he didn't have any plan, he didn't know where he was heading in life, yes Claire was with him but somewhere there was an emptiness in his being, he didn't know what was it and what to fill that emptiness with, his mind is being bombarded with these thoughts, and then out of nowhere he saw something shiny and glittery, it was the half heart locket, that he gave to Stacy, that reminded him of the good days as well as the bad experiences he had with her, trying to shake these thoughts off his mind he opened his laptop. *This may help me not to concentrate on the feelings* he thought.

Opening his laptop he headed to the internet to read some articles or watch any videos which would keep him occupied, as he was searching through, a message popped up on his

screen it said *your trash is full*, he clicked open the mail icon and it led him to the, e-mail page, there was pile of messages in the trash box (most of them were just ads), he began to clear one by one, filtering the important ones aside.

As he was doing so he found Stacy's email in the trash, *I never sent an email to her, and then what's this?* He thought, he clicked on it, and as he read through it, his jaw dropped, it was a mail telling Stacy that he's breaking up with her. *Who would do this?* He thought and logged out of his account and began to contemplate, as he logged out he saw Claire's account in the recently logged accounts, he clicked on it.(he already knew the password though). While he was searching through her mails, he found the same email that was mailed to Stacy by using his email id, which now is saved as a draft, with exact wordings; the only difference was that the email from which it is sent was of Claire's.

Chapter 58

Walking Away

Richard couldn't fathom what he had seen, (it was as though, a nightmare, but no it is not, it's real); probably he would have never imagined that Claire would do something like this (and who would, by the way). He didn't know what to do now, he was angry, confused, shattered, and most importantly he was broken. But what good it will do, by being angry with Claire? She wouldn't bring Stacy back into his life again, the one whom he loved and still does.

Tears began to roll down his cheeks, it was as if all the feelings he had for Stacy, now came forth in the form of water and salt, forming a tear, a heavy tear. What more can he do now, except to cry over the person he left because of someone else's mistake.

But in the midst of all these, questions began to drop in his mind. *Why?*

Why did Claire do this?

And how can she do such a thing?

Did she hate Stacy that much?

Or she hated me?

While his mind was racing with these thoughts, his phone rang, bringing him back to the present, it was Claire, he didn't want to answer the call, no, he couldn't do it; the ringing didn't stop, call upon call; but somehow, he did click that answer button, hoping this would answer his questions.

"Hi Richard," Claire said, she sounded normal.

"Hi, Claire," he said with a low voice, although the flow of tears didn't stop.

"Richard, can we meet?" Claire asked.

"Now?" he said. It was almost midnight and the sky was thundering as if giving an invitation to the raindrops to kiss the ground. The moon was nowhere in sight, probably hiding behind the dense clouds, veiling him-self away from the glares of others.

"Yeah, it's a bit urgent, please," Claire said.

"Sure, I'll come," Richard said.

"Please don't come to my apartment, let's meet somewhere else, I have something to tell you," Claire said, hiding her emotions.

"Sure, then I'll come to the park that's near your apartment," Richard said.

“Yeah Sure, see you in a bit,” Claire said.

“Yeah,” Richard said and hung up the call.

The midnight moon hung unto the dark sky, the clouds moving sluggishly, as though some old pals taking a friendly walk in the open skies. The voice of silence swept the atmosphere, with the chilling winds blowing. Claire was walking towards the park; she wore a light blue over-coat upon a light pink frock, and a cherry red scarf around her neck, placing her steps slowly, her heart beating faster, with every step she took. It became wild, perhaps her heart felt ... heavy, this is the moment which decides whether the person whom she loved with all her being, will stay with her or leave her. Although she knew, that it is the latter and she would never see Richard again in her life after this moment, she took the step to spill out the truth and the mistake that she did out of desperation and loneliness.

Claire wasn't hoping anything good, nor did she imagined the worst, it is the time for her to face the outcome of one wrong decision she took, which didn't happen all of a sudden, it was intended out of a desire to get something and someone which was never perhaps meant for her.

As she entered the park, she took a deep breath, trying to calm herself down, but it wouldn't happen, her heart still raced; but somehow, she reached the empty wooden bench and took her seat, below the gigantic tree swinging to the cold gentle breeze. Pulling her phone from the purse, she typed in Richard's number, *one last time*; the phone rang on the other side, he answered after a few rings.

“Where are you? I came to the park” Claire asked.

“I'm already in, at the fountain in the center of the park,” Richard said.

“Coming,” Claire said and started towards the fountain.

As she reached the mini fountain, she saw Richard, sitting on the bench, which is behind the fountain, he wore a black

hoodie and track pants; sitting as though a statue in the coldness of night. She could see sparkles of tears upon his face, a proof that said her, the truth has been spilled. *But anyhow, it's my responsibility to let him know* she thought.

"Hi," Claire said, as she stood beside Richard.

"*Oh, Hi ... Claire, come sit here*" Richard said. Claire sat beside Richard; Allowing the distance between them to remain. Neither of them spoke, the air was filled with the sounds of the water from the fountain and the insects of the dark singing around a melody, a melody that felt painful.

"*I am sorry Richard,*" Claire said looking straight.

Richard remained silent; he couldn't say anything although every single cell of him was saying to leave that place.

The one person whom he loved the most has been snatched away from him, because of someone else's immaturity. He couldn't say that aloud, but that feeling was heavy on him, as though someone had put a heavy stone upon his heart, to be crushed into pieces. Richard couldn't stand a moment with Claire. He couldn't even look into her eyes.

"*Richard, are you listening to me?*" Claire asked.

"*It's okay Claire, I don't know what else to say, I mean...how could you do that ... I can understand your feelings and I hope I know in what situation you have done this... but do you know something ? I don't hate you for that, but I lost the respect that I have...I mean had for you, I don't have any words to say Claire,*" Richard said. "*For me my love was and still is pure, but you filled that purity with your filth, I don't know if I could ever forgive you, but I will someday, forgive you, you know why ? Because I don't wanna hold on to you, I don't want you in my life Claire, leave me alone,*" He said and fell silent.

Perhaps those words hit Claire in the deep, she didn't speak another word except she sat in silence and after few long moments she *walked away* without uttering a word, not only from his sight but also from his life. Forever.

Chapter 59

Into the Pit of Seclusion

After that night Richard never met Claire again. How could he by the way.

Richard sat in his room, lit with a small light hanging above him along with silence and pain (a pain so great) as his only companions, brooding upon the times, the good times he spent with Stacy and the love she showed towards him (the love which he failed to return back). She was the perfect woman for him, whom he never intended to lose, not even in his wildest dreams.

He reminded himself of the day when he fell in love with her for the first time ever, not for her beauty, although she was as beautiful as a full moon, with a baby-like-smile and her marble eyes; but no, he didn't fell in love with her beauty but rather for who she was and still is.

He recapped all the lovely memories that they made together and the dreams they dreamed together, the innocence in her voice, which existed only when he's around, and the sparkle in his eyes, which existed only when she's around him.

But now there he is, sitting alone in a *lake of loneliness*, miles away from the love of his life, because of a mistake, a mistake that can never be undone (or can it be? Umm ... Let's hope so).

There was a time when he shared every little thing of his day with Stacy, even though it sounded stupid and senseless at times (and sometimes childish), he would tell her just to listen to her giggle, and her sweet voice, that made him fall for her every single time he heard it. And now he is far away from not only her but also a part of him, which perhaps she took away with her.

Droplets of tears rolled in his eyes, he wanted to cry, weep, wail and what not, but no, he couldn't do any of those; there was a vacuum which has been created within him, he knew what it was but he couldn't fill that emptiness with something else, except for his Love, Stacy.

All of a sudden the phone rang; bringing him back to the present, Richard wiped his tears off and went to answer the call. It was from Williams his friend, his best-friend, who never left him no matter what.

"Hey, Will how you?" Richard said, answering the call he tried to sound normal. He didn't want to upset his friend.

"I'm good bud, how about you?" Williams asked.

"Pretty well," Richard said.

"Good to hear that, and listen, dude, I need your help, will you?" Williams asked.

"Yeah tell me," Richard said.

"The thing is I'm planning to start the recruiting process," Williams said.

"That's great!" Richard exclaimed.

"But I guess I'll not be available to conduct the interviews since I've got a client meeting to attend," Williams said.

"No problem you can re-schedule the interview," Richard said.

"That's not as simple as it sounds dude, people are coming from different colleges and the time is less," Williams said.

"Okay, so what do you wanna do now?" Richard asked.

"Well, I'll send you the list of the short-listed candidates, for the first fifty per cent you take the interview and for the remaining, I'll take," Williams said.

Richard hesitated before speaking, trying to refigure his emotions, which wouldn't listen to him. *"Okay, sounds good, but when you'll be back?"* Richard asked, in a hazel voice.

“In a day or two I guess,” Williams said. “I’ll give you my chamber keys, and if you need any help just give me a call,” he said.

“Sure,” Richard said half smiling.

“Thanks, bro” Williams said.

“Now, don’t be too formal,” Richard said. “Have a nice and safe journey,” he said.

“Yeah sure,” Williams said. “Take care, and once again thank you,” he said.

“I’ll kill you if you don’t stop that thank you thing,” Richard said.

“Okay sorry, bye,” Williams said.

“Yeah bye,” Richard said a hung up the call, pulling himself back into the pit seclusion.

Chapter 60

Light up the “Jellies”

The very next day, Richard freshened himself up, (the cold water splashing on his face felt refreshing as though he has been born again) , he put on his black suit that his dad had gifted him (perhaps a few months ago I guess, I don't exactly know, phew!). Anyway, glancing at himself in the mirror he reflected back to the times where he and his dad would spend a quality time, where they would talk about ... um ... almost everything I should say, (and by the way Richard is attached a lot to his dad) which put a tear in his eye reminding himself of how he missed his dad so much. Being far away from family doesn't seem good right ? Although you have your best buddies around, you still feel that void and that distance (do you, by the way fell the same ?). Anyway, immediately after getting ready he dialled up his dad's number.

"Hey Rich, how are you my boy" dad said.

"I'm good dad, how're you and mom?" Richard asked.

"Everything's fine," dad said.

"Good to hear that," Richard said.

"What happened, you sound a li'l bit off, is everything okay?" dad asked.

"Yeah dad, everything's fine, I just ... miss y'all," Richard said adding a slight chuckle.

"Even we miss you a lot Richard, so how's your company running by the way?" Dad asked.

Richard was expecting this question (yeah he did), a question for which he didn't know the answer. But he couldn't hide the truth from his own father, without whom he would have never been in a place and position where he is right now. His father believed in his dream, but now that dream had shattered, leaving him clueless; and now he had a choice and a decision to make, either to tell the truth or ... hide it, which would eventually come out one day or the other. So Richard decided to spill the truth.

"Dad, I ... need to tell you something," Richard said.

"Yeah tell me," dad said, catching the seriousness in his voice.

"I left the company," Richard dropped it.

There was silence in both the ends, neither of them spoke.

"It's alright Rich," Dad said after a long pause.

"What? Aren't you angry with me?" Richard said as though he wasn't expecting this reply from his dad. (he didn't, I guess, who would anyway)

"No Rich, I'm not, I know there must be a reason ... for you to take that decision, and I ... totally understand that," dad said.

Richard remained silent, he didn't know what to say; from his childhood, his dad (and his mom) had sacrificed almost everything for Richard, giving him whatever he needed, even before he asked for, putting aside their own happiness just to fulfil their son's.

"Dad I'm sorry," Richard said.

"Don't be sorry Rich," Dad replied. *"It's okay, we all make mistakes and I know you've planned to do something, and it didn't turn out well, so what? there are people who wouldn't even try; you took a risk, that's a big step and I'm proud of you for that, but don't give up, keep trying, and don't try to question what you're doing; whatever you do, do it with all your heart, mind and soul. And remember, whatever may be the outcome, try to face it even if that breaks your heart, but never let go of your dream"* dad said. *"And one more thing, don't forget that you have something in your 'jellies' you know it right? So light up the jellies man,"* he said. (And by the way, by "Jellies", he meant his inner self).

"Yeah dad, sure," Richard said, adding a slight chuckle.

"Take care, don't think too much, just enjoy the moment," dad said.

"Thanks, Dad," Richard said. *"Okay then take care,"* Dad said. *"Sure,"* Richard said and the line went dead.

Richard sat silently, pondering upon the conversation; a couple of minutes later, he got another call it was from Williams.

“Hey man, what’s up,” Richard said.

“Hey Rich, I’ve sent you the details regarding the interviews that you need to take, once go through it, and try to schedule it soon,” Williams said.

“Yeah sure, I’m planning to take the interviews after two days, is that fine?” Richard asked.

“Yeah, it’s fine,” Williams said.

“Good then I’ll get back to work,” Richard said.

“Yeah bye,” Williams said and ended the call.

Soon after the call ended, Richard went into his room, the room wasn’t lit; he switched on the lights, sat on his chair, opened his not-so-new laptop, logged into his account, and began to go through the details about the short-listed candidates, keeping the words of his father in the back of his mind. Words which perhaps, lit up the “Jellies” in his own being.

Chapter 61

Cherished Love

Richard spent most of his time in going through the list that Williams had sent him; most of his time, he either spent in sending emails or scheduling interviews. Most of the people who came were either dis-interested, or under-qualified or either they were over ambitious and didn’t have the zeal that he was looking for; it appeared as if all of them wanted to join a software firm just because of the pleasant pay they would be getting (and by the it’s not that easy dude, if you know what I mean).

By interacting with various people, Richard recognised his need to develop himself, a lot, so before scheduling the next interview he devoted his time in reading books related to business development and leadership, and also books on understanding people, although he knew they may help only a little and everything depends on his ability.

After Williams returned, Williams too spent most of the time in taking interviews, but most of the days he would go to have a chat with his new clients and investors who were interested in his company.

As the days progressed, they are done with the interviews, and now the only work they have is to select suitable and eligible candidates.

“You take care of the selection criteria, Will,” Richard said.

“Yeah I have selected a few now, but it would be better if you have a look at the list before finalizing,” Williams said.

“Yeah sure, I will,” Richard said.

“Then shall we do it tomorrow?” Williams asked.

“Yeah sure,” Richard said.

The very next day Williams and Richard began to analyse every candidate whom they have short-listed, checking their eligibility and their performance.

“So how was the interview session?” Williams asked.

They were sitting in the office, which Williams had recently renovated a little.

“Don’t even talk about it,” Richard said. Williams blurted out a chuckle.

“Seriously man, everyone who came was a different character,” Richard said.

“So it means the books didn’t help you out,” Williams said glancing towards the bookshelf that stood behind Richard.

“Oh! Forget it, while reading, it sounded awesome, but coming to the implementation, it was like bang!” Richard said pointing a finger to his forehead.

“Don’t read books bro, read people,” Williams said.

“I don’t know how to read people,” Richard said.

“Oh! Come on, you were the lover boy in the college and you used to participate in every kind of activity, you’re experienced” Williams said.

“So, you call it experience?” Richard asked.

“Yeah,” Williams said.

“You’re totally out of your mind,” Richard said.

“Okay let’s leave that matter,” Williams said. *“By the way what about that girl?”* he asked.

“We broke up, you already know it,” Richard said.

“No, not that one, the one whom you met in your bachelors, you said she was your first love,” Williams said.

Richard fell silent, as though he has been teleported into the past, as though those memories of his first love – Stacy had hit him. However after a moment he said, *“That was long back, now I don’t think she even remembers me,”* he said. (by the way, he didn’t tell Williams that, it was Claire, who was the reason for his break up with Stacy).

“Maybe, or maybe not,” Williams said.

“No dude, I guess the thing about first love is, it’s beautiful and magical, although we aren’t together anymore, somewhere I feel like I can’t let go of her, you know even if i try to forget her, I am unable to do that, maybe somewhere along the line the two of us became one,” Richard said.

Williams nodded silently.

“Cherished Love, you mean ?” Williams said

“Yeah whatever you wanna call it,” Richard said.

“So, you still miss her?” Williams asked.

“Yeah sometimes,” Richard said. Although he knew he misses her every second. *“And why are you asking all of these now?”* Richard asked.

“Just to have a small talk,” Williams said.

“And you didn’t find any other topic to talk about in this world, except for these?” Richard said.

“Okay, okay forget it, let’s get back to work,” Williams said. *“And man, I forgot to tell you, yesterday I came across a woman, who is very bright academically, I’ve seen her performance,”* Williams said. *“But...”*

“But, What?” Richard asked.

“It seemed that she was bothered about something,” Williams said.

“Which youngster isn’t? now-a-days, everyone is bothered about something or the other” Richard said.

“No, not that kind of thing, you know like it seemed that she was heart-broken,” Williams said.

“Oh! Really, how can you say that?” Richard asked.

“Experience” Williams said.

Richard gave out a chuckle.

“Okay, let’s not get too deep into it, so tell me when is the final interview you’re gonna take?” Richard asked.

“Maybe in a week or so,” Williams said.

“And based on what are you selecting the candidate?” Richard asked.

“What do you mean?” Williams asked.

“I’ve read in a book recently, that, mostly recruiters would be looking for character, instead of totally focusing on the academics and their skills, and if we follow this we may find some really good employees for us,” Richard said.

“Yeah, let’s do this,” Williams said.

“Good, all the best” Richard said.

“What do you mean by all the best, you too will be joining me,” Williams said.

“Dude, first of all, whoever will be coming will be freaked out just by one person taking their test, and you want them to be scared more by two people taking their interviews at a time?” Richard said.

“Yeah there’s a point in what you say, but once if you check them, it would be better for me to choose the right people, you are like the mastermind who can read people’s thoughts,” Williams said.

“Okay, I will do, and I’m not some ‘mastermind’ as you say,” Richard said with a giggle.

“I know you would,” Williams said.

He didn’t want to by the way, because of a fear, that what if he comes across Stacy ? how can he face her ? Can he ? Although these questions are swimming in his mind, he didn’t speak them out, because he didn’t want to upset his friend. So he kept these thoughts to himself, like a secret treasure, which no one except him, knows about.

Chapter 62

The Melody of a 1000 sparrows

A week passed by, with Williams and Richard getting back to their business of recruiting people.

“Dude, don’t you think we need to recruit an HR?” Richard asked.

“Yeah even I was thinking about it,” Williams said.

“So, let’s do that first,” Richard said.

“What! Now ?” Williams asked.

“Yeah, I mean soon,” Richard said.

“Sure, let’s start from tomorrow” Williams said.

“Done” Richard said.

For the next couple of days, Williams met several people who were interested into Human Resource, and at last, he finalized Alex Conner, Since Alex was young and seemed passionate regarding his field of work they considered him (and by the way he was qualified too).

“Welcome Mr. Alex,” Williams said. *“Your work will be assigned tomorrow, don’t mind because I’m assigning work the very first day, it’s a bit urgent, hope you understand that,”* he said.

“Yeah sir,” Alex said.

Alex worked hard and proved his potential before Williams. And Williams too seemed impressed by his work. Alex didn’t meet Richard yet, since Richard took an off, after spending time, or I should say much of his time into recruiting and analysing people.

“Alex there is a group of people you need to take interviews for,” Williams said.

“Yes sir,” Alex said.

“So, I’ll give you the details of those candidates, that I’ve finalized,” Williams said. *“I’ll mail you the details in a while, so just take the final interview and give me the report of it,”* Williams said.

“Sure sir,” Alex said.

“Cool, all the best” Williams said.

The final interview is scheduled for today and the office was filled with people all around. Some looked tensed and the others looked as if they came to some casual meeting, cool and without any tension plastering upon their faces.

The interview lasted almost for an hour for every person who came to Williams. Richard didn't want to take interviews but said that he would be watching, and analysing people. So Richard took a seat near the table in a room at a distance from Williams' cabin, from where he can observe people.

After a while, as Richard was watching through the glass, he saw her, that same structure, and that same baby-like face and those eyes, it was as though a dream, a dream that was buried deep in the inner-most part of his soul. God, he couldn't forget her, how could he, even if he tries with all his strength to do so, he couldn't do that, unknowingly he had taken her into his being as if they both are one.

It was Stacy, he saw her, that same Stacy for whom his eyes were looking desperately although he didn't talk about her all these days there's a part of his soul that longed for her, and only her and her smile and most importantly her love, because no one in this world could fill that void within him, he felt as though a part of him was within her, which even Stacy was unaware of.

Richard's heart was thunderous, he could clearly hear the rhythm it was making; it seemed as if his heart was saying: *It is her, your first and only love, destiny has brought you together again, giving you another chance, to make things right between you and to solve the misunderstanding. Try again.*

And by the way although Stacy and I are from same class, I wasn't with this batch, I came later.

Richard still couldn't believe his eyes, he saw her after a long time, a very long time to be honest, but still, she looked the same, he began to analyse the details of her face, her eyes most importantly, which twinkled like the glittery stars, and her lips seems like a flowery wave, that went up and down as

she spoke, although the glass between them didn't allow her voice to be heard, but he could still remember that voice of her, which felt like *the melody of a thousand sparrows* singing together.

It seemed as though time stopped just for him to look at not only at her face but also at her soul, with her curly lips that looked as cherries and her silky smooth hair, which added to her beauty, and man those eyes, those beautiful eyes, which made him fall for her every single time, those eyes which filled his dreams and memories.

Chapter 63

For How Long ?

Richard sat in his room, with darkness covering the atmosphere and the night was silent, as though heaven itself had gone mute, he sat in that hush pondering over the picture he saw today, yes he saw Stacy, his Stacy. She was beautiful as she always was, but Richard observed something else in her, in her eyes, they not only portrayed beauty but also pain; although he was far away from her, he could feel that in her, a kind of pain caused by heartbreak, a heartbreak caused by him, which can never be undone. Or can it be?

From the time Stacy left his life (no, from the time he left Stacy), he couldn't find anyone else to fill that vacuum and

void that has been created within him, and within his heart. Although he thought he could do so, by allowing someone, through which perhaps he would be made whole (you know whom am talking about right?), but he couldn't, and most of us do this right? I mean once a person leaves us ... suddenly, we think that ... that we can fill that vacuum within us by allowing someone else in that place, but I have news for you, real love doesn't work that way, once that real love leaves, that scar stays with you forever, though the person may not stay, but that invisible scar upon your heart stays forever, until you open your eyes in the eternity.

Richard's mind was bombarded with these thoughts, I should say these vicious thoughts, but however he shook those thoughts off from his mind, Stacy is gone and she can never come back to him, no matter what price he pays. Sometimes giving up on the one we love is the only option available to choose. And there's no true love, without a true sacrifice right?

But he wasn't ready to do that, to sacrifice his love or to give up on Stacy and never again come into her life, it seemed hard and aching. But sacrifice is all about that, true sacrifice is giving up that which you love the most, regardless of how painful it is, and in Richard's life he loved Stacy truly and unconditionally.

But, Richard promised himself, a promise that will break his heart and due to that he may lose the person whom he loves with his whole being, the promise was, that he would never again interfere in Stacy's life, no matter what the circumstances are, he decided boldly. *But for how long will the promise be kept?*

A few days later...

Chapter 64

A Best-Friend Indeed

“What are you saying!!” Richard exclaimed.

“Yeah,” Williams said.

“You’re going to Singapore?” Richard said with excitement in his voice.

“Well, Yes,” Williams said.

It’s been few days since the recruitment process was successfully done, the foundation was laid and work has begun, and Alpha Corporation was launched, and it’s doing pretty well, with numerous products sold and various software solutions provided.

In no time, the company skyrocketed, shaking hands with some of the leading corporations around the world. They sat in the coffee shop sipping black coffee. *“So, you’re gonna give a huge party, I guess?”* Richard said.

“Hopefully,” Williams said.

“Dude, remember if you try to slip away without any treat I’ll surely kill you,” Richard said.

“Okay, okay I will” Williams said as he took a sip.

“I trust you,” Richard replied.

“And by the way, if you wouldn’t be here, who’s gonna take care of the work?” Richard asked.

“I said Alex to look after, and if he needs any help I told him to contact me or you,” Williams said.

“That’s good, he’s very reliable though,” Richard said.

“Yeah, he is,” Williams said.

“And what are you planning to do?” Williams asked.

“I don’t know,” Richard said almost immediately.

“What do you mean by that?” Williams said.

“I mean, I do have some dreams, but ... I don’t know, am a bit confused, you know” Richard said.

“Yeah, I know you that you wanted to release a solo album, right?” Williams said.

“Yeah, but that was long back, I don’t know if I can do it or not,” Richard said.

“You can do it Rich, you’ve done so much in life regarding the things in which you don’t even have any experience, and music is like you can do that in a snap,” Williams said snapping his finger.

“Yeah I think so,” Richard said.

“Do you remember that day in college once we had a fest and you came to my home for practice?” Williams asked.

“Yeah, I do remember, and instead of practicing we played games in your Play-Station,” Richard said with a light chuckle.

“Yeah but even with little practice you’ve performed so well,” Williams said.

“It’s nothing, I just did what I know,” Richard said.

“Exactly,” Williams said.

“What are you trying to say,” Richard said.

“Look, what you have inside is something that nobody in this world can have, there’s a special gift inside you, you just need to spark that out man,” Williams said.

All this while Richard was listening to his best friend, with all the attention, and eventually smiling.

“Are you even listening ?” Williams said.

“Nothing I was just wondering how you are so wise,” Richard said.

“Now enough, it’s not wisdom, I’m just telling you to focus on what you love doing,” Williams said.

“You sound like my dad, did you speak to him while coming?” Richard asked.

“I’m being serious,” Williams said.

“Okay, I’ll do, and thanks for your words,” Richard said.

“I think you said you don’t like me to thank you, and so do I,” Williams said.

“Sometimes we can thank,” Richard said.

Chapter 65

Dear Love

Richard brood over the conversation he had with Williams, although it was a random friendly conversation, it sparked something in him, I guess that’s what best-friends do, they wake up the hidden man inside us, who is afraid of waking up,

is afraid of trying and is afraid of failing (and those idiots ... I mean best-friends, there's no difference between those two terms by the way, anyway, yeah those idiots don't even know that they have done all those, you know). But yeah, best-friends are the only ones who know how to enlighten us, even though they sometimes irritate you (like Stacy, who almost all the time annoys me) but there is love and care hidden behind.

Sitting in his room he took out his guitar, the guitar bag was enveloped with dust, an evidence of its age (he got it perhaps five years ago I guess, or maybe four, I don't exactly know). It was his mom's gift to him, not on his birthday though, it was a surprise, suddenly one day his mom put some money on his table and left a note, saying: *for your guitar, with love: Mom*, it was quite a surprise, that he wasn't expecting.

He held the guitar in his hands, it looked stunning, with a gradient of blue and black making it look classy and elegant, along with the golden strings attached(not exactly golden though). Richard closed his eyes, held the guitar in his hand as though feeling it; he took a deep breath, exhaled sharply and began strumming; first gently as though handling a tiny baby. The strings were moving like waves, producing a cadence which soothed the ears and perhaps his heart too; he heard a few birds tweeting at a distance, as though they were his choir, singing the chorus for him, moving along with the music that he was playing.

It went on for hours, those were the hours of what we call peace, a kind of peace he has created for himself and now is floating in it, not bothering about the chaotic world around him, as he was doing so, something occurred in his mind, like a flash I should say; immediately he rushed towards his laptop, placing the guitar aside, he rushed into his room not wanting to take that picture off his mind.

He took his laptop and began to type in it, it wasn't a rapid typing but slow and steady, not in a rush, but in peace and silence; a peace like a still river, and a silence like a child's sleep. It took him almost two to three hours to complete what he started, he wrote a song. A song describing his love for

Stacy, although she wasn't with him at this moment, she was present with him in the form of that song, it brought all the memories back to him, a song about his Stacy, his *Dear Love*.

Chapter 66

Hoping For Love

“We all believe in love, and the magic it does but do we ever realise, that its hope which keeps the fire called Love alive? And what's Love without hope? A dead one?”

Richard began to sing that song daily, sometimes he would just hum a little and other times he would go on with the song, singing it as though telling those words to his Love, again and again, the song went like this:

“Dear Love, I know it hurts, that I am not with you at this moment, to leave you all of a sudden wasn't my plan, but I did leave you, and that was the biggest mistake of my life, you showed me what true love is, but I failed to do the same, because of some fake assumptions that I've made, that put a doubt inside of me, a doubt that you never loved me, but somewhere inside, I have a knowing, a knowing that one day I will get a chance to tell you how grateful I am because of everything that you have done for me and all those memories you have given me, although I broke your heart, and maybe you hate me for that, I genuinely accept that and I think I deserve that hatred from you, due to the things you have gone through, I can never undo that, but now the only thing I want from you is a chance, a chance to make things right between us, although I know I couldn't completely set them right, but please give me a chance to love you again, in the same way you have loved me for the first time.”

Richard wanted Stacy to hear this, but how? She is not a part of his life anymore, he wanted her back, and give her back (no to return her back) the first love, with which she had loved him and he had loved her. But there's no chance now, people say,

that once a person leaves you, they cannot come back into your life again, and even if they come, you couldn't get back the strength to love them again, the same way you did at first. (Is it really true? What do you say? I don't really know about you, but for Richard it wasn't true, he didn't accept that; he knew that he loved Stacy with all his heart, and will always do, no matter what; and by the way, what does it mean to love truly? Does it mean, just to have a relationship with each other ? can't love stay ever after a "break-up" ? what do you think ? will it? maybe).

The only way Stacy can step back into his life, is for him to step back to her life. You know, the things which we left behind us will not follow us, we are the one who needs to take a step back and go after it, to recover and to reconcile, Richard thought. There's a saying that says *True love always comes back*, but at times to get back that true love we are the ones who need to take a step backward, to re-invite that past and to re-create those moments. Sometimes times stepping back is the best choice we ever make.

Then Richard made a decision, he pulled his phone out, began to type Stacy's number, he didn't forget it, (how could he by the way); his hands were trembling, and his heart roared mightily and his mind, it was saying a no, but he didn't listened to his mind this time, instead he listened to his heart, which was saying a resounding yes. He placed the call, but what will he talk, words didn't dare to come out of his mouth, even before the call got connected, he hung up and stumbled on the chair. A battle of yes' and no's began within him, once it was a "yes we can do it!!" but the next moment it is "No! don't do it" it was a battle indeed.

Then it was done, Richard did that in instinct, he didn't describe anything, but the message was straight from his heart, he typed it with a light of hope, a hope of return. But some questions began to swarm in his mind, what if she didn't want to return to him? What if she hates him? That thought killed him on the inside, but Richard was hoping that if not today, someday or the other she will definitely come back to him,

with a forgiving heart sparking up the hidden joy back into his life. And that hope, kept his heart at ease.

Chapter 67

Shades of Love

‘Most of us have memories right? (To be honest, a lot of memories, if we consider our childhood too). And among them are, some good, some bad, some happy, and some ... sad. But the thing about memories is they kind of spark a light within us, that light which have been put off, by none other than ... ourselves; perhaps we don't want to visit those memories again? Or maybe we just are trying to forget them? But news flash!! Memories don't leave that easily; they arise back, time and again reminding us of our beautiful past, that past which we try to escape from, and a past which we labelled as “dark” but actually that past is the one which shines the light,’

Richard was looking at the pictures (or I should say memories) that Stacy and he had taken a long time ago, with smiling faces when everything was going well and happy between them, loving each other, staying in each other's arms, and embracing each other. (Love's so weird right ? when we have it, we don't try to embrace it wholly, but once it is gone, we try with our whole heart to get that Love back).

He still remembers the time when they would spend hours together, without any care about tomorrow, holding each other's arms, not letting go, not even once. They would dream together, sometimes Stacy would be busy in painting, it was her passion, and she loved it from the core of her heart. Though she wasn't a professional in it (which she would one

day, I hope so), but she would do whatever her heart said, and it would turn out beautiful, just like her.

Richard loved her art, they were beautiful, and as the time passed, she turned her room into a mini gallery of her own, there were numerous paintings, "*Someday, I'll paint your face, with that beautiful smile of yours*" Stacy would say to him, for which he would give her a smile, he knew she would do, she was gifted in that, and was made for that, that made him happy. Some days they would do it together in Stacy's upper room, which was dedicated only for her, she would never allow anyone in (except for me, of course), but only Richard, it gave them privacy.

They would paint together, holding each other's arms, playing like kids, and immersing themselves in those shades, those *shades of love*.

One day, as Stacy was painting her new piece of art, Richard came from behind and gave her a light embrace, holding her arms and helping her in mixing the colours, their hands were dirty and soft from the cream of those colours, he could smell her hair; it was as beautiful as the aroma of a thousand jasmines. Then as they were continuing that, he turned her around to face him, they were close, and it was as if they could exchange each other's breath. Richard moved much closer, she didn't resist, Stacy knew what he was about to do, their eyes met, they could see each other's reflection in their eyes.

Then slowly, Richard began to take off the hair that fell on her face, it felt as soft as wool, then swiftly, his lips were on hers, embracing them as he looked deep into her soul. He kissed her and so did she with her painted arms around his neck and his hands holding her face, that cold touch from him made her giggle, his hands were icy cold, but she didn't take them off, letting the chills go deep into her body and eventually her soul. It was a long kiss, and intense with each other tasting their souls and filling it with love; Pure Love.

Stacy didn't want this to come to an end; she wanted this to go on forever, till eternity. They hugged each other, with their bodies pressing together, fingers playing together and their hearts beating faster and faster making a rhythmic wave, she rested her head upon his chest, experiencing the rhythm his heart was making, that made her fall in love for him, again and again.

That night they spent in each other's arms, with the melody of birds singing around, and the cold breeze resting on their skins, which made them move more closer, to experience each other's warmth and making both of them as one. It was indeed a colour-filled night.

Chapter 68

A Love So True

Richard was scrolling through Stacy's pictures, with tears in his eyes, suddenly the screen popped up a notification reminding him that the phone needs to be charged. He looked around hunting for the charger, it was behind him, stretching himself a little bit, he plugged it in, and went into the kitchen to make some coffee. (Perhaps that would help ?)

After a few moments, he walked back towards the living room. Holding the cup in his hand, Richard sat down, still thinking about Stacy. *I shouldn't be thinking about her* he reminded himself, hoping to take his mind off Stacy, he switched on the T.V and surfed through the channels, and he was doing so, he found a news channel covering a story about a plane crash, in which a well-known person was involved, as he was watching he was shocked by seeing the person who was a victim of the plane crash it was Williams his best friend.

He didn't know what to do, his mind went blank, his true buddy, whom he respected and loved so much has been in a plane crash, tears rolled down his cheeks, he was hoping and praying that Williams would be fine, and at a distance, he saw a flickering glow, it was from his mobile, he went to see what it was, it was a message from Williams, he read it, his hopes began to rise and without any delay, he packed his bag and hurried off, he was sad, but also happy, for he was going to see his friend after such a long time, but Richard never expected that he would meet him at this time and in this way.

Hastily, he went to his car, started the ignition and the car zoomed. All the way his eyes were trying to push off tears, he already lost Stacy whom he loved with all his heart, with whom he had imagined a future, although she is alive, she

wasn't with him and that was killing him daily, but he was trying to push off the thoughts of returning to her, he wasn't sure that she could forgive him or not, the mistake he did was unpardonable, he didn't expect her to forgive him and come back to him, no, he didn't, but somewhere in his heart, there was a voice, a small voice telling and reminding him, time and again, that true love always comes back. But how true is his love, is the question.

Present Day...

Chapter 69

Longing For Love

Tears began to roll in Stacy's eyes, it was as if all the hatred she had developed towards Richard has turned into love, a pure love in a split second, a love that she didn't want to lose again, it was as if the memories they made flashed in her mind pulling her back into the past, a past which she never wanted to visit again, but now, there was a longing in her, a longing to revisit those times, the good times they spent together, a longing to cherish those moments again as though they happened for the first time, there was longing in her, for something marvellous, something spectacular, something divine, it wasn't just a longing to see him, it was a longing for Love itself..

"Where is he?" Stacy asked, with tears still in her eyes.

I didn't respond.

"Kevin, speak up?" Stacy said.

"I don't know, he just went away," I said.

"What do you mean went away?" Stacy asked, clutching my shirt.

"He looked sad," Julie said.

None of us spoke for a moment.

Stacy took a deep breath, rubbed the tears off her face, splashed some water on it and began to walk rapidly, we followed her, and then I stopped her at the exit gate.

"What are you tryin' to do Stacy," I asked.

"I want him Kevin, I can't lose him again," Stacy said, with watery eyes.

"Do you know where he is?" Julie asked.

"Maybe... I know," Stacy said, trying to frame the words.

None of us spoke. *"Here take this,"* I said handing Stacy the car key.

"Where did you..." Stacy began to ask.

"That's not important; you go now," I said, slowly glancing towards Claire (it was her car key by the way).

"Thanks, Kevin," Stacy said giving me a light hug and after a moment she zoomed off, in search of her Love, her Dear Love.

The car came to a halt. Stacy stepped out, she wore a white frock that came till her knees, she looked like a fairy, beautiful and marvelous, with her marble-like eyes that were shiny black and filled with tears, and man those cherry-red lips and her silky smooth hair hanging loose and bouncing with every

step she took, along with those earrings dancing around like butterflies.

She entered into the coffee shop, the place where she met her love, Richard, and the memories they shared with this place, all those moments flashed in her mind in an instinct, she didn't know whether he would be here or not, this is what her heart said, to come here, and she did it. (Sometimes, this broken heart of ours takes us to places, where the mind probably could have never imagined to be, and that place turn out to a Paradise, a Paradise of love).

She followed her heart, not bothering about the outcome, but Stacy was expecting Richard to be here, she knew him, he would never let her go, even if he did let her go, she wasn't ready to leave him again, with these thoughts racing through her mind, she looked around hoping to find him, or at least look at him.

Then she saw him, although she saw him from the back, she knew it was him, she ran towards him, with tears in her eyes and joy in her heart, Stacy stood before Richard. He stood up, with eyes wide open and heart beating faster and faster, before he could say a word, Stacy grabbed him and planted a kiss on his lips, it was intense and passionate, as though reconnecting their heart and soul with each other as if combining all those moments of their friendship and love and all the emotions at this moment and experiencing it all together as one.

“Hey senior! I'm sorry, i...I don't know what to say, except for ... I love you, I really do Rich, I didn't know how much I longed for you, until ... until I realized your true love, which has somehow awakened the true self within me, ” Stacy said. *“I'm sorry Rich, it's my fault, I didn't recognize your love for me,”* Stacy said holding him close and trying to hold back her tears which never stopped.

“Don't be sorry, in fact, it is I who need to be sorry, for hurting you and all the things you've gone through because of me, but did that stop you from loving me?” Richard said. *“You are the best thing that happened to me Stacy Parker, if it's not*

for you, I wouldn't be the person who I'm right now, it's all because of you, because of your love, that undying love for me, which acted as a light that helped me to discover my true self," he said with tears rolling down his eyes.

Stacy was silent, she didn't know what to speak, her mind was racing, and the adrenaline was rushing through her body, with the thumping of her heart becoming much faster with every passing second, and the man who stood before her, she was longing for him and for his love, but she wasn't sure if this is the right thing to do, there was a battle going on inside her, a battle between her mind and heart, her intellect and emotion, the heart was saying to love again, but mind, it said totally opposite, then she decided to give herself a chance, a chance to love and to be loved again.

She came closer and gave him a hug, with their bodies pressing together and feeling the warmth of each other, both their hearts were racing as horses, they could feel it, it seemed as though the time stopped just for them, allowing them to embrace the moment by holding each other in their arms. It was as if all those years of separation vanished in that single moment. A moment of reconciliation.

"I would never let you go again," Richard said

"And so will I, I loved you and I still do. I want to spend every moment of my life with you; until death separates us" Stacy said.

"I love you, Stacy, you were my first love and you will be my last too," Richard said, with tears dripping down from his eyes.

That's how two lovers, became one by inviting their Love amidst them; Their Dear Love.

Chapter 70

A Love-Ly Conversation

They say, Love hurts, but does it really? What do you think? Does it really hurt? Why do you think so ? Many of us have a wrong perception on this whole idea of love, right? We say love is beautiful sometimes, and some other times ... we say love is hard, why does this happen? Don't we know what real love is ? Do we really know? What is Love to you? is it just a feeling ? Or something more than just that? For me Love is divine, a divine feeling, yeah I agree Love is a feeling, but it doesn't stop there, right? Many of us decrease love to just a feeling; but no, Love isn't just feeling, it's the greatest emotion, a human can ever possess, and a greatest gift you can ever give and you can ever receive, because True Love drives out all the darkness within us, replacing it with a heavenly light, a light that can never be put off.

Stacy and Richard, sat in the same coffee shop (It's so weird right, how we think, that once a heart or I should say hearts are broken they can never be fixed or made whole, but no, where there is true love, there is a true healing, not just a physical healing, but an internal one a healing of the broken hearts and eventually of the shattered soul).

They didn't talk for a while, but except for a long silence, but this time the silence felt beautiful and lovely.

"It feels so awkward right ?" Richard said, breaking the ice of silence.

Stacy didn't reply, but shot a smile at him. *"Yeah, I mean kind of,"* Stacy said. *"You know, I'm sorry,"* Stacy said.

"Sorry for what ?" Richard asked surprised.

"Sorry for ... yelling at you the other day, I mean I sometimes do weird shit, you know," Stacy said.

“Yeah I know, you are so weird, that’s why I love you,”
Richard said adding a slight chuckle.

“Very funny ... and ... I missed you Rich,” Stacy said, placing her arms upon his.

“I missed you too, Stacy, I really did, I am so sorry. I never intended to harm, no I can’t even imagine that,” Richard said.
“You are the best gift I have ever received, a gift from above”
Richard said.

Stacy remained silent, as though trying to process the words she heard.

“Okay, um,” Stacy said.

“What?” Richard asked.

“Will you please stand up?” Stacy said.

“Okay, my dear Lady Love,” Richard said and stood up.

“Now, walk towards me,” Stacy said. He did as said.

“Okay, stop” Stacy said, they stood perhaps a few feet apart maybe three? I guess so.

Stacy exhaled a bit, before speaking, *“Close your eyes and shut your mouth, don’t talk. Just listen, okay”* Stacy said.

“Okay,” Richard said adding a chuckle and eventually closing his eyes.

“The moment I saw you for the first time ever in that stupid college bus, I somehow fell in love with you, I ... didn’t know at that time that you know, um ... that you were and still are ... um ... I don’t say special but um ... kind of unique you know, you are one of a kind Rich, you never act or pretend before me, or to be honest you never tried to impress me, although perhaps unknowingly I’m impressed by you daily, and on the day you proposed me in the midst of the peace, I had many words to say, but I couldn’t spill them out, I’m a dumb idiot you already know that anyway, so now here I am standing before you, with a childish heart, am asking you, will you be the Love of my life ?” Stacy said.

Richard remained silent. *“I know it’s kind of odd, a “girl” asking out, but let’s normalize this now, for us,”* Stacy said. *“What do you say?”* Stacy asked.

Richard without a second thought, hugged her closely, embraced her, *“I love you Miss Parker,”* he said planting a kiss on her fore-head, and a smile curving his lips and his eyes glowing. *“I love you Mr. Stephen”* Stacy said with a genuine smile sticking on to her lips. It was indeed a *Love-Ly conversation.*

Three months later...

Epilogue

‘There is no true love, without true pain,’ said my best friend once. I didn’t understand that phrase until today.

‘They say when our loved ones leave; they take a part of us with them, leaving an empty space within us. It’s true, we can’t deny it, and did you ever feel it? That when someone whom you’ve loved with your whole heart and dreamt an entire

future, a good future with them had left you obscurely, a vacuum is created within you, what will you fill that vacuum with? Nothing; Nothing can take their place; it will be dedicated to them and them alone.

But what happens when that long lost friendship and love, comes back, not only to just fill that empty space within you, but they give you a new hope, and a new beginning, with new expectations, to fill that emptiness with something, bigger and beautiful than you can ever imagine; and to help you discover your true image and your true self, and the purpose for which you've been created for, and to you give you another chance to love again, dream again and live again to the fullest'.

They say Love hurts, but does it really ? I thought so, but now I'm fully persuaded that Love does hurt, but behind that hurting, lies a new beginning, a new beginning of hope.

With these words typed in, I closed my laptop; my hands trembling, and my heart racing by seeing my dream come true.

I always wanted to write, but never took that step ahead, somewhere inside I have created few boundaries, boundaries which now became great walls, strong and mighty, perhaps it's because of that little spirit of fear that took shelter inside me, a fear that I might fail, a fear that I might never be good enough, I never tried something out of the ordinary; but now, I have broken them upon my life, with the help of hope and faith as my weapons, and obviously Love. I broke the jaws of fear and self-doubt, which has bound me in captivity for a very long time.

Finally, I've written the book, a love story which I always wanted to write from a long time, a beautiful love story of my best friend, which dwelled inside my heart form ages; this isn't just a story that has popped up in my mind, I lived in this story, I moved with the characters in it, the characters which impacted my life, by showing me the meaning of true love and true friendship, and I can never forget them, no matter what.

“*So you finally wrote a book!*” Stacy exclaimed, her eyes excited with a beam of light in them, and I guess that’s how best-friends react, when you succeed in what you do, they may not show it on the outside, but trust me, none in the whole world would be as happy as your best friend upon your success.

“*Yeah, little pig!*” I said, glancing at her smiley face.

We sat in the same coffee shop, where this beautiful story of love and friendship began, there are many memories attached to this place, memories which I can never forget.

We met after three months, three long months since I was not in the city at that time. Although we were connected through phone calls and group chats, it felt beautiful to meet again in person, and see again those faces, those stupid faces, which gave me a sense of family, a family that came as a gift from above.

Richard settled down as a musician, he started his own band which is doing pretty well nowadays, (I don’t exactly know the name though) with a group of five people who are very passionate and enthusiastic about what they are doing.

And Julie the love of my life; started a blog on photography, she was always interested in clicking pictures “*Photography is an art*” she would say; and that was one of the reasons which I fell for her.

And coming to Stacy my best friend and an idiot who gave me some of the best memories that I could remember forever and a story to write, she too went with her passion- painting; She started it as a hobby in her childhood, she would do it for hours and hours never getting tired, maybe that’s what passion does, it makes you more energetic.

Art was something that gave her a high, a kind of high which only she could experience, Stacy never cared about what people told her about her art, everyone has their own opinions, and so did she. Stacy knew it was beautiful, no matter what

people around her tried to say, she focused on what she wanted to do, and had done it, silencing the voices around her. And by the way Stacy did paint the portrait of Richard as he said, but she didn't reveal it to him right away, perhaps she is waiting for some special day (you know what I mean ? The V-Day I meant).

"And what about you, how's your band?" I asked glancing towards Richard.

"Good, going well," Richard said.

"And Stacy, I heard you're going to present your painting in the art exhibition, is that true," I asked.

"Yeah, Rich helped me a lot in that, he knew few people there, so I guess that kind of came as an advantage," Stacy said.

"That sounds cool, all the best," I said. *"Don't forget to give me a treat after that"*

"Sure," Stacy said with a smile.

"What about you, Julie?" Stacy asked.

"For now I'm just going where my camera takes," Julie said.

"I've seen your profile in the social media, nice clicks by the way," Richard said.

"Thanks," Julie said.

"And when are you publishing the book, Kevin?" Richard said.

"Soon I guess," I said.

"All the best, I hope it will be successful," Richard said.

"Thank you," I said, with a smile.

"By the way, what's the title of the book?" Stacy asked.

"Dear Love, I Know It Hurts," I said, for which Stacy beamed out a smile glancing into Richard's eyes, both of them showing forth their Dear Love towards each other.

To My Reader's

Dear Reader, thank you for picking this book up, I hope this story had inspired and encouraged you, and gave you a new Hope, a hope to go after what you love for and never give up.

Like Stacy, maybe you've lost that first love, and I know it's heart-breaking, even though the person whom you love had left you, their memories never do, and that's the beauty of first love, it leaves a beautiful mark upon your heart, which can never be erased, but that's not the end, you will find that true love, which is waiting for you, and you don't need to go after love, if you have a pure heart and a pure soul, it eventually comes looking for you, and when that love comes, it will be like that first love, beautiful and soul filling, which no one can snatch away from you, not even death. So hope for the good and enjoy the moments, smile, because it is contagious.