**Prologue**

This is the heroic tale of a man who LIVED. He is the one who lives whereas the rest merely exist. He is the HERO of this tale in the truest sense. Every time he faced a challenge, he felt charged. Hardship motivated him. This is an extraordinary tale of a mortal who rose above the heroes.

True to the meaning of his name, Kunal, is nothing less than a God. The God of success, hardship, and tragedies. Although the tale may sound surreal. This is the story of my childhood friend Kunal Giani. It may sound like an epic to you. His hardships will shake your soul. The tragedies may shatter your fairytale dreams. To top it all, the climax might look like an impossibility.

To tell you the truth. This story is as real as the air we breathe. The tragedies that might break the strongest of spines only added milestones to the career of this phenomenal personality. Losing his mother at the age of six to being totally abandoned at the age of nineteen.

This is the story of Kunal’s hard work. The story of impossible dreams and ways to achieve it. Not only is Kunal my childhood friend but is also the only friend I have ever had. He gives me the motivation to live. The continuous struggle to achieve one’s dream.

There is always this warm smile dancing on the handsome face of Kunal ever since I first met him in XIth standard. Despite the fact of living alone with his father without any female help. Nobody ever came to know of the hardships he faced at home. He and his father used to take rounds in cooking. Mr. Singh was no super chef but he had been taking care of his only son to best of his abilities since he was six years old. Being a single parent is not a piece of cake. It was in class 8 Kunal decided to share the burden of his father.

Not only did Kunal receive his father’s good looks but he also inherited his strength along with the 40 lacs loan debt. This is the struggle of a phoenix who rose from his ashes. Dropping out of the college at the age of nineteen to repay his father’s loan. Facing tragedies after tragedies to become a business mogul with his net worth of 4000 crores.

This is the tale of romance and heartbreaks, crushed dreams and extraordinary success. One who could possibly have been the internationally acclaimed tennis player with a remarkable gift now plays the game only when he gets time from his busy schedule. The boy who was once a topper had to give up his studies during the second year of his engineering in electronics. Left without any friends or family, mentor or guide at the tender age of nineteen. Faced with the trials and tribulations that could have broken the strongest of the back. The only one who could emerge victorious out of all this without any blemish or scar is none other than the hero who is made up of much sterner stuff.

This is a journey into the life of a hero. His life is like a roller coaster ride with bumpers and shockers at every turn. Whenever one is faced with dark days, heart-searing tragedies or soul-shattering pain, just read the extraordinary story of unmatchable trauma.

This tale of motivation and inspiration is based on real-life events of Kunal Giani. When everyone left his side, all he had was the teachings of his father. His father guided him during his life and even after his death, he showed him the way like a lodestar. Whenever he was faced with tough situations or difficult times, during the times of critical decisions, he always relied on the golden words of his father that he thought him during his lifetime.

Kunal lived the dream of his father. The dreams of entrepreneurship. Now, Kunal is one of the top industrialists and world-renowned entrepreneurs. This could not have been possible without his dedication, perseverance, and hard work. He is the guy with a never say die attitude.

**Chapter 1.**

**The Beginning Of Struggle**

The real heroes are those that fight the most ferocious battles. This is an awe-inspiring tale of one such man who has been at war with his life since childhood. His life is a prism of hardships, struggle, and tragedies.

The tragedy hit him way before his days of struggle started. His father was the axis point of his world. The entire world came crumbling down when he had to share his most coveted entity with total strangers.

Although Mr. Singh was a clerk in the SBI he was extremely ambitious. He harbored dreams of becoming a successful entrepreneur. The desire to be independent fanned the fire of his volatile dreams.

For him, the sky was the limit. He wanted to be a free bird who can soar high in the sky. Nothing should ensnare him. Definitely not a 9 to 5 job. The chair he sat on each and every day made him feel like a cell and the office as a prison. One cannot imprison a free soul. Unfortunately, destiny clipped the fluttering wings of Mr. Singh before his mighty flight.

“Look at him, he looks like a Greek god,” whispered a girl to her friend. They had come to deposit some cash in the bank. Even though he sat in the secluded section of the bank. His breathtakingly handsome good looks attracted the opposite sex to him.

“Wow, he is so fair,” the other female added. For a few minutes, the two of them hovered around his desk trying desperately to draw his attention. To locate such a good looking and handsome man at a boring place like a bank was a rare occurrence. Mr. Singh could sense that these two women were waiting for him to look up at them so that they can strike a conversation with them. Quite contrary to their high hopes, Mr. Singh chose to ignore them completely. He remained engrossed with the task in his hand.

Mr. Singh always remained oblivious to the ogling eyes of the women who crossed his path every day. There was only one woman who reigned over his senses and that was none other than his wife.

Mrs. Megha Singh, she was the second wife of Mr. Singh whom he had met in the same branch. Their love story started as a fairytale romance. She was a divorcee with a girl child named Pinky. Their loneliness pulled them towards each other. Their pain served as a connector. Soon the two tie tied the knots.

Mr. Singh had promised to remain truthful to Megha and treat Pinky like his own and he stuck to the promise he made to Megha till the last day of their relationship.

Everything was too good to be true for the newlyweds. Initially, everything went on smoothly. It was a happy family of four. Mr. Singh and his son, and Megha and her daughter. Kunal was an understanding little boy who followed his father’s instructions and made sure that his sister Pinky felt never got disturbed. He was to listen to his Ma and play with his sister. Kunal never did anything that would upset the two of them.

Their house was a little small in size to accommodate all of them. It had two bedrooms only, with minimal furniture. The parents slept in one room and children in the next.

The drawing room featured a color TV. The kitchen housed a two burner gas stove and a refrigerator. There was a small dining table at the far end of the drawing room. The table appeared smaller with an addition of two extra chairs. His father’s mantra less is more did not fit anymore.

Soon, the goodness and good looks of Mr. Singh backfired. His wife shifted to the children’s room and naturally he was left to sleep with Kunal in his room. Megha was the woman who was extremely difficult to please. No matter how hard the two of them tried the mother and daughter duo always had some sort of complaints against Kunal and Mr. Singh.

The more Mr. Singh tried to balance his love and attention for his two children. The more vehemently his wife accused him of being biased towards her daughter.

The first blow that Kunal’s five-year-old heart received was seeing the color of his house change from pastel blue to baby pink. No brownie points for guessing that pink was the favorite color of his halfsister – Pinky. Pinky preferred everything pink, right from the walls to the ceiling to the doors and windows. She always wore pink. Her backpack and pencil box was also pink. Pinky felt that she had a copyright over this color as her name was Pinky.

After changing the color of his house pink, it was time to capture the TV. Who controlled the TV remote? Once again, no points for guessing. Pinky indeed. She even captured the tiny study table where Kunal used to complete his homework.

It was always Kunal who had to sacrifice and compromise. But nothing seemed to please the ladies of the house. The five-year-old mind of Kunal was traumatized by the bitter fights of his parents.

Megha always made sure to never fight her husband in her daughter’s room. She made it a point to always unleash her venomous tongue in front of her step-son. Mr. Singh did not want his son to hear the words such as “womanizer,” “leech,” and “philanderer.” This is why no sooner did his parents return from the day’s work. Kunal used to start his countdown. He dreaded the moment when his father would lock him up in the bathroom.

The bathroom was a good choice when the fights took place in the drawing room. But when the arena shifted from the drawing room to his bedroom. No door or walls could keep the high pitched voice of his mother concealed from him. He could hear every allegation, every accusation. All the insolent slurs hurled at his father, his hero, were heard by him. He shed silent tears of pain and frustration. Kunal seemed to have matured way before his time. He acted much older than his age.

Once, after growing up a big man, Kunal had to visit a nursing home for something urgent. There, he saw a woman busy with her mobile as a five years old boy vomited in front of her. The woman who was registered as the boy’s mother chose to ignore him as he continued to vomit. His frail body was wrecked by a tumultuous outburst of solids and fluids from his mouth. Unable to hold himself any longer, Kunal forgot all about the work he had gone there to undertake. He moved towards the boy and started to pat his back in order to ease his pain. At that moment, the boy looked at him in his eyes, the vivid pain in that little boy’s eyes froze him in his place. The little boy conveyed his whole life story in that fraction of a second when he looked at Kunal.

The woman on seeing Kunal next to the boy asked him defiantly, “What is it you are doing here?” That was the moment when it took him all the strength to control his fury, he looked at her with chilling eyes and said, “I am doing what you were supposed to be doing.” This piqued the woman’s temper and she wanted to say things in her defense. Kunal was in no mood to listen to her phony talks, he rose from his place and shot towards the door. Once there, he turned back to look at the boy, the poor little boy was apologizing her with folded hands. At that moment Kunal was flooded by memories of his past. That phase of his life which he had chosen to bury in the deepest recess of his memory. Shaking his head in a dejected manner, Kunal left the place.

Back in those days, Kunal used to claustrophobic in the chaotic atmosphere of his house. It was only at his school, he could breathe. Deprived of the undivided attention of his father. He dived into the abyss of his school books. Away from the morbid and morose environment of his house. His school became his new home. It was in the studies, he discovered solace. This is one of the reasons why Kunal flourished in his studies and soon became a topper. He always scored wonderfully brilliant grades in school.

All the teachers loved the sweet looking brilliant boy. The boys in his class did not see any reasons to dislike him. He was always so helpful and kind. The school was his home away from the home. This is where he felt peaceful and happy

***That Fateful Night***

Kunal has not been attending his classes for last one week. Mr. Singh too had taken leave from work. Both of them were suffering from chicken pox. His ailing body was in severe pain due to high fever.

Suddenly, Mrs. Singh came marching in their room. She looked ravishing in her red saree. Seeing her fully decked up and ready to leave surprised Mr. Singh. With much difficulty, he raised his fragile self. He too was suffering from high fever.

“Where are you going at this hour?” Mr. Singh asked his wife.

“I have some urgent work to do. Moreover, this house stinks of ailment. I need some fresh air” came her nonchalant reply.

Mr. Singh picked up his ailing son and put him in the bathroom. Kunal looked at his father with a pained expression on his face. His appealing eyes begged him not to lock here today. Painful tears of helplessness and sorrow welled the dark eyes of Mr. Singh.

“Beta, I will be back soon. Please forgive your Baba for making you lie here in this condition. You will understand everything when you grow up,” his father consoled him.

Kunal was too young to understand anything at that time. He held on to his father tightly. It broke Mr. Singh into thousand pieces as he unclasped his son’s tiny fingers from his hand. Kunal was trying to cling to his father the way a drowning man clings to a plank. Wiping off tears from his handsome face, Mr. Singh closed the bathroom door.

A bitter sob escaped the broken heart of Kunal. He started to shed silent tears as he heard his parents fight.

“You cannot leave the two of us in this condition. Can’t you see both of us need you at this hour? What if one us collapses or there is an emergency situation. None of us are in the position to take care of the other” Mr. Singh tried to convince her of the seriousness of the situation.

“Can’t you see my daughter must not live in this house with you two? This disease is contagious,” she retorted defiantly.

Mr. Singh was taken aback by her coldblooded response. Soon the argument heated up and like always the fight started.

“All you ever care about is your son. Kunal Kunal Kunal. If he was all you ever wanted then why did you marry me?” she screamed.

Kunal put both his hands on his ears. He was trying hard to prevent the words of her mother reach him. His attempt was futile. He could hear everything. He could feel the hatred in her mother’s voice as she spat his name.

Soon the voice of his father began to dwindle as his weakness began to engulf him.

“Please, try to understand, we do need you at this hour” Mr. Singh implored his wife.

He continued, “I am never biased towards our daughter. If ever am biased towards anyone, it is my son. It is always him who has to be an understanding sibling despite the fact of him being younger to his sister.”

“Yes, yes, my daughter is a grown-up woman,” as usual, she twisted the words of her husband by diverting the entire angle of the conversation. Deviation from the main topic was the most potent weapon of his mother.

“You are neither a good father nor a good husband,” she accused.

Kunal understood where all this was going. Now, once again his mother will hurl insults at his dear father. Call him names and throw allegations at him.

The two began to fight once again. Mr. Singh was not a biased father nor was he a cheater. High fever and chicken pox had made him cranky. The chaotic state of his house, troublesome marriage, and an abusive partner added to his frustrations.

Today, his wife was pushing him to his limits. Had it been any other spouse, things would have turned extremely nasty long ago. But this man was different. He was a true gentleman in every sense of the word.

He tried his best to normalize the situation. “Calm down my dear, think with a cool mind. Do you think it is feasible to leave us like this? In this condition” in order to pacify her, he moved towards her. Kunal could decipher from the sound of his father’s slipper. He heard a few steps and then there was a crashing sound. Glass was banged against the wall.

The sudden sound of glass shattering against the wall petrified him. Not being able to hold it any longer, he started to cry loudly.

The door opened and his father took him in his arms. Kunal hugged his father with all his might. He did not want to let go.

His mother saw them disdainfully and left. That was the last he saw of her.

**Chapter. 2**

**My One & Only Priority**

Kunal held his father tightly as the two of them slept. Last night was a nightmare to him. The nights and days prior to the previous one were nothing less. Kunal recalled the days he spent with Pinky and Megha. The horrifying memories made him shudder.

Kunal could vividly see how he sat crouched at the corner of his bathroom and cried continuously. He had spent many nights like this. But yesterday, Megha had crossed all boundaries. She had thrown a glass container at his father. He felt lucky his father was not hurt. Kunal trembled at the thought what if Megha had killed his father last night? What if his father too was confined to the flat surface of Polaroid images just like his mother.

Despite all the trauma and pain caused by his mother. Kunal remained unaffected. The little boy felt at ease. The reason was simple. He was cuddled in the strong arms of his father. Kunal felt safe and at home in his father’s arms. The home which he had been missing since last few months.

“My Baba is my world,” Kunal hugged his father tightly. A smile danced on his cute little angelic face as he inhaled the comforting smell of his father. The strong masculine smell of his father was more like a whiff of heaven to him.

Even though he was half asleep, his mind was awake. “Please God, please I beg you, don’t take my father away from me ever again. I will never ask for toys, outings or TV remote. Just let my Baba stay with me like this, always.” Kunal implored God. Kunal had suffered a great trauma all these months. His world, his Baba was literally snatched away from him. He still shuddered at the thought of sleeping alone without his Baba by his side.

His father always sang his lullabies, read out stories to him or just narrated heroic tales of historical personalities. Sometimes, Baba also narrated fictitious tales of a hero who slew all the demons with his sharp sword. The hero of his father’s tale was fearless, brave and extremely courageous. He was always undefeated and nothing could ever kill him. His hero was immortal. He never lied or cheated. And the best part was when Mr. Singh used to smile every time Kunal asked him, “What is the name of our hero Baba?” ruffling his hair affectionately, Mr. Singh always hugged him when he said in a deep animated voice, “The hero of our tale is the fearless and brave Kunal Giani– the demon slayer.”

Surprisingly enough, the God he prayed to did not resemble those he saw in the temple or in his house. Kunal’s God was an exact replica of his father. The only difference being, it wore a crown and sat on a giant throne.

Kunal was busy praying for the nearness of his father. Suddenly, there was heavy banging on their doors. Someone was knocking vehemently. Kunal and his father sat bolt upright. “Stay here, I will see who it is at this time.” The clock showed 7 a.m.

Mr. Singh somehow managed to reach the door. Chickenpox and high fever had made him extremely weak. Kunal trailed his father with tiny steps. He did not want to stay away from his father for even a second.

No sooner did his father open the door. A group of burly men dressed in khaki uniforms barged in. Mr. Singh was taken aback by the ambush of policemen.

“You are under arrest for domestic violence?” the cops falsely charged Mr. Singh.

The men surrounded his father and spoke to him a loud voice. They were all speaking at once and Kunal was not being able to understand as to what exactly was going on with his father. Mr. Singh tried to explain his point, convince the men that he was innocent. The cops continued to scream. Helpless and scared, Kunal cried loudly.

In the middle of all this commotion. There is only one thing that he could hear. Over and over again.

“Article 498a!!”

It was only later he understood why was his father taken away from him. Megha had filed a false case against Mr. Singh. She had alleged him of domestic violence, harassment, and dowry charges.

As the policemen manhandled his innocent father. All Kunal could do was run around those huge men. He begged, groveled and implored each one of them to stop. Not to take his father away. But they did not pay any heed to him.

Mr. Singh tried his best to make the policemen proceed with the inquiry or interrogation in his house. “Sir, my son and I have chickenpox. I am not supposed to leave the house. You can do all the judicial proceedings here,” he requested. All his appeals were ignored and he was dragged to the police station.

The horrifying sight of his father leaving with giant-sized men further traumatized Kunal. It was only a while ago he prayed for the nearness of his father. And now once again he was being snatched away from him.

As Mr. Singh could not leave his ailing son alone. So he dropped him at school. He requested Kunal’s Principal to take care of his son till he returned.

Kunal sat at the corner of his playground after school and sobbed. Mr. Singh had assured his son that he will be back soon.

Luckily, Mr. Singh’s friend was a police commissioner. The two of them had studied in the same school. Not only were they classmates but the two were close friends too. Mr. Singh had helped him a lot with his studies as he was one of the brightest students in his class.

Mr. Giani placed a phone call to his friend and informed him of everything. No sooner did the police commissioner hear about the arrest of his friend he spoke to the officer-in-charge.

Thanks to the authority of Sachin, Kunal’s father was released. In between the whole ordeal, something snapped inside Mr. Singh. All his love and affection for Megha vanished. No more did he feel for her like he used to. Instead, his love got replaced by a thick slab of stone. The woman had betrayed him. She broke her promise of lifelong companionship. There was no vow of sticking to your partner in sickness and health in this marriage anymore.

Mr. Singh met Kunal after school. He clung to his father tightly. Pulling the shirt of his father, Kunal asked, “Baba, will those men take you away from me again?” Fear lurked in his eyes, his father pulled him into his arms and comforted him, “Baba will never leave you, and I will always stay with you. From now onwards, nothing will take me away from you my son.”

Kunal hugged his father with all his might. The tiny little arms of his son filled Mr. Singh with sheer strength. The future appeared clear to him. He knew what he had to do. He will live for his son. Fight the battles of life for his son. The road ahead was full of struggle and hard work, he will traverse it alone with Kunal, for Kunal, his bundle of joy and optimism.

The two of them went to their house. All this while, Mr. Singh smiled and asked his son about his day at school. As they stood at the door, the two of them saw an envelope stuck at the latch of their main entrance.

Mr. Singh tore open the envelope and looked at its content. Megha had filed for the divorce and these were official divorce documents that she had sent to him. Mr. Singh felt myriads of emotions all at once. He was shocked, disturbed and relieved at the same time.

Mr. Singh did not react in any manner to the legal notice. As a matter of fact, he went inside the kitchen and made vegetable soup for Kunal. The comforting smile never left his face as he continued to tell him stories and feed him soup.

In the meantime, Kunal’s grandmother called up. She had called in to inquire about the health of her son and grandson. Clutching the paper in his hand, Mr. Singh informed, “Megha has left, never to return ever again.”

“What are you saying Sarvadeep?” Gayatri sounded nervous.

“She is absolutely fine Ma, don’t worry. It’s just that, Megha has filed for a divorce.”

Divorce was a rare occurrence in those days. Those were the time when couples stuck to each other, in sickness and health, rich and poor, trouble and ease, happiness and distress – the couples never left each other’s side. The news of divorce shattered Gayatri. She came running to meet her son.

Kunal looked at the two of them as they spoke. His grandmother was a soft-spoken, softhearted lady with an ivory skin and salt and pepper hair. He never got a chance to meet his grandfather as he had passed away way before Mr. Singh’s marriage to Kunal’s mother. Wiping off her tears from her *saree*, Gayatri sobbed, “My child Kunal has been orphaned once again.”

Mr. Singh holding his son close to him declared, “My son is not an orphan. I am his father and mother both. I will be his sibling and friend. I will be everything he wants me to be. Kunal does not need anyone else as long as I live.”

Mr. Singh continued, “Kunal is my son and my lifeline. He is my universe and the axis of my world. From now onwards, he is my one and only priority. I will make sure he does not need anybody. I will look after my son to the best of my ability, provide him with the best upbringing and make him an exemplary personality.”

In his father’s arms, Kunal closed his eyes and thanked his God. Today, it got confirmed that his father was his God. To Kunal, his God was not a male or female. He never called him, him, but it was always an IT for him. Today when his father announced to *Dadi* that he will be Kunal’s mother and father, brother and sister, friend and family. All his doubts got cleared. There was nothing left to be confirmed or explained.

His father was his God in a human form. Just like God, he fulfilled all his wishes. His father was compassionate, benevolent and all mighty. Maybe his father was on some secret mission on earth. Maybe he did not want anyone to know about his true identity. This is why he had taken the human form. Whatever the reason might be, he realized the simple fact.

Now onwards, for any sort of need or wish, he was not to look anywhere else. His father was there for him. He will take care of all his dreams and desires.

Mr. Singh embraced his son affectionately as Kunal revered and exalted his father manifold times. The two of them held each other as Gayatri saw them with sad tears in her eyes.

From that day on everyone looked at them sympathetically. But for the father and son – there was no looking back. The two of them spent long hours in each other’s company. No matter how tiring his schedule was, Mr. Singh always made sure to narrate the story of Kunal – the demon slayer to him. Kunal remembered all the stories by heart still he insisted on listening to the same story over and over again.

Mr. Singh showered his son with wonderful toys. Kunal had a bag full of toys. Maybe he had giant sized cartons filled with various toys. He had a vast collection of Hotwheels. Automobiles of any sort were Mr. Singh’s passion whereas Kunal was crazy about cars. This is one of the reasons why his carton was mainly filled with cars of different models, colors and make. Apart from cars, the superhero figures was another favorite of Kunal. He had figures of G.I.Joe, Superman, Spiderman and many other amazing comic characters.

Mr. Singh and Kunal had created a sweet little world of their on where only the two of them lived undisturbed and unaffected by any outside entity.

**Chapter 3.**

**Strength of a Father**

The next few days were uneventful. The false charge of dowry or 398a against Mr. Singh was withdrawn by Megha. The divorce proceedings continued. Mr. Singh appeared at all the court hearings. He always stood there with his head held high. The kind gentleman remained undeterred and unadulterated by the filthy remarks and false accusations of Megha. He knew he was truthful and sincerity was his biggest weapon. Mr. Singh was a staunch believer in honesty. To him, an honest man never faced the defeat. It is the liar or wrong who suffered in the end. A wrong person never wronged anyone as much he wronged his own self. The evil has always caused the maximum damage unto its own self.

Many at times, on various occasions, Mr. Singh was found repeating his favorite created by himself, “The sincere one is never sorry.”

Right from taking care of household chores to Kunal’s studies and his own office. Mr. Singh undertook all the tasks efficiently. There was nothing he could not do. Mr. Singh was blessed with an extremely kind disposition and a robust back that made him bear the heaviest of burden without any complaints.

Everyone around him felt surprised wondering how he managed everything so effortlessly. He always had this admirable smile on his face that automatically melted the heart of anyone who crossed his path.

Mr. Singh remained undeterred by court proceedings even in the midst of his busy schedule. Megha, however, was not one bit like Mr. Singh. He was made of much sterner stuff than she could ever imagine. Soon she succumbed to the tiring legal hearings and decided for an out of court settlement. That day when he came to know about Megha’s proposal of out of court settlement. Mr. Singh smiled inwardly and muttered, “The sincere one never suffer.”

Mr. Khemka, Megha’s lawyer conferred her message to him. She was willing to close the case if he paid her handsomely. Mr. Singh was not the kind of a person who held malice neither was he sadistic. He was a gentleman of the highest order. Megha was unable to cope with the pressure of fighting a legal battle, he realized. Hence, he agreed to let her go scot-free. Mr. Singh was one such gentleman who even treated people who wronged him with kindness and benevolence.

Megha was paid a good amount of money by Mr. Singh in exchange for peace of mind. The case was finally settled between the two. The day they signed the divorce paper, Megha stood opposite Mr. Singh.

“I have caused you immense trouble. Hope you forgive me,” she looked ashamed.

“You don’t have to apologize me. You did not cause me any trouble. It was all designed this way by the greatest Designer of all. But yes you have caused a lot of pain to my family. Honestly speaking I am nobody to forgive you. I sincerely hope that that six years old boy forgives you,” Mr. Singh stated.

He further continued, “Although you never considered me Pinky’s father, but that girl is still very dear to me. I have a piece of advice for you,” Mr. Singh’s words slashed through Megha’s self like sharp daggers.

“I am sorry,” it was all she could utter.

Mr. Singh shied away her apologies with a careless wave of his right hand and said, “Don’t imbibe your daughter with your melodramatic traits. Try to raise an independent individual and not a crafty woman. Fill her with confidence and self-respect. Make sure she remembers you with reverence and not regret.”

Megha looked at him stunned as Mr. Singh walked away from her. She looked down in embarrassment while he held his head high. He did not have any guilty conscience that would torment him. He would never know whether Megha was able to sleep peacefully after that day. Fortunately enough, he never had anything on his conscience that would disturb his sleep.

Soon after that Kunal’s father decided to have a change of location. For a period of five years, Mr. Singh shifted to Raipur from Bhopal.

In Raipur, Kunal was enrolled in standard I at Kendra Vidyalaya School. It was here he completed his education till standard VI. True to his words, Mr. Singh made sure his son does not suffer due to the absence of a mother in his life. Be it sports day, PTM (Parent-Teacher Meeting) or any sort of school functions, Mr. Singh was always present.

At home, it was Kunal’s father who helped him in his school tasks.

It was this one time where Kunal had cooking competition in his school. All the children were accompanied by their mother except Kunal. Instead of feeling out of place, the father and son duo had a gala time making a cheese sandwich. Surprisingly enough whereas the other children of his class depended upon their mother for each and everything, Kunal helped his father in grating the cheese and spreading the butter on bread.

It was a joint venture. The teachers could not look at anyone else but these two charming men. The female teachers were literally bowled over by the Greek god looks of Mr. Singh. And to top everything, his affection towards his son melted everybody’s heart.

They did not win the cooking competition that day because there were many mothers who held much pride in their cooking.

On their way back from sports day, Mr. Singh muttered to himself, “Who makes *aalu ke parathey* (Indian bread stuffed with potato) at breakfast?”

Kunal replied in a flat tone, “Prashant’s mom.” Both of them burst into laughter at this. It was Prashant’s mother who won the cooking competition that day.

Till this day, Kunal prefers cheese sandwich over *aalu ke parathey* and smiles reminiscing his father’s frustration over “*Who makes aalu ke parathey at breakfast*.”

The PTMs were always fun. It was the tradition cum superstition of Mr. Singh and Kunal to get the same haircut on the report card day. They always donned the famous crew cut with sides shaved hairstyle. As the two used to sit opposite the class teacher, the concerned teacher would always find it amusing. The duo used to look like an original and a miniature set of the same mold.

Each year, Mr. Singh heard the same remarks, “Your son is brilliant.” “He will go a long way.” “You are raising an amazing person.”

Mr. Singh was an amazing personality. At home, he managed everything extremely efficiently. Along with undertaking major household chores cooking, cleaning, and washing. Mr. Singh also helped his son in his studies. He never felt the need of having a private tutor. Kunal too had kept his promise, the one he had made to his God. He never pestered his father for toys, ice-creams or picnic. Moreover, he did all he could to ease the burden off his father’s shoulder. He attempted to wash the dishes or sweep the floor. But his father stopped him, “You are too young for all this. I myself will hand over your responsibilities to you. Now is not the time.”

There were never any complaints against Mr. Singh in his office. It was through his sheer dedication and hard work, within a span of five years, he was assigned the post of a Service Manager in the bank he worked for.

After completion of Vth standard, Kunal and his father returned to Bhopal. Here, he got an admission in Campion School. He commenced his studies from the VIth standard here.

Once back in Bhopal, the life retained its normal pace. Two years passed swiftly without any major events.

Kunal had just stepped into his teens. Mr. Singh took his son out to Van Vihar. Although it was a national park or a zoological garden but the place was mostly visited by young lovers. It was on purpose Mr. Singh had brought his son here. The two were extremely close to each other and Mr. Singh had always treated his son like a friend.

“Look at all these animals outside the cage,” Mr. Singh referred to the couples who were completely engrossed in each other.

Kunal averted his gaze and tried to look elsewhere. Mr. Singh continued, “You must be experiencing new developments in your body. This is the age of physical, mental, and emotional change,” he informed Kunal with his hand around his son’s shoulders.

“Baba what is it you want me to learn?” Kunal knew his father never said anything without any reasons.

“It is time for you to control, concentrate and elaborate,” Mr. Giani declared. Kunal looked askance.

His father explained the entire theory to him in detail.

“Biology my son, it is all about biology,” spreading his arms, Mr. Singh continued, “Everything you see around you is a part of biology – the study of living organisms. The change has already started to take place within you. It is for you to control your biological change, be it a physical urge, emotional outburst or mental pressure, you need to control everything and remain calm at all time. Okay?”

Kunal nodded in agreement.

“Next is concentrate. You need to concentrate more on the biology taught in class rather than the one concerning the opposite gender.” Mr. Giani smiled like an elder brother cum guide.

“What do you mean by elaborate Baba?” Kunal asked his father.

He ruffled his son’s hair and confirmed, “Whatever you learn, try to elaborate that in your exams. These two years are the most crucial as well as most important years of your life. It is in these two years you need to prepare yourself for your board exams.”

Holding him by his shoulders with both hands and looking at him straight in eyes, Mr. Singh declared, “Rise and shine beta. You are born to rise like a blazing sun and shine like a bright star. I am not raising you to be somebody’s boyfriend or employee. I am raising a king of coming times.”

Kunal absorbed each and every word of his father in his heart and mind.

Suddenly, holding his hair and shaking his head, Mr. Giani said, “This is way too long for a schoolboy.” And then he held his own hair with the other hand and joked, “This is way too long for a service manager.”

It was from there, the two of them headed towards the salon.

The next three years simply flew away like a swift bird. Kunal had appeared for his board's exams of Class X. The two of them awaited the result which was to come out the next day. The two of them discussed the appropriate subject for Kunal.

“Baba, I think I should take up science. Medical is more of my forte,” Kunal told his father.

“You can also keep an option open for mathematics. Engineering is also in great demand nowadays,” his father suggested.

The discussion continued for a long time as both of them were very excited. None of them slept that night.

Kunal and his father woke up slightly nervous. They two of them waited for 10 a.m. with bated breath.

**Chapter 4.**

**The D Day**

Kunal paced frantically in his room. Time and again, his gaze went to the wall clock. The small hand was sort of stuck at the digit 8. The way the time dragged on that particular morning frustrated Kunal. He desperately wished the time to speed up so that the suspense of his board result could finally come to an end. The entire ordeal of waiting for the result was getting on his nerves.

“Stop being so nervous,” Mr. Singh said affectionately. He tried to wear a calm exterior so that Kunal can be pacified. “Baba, this feels terrible. I hate the entire waiting process, it is excruciatingly painful” Kunal sounded exasperated.

Mr. Singh continued in his soothing tone, “Calm down beta, everything will be fine.” Offering him a mug of coffee, the two of them sat and started to discuss about Kunal’s future subjects once again. Mr. Singh spoke of the uneventful incidents of his that took place on a regular basis. Kunal’s father was as nervous as his son, he even started to discuss about the rising price of the vegetables and tantrums of their maid with him. His vain attempts at easing the tension completely failed. The more he tried to calm down his son, the hyper he himself became.

Soon the sweet moment of minor victory arrived. Mr. Singh shook his son proudly, “88%!!!” His son had scored in the 90s in almost all the subjects except Hindi and History. He could not go beyond 80% in these subjects. Kunal was not much into theories. He had scored best in Mathematics. More than 90%.

“Baba, I have made up my mind, I will take up engineering,” Kunal declared enthusiastically as the two of them enjoyed their lunch at a cozy restaurant.

“Post engineering, I will complete MBA,” Kunal gushed excitedly. Mr. Singh just smiled looking at his son who never failed to make him proud. Mr. Singh was trying to tell him something but in his over enthusiasm, Kunal continued to share his future plans without providing a chance to his father to speak.

“Baba, Baba I will take you to the United States of America,” moving his hands frantically, he made more plans. “After retirement, you will simply sit at home, have fun and date white aunties,” he winked naughtily. Holding his father’s hands, he exhaled happily, “I just want you to relax Baba. I want to make you the happiest father in the whole wide world.”

Warm tears of happiness danced in Mr. Singh’s eyes. Shaking his head vehemently, Mr. Singh stated, “I totally agree with each and everything you said till now. However, you must not forget this that today is an extremely proud day for me. You have filled me with utmost happiness.”

“Come on Baba,” Kunal felt shy as his father expressed his joy.

“Don’t you dare come on Baba me today of all days,” Mr. Singh said, “Today is the day that calls for a celebration. It is the day that you should remember happily for the rest of your life.” Mr. Singh had decided to make it the most memorable day of his son’s life. And till this day, it remains one. Kunal could vividly remember each every second of that beautiful day he spent with his doting father.

After clearing the restaurant bill, Mr. Singh took him to a place Kunal least expected. The two of them stood outside an automobile showroom. Kunal was still not very sure as to what exactly was going through his father’s head.

No sooner did the two of them enter the Hero Honda bike showroom, a sales personnel came running towards Mr. Singh. From the look of entire events, Kunal could feel, everything has been pre-planned. The man then took the two of them towards a red colored model. It was a red CBZ bike, Kunal’s dream bike.

Mr. Singh looked at his son and smiled. He handed him thick black colored bike keys, “This one devil here belongs to you son,” he confirmed. The look of shock and surprise was plastered on the young handsome face of Kunal. He was growing up to be every bit like his father.

Kunal held the bike keys and just looked at his father dumbfound. Mr. Singh clicked his two fingers in front of his face as if trying to break his reverie. Kunal hugged his father tightly and gave out a loud scream.

Everybody in the showroom turned towards them and looked at him with surprise. Mr. Singh screamed proudly, “My son here has cleared his first board exam. We are just having a small celebration here.”

Everyone started to applaud Kunal. They clapped happily as Mr. Singh cried with sincere joy. Many of them came forward and shook hands with Kunal congratulating him on his success.

That day Mr. Singh said, “Hear these claps and applause? Get used to it my son. You are going to hear it all your life. Millions and millions of people will stand in your honor. People will follow you, emulate you and look up to you. Your face will appear on TV and newspaper. Articles will be written about your achievements. Books would be released in your honor. Beta, you are the hero of tomorrow.”

The blessings and the bike of his father never left Kunal. Till this day, the words of Mr. Singh ring in Kunal’s ear. He vividly remembers each and every moment spent with his father. As he grew up, one by one, each and every word of his father uttered that day has come true. Today, when he recalls that day Kunal cannot help but feels more and more moved.

The feeling of pain and happiness, loss and achievement run parallel in his life. Whenever he feels sad, distressed, happy or lost, Kunal goes and stands in front of that one model that occupies a special space among the fleet of his expensive cars. His father’s red CBZ – his first bike. By just standing there in front of the bike, Kunal feels strong and motivated. This bike has been his constant companion during his time of trials and tribulations. Hard work and struggle. The two of them strived together. This bike is the reminder, his father never left his side.

As the two of them rode back to their home, Kunal said, “So this is the reason why from last few weeks I have been made to run extra errands on your scooter. Now I get it, you were making sure that I don’t bump my new bike against the wall” he contemplated animatedly. Mr. Singh laughed heartily as his son pretended to uncover the biggest conspiracy theory of his father.

That was the longest and one of the happiest days the two of them spent together. Mr. Singh had taken his day off and the two of them decided to bring down the city that day. Kunal rode around the highways, freeways, lanes, and alleys on his new bike with his father on the pillion.

The two of them rode around like crazy buddies, screaming, shouting and guffawing all over the place. Mr. Singh’s chest was bursting with pride and ecstasy. Kunal felt grateful and was overjoyed by the total experience.

The two of them returned home late that night. Kunal rushed to the kitchen and made coffee for the two of them. Handing him the mug, he sat next to Mr. Singh and started once again, “Baba, I have decided, two of us will shift to the U.S and settle down there for good. You will retire soon and let your little champ take care of everything,” Kunal droned on.

He continued to chalk out his future dreams. Soon his eyelids started to turn heavy and his voice became slightly thin. Mr. Singh got up with the young boy and went to his bedroom. Kunal slumped on his bed. No sooner did his head touch the pillow, Kunal crashed to a deep sleep.

Mr. Singh stood at the head of his son’s bed for a long time and looked at his sleeping child lovingly. “I wish all your dreams come true. I will make sure all your dreams come true. You will get the best of everything my boy,” Mr. Singh whispered inwardly. Turning off the lights, he departed from his son’s tiny little room.

**Chapter 5.**

**The Arrival of the Much Awaited**

It was the first day of the new session. The Campion School awaited the new entrants of Class XI. Everybody crossed the giant school gate with a myriad of feelings. Suddenly, a red CBZ whooshed past the students. Everybody looked at the rider and his devil of a ride awestruck. They were all stunned when the helmet was removed.

There stood their very own sports champion of Campion School – Kunal Giani. He was their only hope in all the inter-school racquet championship. Kunal turned a wizard when handed with a bat. He literally created magic and mesmerized his audience. Be it squash, badminton, lawn tennis or table tennis, Kunal always fetched his school a trophy in all these sports. He was a maestro par excellence in racquet games. Needless to say, most of his schoolmates felt nervous competing with him in any sort of racquet games.

The boys rushed towards him and touched his bike in adulation. Kunal was one of the most popular boys in the school. He was most helpful also. At any point in time, anyone ever needed any sort of help, Kunal was always there for their rescue.

Although Kunal took admission in this school in the sixth standard. It did not take him long to become an integral part of the school. He was a favorite of all the teachers due to his excellent performance in studies. The classmates of Kunal also liked him a lot because of his friendly nature and kind disposition.

Now, with the addition of his new bike, he had become the most popular boy of the entire school campus. He came to be known as the guy with red CBZ.

Kunal had the same fair complexion as his father and had an eye for details. When he came back to his city after five years. It did not take him long to adjust to the new school. Soon, he grasped his surrounding and adjusted himself remarkably well to an all-new environment.

More so, this was not a new place for him. Bhopal was his hometown. His birthplace, his very own city.

As promised to his father, Kunal stuck to his decision. He enrolled himself in mathematics.

The session for class eleven commenced. This is where I take my grand or minor entry. I am Rahul, Kunal and myself are best friends. Or how should I put it more appropriately? Kunal is not just my best friend but my one and only friend. He is family to me. I am an eyewitness to his success story.

Being in awe of his struggle and tribulations all my life. This is the reason why I took it upon myself to let the entire world know about this hero of mine. The hero who inspired millions. The man who will motivate many to achieve their dreams – the great Indian dream of success in entrepreneurship. The quintessential key to kickstart a successful startup – perseverance.

Unlike Kunal, I was not a Bhopal boy. My father was a TI in Madhya Pradesh Police Department and it was during my eleventh standard we had relocated to Bhopal from Jabalpur. I had taken admission in the Campion School in XIth standard.

The memory of our first encounter is still very vivid in my mind. There was an unusual presence of a buffalo during the computer classes. Buffalo in a classroom!! Absolutely right. This unusual yet regular occurrence of a buffalo during the computer classes of Kothari Sir was nothing new to the fellow students of Kunal. One can also call it a common sighting.

Where did this buffalo come from??!!!

This buffalo was none other than the boy with an angelic smile and devil’s mind – Kunal Giani. Yes, you heard me right. It was this boy who was behind all the nuisance. The moment Kothari Sir used to turn towards the board, Kunal used to create buffalo sound from his mouth. This high pitched buffalo “moo,” used to echo within the classroom. No matter how hard we tried to stifle our laughter, a thin smile always flickered on our innocent looking straight faces. None of us wished to give away Kunal’s well-kept secret of a mooing buffalo in a computer class.

One day, during Kothari Sir’s classes, the common sighting of the invisible buffalo occurred. No sooner did Kothari Sir turn towards the blackboard to write something down, “Mooooo,” a loud cry of a buffalo evaded the silence of the classroom.

Kothari Sir turned around on his heels and looked at everyone. The look of confusion was clearly visible on his face. Shaking his head as if trying to ignore the sound, Kothari Sir reverted back to his lesson.

“Moooooo,” the sound resurfaced. Kothari Sir turned around, looking curiously at everyone. He was unable to understand why did the buffalo mooed only in this class. Trying to ignore, he once again attempted to concentrate on the lesson of “Journey of Computers Over The Last Three Decades.”

“Can someone please shut the windows?” Kothari Sir directed the students present. He further moved on and said, “There are cows hovering outside the field. Their noise is so disturbing.” Kothari Sir expressed his helplessness and irritation, “Those cows out there make it a tad difficult to take classes peacefully.

Satish rose from his seat and closed the windows. This, however, did not help. As long as the buffalo studied under Kothari Sir, it was not possible for him to teach peacefully.

“Mooooooo,” the grand buffalo mooed once again. However, this time there was a new development.

“Moooooo,” the grand buffalo was accompanied by an equally grand partner.

Unable to control myself any longer, the buffalo within me surfaced. I have been a silent spectator to Kunal’s mooing for a long time. I used to thoroughly enjoy myself the way Kunal mooed incessantly throughout the computer class.

No sooner did I interject that day, Kunal’s eyes met with mine. At that instant, the bond stronger than brotherhood was formed between me and him.

Kunal flashed his infectious smile at me. I winked back at him. Kothari Sir continued to blabber about the disturbance created by the animals outside. The broken window panes were unable to obstruct the disturbing noise was the excuse presented by Aayush, one of our friends and partners in crime.

“How am I supposed to teach in such a chaotic condition?” Kothari Sir flailed his hands helplessly in the air. He shrugged his head in disapproval.

The two naughty buffaloes mooed and the class continued in its confused state. After the departure of Kothari Sir, Kunal came and stood in front of me.

“Hi buddy, my name is Kunal,” he stretched his right hand offering me friendship. Shaking it with equal enthusiasm, I replied, “I know, you are ‘the boy with a read CBZ.” To this Kunal gave out a hearty laugh and added, “Thank god, they address me as ‘the boy with a red CBZ,’ and not ‘the boy with mad cow disease.’” This made both of us convulse with a rib-cracking laughter.

Over the next two years, our friendship developed by leaps and bounds. The levels of our mischief reached new heights. As our wickedness soared, our grades fell marginally. With each of our pranks under our belt, we scored more brownie points in nuisance. Kunal had never felt so happy in his entire life.

**Chapter 6.**

**Masters of Mischief**

No matter how many complaints Mr. Singh received against Kunal and me. He was one person who never reprimanded us with harsh words. All he ever said, “Why are the two of you like this?” The best part is, he always heard our mischief stories with rapt interest. There always appeared a satisfied smile on his face as we narrated our stories to him. If Kunal is my hero then Mr. Singh was no less than a second father to me. I felt so much at home with him. Whenever I was in deep trouble, Kunal’s house was my safest abode. There is a very strong chance of Mr. Singh passing on each and every information of my whereabouts to my father. Maybe, that was the reason why whenever I returned to my home after staying at Kunal’s house for a long time, nobody asked me any questions.

In his heart of hearts, Mr. Singh knew that the two of us did not mean any harm. He had great confidence in both of us. Mr. Singh strongly believed in the two of us. I still remember the first time I visited Kunal’s house. It was not very big but it was huge in terms of knowledge and information.

Mr. Singh was a voracious reader. His desk was stacked with glossy magazines about automobiles and entrepreneurship. He enjoyed learning about new technologies. It was through his habit of being a voracious reader, he was at par with latest market trends. He was well abreast with the changing society in terms of economic and technical developments.

There was this one time, I still have the memory of that interaction vividly etched on my mind. Mr. Singh pointing at the picture of a yellow Lamborghini in one of his automobile magazines said, “This, I want you boys to own cars like this.” Looking at me straight to my eyes, his gaze pierced through me, “Definitely cars like these are not a necessity. But to own a Lamborghini or a Rolls Royce from your hard earned money acquired through honest means is a sign of real success. One has to maintain one of its kind lifestyle wherein he can flaunt a sleek ride like that.”

Mr. Singh further elaborated, “You need to reach to the stature of such a man who can afford a luxurious car like that in his life. One cannot just buy a car like that and park it in a housing society complex parking lot. These amazing beauties call for a lavish space.”

I was in awe of the entire idea and could imagine myself in the setting he visualized for us. Mr. Singh explained, “To house these drives, one needs a splendid state of art home. And of course, a business industry that would complement and provide the means to afford the exorbitant things you would then own.”

At that time, Mr. Singh pulled my ear playfully and asked, “How do you think all this is possible?”

“By excelling in studies Baba,” I volunteered nervously. He gently tapped on my head as he advised, “Through proper planning, and implementation of the same. Mark out your steps beforehand and create well-marked strategies that would ensure your financial independence.”

Kunal finished his father’s sentence, “And all this is possible through….” All of us said unanimously, “Entrepreneurship.”

It was Baba’s dream and desire that one day we should be able to afford those expensive luxurious cars. He wanted us to make it really big in life. Till this day, I can kind of feel that Baba is watching over us from somewhere up there. Whatever we are now is because of his blessings, guidance and iron like confidence in us.

Those were the wild west sort of days for us. Our mischief was at its peak. Those days, the two of us were masters of mischief. We were so engrossed in our small world filled with pranks, fantasies, mischief-making that we became oblivious to our falling grades.

Totally engrossed in our own world, we failed to notice our shift from the toppers to hip-hoppers which means our grades had lapsed to the 60 and 70% from 90%. But the two of us were not concerned. Whenever we were reminded of our topper days, “What has happened to the two of you, you boys were topper once?” We answered the question like these by simply crossing both our hands in an X, a smug look on our face and a slightly accented voice, “Relax mate, we were toppers then, we are hip-hoppers now.”

The crux of the story is, we were in our careless – carefree most stage of life at that time. Riding on the bike throughout the day, raiding local and not so local food joints or just creating a ruckus every now and then was all we ever did. Morning, noon and night, our buffoonery saw no limits. We were the most innocent and wildest beasts.

Every evening after school our favorite hangout to sooth our pained eyes due to watching boys and only boys around, we frequented Amer Bakery Hut and Bittan Market Haat. These were the hub of eye candies. “Three o’clock, Seven,” Kunal declared. Turning my head towards the given direction, my instant reaction was “Dude, do you see those lustrous manes, she is anything but 7. I give her 9,” my vote was cast.

Kunal clucked his tongue in disapproval, “She does not qualify in other necessary areas of major appeal. She does not fulfill the major criteria, simple,” he winked with a naughty smile. His words were final. Kunal had a way with logic and he always proved his point with his keen analytical mind and wonderful words. Kunal could maneuver anyone with his conversational skills. He was and still is the master of words.

“3 o’clock, 8” this time it was my turn. The two of us used covet mode of conversation to notify each other about the location of good-looking girls. Those days, every girl looked good to us. We followed the traditional army or spy code for direction. Pointing to the girls through eyes or fingers was downright derogatory for boys with our intellect.

We always held much pride in our intellect. For Kunal, the class was of great importance. No matter what, he always maintained class and dignity in everything he did. In all walks of life, Kunal never compromised with his honesty and ethics. Even while checking out girls, he maintained his class and caliber.

Those were the days when the kids were yet to be hit by packed junk foods with a variant of flavors in chips, mix, corns, and other similar stuff. For us, the roadside junk foods sold on the mobile carts by good-natured bhaiyyas (big brothers) was nothing less than a delicacy. We used to hog onto kachori, samosa, khatta gola (crushed ice candy), golgappa, and dahi bhalle etc.

The daily routine of the two vagabonds was fixed. We lived our life on simple Carvaka theory – eat, drink and be merry.

For sure, we ate like beasts. Drinking alcohol or smoking cigarette was out of the question. We had much better things to do in life than ruin our health in the name of lame kick.

Any sort of substance abuse was totally unacceptable for the two of us then. We loved our body, senses, and happiness the most. The peace, prestige, and happiness of our parents was of utmost importance for me and Kunal. As far as Kunal was concerned, Baba was the be all and end all of his life. On many occasions, he was seen speaking highly of his father.

Once in a while, we frequented our most favorite hangout – Water And Land Management Institute commonly known as WALMI. It is the dam located in the Walmi hills of Bhopal.

The two of us used to often climb up two hundred steps and sit at the top of the dam. This was the place where we opened our hearts out to each other.

Sitting at the top of the dam, far away from the maddening crowd. The silent, secluded, peaceful spot surrounded by serene scenic beauty filled us with extraordinary calmness. This was our throne. The city from this spot appeared like our kingdom.

The two princes or the two enthusiastic youths spoke with each other like grown-up men. We shared our dreams and aspirations with each other. We also spoke about the girls who occupied a good part of our both sides of the brain – right and left.

“My father means the world to me,” Kunal confessed to me. “I wish to make him extremely proud. My only desire is to provide him with all the luxuries and comforts of the world,” Kunal droned looking out at the vast expanse in front of him.

Sensing the concealed pain in Kunal’s voice, I tried to change the topic. I am quite a pro at diverting one’s attention. I could always empathize with Kunal and this one of the main reasons why we are where we are today. We were the duo of dudes then, and are the band of brothers now.

“What is the first thing that you notice in girls?” even though I knew the answer to this question way too well. Still, at that time, I needed something light to take his mind off of the disturbing subject.

“Eyes, if a girl asks me this question. Lips would be my reply if my girlfriend would ask me the same,” Kunal was trying to play it safe. “I am not a girl and neither am I your girlfriend. Now tell me, what is it that turns you on,” I had no intentions of letting him get off the hook easily.

“Something that is little below the lips and way too lower than the eyes,” Kunal narrated his weakness quite shamelessly. “What about you bugger, what is it that you like? Not that I don’t know the answer. Still, I would like to hear your answer,” Kunal was at my case now.

“Why choose just one part when I could devour the entire package with utmost pleasure.” I expressed myself in the most lecherous voice with really explicit motions of hands. Kunal slapped me on my head for my desperation.

Kunal and I used to spend hours talking about nonsense nothings. In those years, our days were filled with discussions of dreams, girls, things at home, girls, weird teachers in the class, girls and their tantrums, movies, cars, girls and last but not the least girls again.

Well, we were in our teens, in fact, now we had stepped into late teens. The pangs of studying in all boys school all your life is frustrating to the power of infinity. To add woes to our worry, we were introduced to the fantastical world of internet.

Do you know 30% of the internet world is captured by pornography? This means more than 30% of internet covers pornography. Well, that is mainly because of the users’ age. Majority of the internet users are teenagers. Michio Kaku, the world-famous physicist jokes, if the majority of the internet users was not teens but elderly people then maybe pornography would have shot up to 50%. His exact quote is, “Just wait ‘til the grandmas and grandpas log on to the internet. Then 50% of the internet would be pornography.”

Those days, having an access to the internet was a rare sighting. Blessed were those who could log on to internet and dive into the world of erotic fantasies. Kunal was one of the lucky few who had an access to the internet at home. It was private, safe and provided him with sheer freedom. He made the best use of his well-obtained resources. He was my windows to pornography.

There was a secret file, obviously hidden in his computer. There were folders inside that secret folder. Here, there were mind-blowing images of sweet-faced, hot looking bombshells like Lisa Ann, Asia Carrera, and Tera Patrick. But our queen was no other than Jenna Jameson. She simply topped the libido chart. Both of us loved ogling at those babes for hours.

**Chapter 7.**

**The Farewell to Remember**

The day we bit adieu to our school is one of the most memorable days of our lives. It was at the farewell party of our XIIth standard, the two of us tasted beer for the first time.

“So, this is it?” Kunal said excitedly as he held the beer bottle in his hand. “You go first,” I pushed him to try it first. I wanted to see his expression as he gulped down the first sip of manhood. The two of us were nervous, excited and high! Yes, even before we could finish that bottle of beer, the two of us felt high.

“Your turn,” Kunal held out the bottle at me. He shuddered as the first few drops of chilled beer burnt his insides. It raced through each cell of his body. I also felt the same sort of burning sensation paired with an electric shock on my first sip.

We took our turns in finishing off that bottle of beer. The two of us finished it eagerly and inevitably for the first time we were really high. We laughed like fools. The feeling of uncontrolled euphoria engulfed us. There was no stopping us then.

At that moment, we were philosophers, lovers, reformists, and maybe feminists. Yes, you heard me right. It was I who said, “Pornography is against feminism. It is downright shameful. We men are so insensitive. How could we take women as some sort of commodity.” The social reformist cum feminist was on the roll. All this time, all Kunal did was nod his heavy head in agreement.

“Jenna is not a commodity to me. In fact, none of the girls are,” Kunal declared. Suddenly, he thought something and went to a nearby telephone booth. Those were the days when public phone booth had its own charm. Many relationships were formed, love stories blossomed, heartbreaks occurred, families got connected, international ties became stronger – all these through the PCO/ STD/ ISD of the late 90s and millennium era.

For a long long time, Kunal stayed inside one of the telephone booths. He was completely engrossed in a very serious conversation with someone special. It was no secret to me. After an hour or so, Kunal left the booth with red eyes. He was and still is an extremely sensitive person. Even though he always wears this tough exterior. But I know the real him. The slightest of the pain of the people close to him affects him extensively. To him, he comes last, and the comfort, ease, and happiness of others are all that really matters.

A friend in need is a friend in need. Despite, the fact of being tipsy myself, I wanted to make sure, Kunal does not get affected by anything adverse. Under no circumstances, I wanted the painful memories of his traumatic past to surface at that moment. That is when my Maruti 800 came to the rescue.

The two of us were comfortably seated in my car. The effect of alcohol had long subsided. The plan was to take a stroll of the city road and then hit the long stretching highway to ease our nerves. There is nothing better than long drives when it comes to relieving stress. But before we could spread our wings and drive on. The painful traffic jam took hold of our takeoff.

We sat in a traffic jam and looked helplessly at a long trail of vehicles ahead of us. It wouldn’t be wrong to say that we were sandwiched between giant-sized trucks, packed buses, cabs, cars and all sorts of public and privately-owned transports.

Soon, Kunal started to get frustrated. He was the restless type and never liked to stay at one place for long. Stagnancy was something he completely loathed. Dynamism was in his blood. Unable to hold himself any longer, he started, “This car of yours is good for nothing. It is a useless piece of waste material. Calling it worse than a garbage would not be wrong. Throw it at a scrap shop and the owner would sue you. Why do you even take this shit out? I just don’t get it. Huh!” there was no stopping him this time.

“The worst part is, you pride yourself on owning it. Why do you even take this shit out on the roads? I just don’t get it,” turning towards me in disgust, he asked, “And why did you have to take it out today of all days? Don’t you know it is our big day, ‘the big day today?’” Kunal went on and on and on with his complaints. He completely despised my car. I smiled inwardly as my plans of effectively diverting his mind from the disturbing thoughts was finally successful.

My father was a TI at Shahjahanabad police station in Bhopal. This provided me with an extra advantage. I stealthily went down and took out my father’s siren and placed it above my car. Soon the red light started to roll and the siren started to blare. This was enough to get me my job done.

No sooner did the red lights come into action, the vehicles made way for my car. I cut through the oceans of vehicles that had to move from their location to pave way for my small little Maruti 800.

As I emerged out of the packed road smoothly without any fuss or any sort of obstruction. I threw him a smug look and said vainly, “When your car has a red light on top, nobody is bothered about the model you drive. Power talks, baby!”

Smack! Once again, I got a slap on my head. This was our unforgettable journey from boys to men. I still smile sheepishly when I look back at those golden years of my life spent with the very best form of human being I could ever come across. No wonder, there escapes a cold sigh of longing whenever I think of the days gone by. Verily, for me and Kunal both, those were the best days of our life.

Now, when I look at him in his full glory and intimidating personality. I am quite in awe of this man. However, this does not change the fact that he is still the very same person with me and with everyone around who stood by him during his days of struggle and hard work. It is his sheer dedication, persistence and never say die attitude that made him realize his dreams. He is what he is all because of his father’s principles and his honesty towards his work.

There is a great chance that Kunal would have been a national champion in racquet sports in today’s time. There is a great possibility that he could have represented our country in sports on an international level. But destiny had something else in store for him. The dreams of him being a sports personality appear like a distant fantasy when his study itself had to suffer due to the sudden twist of fate.

Now, all he ever does is work, work and a lot more of work. Calling him a workaholic would not be unjustified. Once in a blue moon, he holds the racquet in his hands but this for sure is different from the days of the past. Moreover, there is a just a faint reminder of the previous Kunal at the tennis court now. He still plays very well but now it is more of a stress relieving activity or fun game, nothing more than that.

Life has been no less than a roller coaster ride for him. Back in those days, none of us would have imagined that one fine day this happy go lucky boy would wake up to see the darkest day of his life. And the following days would be no less dark. In fact, the nightmare would continue and appear like a never-ending trial of pain and sufferings. One could surely not imagine that the very same boy who is always after some sort of nuisance and mischief would be stripped of all childish shenanigans. The adolescent tantrums would become something unknown to him.

The only thing that would capture a good part of life, morning noon and night would be work, work and a lot more of work. He will become a clock that ticks 24/7 without any choice and without any voice. The life and personality of Kunal too would resemble a clock that has to tick away and keep moving forward. Move ahead and move an inch closer to the dream.

Initially, it was not a dream, but it was more of responsibility. He was left with no choice but to do what was asked of him. Kunal had to first and foremost clear the 40 lakh debt off his head. It was the loan that Mr. Singh had taken from the bank to start his own foam business. In the later chapters, I will tell you briefly about the business.

All it took was just a minute for Kunal to strip the cloak of a kid off his back and wear the iron suit of struggle, hard work and extremely robust lifestyle. But Kunal is a hero and a hero always remain one. Even if the suit was made up of hot iron with pins of pain and hardships attached to it. But it was a suit nevertheless. And what is a hero without his suit? He donned the armor of struggle and rigorous trials and tribulations without any complaints.

The hero with an effervescent smile emerged victorious after vanquishing all the demons that surrounded him. Today, he stands tall and reigns like a king. No negativity dares cross his path.

**Chapter 8.**

**Season Of Changes**

“Please Baba, last time. I will never bother you for your bike ever again,” crouched at Mr. Singh’s feet, I pleaded him. Mr. Singh owned a Java, it was an extremely popular bike in those days. It had the looks of a ravishing sports bike. A Java ride was bound to turn heads and attract the most coveted attention of the opposite sex. Baba looked at me affectionately and said, “Your promise of ‘never again’ will expire in two days’ time. once again you will crouch at my feet like a small puppy,” Kunal interrupted, “Bhikhari, Baba call him a Bhikhari.” Baba glared at him reproachfully. But he was unstoppable, Kunal continued, “Baba, this *Babu sahib* sitting at your feet has three sleek cars parked under his lavish bungalow. But this guy here would still implore you for a bike.”

Baba smiled and nodded in an understanding manner. He then signaled me with his hands, “Go there,” pointing towards the location of keys, he said, “Go, get the keys from there. And do keep in mind, no racing and no bike stunts. Be careful both of you.”

Baba knew it way too well as to why did I need his bike. It was definitely not for some urgent work, and there definitely was no emergency. All I wanted was to ride all around the city with Kunal by my side on his CBZ as I sped across the city on Baba’s Java.

Like a comet, I shot towards the key stand and snatched the bike keys from its place. The two of us then covered familiar roads of Bhopal like Jay and Veeru of Sholay. This used to be a part of our routine.

Those days, the two of us were so busy fooling around that it never occurred to us that the final term for the eleventh standard has arrived. As it is, due to our busy schedule rotating around WALMI, road rides, my crazy kind of long drives on Maruti 800 and so on and so forth, we never got any chance to prepare ourselves for the final term.

Somehow, we managed to give our papers. Even on the final day of the exam, we were carefree like a child and attempted all the questions without any fuss. The two of us had sharp brains which is why we were not bothered about the grades. We knew we would pass.

Well, now for the toppers to be happy with the grades of just passed or the marks of an average student were something unappreciated and unacceptable for the family or teachers. But Baba was a different man. He never behaved like a father. He was more of a friend with streaks of a mentor and a guide.

The day of the results finally arrived. Kunal handed his report card to Mr. Singh. He scanned the term end report surreptitiously. In the end, he just said, “70%...hmm. I hope you know what you are doing. If you are aware of the effects of these marks in your life, I am cool with it.” Mr. Singh was not the kind of father who would pressurize, compel or condemn his son for low grades. Suddenly, something crossed his mind, Mr. Singh asked Kunal, “What about Rahul, how did that *pagal* score?” his voice was filled with love and affection as he asked about me. “65%,” Kunal replied flatly but he could not stifle his smile for long, as he informed his father about my grades. Mine was not very different from his. We were our mirror image, an exact replica of the other.

Mr. Singh raised his hands in mock exasperation, “The two of you must get hold of yourself. What is it the two of you do whole day is beyond the scope of my menial comprehension.” He seemed to have laid down his defense. Kunal’s father always ruffled his hair in order to pull his legs. This time too he ruffled his hair and Kunal just said, “Baba not again, no.”

“Do you remember our crew cut days Kunal?” Mr. Singh asked him looking far out somewhere in a remote distance of their past. “Yes baba I completely do,” Kunal replied instantly with the same smile on his face. He too could visualize the father and son duo as he reminisced about the good old past memories. “Baba, how about repeating the same haircut today. It will be like a quick walk down the memory lane. Both of us can have the same haircut once again. What do you reckon?” Kunal was the most loving and obedient son. Whereas Mr. Singh was the perfect epitome of an ideal father and true gentleman, he rejected his son’s childish idea by saying, “I don’t want to break the hearts of all the girls who drool over your locks.”

Although it was an innocent sentence by a loving father but at that moment Kunal realized when his father used to cut his hair short for his son, he was a handsome young man. Many women must have been after him. But he remained oblivious to all of them. To him, they were nothing more than a distraction. He never bothered about his looks or life. His son Kunal was his life. He had sworn to provide Kunal with the very best of everything. Mr. Singh had taken a vow to make sure Kunal never felt lonely again. And till his last breath, he made sure to live by the promise he made to himself.

As the two of us stepped in standard XII, Kunal took admission in one of the leading IIT prep coaching centers of Bhopal. Regardless of the fact that his grades had slumped from its original status and now stood somewhere around those of an average student. Nobody could compete with his razor sharp and super intelligent brain. He belonged to the class of the intelligentsia par excellence.

Kunal was an extremely intelligent boy and soon everyone in his coaching center came to learn about his intellect. He studied physics and mathematics there.

Physics classes was a piece of cake for him. What do you expect of the boy who has grown up reading books of Albert Einstein, Stephen Hawking and other prominent physicists instead of fiction novels…. a genius mind of course.

Be it Einstein’s theory of relativity, Hawking’s theory of black holes or the history of time, or the plain simple laws of motion by Newton. Kunal knew intricate theories of physics like the back of his hand.

He is the kind of person who mixed well with everyone and it was not difficult for people to develop an instant liking for him. It was quite common for people to take an instant liking to him or get impressed by him. Everybody who came within his radar was bound to be in awe of him. But the problem was Kunal chose very few people to come close to him. It was very difficult to attract him or gain his attention. He was attractive by default but none could attract him.

Our school, Campion, was an all-boys school. All we ever saw of girls was during one of those rare occasions of inter-school competitions. Many tales of sweet romance blossomed during such events. I and Kunal were not so lucky. When thrown into girls’ company, we simply chose to remain silent. Our shyness was mistaken as vanity by many. Never mind, these things did not bother us much. Or we pretended to show off that it did not.

However, things changed for Kunal during his coaching classes. There he met this mind-blowingly sweet natured girl named Devika Nafde. Whenever he took an initiative to answer the questions thrown at them by their coaching Sir, the entire class used to get mesmerized by the abundance of knowledge he possessed in the science. Kunal has immense knowledge and calling him a powerhouse of information would not be untrue. Till this day, he can talk on almost any topic one chooses to talk to him about. It is due to his knowledge he is where he is today.

Majority of the girls in his coaching classes drooled over this tall, handsome and extremely fair complexioned good-looking boy. Among the group of girls, Devika was the only one who attracted Kunal. She had beautiful twinkling eyes that complemented her extraordinarily soulful smile. Whenever she smiled, beautiful angels of joy and happiness danced in her eyes. Nobody could help but fall for that drop dead gorgeous good looks. She was a lethal combination of good looks and kind disposition.

For the first few weeks, the two of them just exchanged shy glances and cordial greetings. Butterflies the size of dinosaurs used to somersault in his stomach whenever she threw him that beautiful smile of hers.

One fine day, Devika came and stood in front of him. His heartbeat accelerated at a frantic speed as she handed him her phone number. That was the first time his heart beat for someone in such a weird manner. Soon, the romance developed and within a few months, my bro was officially committed to the sweetest girl I could ever come across.

Kunal’s relationship with Devika did not change his friendship with me. Our friendship remained unaffected. The crazy routine of junk food stall hopping, bike rides, talks of future and spreading nuisance all over the place continued in its well-paced manner. Now, there was one more topic of discussion – Devika.

“Bro, doesn’t she has any girlfriend, cousin or sister who looks as sweet as her? I asked Kunal hopefully. He turned his face towards me and asked curiously, “And why do you ask this question?”

My reply, as usual, was lame and glare worthy, “Bro, I also want a girl like Devika. She should be sweet, simple, and beautiful and understanding like Devika and not some pain in the ass like the rest.” Slapping me on my head, he muttered, “Ass!”

**Chapter 9.**

**The Giant Leap**

It was the month of April and the year was 2002, we had just got our admission in standard XIIth. Life was still the same for us. We were unaware as to what future held in store for Kunal.

As Kunal kept aside his backpack after returning from school, Mr. Singh said, “Kunal, I have something important to tell you, or you can say something of utmost importance to share with you.”

Kunal stopped in mid-way of his work and asked his father in a serious tone, “Is everything okay Baba? Are you alright? What is it?” Instantly, he was gripped by all sorts of wearisome thoughts. “Relax beta, calm down,” Mr. Singh tried to pacify him. He knew Kunal was extremely possessive of his father. Even the smallest thing related to Mr. Singh was of great importance to him. In fact, anything related to Mr. Singh was his first priority. First Baba and then everything and everyone else.

“I have submitted my papers,” Mr. Singh broke the news in an extremely calm voice to Kunal. He was a little taken aback by the sudden news of his father leaving the job. Although he knew his father must have had some valid reasons to quit his job in the bank. He thought, for sure Baba has something else, some other plan ready because his father was an extremely meticulous and organized person. He had an extremely cautious and careful bend of mind. So, surely there must be something or the other ready. But still, quitting a well-paid, government service was something that Kunal was not able to take as calmly as his father broke the news to him.

“What will you do now Baba?” he asked his father in a nervous tone. Mr. Singh replied to him exuberantly, “I will chase my dream Beta. I will do something that I have always wanted to do. I have taken the giant leap and I wish to make it big soon. The whole world will stand witness to my success story. Our struggle story,” Mr. Singh said with confidence oozing from every word he uttered.

“Come and sit here,” he waved to his son and asked him to sit next to him. Kunal sat beside his father and Mr. Singh started his story, “I still remember the day I submitted my resignation letter.”

Mr. Singh continued, “The man sitting opposite me was rightfully taken aback, but I had to do what I had to do.” Turning towards Kunal, he said, “Now don’t give me those incredulous looks. I did what was for the best of me and you.”

Mr. Singh looked at Kunal deep in his eyes and confirmed, “I have served in State Bank of India the tenure that was expected of me. I had made sure to be there for the exact amount of time that would ensure the best pension possible. Now, I will get my remuneration without any botheration.” Mr. Singh exhaled a sigh of relief.

Kunal was still not sure what his father was talking about, “But what exactly do you have on your mind?” he asked his father unsure. Mr. Singh gave him a long lingering look and then said, “Surprise!”

Kunal smacked his hand on the table in mock frustration saying, “Oh come on, I have had enough surprise for a day. Anything more than this would turn into a shock. Please tell me what is it, Baba.”

Mr. Singh patted him vehemently on his back and said, “Come, come let's go, I have something important to show you.” Kunal had no idea what had come over his father and why was he behaving in such an erratic manner. But the whole energy and positive of Mr. Singh filled him with great excitement. He too was a part of everything and he was more than eager to see the surprise which as per his father, Mr. Singh was hiding from him for more than a few months now.

The two of them drove on for a long time and then after almost an hour and half of traveling they entered Mandideep, it is an industrial town located 23 km from Bhopal.

Standing in the midst of a vast land, Mr. Singh pointed towards a void location and informed Kunal, “This is the place where I am going to build the best foam industry of all – KunSar!” For a few seconds, Kunal could not believe as to what his father had just told him. The dreams of his father being an entrepreneur would finally come true. They had reached that stage of life. Finally, they will realize all of their dreams. His father is finally on his own.

Kunal raced towards his father and gave him a bear hug. He was totally thrilled with the news. “Baba, what does KunSar mean?” Kunal asked Mr. Singh curiously, “There is only one being whom I have always placed, in all walks of life, before me. Kun stands for you my son, it is the first three letters of your name – Kunal.” His father said with moist eyes. Kunal was equally touched and felt emotional at that time, “I know Sar is the first three letters of your name – Sarvadeep. This makes KunSar, oh Baba, you mean so much to me, I just cannot explain,” Kunal hugged his father and declared. That was the most emotional moment of their life. Kunal was very much moved by his father’s endeavour and especially the name he had chosen for his company was something that had left Kunal totally speechless.

Mr. Singh was an exemplary father who lived for his son, his son was his universe, and Kunal must never suffer due to the lack of mother or siblings, Mr. Singh left no stones unturned to make sure Kunal did not feel alone in his life. He fulfilled a good part of his life. As far as his friends and love life was concerned, Mr. Singh never ever interfered, he left his son on his own. He never imposed any sort of compelling rules over his son.

Mr. Singh pointing at the various locations of the site they stood on, he said, “This is where the machines would be installed,” running to the other direction at the corner, he narrated the location of the different machines he is going to work on. He pointed at the other side and said, “This is where I am going to sit, you can also call it my office.”

Mr. Singh ran and stood at the various points of his one-acre land and explained which machine he was going to install in which location. Although all they could see was a vast land or plain green field but the two of them could visualize the entire factory in its working condition. There were machines rolling on the side. The other machines produced foam. There were tiles of bonded foams and rebounded foams. The two of them stood there dumbfound as they witnessed the leading industry in foaming business.

That time, they could only see the future with their mind’s eyes. Soon with the dedication, perseverance and never say die attitude of Kunal, the dreams of KunSar being the No.1 manufacturer and exporter of foaming industry was realized with a slight difference in the name of the company.

“Baba, how will you manage everything?” Kunal asked his father excitedly. “Beta, I am your father and I want to set an example for you and all the other budding entrepreneurs?” he replied confidently.

“Baba, who will opt to become an entrepreneur at the age of 48?” Kunal asked his father the question because Mr. Singh was somewhere around the age of 47 or 48 when he quitted his job at the bank. In those days people were not as adventurous as Mr. Singh. Entrepreneurship was an unheard term and leaving a government service or a fixed post was a completely alien idea for the working class at that time.

“Beta, I have already applied for a loan to start my business and have offered a proposal which took me months to complete. In that proposal, I have explained my plan of action in detail. The details of the investment, profit, and total turnover has been pointed to the best of my ability. Not just the profit and capital, I have also included the possibility of success and the future of foam industry in India. In my proposal, I have filled up all the loopholes. It is a watertight project which is bound to provide me with fruitful results in the given period of time.” Mr. Singh droned on with his plans and highlighted the future success to his son.

Kunal could not help control his happiness and excitement on listening to the detailed description of his father’s future business. His heart was bursting with happiness and pride as he looked at the vast expanse of land in front of him. Inhaling the heartwarming smell of the land of future factory KunSar, Kunal closed his eyes and let the feeling of the euphoria engulf him. He wanted to absorb each and every second of the moment, each and every atom of his surrounding, and each and every emotions of the two of them from every pores of his body.

This was the best day of his life. He wanted to live every second of it. Finally, his father would be on his own. Every day, when he saw his father heading towards that nine to five job, he told himself, my father is not meant for this. He is meant for larger things in life. He is meant for something great and extraordinary. And today, his father had taken his first step towards realizing his dream. Soon, he will live it up!

**Chapter 10.**

**The Surreal Reality**

The days dragged at its normal pace. The tuitions for the IIT continued in the coaching center. Kunal, myself and Devika sat on a bench. The romantic couple was separated by a barricade named Rahul. I sat between the two of them. Much to Devika’s annoyance, I always sat in the midst of the two. She truly despised my presence because naturally, she wanted to spend maximum time with her beau all to herself. With me in between the two, Devika did not receive the undivided attention she so wanted and obviously deserved.

Initially, during most of their dates, I was the most unwanted company possible. This may sound outright weird but I also accompanied Kunal on his first date. Accompany would not be the appropriate word, an unwanted accomplice would do more justice to my irritating presence during their romantic outings.

During Kunal’s first date, as the two of them sat uncomfortably, I continued to talk. My motto was simple, I just wanted to see how does it feel to go on a real date. So far, I had only seen guys from my class or people I am not too close to going on a date with girls. But Kunal was different from the rest, he was my brother, my best friend. So it was more than compulsory for me to go on his date with him.

“You study in St. Joseph convent, don’t you?” although I knew the name of her school way too well still I asked her the question. It was simply my way of breaking the ice. Devika just nodded her head which was barely visible and I could not make anything of it, whether it was in affirmation or negation I am yet to know. The same barely visible shake of the head I received as an answer when I asked her about her friends at school.

Finally, when I asked her, “Will you introduce me to one of your friends,” Kunal got up and glared at me. I understood the sensitivity of the situation and rose from my place. Sensing Devika’s uneasiness, Kunal sent me away that day.

Followed by that incident, whenever they used to go on a date, I always used to coax him to tag me along. Sometimes, I was there with them, which was not very frequent. Many at times, Kunal and Devika spent cozy alone time together.

The two of them had come very close to each other. It was on a moonlit night when Kunal called her up. “Hi,” she said over the phone in that familiar sweet tone of her.

“Devika, I want to tell you something. May I?” Kunal sounded eager and nervous. His voice held a faint quiver to it as he spoke. This was mainly due to his love-filled heart which beat at a supersonic speed. Devika closed her eyes as she nodded her head vigorously. Her long tresses danced all over her beautiful face as she shook her head in affirmation. He cannot see me through the phone, she suddenly realized, “Yes tell me,” she whispered softly in his ear.

Her magical voice rang like silver bells, it sounded like a melodious wind chime on a rainy night in his ear. Kunal mustered all his courage. Finally being able to find his voice, he blurted, “I love you, Devika.”

The three magical words uttered by the most charming boy she ever met or her prince charming whom she had adored from the very first time she set her eyes on him. It made her head reel for a moment. she blushed crimson when she heard him profess his love for her.

Devika knew Kunal was expecting a reply from her end. She was an extremely sincere soul. There was no point dragging the episode and act pricey like the average girls. Devika too felt extremely strongly for Kunal. No sooner did he express his feelings for her, Devika smiled and said in her singsong voice, “I love you too Kunal.” The moment she said the most coveted three golden words of eternal joy, the line went dead. She hung up the phone out of sheer coyness.

Till date, Kunal is a diehard romantic and a complete love fool. That day Kunal did not behave any different from how he would behave today. He simply kissed the phone out of pure joy. I stood there enjoying the sight of a happy Kunal. I saw a boy who was totally in love with the girl of his dreams. To call Devika as his first love would not be wrong.

The studies continued at its normal pace. On the other hand, Mr. Singh was completely engrossed in setting up his factory – KunSar.

“How are the things at Baba’s end? What is the progress of your factory Kunal?” I asked him one day in a matter of fact tone. “Baba is busy streamlining everything from the market’s end. He has to set up a stronghold in the market before he starts manufacturing the foam?” Kunal told me whatever he knew of his father’s startup business.

Mr. Singh was someone I always looked up to. This time too he had left a deep impact on my mind with his bold step. Totally in awe of him, I expressed my reverence for Mr. Singh to Kunal, “Baba is someone with an extraordinary valor and courage. At the mere of forty-eight, he has taken such a daring initiative,” I continued my litany of Mr. Singh, “He has taken entrepreneurship to the next level by setting up examples for the generations of entrepreneurs to follow. I mean to say who actually leaves a government service at the peak of one’s career in order to follow one’s dream. To start up his own business,” I concluded.

Kunal smiled and said, “Well, that’s Baba for you. He has his own style and charisma. He loves great challenges and welcomes new adventures with open arms. This does not mean he is a reckless man. If you look at his business plan, the one he submitted to the bank to acquire his loan, you will get bowled over by his expertise, the way he presented his entire setup. The precise detailing and pointwise business structure are absolutely noteworthy. What could possibly have required multiple minds to come up with something as foolproof as KunSar, Baba created each and everything right from the scratch all by himself. Totally on his own. He surely is a one-man army. I would call him gifted.”

Suddenly, Kunal looked at me surprised, as if he was snapped away from his untimed reverie, “Hey….exam is just around the corner. This time, we cannot afford to goof up buddy. Class XII is extremely important for all of us,” he continued a little unsure of his future. A lot had been going on in his head since long. To him, Devika was also his responsibility. He could visualize a beautiful future with her. To achieve that, it was important for him to work hard.

“Yes, especially when you and Devika have decided to take admission in the same engineering college,” I said playfully and winked at him.

“Correct dude, I just want to clear my IIT or MIT entrance and score an admission there,” Kunal expressed his plans for the future.

Here, Kunal was making future plans for his studies and life ahead with Devika. Those days, we only used to make plans at night, after a long and tiring day of roaming all over the lanes, by lanes and roads of Bhopal. Next morning, we used to start all over again. The vagabonds within us used to surface every morning, persist throughout the day and go to sleep at night.

Kunal was a free bird and all he did was soar higher and higher in his own sky. At that time, his flight was directionless, he soared aimlessly here and there, and everywhere. It was only after his life took a U-turn, did he change his entire lifestyle. He did not choose the change, the twist of fate decided to change his life. One can also say, it was the change that chose him.

The change may not have been too welcoming. But somehow, Kunal managed to adapt to the change. He did not embrace the hard facts of life with open arms. Nevertheless, he accepted each and every harsh reality with that ever present smile on his charming visage.

Hugging me he said, “My greatest fear is loneliness. I fear losing people close to me.” Sensing the panic in his voice, I got a little anxious, “Why is it you say so bro, I am there, Devika is there. Of all the other people, your Baba is and will always be there for you. what makes you say that. You will never be lonely bro.” I was beyond worry on hearing all this.

Holding me close to him he said, “Bro, of late I have been having some sort of premonitions. These are weird feelings. I fear that soon I will be left on my own without any help or guide. There will be no one by my side when a calamity so severe befalls over me. I will have to tread extremely difficult and crucial paths all by myself.”

The ghosts of fear of the unknown were etched clearly on his handsome face. he looked forlorn and lost. That day, there was something about the way he spoke to me, it shook me from within. I myself had gotten scared. What if, all this comes true. I didn’t know at that time, all his fear, nightmares and premonitions would come true!!

**Chapter 11.**

**The First Blow**

The two of us managed to clear our class XIIth. Those days, what mattered more than scoring good marks in term end exams of XIIth standard was clearing the IIT and AIEEE. To be honest, maybe we did not give in our best those days to the entrance tests.

The two of us sat at our favorite spot on the dam of WALMI discussing about IIT results. “We are still not ready for IIT I guess,” I stated, looking out vaguely at the void space ahead. We did not make it to IIT and this did not go well. It was difficult to comprehend that how come we did not get into IIT. The two of us considered ourselves extremely smart and intelligent. This sudden failure was something totally unacceptable.

It is a confirmed fact that IITians are carved from a different dice. We are not IIT material. This was something that did not go down well. The question was, what next. What if we fail to clear AIEEE too? Now that would pose a great problem for both of us.

Although there was another option in PET but that was something which Kunal was not taking into consideration.

Unable to take the disturbing silence anymore, once again, I tried to break the ice, I said, “Relax buddy, it is just IIT, we still have other options left open. Don’t lose heart like this. It is just the beginning. The road ahead is way too beautiful,” I did my best to console him.

Turning his head towards me, away from the vacant expanse ahead, he retaliated, “It is not just IIT. To me it is “The IIT,” he stated by showing quoted fingers. I had touched the wrong wires and now, he was blasting at me. “IIT means Indian Institutes of Technology. It is not some sort of private educational body. It is an autonomous public institute set up by the government. This is the heaven, the place to be for the cream of students. Here, high quality, engineers, technologists, and scientists are produced. It was my dream then, it is my obsession now. I have to get into it. I will make sure that it is either IIT or nothing.”

There was suppressed fury and anger in his voice, he was angry at himself for not being able to clear the entrance. “Stop being so hyper. We are just students. To us, any educational institute would do. There are greatest scientists, scholars, and engineers who did not have the perfect opportunities to acquire the best of education. They had it the hard way. They did not give up or quit. You are sounding more like a quitter than a winner. Remember something bro, whenever you feel low, think of this quote by our very own Big B, “Winners never quit and quitters never win.”

Even though, the quote was inspirational but the way Kunal looked at me with a slightly lopsided grin and “not again” looks in his eyes, I understood something somewhere was terribly wrong. “Whose line is it anyway, whose quote is it *bhai*?” Kunal asked me. By now I had understood, I have once again slipped, “It is by Mr. Amitabh Bachchan, I saw it online,” I confirmed.

Clapping his hands in applause he stated, “You know what Abraham Lincoln has to say about internet or precisely speaking the quotes published online?” “B…but,” I wanted to interrupt him as to how come Abe Lincoln predicted about the internet when he died over a century ago, before the arrival of the internet. This was outright absurd and completely confusing. Kunal stopped me by raising his hands and continued, “He said, “You can't believe everything you read on the internet.” If you search the internet for this quote the date is published as 1868 which is three years after the death of Abraham Lincoln. Now the question is, how come he predicted about something a century prior to its invention and that too three years after his death?”

By that time, I was scratching my head with embarrassment and not confusion. I was smart enough to understand where exactly did I go wrong. Hence I put down my defense and asked him, “I agree that the online quotes are not always genuine and I should have definitely done my research before quoting those lines. Now, will you be kind enough to explain, who said those lines about winner and quitters?” Kunal smiled and softly smacked me on my head as he said, “Vince Lombardi, the world-famous American football player, successful coach and an executive in the NFL – National Football Player.

Rubbing both his hands together, he said, “Let us get ready for the results of AIEEE.”

AIEEE is quite similar to IIT in terms of merit and prestige. It is now commonly known as JEE main – Joint Entrance Examination – Main. During our time, it was popular by the acronym AIEEE, precisely speaking All India Engineering Entrance Examination. The entrance exams were organized by Central Board of Secondary Examination in India in the year 2002.

For Kunal, 2002 was the year of many changes. That was the time when Baba started his own startup company. By the time Kunal cleared his XIIth standard, Baba was totally engrossed in his upcoming factory in Mandideep – the industrial area of Bhopal.

The days went by as we awaited the results of our AIEEE. This would decide our chances of admission in the prestigious engineering colleges of India. My results were out, I could not clear AIEEE. This dampened my spirit because now the only option I was left with was PET.

Dialing Kunal’s number I awaited his response with bated breath, “Hi,” his voice sounded flat. “Did you check your result? I asked him in a not so confident voice, “Yes I did,” his tone remained unchanged.

Somehow, I could understand something somewhere was not right, mustering my courage, I stated in a nonchalant tone, “I could not clear my AIEEE. What about you?” I asked him.

“What do you reckon? My results are not very different from yours. I also could not clear it,” this time his voice sounded a little heavy.

The two of us tried to talk about trivial things of no valid interest but soon we got bored. None of us were in the mood to carry on with our formal chitchat. I hung up.

The two of us had attempted various entrance examinations but did not get success there. We were neither selected in IIT nor AIEEE.

As the two of us sat on my terrace, Kunal asked me, “So this is it? You are going back to Jabalpur?”

My heart was also heavy with the disturbing thought of going away but there was nothing much I could do about it.

Looking at me with the same sad eyes, he asked me, “What is the name of this college you are going to again?” I could sense that he was not very happy with the fact of me leaving him.

“Hitkarni College of Engineering and Technology. It is one of the private colleges of Jabalpur,” my response was meticulously flat.

Suddenly, the mercurial mood of Kunal surfaced, he was back to his normal chilled out self. He simply looked at me and said, “You are just going to a different town. You are not dying on me,” this made the two of us burst into laughter. This is how we were, we could not be upset for long. In fact, when we were together we could not help remain serious for long.

For my engineering, I returned back to my native land, Jabalpur. Ever since then, I have stayed here only.

The change in my location did not change anything in our friendship. Distance never posed any problems for the two of us. Till date, we continue to see each other once in two to three months’ time.

The hectic schedule or a tiring day always ends in a light mood with a glass of wine or joint. The high time is brotherhood time. Those are the moments when we are back to our old self. The two brothers laugh, cry and talk about things that are important and not so important. The strong bond of friendship continues till today. We always catch up over a long weekend once in a while.

When I relocated to Jabalpur, Kunal decided to take a drop. He was not willing to get into a private college. “I cannot take admission in a private college,” he sounded extremely sure of his decision. He had made up his mind that he will take a drop and prepare himself for IIT entrance examinations next year. This obviously was a bold decision, especially for a student.

Nobody, no student would take a gap of one year and see his fellow classmates move ahead of him while he would stick to his dream of getting an admission in IIT. There definitely is no problem in private colleges but Kunal was adamant he will not get into any private college. His decision was final.

“What does Baba has to say about it?” I asked him confused. “Well, Baba will say whatever he has to say. He is yet to know about it,” he informed me nonchalantly.

My Pandora box of questions was open. I have always been like this, highly inquisitive. Once I started asking questions, there was no stopping me after that. I threw my next question at him, “What about Devika? Will she take a drop just like you or she has something else on her mind?”

“Devika is waiting for her time,” he smiled as he said this. I couldn’t understand and I expressed my ignorance, “What do you mean?” I asked. “Well, Devika will do what she has to do. I am nobody to govern her preference in studies,” the liberal confirmed.

**Chapter 12.**

**The Fatal Twist of Fate**

The next day Mr. Singh sat opposite Kunal and asked him, “Are you sure about it? Taking a drop of an entire year at this juncture is not a wise thing to do,” obviously he was miffed by Kunal’s decision of taking a year’s gap in his academic field. This was the time when each day was vital in a student’s life. And to see a year’s gap was something nobody would take up wisely especially at the career front.

Mr. Singh tried to explain the same thing to him, he said, “Son, you need to understand the importance this year. It is going to play a major role in your future. You must not let a year go to waste just because you want to get into IIT. There are end number of IItians all over the world doing extremely well in their respective fields. If you have it in you son, you can achieve it. Be it any college. True merit never goes astray.” Mr. Singh was not willing to agree with Kunal. He considered his decision childish and immature.

“This is not a wise thing to do son. You must not take such a risk. Don’t play with your career.” Mr. Singh said for the final time. “Really Baba? You really think it is a risk. Since when did you start to doubt your son’s decision? Baba, have faith in me, I will not let you down. I will get into IIT next year and then there will be no looking back. We are going to go places, Baba,” Kunal announced with confident dreams in his eyes.

Holding his father’s hands, he spoke his heart out to him, “Some dreams don’t let you sleep while there are certain dreams that are not meant to be slept upon. Baba, getting into IIT is my only dream. It won’t let me sleep nor will I sleep upon it.”

Mr. Singh smiled at his son and said, “Why only IIT son, make sure all your dreams are close to obsession. Be the one who always says “I will,” and not “I can.” Be the one who says, “I must,” and not “I will try.” You know something, “TRY,” is an extremely lame term invented by someone with no confidence at all. Whenever someone says, “I will try,” I understand, this person would only come up with excuses and no fruits.”

Holding both his shoulders in a tight grip, Mr. Singh shook him with enthusiasm and said, “Set the sky as your limit son. You must always aim for the moon so that even if you fall, you will fall among the stars. By the way, the moon is just a satellite or calling it a wannabe planet would not be wrong. All the planets evolve from the stars. Each star has a solar system of its own. This means, make such preparations to achieve your goal so that even if you fail to achieve it, you will find yourself way above the goal you had set for yourself. If not the moon then obviously something far more superior than it,” ruffling Kunal’s hair affectionately, Mr. Singh hugged him and said, “Do whatever you please son. I know you will always make me proud.”

This was a big relief for Kunal because he did not want to do anything that would upset his Baba. Now, since he had given him his approval, he felt at ease.

Kunal and Devika sat opposite each other at a coffee joint. Kunal played with his French fries as Devika sipped her cold coffee. Even though Kunal was a little bit low due to his decision of taking a year’s gap. All his friends had moved ahead of him but he had to do what he was meant to do. Devika too had taken admission in one of the private colleges of Bhopal. She too was an engineering student.

“When does the session start?” Kunal asked her in a matter of fact way, “Next week,” she snapped. Devika was totally upset with Kunal because he was taking a year’s gap. This decision of his had wiped off her hopes of studying together with her beau. For two years, she had harbored the dreams of studying together in the same college. But now, with this stupid decision of Kunal or so she thought, she was to study all by herself.

For almost two hours, she suggested him different ways of how the two of them can study together. “How about I also take a drop and the two of us take an admission in the same college next year. That way both of us will be able to study together and spend more time with each other,” she suggested excitedly. This was one of those bizarre ideas of her that proved her innocence and sincerity as far as the importance of this relationship was concerned. “Why are you girls so foolish?” Kunal sounded exasperated.

Had it been any other boy, he would have accepted the proposition but this boy was different. He was not selfish neither did he suffer from male chauvinism, it did not matter one bit to him whether his girlfriend was one year or a couple of years senior to him. If the person opposite to him loved him truly then everything else appeared trivial. All his life, he had craved for love, true love, and with Devika, he experienced true love. She was his solace, his peace of mind. Earlier, it was only Baba for whom he wanted to do great things but now there was an addition. Devika too was a priority for Kunal. He wished to shower her with expensive gifts, lavish lifestyle and worlds of luxury. Kunal was happy in his sweet little world that consisted of Baba and Devika, and maybe me too.

The day for the results of IIT arrived. One year had passed. By now, I was totally into my own engineering classes. I was about to get promoted to the second year whereas Kunal being the man of his word waited for his IIT. As he scanned the chart to locate his name holding his breath. Once, twice, thrice, he looked through the roll numbers over and over again but he could not see what he wished to see. His name was not there. This time too he could not make it.

That day, Kunal returned home with an extremely heavy heart. Mr. Singh entered his apartment at late night. He had been thoroughly occupied in his upcoming business venture. As a routine, he went to Kunal’s room, the lights to his room was turned off. It did not take long for Mr. Singh to realize that his son did not make it.

Mr. Singh switched on the light and asked, “Why are the lights turned out? Is everything okay?” Although he knew everything yet he feigned ignorance. Kunal looked at his father and for a moment Mr. Singh was taken aback by the sadness that lurked in his darling son’s eyes. He could bear anything but under no circumstances could Mr. Singh tolerate his son’s unhappiness.

Taking hurried steps, in just a few strides he stood next to his bed. Mr. Singh was a tall man and Kunal had taken after his father completely. He is an exact replica of his Baba. Hugging his son tightly, Mr. Singh said, “What is it that upsets you so much, son? If it is the thing with IIT then let it not get into your head,” Mr. Singh tried to console him.

“Don’t cry over your past. What has passed is past. Past is never going to come back. Let not your present be affected by something that is not there anymore. It is the present that decides your future,” Mr. Singh’s golden lines sank deep into his skin.

Today, Kunal is what he is only because of his father’s teachings. He owes his success, life, prosperity, skills, in fact, each and everything to his father. He says, “My father made a man out of me. I am what I am because of my Baba’s upbringing. I didn’t have anyone by my side from a very young age. My father was my family. He was my father, mother, sister, brother, friend and relative. As long as he lived, he guided me. Now that he is gone, he still guides me like a lodestar from above. Whenever I am faced with a difficult situation, I just imagine Baba, and think how he would have behaved in a situation like this. Well, everything appears crystal clear to me at that moment.”

That night, Mr. Singh did not let Kunal wear a wet blanket and feel grumpy. He dragged him out of his bed and threw his bike keys at him. The two of them rode all through the town at late night. They ate from a *dhaba*, enjoyed tea from a roadside tea stall. Soon, Kunal forgot all about his sadness. This is really very surprising, how Mr. Singh managed everything so effortlessly and efficiently. Even after having a hectic day in the factory, he always managed to make sure that Kunal never felt lonely or faced any sort of problems whatsoever.

The work at KunSar continued at a rapid speed. During the year when Kunal was busy preparing himself for his IIT, Mr. Singh created and executed his business plans. Everything was in perfect order. The machines had to be of the best quality so obviously after an extensive market research Mr. Singh decided to opt for the machinery of international standard. KunSar was his dream and he did not want to leave any stones unturned to achieve his dream of the No.1 foam manufacturer and exporter.

Followed by machinery, it was time to hire the right candidates to work in his office. Mr. Singh had created a team of finest and most efficient factory workers. By default, he was a perfectionist so he chose candidates that could be worthy of his company, today and in the long run. He handpicked the most skilled employees and interviewed them himself.

The market was already set. He had been meeting various dealers over these years and with his excellent personal relation skills and transparency, he cracked several profitable deals. Mr. Singh held his morals and ethics very close to him. Whenever he spoke to anyone, he made sure the person opposite him had the complete picture of everything.

Initially, he was being suggested to play safe, and not to bare open his heart to everyone. Mr. Singh was the man of honor, he did not believe in cheating or duping people, all he ever said to such men was, “I cannot cheat the same person twice but I can do business with the same person all my life provided I am truthful and honest.” More than profit he believed in goodwill of the company. Money was important but not at the cost of his prestige.

It was his honesty that had spread his name in the market like a rapid fire. Everything was ready and good to go for Mr. Singh. His project was ready to kick-start any moment. Kunal, on the other hand, did not let the failed attempt in IIT for the second dampen his spirits. He enrolled himself in Bhopal Government College. He took electronics and got busy with his studies.

Their life followed a set routine without any major event or happenings. When I was in my second of engineering, Kunal was in the first year. By this time, Devika too had come to terms with Kunal’s routine. The future was all set, the two of them were to get married once they held an important position in their respective field.

Mr. Singh was totally in his business at this time. Many at times, Kunal visited his father’s business site and helped him with anything his father asked of him. Kunal’s life flipped upside down when he was in his second year of engineering. He faced the worst day of his life. That was the day when the life’s biggest tragedy engulfed him.

**Chapter 13**

**The Sky Falls Down**

Mr. Singh stood in a particular section of his factory where the machinery was being installed. The machinery engineers were busy setting up the different sort of foaming machinery. The factory was filled with energy and exuberance. Everyone was busy working on the newly installed foam machines. He kept running from one section to the other to make sure that everything was in order. He had been working tirelessly since so many months in the hope of realizing his dreams. Today was the day that would take him extremely close to achieving his goal.

Today was the final day of the factory setup. Each and everything was installed and was ready to run. The factory was to take off today. Tomorrow would be another a day. A new day, the day Mr. Singh has been waiting for all his life. He had spent all these years in preparation for the big dream. The table is set, the game has begun, and tomorrow will be the day of victory.

“Sir, please come, the engineers are calling you for the test run,” Madan, one of the factory workers informed Mr. Singh.

Both the father and son were busy leading their own separate lives. One was setting up a new industry whereas the other one was making preparations to skyrocket their project after completing his degree course.

Kunal was in the second year of his engineering degree. His aim remained fixed. He wanted the very best for Baba and his longterm girlfirned, his first love, Devika. Kunal was confident of doing extremely well in campus recruitment. Even though that was to happen more than two years from that day as he had recently got promoted to the second year. Still, he had started to prepare himself to become the very best of the best, to be at the top. The topper streak was back.

It was during his first year in college, I had come down from Jabalpur to spend a few days with him. As I was in the second year of my engineering degree, I boasted about the crazy things I did while he was busy preparing for IIT entrance.

“Senior,” Kunal scoffed and added, “Big deal! You have not achieved anything extra in this one year. You are still the very same to me.”

“Nope,” I denied and said, “I have got something on me which you cannot even dream about.” I told him vainly with an extra smug look on my face.

“What is it, if I may ask?” Kunal tried to sound bored and appear indifferent.

“Blessings of *Bholenath*,” I winked at him.

Bholenath is the name of Lord Shiva. He has many facets and *avatars*. Etymologically, the term Shiva means that which is not. It means the absence of the presence.

As per science, the dark matter – darkness, constitutes a good part of the cosmos. To be precise, the cosmos has more of dark matter than the stars – the part that which is in the light. The part that is manifested to the human knowledge. The dark matter may also mean that which is not there. And as per Hindu *shastra*, Shiva means that which is not. Therefore, Lord Shiva can be logically termed as the dark matter – the one that has the entire cosmos within its realm or the one that truly constitutes the entire cosmos is actually Lord Shiva.

Shiva is *Ardhanarishwar*, *nirgun*, *nirakar*. He is both male and female. He is there and not there at the same time. His presence is there in the absence. This means he is there, he is present everywhere. Even when we think that he is not there or does not appear to be present, Lord Shiva is there as well.

Lord Shiva has many *avatars*. One of them has been vastly associated with poppy/weed. Those who smoke marijuana are highly intelligent, extremely wise, and very peaceful. This has been proven by studies conducted during research surveys. This is one of the reasons why there are many progressive countries that have lifted the ban on marijuana, weed, poppy, or grass. They reached this conclusion after conducted an extensive research on the miracle herb.

The engineering students are always experimenting with different sort of machinery. The inbred experimental streak of these individual also gives rise to trying out new fun things. Weed is definitely one of them. Not only do they want to know the intricate details of a machinery. An engineering student is by default an inquisitive soul. They love to tear open everything to know what does it actually constitute. They also love to carry out new experiments with their body. If something is out there under the sun then these people have to experience it. Their mantra is simple, “If someone else can do it then so will I.”

This was one of the reasons why, that day I decided to open another new window to Kunal. Hence, I rolled out a joint in front of Kunal. He gawked at me with childlike surprise as I crushed the weed with a small scissor. I had used a slow burning paper for my joint to make sure that we enjoyed our time to the top. At that moment I felt like Ulysses and I wanted to drink from my cup to the last lees. This is why I used a slow burning paper so that the joint can last for a real long time and the effect can continue for more than just a few minutes.

On lighting up the smoke, I offered him to take a drag, “Here you go my boy, one drag and you will float. Why drink alcohol and die when you can smoke up weed and fly” the wise man within me was in full swing.

There were three of us present at that time. Me, Kunal and Prashant – the third boy was Kunal’s classmate. I took a long drag and felt the smoke heat up my lungs and raid my stomach. Suddenly, I started to feel full. A sense of sheer calmness engulfed me.

Next, it was Kunal, who also took a long drag and closed his eyes. I kind of felt, Kunal is not yet high. So I offered him another drag. This time, after smoking up, when he opened his eyes, I could see red lines in his eyes. He too was high now. Kunal had become very silent. His head reeled as he accessed new crevices of his conscious mind.

Prashant was the one that created the biggest scene among the three of us. I had a hunch that he is not going to stay calm, but Kunal had insisted that we should make him try as well. For Prashant, like the majority of those in the society, weed was more of a taboo. If the need be they can even associate the herb with the list of deadly drugs available in the drugstore for toxic use or maybe with cocaine too. These are the ones who have no idea about the health benefits of weed and consider it more of a drug than an herb. Associating weed with intoxication or physical harm is, in reality, a western world controversy. The drug lords do not want people to know about its benefits simply because their business would stop. By the way, drug lord does not mean the drug mafia, it actually means medicine companies.

Prashant, who had not even inhaled the smoke started to feel high. Honestly, psychology can do wonders to human mind and body. “Bro, bro, get hold of me, I am flying,” Prashant panicked with his hands flailing in the air looking for support. Kunal became nervous as he saw his condition.

I was a pro in this field, I just waved out at him with my body slightly bent forwards and said, “Bro, all of us are on the same airplane, relax.” Prashant then sat in the corner enjoying his trip.

This is how the two of us met from time to time. And each time, we created a huge ruckus.

Kunal was sitting at the back bench of Digital Communication classes. Usually, he preferred a seat somewhere in the middle where he could listen to the lectures clearly. He was a sharp minded pupil, soon the professors, as well as the fellow mates, recognized him. The teachers liked him for his attentiveness and discipline. His classmates enjoyed his company and they loved the hilarious jokes he cracked. The first two semesters got cleared effortlessly. He scored great points in his semesters.

Today, Kunal was restless since morning. He was not his normal self which is why he was disturbingly silent and aloof. The professor continued his lecture but his words did not make any sense to Kunal. Suddenly, a buzzing sound raided his auditory senses and he began to feel claustrophobic.

Kunal and his father were inseparable. His father breathed through Kunal’s lungs. The two of them were literally two souls residing in the same body. The bond between the two was very strong. Even before the great tragedy could ambush him, Kunal started to have extremely strong premonitions about the dark times ahead. The time when he would be bereft of all support and guidance, all love and affection, and all relations and blood ties. Kunal had no idea that he would soon be orphaned in every sense of the word. Even before the tragedy could strike him, Kunal was feeling scared. The fear of something unknown benumbed his senses.

“Hi babes,” Kunal said over the phone. No sooner did the professor leave the class, he dialed Devika’s number. The two of them had come really close to each other by now. The childhood romance or the puppy love of standard XI had blossomed into a full bloom of relationship as Devika entered the third year and Kunal got promoted to the second year.

“What is wrong?” Devika asked him anxiously. It was completely weird how Devika understood Kunal’s mood by a simple “hello.” She did not need to see his face in order to know what was going through his head or how he felt.

Once, he had asked her, “How do you understand everything about me without me telling you anything about it?”

“We share a connection of heart and soul,” she had replied calmly then. She also added, “If one of us is restless, the other person cannot stay calm. Have you ever seen it rain differently on the different flowers in a garden? No. If a rose gets drenched by the rain then the lily must also be drenched by the same rain.” Then holding his strong hand with her softer ones, she had declared, “Remember, you cry, I cry – you jump, I jump.” Hugging her fiercely he said smiling happily, “Oh yes, my beautiful Rose.”

“Kunal, Kunal, say something. Why are you so silent? What is wrong baby?” Devika asked a number of times in an agitated voice.

“Yes, I am here,” Kunal sounded lost, breaking away from his reverie. “Can we meet now, please?” Kunal pleaded in a desperate tone.

“Yes, of course,” Devika replied. As it is she always looked forward to their meet-ups. To her, there was nothing better than a date with her loving boyfriend.

“I will come to your college and pick you up from there,” he made plans with her. On hanging up the call, he dialed my number. There were already a few missed calls from Kunal on my phone as he had tried to get in touch with me. Unfortunately, I was attending my “Micro Processing Units,” lecture at that time and my phone was on silent mode.

No sooner did I see his missed calls, I dialed his number but at that time his phone was busy, most probably, he was talking to Devika at that time.

The first thing he said as soon as I received his call was, “Bhai, I am not feeling well today.” There was no hello, no exchange of greetings, he came straight to the point. Well, this is the kind of bond we shared. There was no beating around the bush in our friendship.

“Why, wh-what happened? Is everything okay?” There was something about the way he spoke that made me extremely nervous. “I am fine bro,” Kunal replied dejectedly and continued, “It is just that I am not feeling too well. From past few days, I have been feeling restless,” he sounded anxious and scared, “I fear something I don’t know, I am afraid of some unknown calamity, I fear, some unprecedented trauma is about to engulf me and tear me into pieces. I will have nowhere to go, nobody to turn to,” Kunal narrated his fear in a frenzied tone.

He was cowering in fear and it was completely evident from his voice. “Don’t you worry, everything will be okay. Don’t overstress yourself like this. Baba often worries about you and your over anxious behavior is not going to solve any problems. It will only add up more to his and your troubles.”

For a prolonged time, I tried to console him to the best of my capability. I have no idea how far was I able to help him at that time but sure enough, he sounded a bit more relaxed when he hung up the phone.

Kunal and Devika sat opposite to each other in a coffee shop. Devika looked at Kunal from the rim of the coffee mug as she pretended to take a small sip of her drink. Kunal was trying very hard to maintain a relaxed posture but his wandering eyes gave away the falsity of the calm posture futilely put up by him.

“Will you stop that,” Devika said in a stern voice, he tried to feign ignorance as he said, “What?”

“Will you stop worrying so much?” this time she used a firmer tone as she continued, “You have not been sleeping properly and avoiding me from past two days,” she reprimanded him. “You always shut me out during the time of crisis. When you are faced with problems, you tend to deal it all by yourself, by shutting me out completely,” she condemned him for his erratic behavior.

“I shut you out because no matter how hard I try, I can’t open up with you on certain issues. I just can’t get myself to share my problems with you,” he told her in a repenting voice. “But trust me Devika, you are the first one I turn to when I am in pain,” he confessed sincerely.

The two of them soon got busy with discussing their studies, college, family, and future. By the time, Kunal dropped her back to her college, he felt a lot lighter. The feeling of restlessness had subsided marginally. Now, he felt relaxed and his premonitions or fears had receded to an oblivion.

The remaining part of the day progressed at a normal pace. Kunal focused on his lectures conducted throughout the day. Followed by his regular classes, Kunal headed straight towards his favorite place on the campus – the college library. He was completely in his skin now. The hip hopper of the past had now been restricted only to his memories of the days long gone. Now was the reign of the topper.

Kunal had always excelled in his studies. Now, with my return to Jabalpur, Kunal was back to his old self. Just like Mr. Singh, Kunal too was a voracious reader. Off late, he too had developed a new found interest in the books related to science and technology.

After spending a healthy amount of time in the library, Kunal headed towards his bike. Suddenly, his phone gave out a shrill cry, the contact name “Baba” flashed on his mobile screen. Those were the days of non-touchscreen button phones. Those were the days where unlike phones, people were extremely smart. In those days, the majority of the mobiles phones had a black and white screen with faded blue light.

Mr. Singh was a man of great taste. Even during those days, he made sure that his son uses the most expensive model of Nokia mobiles. Kunal owned a colored screen multimedia phone with white light.

“Hello Baba,” Kunal answered his phone within three rings. “Beta, do you have any plans fixed for the evening?” Mr. Singh asked his son. Kunal replied with a question, “You mean today evening?” Mr. Singh confirmed in positive instantly.

“No Baba, I will be home. Are you going to be late today?” Kunal asked Mr. Singh.

“No way, I am not going to be late. I will be waiting for you at home only when you return from the college,” Mr. Singh was bubbling with energy. His joy was clearly visible from his voice.

Mr. Singh told Kunal, “Make sure you are free in the evening.” “But why?” he asked him again. Kunal was not being able to understand why his father was insisting so much on the same subject over and over again. At that moment, Mr. Singh shared with him the happiest news of all, “Tonight we are going to have a small celebration.”

“What is the occasion Baba,” Kunal sounded eager as he asked his father excitedly. This is when Mr. Singh disclosed casually, “Well, nothing special as such. It is just that all the machinery have been finally installed today, and ….” “Wow, that’s a wonderful news,” Kunal interrupted Mr. Singh out of sheer joy.

“Yes, it is, son. And you know what, the machines have been tested also,” Mr. Singh declared. Kunal was overjoyed, he said, “You mean the test run too has been conducted!” Mr. Singh confirmed in affirmation.

“Beta, now you will see for yourself along with the entire world, what your Baba is capable of doing for you. I will make sure to get the very best of the best for my son. As far as your goal is concerned, let the sky be the limit,” Mr. Singh’s voice got choked with happiness. On the other end of the call, Kunal smiled with tearful eyes as he said, “Baba, I have always received the very best of the best from you ever since I remember.”

Soon, the two men who were behaving like small kids said goodbye and hung up with a long lingering smile on their face.

Most probably that was the last time Kunal had smiled heartily and felt relaxed genuinely. That was most certainly the last time Kunal had felt so much at ease.

Humming some Bollywood numbers, Kunal rode towards his home. His red CBZ was still very much a part of him. As he moved towards his gates, his premonitions were back. Slowly, he went towards his house. Outside of their door, he saw Sushila, their help, sitting on the doorstep.

Kunal went towards her apprehensively. The moment she turned her head and came face to face with him, all the blood seemed to have drained from his body at that very moment. Her face was streaked with tears and she burst into bitter sobs as soon as she saw Kunal.

Kunal tried to get hold of her as he asked Sushila, “What is wrong? Why are you sitting outside?” Kunal raided her with questions. And then, he asked her that particular question whose answer he greatly dreaded to hear, “And, why-why are you crying like this?”

Wiping away her incessant tears which did not want to stop, Sushila broke the most tragic news to him, “Sahab has meant with a huge accident. On his way back from Mandideep, his vehicle collided with a giant sized truck.”

The sky literally fell on his head that day, at that very moment. His whole world got shattered. Each and every dream, desire, and all his wish came crumbling down at his feet. The earth seemed to have slipped under his feet. Kunal took a few steps back and was about to fall on the ground, but he did not allow himself to collapse. He gripped his bike for support and stood firm on the ground.

For the first time, in his entire life, he realized, his father was not there to support him at the time he faltered. It was Kunal, who all by himself managed to stay firm. He stood strong, entirely on his own, all by himself.

“Where is he now?” Kunal was finally able to ask Sushila. His own voice sounded extremely strange to his ears. It appeared to come from a great distance.

“Sahab has been taken to the nearby hospital,” Sushila managed to inform Kunal between the sobs.

**Chapter 14.**

**The Fatal Encounter**

“*The number you are trying to reach is presently switched off,*” Once again Kunal received the same recorded message from the IVR as he dialed his father’s mobile phone. It has been more than a few hours now since he had been trying to reach his father.

“Sushila bua, who had called you?” Once again, he asked his maid. “Kunal baba, I had received a call on your phone,” she meant their landline number. Mr. Singh had saved their landline phone number by the term ‘home.’ This is why during the time of his accident somebody chose to inform the victim’s home.

“Do you know who they were? Who had actually called, Bua?” Kunal was literally losing his mind in his father’s absence. The news of Mr. Singh’s accident had literally shattered him. Moreover, his worry seemed to have no limits as he had no idea about his father’s whereabouts.

“Kunal baba, please drink this,” Sushila offered him a glass of milk as Kunal frantically paced around his home. Sushila had been working for Kunal and his father for quite some time now. She was an affectionate lady and treated Kunal like her own.

“I don’t want the milk. I am just not hungry.” Kunal refused to take even a sip of milk. “What did they say about Baba?” Once again Kunal asked the same question. He was in a state of frenzy.

Suddenly, he got up and headed towards the kitchen. Sushila ran after him, “What is it that you want, Baba?” she asked.

“I will get it for you. Please, sit at one place,” Sushila requested. Kunal looked at her with blank eyes, his mind was far away. “Bua, you must go home now, it is getting late,” Kunal told her.

No, no Baba, I can’t leave you alone at this hour. Let Sahab come and then I will leave,” Kunal’s pain lurched to his throat on hearing his father’s name. The idea of him coming back to the house was more than soothing. He smiled at her. That was a heartbreaking smile of pain and loss. Sushila could not get herself to see a young boy in so much of pain, trying his level best not to break down.

Had it been anyone else, there would have been a big chaos. Everyone would have gathered around the victim. But this was Kunal who from a very young age had learned how to live alone. How to bear each and every pain and trauma in life with a smile on his face.

“Bua, you have your own family to look after. Your kids must be hungry and alone. They need you,” he tried to convince her. He also said, “Don’t leave your kids alone Bua, a child is nothing without parents.”

“What about you Baba?” Sushila asked him anxiously. He simply added with full conviction, “I have Baba, I am not alone Bua. Baba will call me up from the hospital. He may call me up anytime soon. I have to get ready also.”

Sushila was easily convinced by this young boy. She patted his head and left. Before she left, she said, “If at any point in time you need me, please drop a message to our local STD/ ISD public call booth run by Shivram bhai.” Sushila was just a domestic help who stayed in their house throughout the day. She took care of everything right from cleaning to cooking. Mr. Singh was an extremely kindhearted gentleman, he had bought a washing machine so that Sushila did not have to work very hard.

Kunal himself is not very different from his father. He too mingles well with everyone. He treats everyone with the same warmth. Whether it is his client or laborer, executive class or labor class – all are dealt with the same charm and of course the same smiling face.

Kunal went and sat on his father’s couch. The warm fragrance of his father body still lingered there. He crouched and bundled himself on the couch. His mind was overcrowded with all sorts of disturbing thoughts. The coziness and comfort of the couch soon wrapped him in a tight embrace.

Kunal saw himself playing with his father in the park. An extremely handsome man stood at the bottom of the slide as the six years old Kunal came sliding down. Before his tiny little boots could touch the ground, his father lifted him up in a tight hug. The strong arms of his father felt so safe and secure.

Next, the young Kunal pointed towards the curved slide, which was a little longer in length than the one he had stepped down from just now.

The other slide had several curves and turns. His father advised, “This slide has many curves. Whenever you face the scary turns, don’t be afraid, just close your eyes and call my name, I will be there.”

Kunal took small steps and stood at the top of the slide. Mr. Singh waved at him and directed him to come towards him as he held his arms open for his son. The young Kunal felt scared because the slide was huge and twisted like an anaconda every now and then.

Closing his eyes, Kunal slid down the slide. Initially, he did not wait for the curves to call for Baba, he felt too scared to open his eyes and face his fear. Soon, Kunal was able to adjust his body to the slide and its turns. Even then at the difficult turns, he closed his eyes and called his father.

Just when he got accustomed to the slide and dangerous curves, the slide began to shiver and shake. He was trying hard to hold on to the slide for balance. He held the slide so tight, the slide uprooted from its location and jolted him off from his base.

Kunal was tossing and turning up in the mid air, screaming for help. He continued to cry for help but did not receive any kind of aid whatsoever. Seeing no help coming his way from anywhere, suddenly, he used his ace. He screamed, “Babaaaaa.” At that very moment, his father’s smiling face appeared in front of him. Everything appeared white. Soon, the white light became blinding.

The slide and the jerking vanished, and so did the young Kunal. He saw himself riding a bike. It felt like his CBZ but ran extremely fast. The wind lapped against his face and his hair ruffled in the hard breeze. He felt comfortable seated on his familiar ride.

Kunal rode smoothly, the long road ahead was without any bumps or obstruction. The biggest trauma of the shattered slide was over. That was a chaotic phase. Everything appeared smooth and calm now. Suddenly, he saw a giant sized truck which appeared out of nowhere. Kunal tried to control his bike but the brakes did not seem to work. He panicked as the truck drew near. He desperately sought help but his mind failed to provide him with any sort of helpful tips.

As the truck became extremely close he tightly shut his eyes and whispered *Baba*. All of a sudden, the word worked like a charm. The blaring horn of the truck vanished. He felt someone next to him. He saw his father riding next to him on his Java. “Don’t worry beta, I am always with you. No matter where I go. I will always remain with you, in your heart and in your soul. Your Baba will never leave you.” The face of his father began to get blurred as the image slightly got pixelated. He wanted to reach out to him but the smoky figure of his father started to disappear.

The bike and the truck also disappeared. Kunal found himself sleeping on his bed as Mr. Singh stood in front of him. There was a bright light all around him. He looked very healthy and happy. The black under eyes had gone. His hair did not have the salt n’ pepper tint to it. It was totally black combed backward. Mr. Singh gently patted his head and said, “You have a lonely long road ahead of you. You need to travel on it alone. There will be many twists and turns like a slide, many bumpers, and obstruction, but you must not get tired or feel defeated. In the end, everything will be alright. And in case the problems persist. Nothing seems to be right. Then you need to travel further until everything becomes alright.”

Kunal was wide awake as he held his father’s hands. Freeing his right hand, Mr. Singh ran his fingers through his hair, Mr. Singh promised, “You are not alone, never will be. I will always be there for you. Always by your side whether you can see me or not.”

Looking out of the window, at the sky, Mr. Singh confirmed, “My call has come, I have to bid farewell to you. This is just a temporary goodbye. It is for the mortal body. The soul remains eternal. I will always be with you my son,” once again Mr. Singh confirmed in a soothing tone.

Somebody was at the door to take his Baba away from him. The new employer rang persistently their doorbell. Kunal tried to hold his father. He did not want him to go but slowly Mr. Singh waved his hand and said goodbye.

The bell continued to ring. The shrill noise was deafening. It continued incessantly without any break. Kunal flailed his hands in the air to hold his father who continued to wave him goodbye, the bell rang, the noise disturbed. Kunal could not take it any longer and sat bolt upright.

He found himself on his father’s couch. Nobody was around him. He was back to reality. He ran towards the landline which was ringing continuously. “Hello,” he said breathlessly as soon as he picked up the call.

“Hello, are you related to Mr. Sarvadeep Singh?” a curt voice asked him from the other end. Kunal replied in an apprehensive voice, “Yes Sir, I am his son. Who are you?”

The man on the other end remained silent for a few seconds. The silence of a few seconds was deafening. The trepidation of the unknown crept into his bones. “I am inspector Mehra, calling from Misrodh police station.” Kunal has no idea whether it was an inspector or the officer in charge. He is not even very sure about the name of the police inspector. All he remembers of that fateful day is that the moment the call from the police station arrived, his ear started to have a buzzing sound which seemed to hammer inside his head. The insides of his skull wanted to explode.

The policeman was the bearer of the bad news, the news that shook Kunal to the very core, “Your father, Mr. Sarvadeep Singh has met with a serious accident.” The receiver was about to slip from his hand, he held on to the receiver but could not hold himself. His knees gave away as he sat on the floor. The man on the other end continued, “There is a serious injury in his head. The skull has suffered a big crack.” Kunal heard everything without any reactions. His brain was finding it very hard to register the message and decipher the meaning. His heart was not willing to accept anything the man said.

The police inspector concluded, “He is being taken to Hamidia hospital. You are being requested to come and identify the patient.” The man hung up the call and Kunal heard the engaged tone for a brief moment.

Suddenly, something flashed through his mind as he sat bolt upright. The police officer had told him about a serious head injury. I am overreacting he convinced himself. Baba is alright. By the time, I reach the hospital, his dressings would be complete. I will return with Baba. The two of us have planned an evening together. I will not go out with him and neither will I allow him to go out. Baba will have to take rest. Till the time he does not recover, I will go to the factory and take care of the business. Kunal continued to console himself.

Taking the bike keys, he wore the helmet and rushed towards Hamidia hospital which was located far away from his home. He was to cover a good distance now but nothing seemed to matter to him. He simply wanted to cover the distance between himself and Mr. Singh as soon as possible.

Kunal continued to speak to himself in his head, “I must not put all the burden on Baba. I will have to make sure that from now onwards, I go to the factory every day after my class.” He promised himself, “I will take a month’s leave from the college and tell Baba that he is not to move out of the house, no matter what. I myself will go to the factory every day and run the show.”

He thought, “As it is, the machines have been installed. The test run has been successful to check how the machinery works. All I have to do is make sure the factory workers execute their job sincerely. Baba has handpicked his workers. Everyone in KunSar knows me. I will not face any problems whatsoever.”

The discussion with his own self, continued. “What if Baba is seriously injured?” “How is he now?” “Is the fall crucial?” Every time Kunal’s mind was ambushed by such negative questions. He shrugged it away. Kunal was not willing to accept anything bad happening to his father. How can he? Baba was all he ever had, ever since he could remember.

Mr. Singh was his mother and father, brother and sister, relative and friend, he was his whole universe. Mr. Singh was to live very long. He cannot even for a moment think otherwise. The two of them were supposed to go on a world tour. Lost in the thought of his father, Kunal realized he had reached the Hamidia hospital.

On his arrival, he saw a police van outside the emergency ward. He wanted to rush inside but then he had no idea where his father was taken to. Maybe, he was being operated or maybe he was sitting in a particular ward getting treated for his injury. He needed to know where exactly his father’s treatment was going on.

Kunal had never come to this side of their city. The hospital appeared over crowded as a few vehicles with the PRESS stamp on it started to pour in. He was not in the state to bother about the journalists. He had taken the contact number of the police inspector who had called him up from the Misrodh police station.

Mr. Mehra sounded concerned and asked him where exactly he was. Kunal was standing outside the gates of the emergency ward. He informed the inspector. “Please stay there, one of my men would take you to your father.”

At that very moment, a sub inspector stood in front of Kunal and asked him to come along with him. Kunal wanted to ask him so many questions but out of nervousness, he was tongue tied. The two of them stood outside the operation theatre. The red light of the operation theatre was off. Kunal took a sigh of relief. He thought there had been no operations whatsoever. Or maybe, it was a small injury, the doctors must have given him a few stitches. Baba must have managed everything on his.

Kunal took hurried steps towards the operation theatre. Someone called him from behind. “Son, son, where are you going.” Kunal stopped when he realized it was he himself who was being addressed. He stopped and turned around. The sub-inspector stood in front of a stretcher. The face of the patient was covered. The stretcher had been bloodied by the patient’s injuries. There was a huge blob of red color that blotched the head of the person lying lifeless on the stretcher.

The sub-inspector said, “The patient’s condition was extremely serious. He was being badly run by a truck. Please, come here and identify the body. Kunal froze at his place. “*Identify the body*,” the line echoed in his head. Even before he could go and remove the cover from the patient’s face. Kunal knew it was his father. Who else would be so tall? He knew his father’s body. The way he slept.

Kunal somehow managed to drag himself towards the stretcher. “Can you please remove the cover?” he requested the sub inspector. The short man knew what Kunal was going through at that moment. To them, it may have been a routine task. But the youth and innocence of Kunal melted Ganguram, the inspector’s heart. He saw an adolescent boy at the head of his father’s dead body. It surely would be the most painful sight for him. It broke Ganguram’s heart to see nobody around the young boy who was orphaned at such a young age.

Ganguram removed the cover from the patient’s face. Kunal took a few steps back on identifying his father. Mr. Singh was covered in a pool of blood. The blood seemed to have trickled down from the stretcher and blotted the floor also. There was blood everywhere. On the white sheet of the hospital which was now smeared red with blood. On the hospital’s stretcher, there was blood. On the hospital’s floor, there was blood. There was blood everywhere. His father’s blood.

The entire body of his father was covered in blood. “Son, son,” the sub inspector shook Kunal. He asked him, “Is that your father?” “Yes, yes, that is my Baba,” Kunal looked at him with blank eyes and managed to say that much. “I am sorry, son. Your father was declared dead on arrival. His injuries were fatal, he could not make it to the hospital. Your father was dead way before he could reach here,” the man informed him as gently as he could.

Kunal was trying hard to register or come to terms with the fact that his father was dead. He was in a state of shock. By that time, the doctor too had arrived. The moment he saw Kunal, he understood the boy is in a state of trauma due to the huge shock. He was to react, howl and cry to get out of the shock.

The doctor told him, “This man here,” pointing towards Mr. Singh, he said, “This man here is dead,” Kunal did not react, he looked blankly at his father. “Who is he to you? How are you related to this dead body?” This time Kunal blinked a little. The doctor understood how to get the boy to react, “Tell me, how are you related to the dead body? Have you been able to identify the body?” The doctor insisted on the term ‘body’ over and over again.

The doctor asked him the same question over and over again till he erupted, “That is not an unidentified body. He is my Baba, my Baba, do you hear me, that man there is my Baba,” Kunal burst into uncontrollable tears.

He hugged his father tightly. Taking his limp body in a tight grip, Kunal howled uncontrollably. He was left without any family or friend. Today, he was finally orphaned.

Kunal Giani had nowhere to go to. Nobody to turn to. He was all ALONE!!!

**Chapter 15.**

**The Cruelties Of The World**

Kunal hugged his father with all his life. The cold, lifeless body of Baba loudly screamed his father was dead. There was nothing he could do to change the fact. This was the first time he hugged his father and did not receive anything in return. This was the first time he hugged his father and his Baba did not hug him back.

“Wake up Baba, please wake up,” he pleaded. “Please, please Baba, open your eyes. Hug me once, hug me just once my dear Baba,” he groveled as he kissed the blood smeared limp body of his beloved father.

Kunal looked around himself helplessly and cried loudly, “Babaaaa, Baba, Baba, what will I do without you,” Kunal was inconsolable. All his life, he had not shared any bond with anyone except his father. He was the only one person who he ever depended upon. He did not even know how to buy his shirt without his father’s choice. He could not even book a ticket without his father’s assistance. There was simply nothing he could do alone, without the aid of his father.

“Wake up Baba, please open your eyes,” Kunal said between his sobs. For the first time in his entire life, he asked his father for something and his father did not give it to him. For the first time, he called his father and he did not answer him back. For the first time, Kunal was sad, he was crying, but his father was not by his side, he was crying alone and his father was not there to console him. The sky had fallen on his head, his whole life got shattered, the biggest tragedy had struck Kunal, and he was to face it all by himself – without any help or support.

Kunal continued to hug and kiss his father repeatedly. For the first time in his life, he felt utterly helpless. There was nothing he could do to bring back his father from the dead.

As Kunal held on tightly to his father’s body. Kissing him and hugging him. Suddenly a flash of light disturbed him in his sensitive moment with father. He looked up to see where it was coming from. When he looked up, several cameras began to click his pictures. A young boy looking at the camera with his blood smeared shirt, holding his dead father was the perfect recipe for the spicy front-page news next morning as well as local news media.

For a moment, Kunal was taken aback by the sudden ambush of the press who were busy taking his and Mr. Singh’s dead body’s picture. Out of the herd of emotionless journalists, one of them shoved his microphone on Kunal’s face, “How is the deceased related to you? What do you have to say about the traffic rules of our country?” the media journalist asked a series of insensitive, nonsensical questions to him.

Kunal’s eyes become bloodshot as he looked around himself at a bunch of heartless media personnel who treated the sacred body of his father and his own trauma as nothing more than a piece of hot news or a spicy gossip.

Kunal dashed towards that particular journalist who had the audacity to ask him questions at the moment of sheer grief. Kunal grabbed his collar and screamed, “You, bastard, bloody rascal, how dare you click mine and my Baba’s picture.”

“The deceased is your father?” that man asked him despite Kunal’s fury. Unable to control his frustration or keep his anger at bay, Kunal landed a hard punch on his nose. Seeing his blood, the journalist tried to fight him back but stopped as he looked around himself at his competitors who were ready to take a bite of another hot news. There was another journalist who said, “Sir, you can’t raise your hands on a journalist. This is violence.” Kunal turned around and punched the one who was trying to give out sermons to him on non-violence.

“You dirty son of a bitch, you want me to stay calm at this hour,” Kunal screamed furiously. “This may be a news to me, but to me, my whole life has come to a standstill,” he howled.

Soon, the hospital staffs gathered around Kunal and tried to stop him. Kunal was filled with some inhuman strength at that time, there were more than five men who were trying hard to control him but were unable to do so.

Finally, the doctors arrived and condemned the journalists for their insensitivity. The doctor who had brought Kunal back from the shock was worried and feared an unprecedented breakdown. “Relax son, just relax,” he consoled Kunal as the journalists were herded out of the hospital premises.

Kunal looked at the doctor with tearful eyes and joined his hands, “Please sir, please for once look at my father once again. I apologize sincerely for losing my calm,” Kunal pleaded to the doctor. He held the wrist of his father as Mr. Singh’s hand lied limp against his wrist. His robust fingers were lifeless and cold. Kunal kept his ears against his father’s wrist and addressed the doctor in a hopeful frenzy, “Sir, sir I can hear his pulse, please sir, please for once check his pulse.”

Kunal asserted hopefully, “My baba cannot be dead, he is not dead sir, he will wake up any moment, he cannot be dead, baba cannot die,” Kunal’s voice got choked as he repeatedly tried to convince the doctor vainly about the vital signs of his father. Time and again he put his head against his father’s chest trying desperately to locate his heartbeat.

The women around him looked at the young boy sadly. The hospital is one such place where nobody prefers to go out of one’s own will, especially the emergency department. The women and other men could relate to his distress.

An elderly couple approached Kunal. They must have been in their seventies. The old man patted him on his head affectionately whereas the lady held on to his arms. The man’s eyes were brimming with tears as he said, “Stay strong my child. These are trying times.” Kunal looked at the elderly gentleman inquisitively trying to understand what exactly he was saying.

You see her, pointing at the corner, he said, “You see there, that is my daughter. She was the only one looking after us.” Kunal looked at a frail looking girl who must have been in her late twenties. The old man continued, “My son is the regional head of a renowned bank. But he does not even care to drop us greetings on festivals. He is a big man, happy in his own life with his wife and kids,” the old man’s voice was painfully hurtful.

Kunal looked at the two of them and the girl on a wheelchair at a distance. The elderly lady wiped away her tears that flowed down her cheeks continuously. “My daughter, Shreya has been more than a son to us,” the old man confirmed. He broke down into bitter sobs as he said, “But now she too has been diagnosed with advanced stage of breast cancer.”

Kunal looked at them blankly as they continued to console him. Kunal held on to the old man and the lady as he said, “Uncle, aunty, I am not in the state to say anything right now. But I promise you, when this son of yours,” Kunal said pointing at himself, “When I make it big, I will make sure that you or anyone like you does not get to suffer due to financial crunch.”

The promise he made to them that day may have appeared far from reality. It was more of a fantastical vow or words uttered during a weak moment. Kunal too did not have much faith as to what he said to them that day. But today, when one looks at the kind of charity organizations he is associated with, and how he helps people around him, away from the prying eyes of media or publicity mongers, is quite remarkable. Kunal is one such industrialist who does not crave publicity. He is still the same simple, down to earth boy I came across years ago.

The group was busy mourning the loss and pain of their dear ones. A man came and handed a polythene bag to Kunal. “What is this?” he asked the man surprised. “These are your father’s belongings during the time of his death,” the man informed him.

Kunal moved away from the three of them and sat at a secluded corner. The elderly family also preferred to leave him alone. They retired from there pushing their daughter’s wheelchair.

The first thing that Kunal took out from the bag was his father’s helmet. The helmet was blotched with his father’s blood. The fiber screen at the front was completely shattered. From the condition of the brutally smashed helmet, he could easily comprehend the severity of his father’s accident. Despite wearing the safety helmet, he could not be saved.

He then took out his father’s wallet. Inside the wallet, he saw several pictures of himself. All taken at various stage of his life. The smiling face of a toddler, an infant, and adolescent Kunal was splashed with red spots. Kunal kissed his father’s wallet. Once again, he broke down on seeing his father’s clothes drenched in cakes of blood.

Hugging his father’s shirt he cried for a long time. The truth had finally dawned upon him that his father has left him forever. He was gone forever never to return again. “Where are you taking my father?” Kunal asked wildly as the two men came to his father’s stretcher. “We have to keep the body at the morgue,” one of them declared.

“You can take it away when the death certificate is ready,” the first man who spoke informed him. “But is it necessary?” Kunal asked helplessly. He was too young to understand all the formalities. He did not wish to fight with them or argue with them because by now he had understood that these men were only doing their duty. Moreover, it was best for his father. On second thoughts, only the body of his father. His father had left his body long ago.

Kunal spoke to the concerned doctor regarding the official formalities. “You make preparations for the final rites of your father. In the meantime, I will get the papers ready,” the kind doctor assured him.

Kunal did not have any bank account of his own. He did not have more than two hundred rupees on him at that time. He needed the money for Mr. Singh’s *daha sanskar* (cremation rites as per Hindu religion).

The total cost of the entire process was rupees six thousand approximately. That was a lot of money for him at that point in time. The cremation was to be done as per Sikh *dharma* (religion).

Kunal, in reality, was a Sikh. Sardar to be precise. Unlike the sardars, he does not wear any turban or flaunts long beard. Kunal just like his father was a clean shaven, short haired sardar.

Followed by the assassination of the Prime Minister Indira Gandhi, history stills shudders on recalling the horrifying mass genocide of the Sardars. During the riot of 1984, anyone with a turban and beard was brutally killed or harassed. Thousands of Sardars fled from their hometown and started afresh by shaving off their beard and cutting their hair. Mr. Sarvadeep Singh was one of those Sardars who had to follow the demeaning trend in order to save his life. This is one of the reasons why Kunal was not given a typical Sikh sounding name. Those were extremely difficult times for the Sikhs but this one is a lion community. They faced the atrocities, beared the pain, only to emerge a winner at the end. Today, it is the Sardar who rules. They are the crownless kings of the world. They automatically get respect wherever they go. The once severely tortured community is now, always the first one to provide relief work to the victims.

Be it, earthquakes, great floods, or war struck victims, the Sikh with their glorious turbans and affectionate smiles behind the thick beards, are the first one to help.

The same blood runs through the veins of Kunal too. He too had faced the extremely difficult situation. He too was harassed, oppressed and tortured by various men in various situations. But the lion with him did not let him quit. He continued to prowl. He fulfilled his father’s dreams. Now, the lion roars and rules. His roaring success and inspirational story of hard work and achievement is a lesson to all. His never say die attitude is worth emulating in one’s life.

There was a time when Kunal did not even have sufficient amount of money so that he could undertake the final rites of his father. “Uncle, can you please lend me some money?” Kunal stood in front of one of the friends of Mr. Singh. “Is everything okay son?” Mr. Vijay Shukla asked him confused.

Kunal or his father had never sought anybody’s help in their entire life. Mr. Singh was a man of tough principles and he had inculcated the very same traits in his son also. But now Kunal was faced with a desperate time. Hence he was taking desperate majors to ensure the ultimate peace of his father’s soul.

“I need it for the *daha sanskar* of Baba,” Kunal stated blankly, looking at his feet. The news gave a jolt to Mr. Shukla. “Come inside son, come inside,” he called him inside and made him take a seat.

Mr. Shukla returned with ten, hundred rupees note and handed it to Kunal. “This is all I have on me, son,” he stated. Kunal knew the money was not sufficient. He understood, his trials were not over yet. He was to give more tests and undergo more tribulations.

Kunal then went to a couple of more friends of Mr. Singh. A few of them were working in the same bank where Mr. Singh worked before his voluntary retirement. With their help, Kunal was finally able to collect the amount with which he did the cremation of his father.

Kunal stood at the Mehta Shamsaan Ghat of Bhopal. All the legal proceedings had been done. It was Kunal who brought his father’s dead body from the hospital. Once, inside the cremation ground, his father’s body was placed on the *charpai* (the cot) and four men along with Kunal carried the body to the pyre.

The pyre was already set by the workers of the cremation ground. The pandit continued with his Vedic chants for the final journey of the deceased. Kunal, with the help of a few well-wishers, placed his father’s body on the pyre. He tried to hold himself and stay strong as he placed the logs on his Baba’s body.

Kunal circumambulated around his father’s pyre with a bowl of ghee and smashed it on the ground, near his father’s head. As per the rules, a son, especially the first born was supposed to give light to the pyre of the parents. Kunal was not just the first born, he was the only child, only son of Mr. Singh.

Kunal’s hands shook violently as he gave the fire to his father’s body. The moment flames began to rise, Kunal collapsed on the ground helplessly. All his self-control loosened as he broke down and began to sob bitterly. Kunal cried like a small child as his body shook violently. He was uncontrollable. Everyone present tried to console him and control him but he was beyond himself.

He saw helplessly as the fire ate away his father’s body. Every last bit of Mr. Singh’s body turned into ash right in front of his very eyes. The images of father and son rolled in front of his eyes like a movie scene.

Six years old Kunal with his father, walking down hand in hand, both with the same haircut, laughing and talking joyously. The memorable cheese sandwich day. The day he cleared his class X. The incident in the Hero Honda showroom where Mr. Singh gifted him his first ever bike. The night the two of them rode carelessly on the road in order to forget about IIT entrance.

End number of memories of the past attacked and benumbed Kunal. Finally, the flames died down. And so did his spirits. He sat at the foot of his father till the wee hours. Everyone had retired except Kunal. Finally, a man stood in front of him holding a bronze bowl covered with a red cloth. “Here, take this, the remnants of your father,” the man said handing him the bowl.

Kunal clutched his father’s asthi to his chest as he left the cremation ground. He dragged his legs towards the house. He froze to his place as he saw me getting up on my feet as I saw him. I had been waiting for him for past thirty minutes. I ran to hug him. Kunal took a few heavy steps back. Lifting the bowl, Kunal put forward Baba’s asthi towards me and said in a choked voice, “Rahul….Baba!”

**Chapter 16.**

**A Friend In Distress**

Kunal hugged me tightly as he cried his heart out. I had no idea how to react because I had never seen him cry like that. “I am all alone bhai. Baba has left me. Baba has gone,” Kunal repeated over and over again.

Somehow, I managed to take him inside the house. The insides of the house appeared eerily silent. Whenever I had gone to his house, there was always this lively energy, an exuberance feeling of life and joy reigned in each corner of the home. Kunal placed the *asthi* next to the alter consisting of idols and guru Granth sahib. For him, Mr. Singh was nothing less than God. Ever since his childhood, he strongly believed that Baba was the God of the heavens in human form on earth.

Now, his God was taken away from him. He stood a long time holding his father’s asthi. The asthi gave him the feel of his Baba. Not being able to bear the silence any longer, I offered my apologies to him, “I am sorry Bhai, I am late.” Kunal looked at me blankly. Assuming his silence as displeasure, I continued, “Bhai I left as soon as I heard the news. I know you were in no condition to make calls. My father had got the news from one of his colleagues. He informed me instantly. I had returned from the last test of semesters.”

“Have you eaten anything?” Kunal asked me in a nonchalant voice. Suddenly, I saw the once overtly sensitive boy vanish. He appeared cold and expressionless. It was quite difficult to believe that this was the same person sitting opposite me who used to get extremely nervous on seeing his father fall ill. Even a normal viral fever of Mr. Singh used to make Kunal terribly anxious.

Not waiting for my reply, he retired in the kitchen. The sound coming from the kitchen confirmed that Kunal was busy making something for me. I did not feel like sitting idle and doing anything. The moment I entered the kitchen, I was completely taken aback by the sight, Kunal was busy chopping the onions. Trying to hide his real tears by chopping the onions, he simply turned towards me. His face was red with agony, streams of tears rolled down his cheeks as he forced a fake smile and said, “These onions I tell you.” Trying to cover up his pain, he continued, “Wait for some time I will cook dal-tadka for you.”

Hurrying towards him with helpless anger, I dashed at the onions and tossed it away, “Why are you doing this to yourself? Cry your heart out if that makes you feel normal,” I shouted. His reaction was equally aggressive, “How long will I cry and how much will I cry? What good will it do me…. Are my cryings and lamentations gonna bring back Baba….no…no…NOOO!!! He pushed me away with both hands.

Soon, his anger, frustration, and desperation got replaced by helplessness. He collapsed on the kitchen floor, bursting into bitter sobs. I sat next to him as he cried his heart out. Kunal has always been a pampered child. Despite the fact that he never had any female in his family to take care of him or his father. But Mr. Singh had successfully filled the void by playing the part of both a mother and a father. Moreover, he was Kunal’s sister and brother also. To put it in words, Mr. Singh was Kunal’s **UNIVERSE**. Now, with his demise, his entire life came crumbling down. As it is, Kunal had no idea about anything, be it society, homemaking, or business. The time was compelling him to grow up overnight but his innocence was holding him back.

Not everyone is born with the strength to face the hardships like Kunal did. I was no different from the average human beings. At that time, I did whatever my feeble immature mind could suggest. “Let me go out and get something for us to eat. I don’t want you to cook at this time. Kunal had no idea about the rites and rituals of the death as per Hindu religion.

That day, I had to force him to eat his dinner. I could not tolerate his sunken eyes with body shrunk to half. Kunal had not eaten in past two days. On my insistence, he ate two *rotis* that day. This broke my heart into pieces. There was a time when we used to have eating competitions. Nobody could beat Kunal when it came to eating. It was not that that he used to eat a lot. Kunal had this extraordinarily strong competitive streak. He could not tolerate anyone beat him to anything. This was the reason why, whenever we used to have *golgappa* eating completion or any junk or rich food eating competition, people used to create a circle around Kunal and see him eat.

There were so many things that Kunal used to do prior to the tragedy that struck him and changed the entire course of his life. Here, I would like to mention the fact that Kunal used to be an extremely sensitive boy. Be it big, small, trivial or serious things, Kunal used to get affected by it with the same intensity. The boy who used to panic over a minor cough and cold of his father stood in front of me after giving fire to his beloved father’s body. Had it been anybody apart from him, that person for sure would have had a nervous breakdown or suffered severe depression. But this boy here was not some ordinary soul. He was a real hero. The journey of struggle and hardship leading him to success and glory had only begun.

“What do you plan to do next bhai?” I asked him concerned. Kunal did not reply and stood looking outside his window, and then he saw a tow truck stop outside his gates. A uniformed man stepped out of the truck and entered their premises.

Kunal went towards the door and opened it before the man could ring the bell. “What is it? Do you have any information?” Kunal asked him desperately. The man looked down and said, “No sahib, no news. I am sorry to say this but someone was there before the government towing vehicle could reach there.”

Standing against the door for support as he took a step back, he asked in a quivering voice, “What do you mean?”

The man said in an embarrassed voice, “Sahib, someone took away your father’s bike. He must have sold it in a scrap market because the bike was totally smashed.”

Kunal moved towards the man to charge him angrily but I intervened. It did not really matter who had taken away Mr. Singh’s Java. The fact is, the bike was gone for good. The humans can behave like real monsters at times. Instead of helping an injured man, there was someone who chose to make money from his helplessness.

Truly, we are living in a very sorry state of society. There are people who would warm their hands over the pyres of innocent. Instead of giving out helping hands to aid a person in distress, there are monsters who would love to take a selfie with the victim as their backdrop.

The society that we live in considers cheating sportsperson, immoral celebrities and poor farmers as newsworthy or scum of the society, whereas pedophile rapists, fraudulent businessmen, and warmongers are completely ignored. To climb up the success ladder without compromising with one’s conscience and dignity intact is not everyone’s cup of tea. Kunal is one of the few successful industrialists who has a spotless career record. Whatever he is today, is the result of Mr. Singh’s morals and ethics deeply imbibed in Kunal’s personality from a very young age. Kunal is extremely proud of the upbringing his father gave him.

There was a time when little problems used to make him nervous. Trivial issues used to affect him. But now, there is a total transformation in him. There is a complete change of personality of the once over sensitive boy. Now, Kunal is willing to face biggest of challenges thrown his way with a smile on his way. After the death of Mr. Sarvadeep Singh, nobody has ever heard Kunal say, “I cannot do it,” or “It is impossible.”

Kunal is an exact replica of his father. In fact, at times, he surpasses his father when it comes to quick mindedness. He can stay awake nights after nights only to make sure that the task assigned to him is completed successfully.

The uniformed man departed. I made it clear to the man that Kunal was not in the correct state of mind to behave patiently at this time. Somehow, the man understood. Kunal landed a hard punch on the wall out of frustration as the truth sank in that he had lost his father’s bike. He is someone who is very fond of memories. This is one of the reasons why he still treasures each and everything that belonged to his father. The first bike that Mr. Singh had bought him on his Class Xth result still lies safe and in the same condition with him.

The next big thing that Kunal had to do was to organize the *chautha* ceremony. Chautha is one of the death rituals as per the Hindu custom. It mainly occurs within the four or thirteen days of the death of a family member. Geeta is being recited by the family member or the priests for the peace of the deceased’s soul. There is also a *bhog* and *bhajan* after the recitation. This ceremony too was done through the money that Kunal had borrowed from Mr. Singh’s friend.

**Chapter 17.**

**Monster’s Ball**

Kunal had been busy since morning. The *chautha* preparation started at the wee hour of the morning. The priests were busy reciting the Bhagavad Gita. Kunal had already spent more than two hours reciting Shree Guru Granth Sahab for the peace of the departed soul of Mr. Singh.

The way Kunal single handedly took care of everything was remarkable. After the *bhog*, I saw Kunal talking to a few men clad in spotless white kurta and dhoti. They were totally engrossed in discussing something of great importance. The matter appeared serious to me, hence I stood among the group.

“Son, everything that belonged to your father is now yours,” stated one of the oldest member of the group. “Only recently, we came to know about the departure of Mr. Singh. The moment we got the news, all of us prepared legal documents for you,” confirmed the other gentleman.

“We know you are young and do not have much idea about the legal proceedings or paperwork. This is the reason why we got everything ready last night so that things can be done in your favor without much fuss,” said the third member of the group. “Here, see this son, these are the official papers confirming that now you are responsible for everything that belonged to your father. Just sign at the checked space,” the three of them placed the documents in front of Kunal.

He was already completely shattered from within. These documents were nothing more than mere papers to him. But as the man insisted that he must sign the documents. Moreover, they appeared extremely kind and compassionate. Kunal did not see any reason to consider their intentions anything other than that of selfless assistance.

Kunal held the paper in his hands, “Never ever sign any documents without reading it thoroughly,” Mr. Singh’s words echoed in his head but he shrugged the persisting voice and quickly signed all the documents. The men looked so helpful and kind, Kunal did not even feel like reading a single sentence written in the documents. If only he had thought otherwise and had not signed those papers. But what to do, when something is meant to happen it will happen.

Soon, one by one each and every one departed. Even after everyone had left, Kunal still stood at the gates of his house with folded hands, expressing his gratitude to each and every one who had come to attend the *chautha* ceremony of his father.

“Has everyone left?” Devika asked me over the phone. She too had been taken aback by the sudden demise of Mr. Singh. She had been trying desperately to reach Kunal but he had been avoiding her. This was typical of him, whenever he faced any problem, he tended to go into a shell. He preferred to lick his wounds in private.

This time, he had completely vanished from her life by hiding in a deep dark den of loneliness. This must be the reason why Devika, somehow managed to get hold of me and it was through me she was able to keep a tab on Kunal.

“Yes, everybody has departed. We are all by ourselves now along with Sushila bua,” I detailed out everything to Devika. “Do I come over?” she asked me hesitantly. “I think you must come down here, Devika. Kunal needs you by his side at this time,” I confirmed.

At that time, I did not realize that Kunal was not one of us. He was completely different from the ordinary beings leading a normal day to day life. A normal person wants people around him when he is happy, he wants to cling on to someone when he is sad and would want a lot of support when sliding down. Kunal was totally different. He is a lone wolf, he does not want anyone to help him or guide him. He is extremely strong from within. The incessant traumas and tragedies have hardened him to the core. No good news can make him happy and no amount of tragedy can bring him down. There is only one person Kunal depends and that is he himself.

After hanging up the call, I went to Kunal and informed him, “Devika is on her way. She is coming to meet you.”

Kunal continued to stare at the blank space in front of him. Soon, Devika arrived like a breath of fresh air. She was like a blossom in the autumn sun. Devika sat next to Kunal and said, “When do you plan to join your classes?” all she received from him was a vague shake of the head.

“You know I baked a cake yesterday?” she said excitedly. “How many have been diagnosed with food poison?” I interjected playfully. Devika glared at me and expressed mock anger, “Nobody huh! For your kind information. The cake was absolutely delicious,” she retaliated.

The two of us fought animatedly in order to lighten the mood. Devika and I tried desperately to make him smile and be a part of a normal conversation. Kunal was in no mood to laugh, smile or joke around. There was a heavy lead placed on his chest which did not want to budge. Every time he looked at the corner where his father sat, a lump formed in his throat. Whenever he looked around himself, wherever he looked, he got choked at the thought of his father. The very truth that his Baba was not there for him was enough to make him become disinterested about the things around him.

Devika could not pull him out of his gloomy mood. She left the two of us with a heavy heart. Soon, it was time for me to go as well. After the *chautha*, I also bid farewell to Kunal.

This is when the story takes a heartbreaking turn. Within a few days, Kunal received an official letter from the bank. It was a legal notice from the bank confirming that Kunal was indebted with a loan of forty lac rupees (4 million INR). Think that it was some sort of mistake, he ran straight to the bank and confronted them about the letter.

“What is this?” he demanded the branch manager. He was one of the kind and helpful men who stood around him on the day of Mr. Singh’s *chautha*. “This paper directs you to repay the loan taken by Mr. Sarvadeep Singh against his house for the startup business of foam.”

Kunal was taken aback by the calm and cold tone of the man who sat opposite him. “But uncle, how am I supposed to repay such a huge amount. Moreover, I really have no idea about my father’s finance,” Kunal continued to plead his case and finally said, “Why would I pay the loan taken by Baba?”

The man relaxed in his big seat by resting against the plush back of the revolving chair, “Son, you yourself signed the liability papers the other day. I hope you remember, we told you that you hereby claim to be responsible for everything that belonged to your father. You have willingly signed the documents. Please, make preparations to repay your debts.”

Soon, everything became crystal clear to him. The bank executives had tricked him into signing the legal documents. Kunal knew, there simply was no point arguing with the man who had fox like eyes. The harm had already been done.

That particular day, Kunal decided to assess everything from the financial forefront. He wanted to make a list of things that stood as biggest problems in his life at that particular moment.

The first thing he did was take out his father’s passbook. Mr. Singh shared a joint account with Kunal. Once, in his father’s bank branch, Kunal soon understood whom to talk to. The teller confirmed that Mr. Singh had Rs. 40,000 in his bank account. That was all that was left in his father’s account. Kunal realized that the house was in mortgage for the factory. The factory too stood on credit.

There was no source of income for Kunal. He enquired about his father’s pension. The officer in charge confirmed, “Sir, you are not eligible to claim your father’s pension. Had you been a minor then surely things would have been different. But now, with your father’s death and you being an adult, there is simply no way you could place any claim on your father’s pension.”

Suddenly, the whole world reeled in front of Kunal. All he had on him at that moment was 40,000 rupees.

There were disturbing questions that continued to bombard him and rip him off of mental peace. The questions like, “How was he supposed to repay the forty lac rupees loan with just forty thousand rupees in the bank?” “How was he supposed to continue to take care of his daily expenses, and repay the forty lac rupees with just forty thousand rupees in the bank?” “How was he supposed to finish his engineering, take care of his daily expenses and of course repay the rupees forty lac loan with just forty thousand rupees in his account?” all these questions ran through his head over and over again.

Kunal pressed his head with both his hands as he stood under the scorching sun with no shade above him. The hot sun burnt his skin as beads of sweat trickled down through his sideburns. The hot sun was nothing less than the torturous life condition he was faced with. There was no shade whatsoever above him with his father gone. He was literally stripped of all happiness, comfort, and peace with the death of Mr. Singh.

**Chapter 18.**

**Calamities from Every Corner**

Kunal continued to attend his classes. If he had to move ahead, studies was the only thing he could stick to. For a while, he got completely got immersed in his degree course.

For ten days, Kunal did all he could do to normalize the situation. To get a grip on his life. Then, suddenly, he got up and dashed towards Mandideep. He was on his way to revisit his father’s dream – KunSar.

Kunal rode towards his father’s factory. His fast paced bike automatically slowed down as he got closer to the accident spot of his father. He stopped his bike right at the place where Mr. Singh had taken his last breath.

Kunal got off his bike and sat at the side of the road. The dry cakes of blood stuck on the road. Touching the blood which was still there, Kunal pictured the last moment of his father’s life. The fatal collision with the massive truck. His father tripping over and getting his body smashed. The blood splattering on the road.

A giant-sized truck blared its horn as it passed by, and brought Kunal back to present day and time. He was jolted out of the painful flashes of memory that seem to disturb him at all times.

He cried hard for a long time as he sat there missing his father, touching his blood stains plastered on the road at the accident spot.

It was quite difficult to leave the place but he had to finish what he had started. Kunal headed towards KunSar.

The brand new building looked deathly still. Outside the factory, he saw the familiar face of Ram Dayal who stood up the moment he saw him arrive.

“Chhote Malik, Namaskar,” Rama Dayal greeted in the same old friendly tone, but this time his ever smiling face lacked its regular touch, there was no visible trace of smile or happiness.

Ram Dayal opened the factory gates for Kunal and left him on his own. He stood in the middle of the huge factory all by himself. The sparkling new machinery in the factory was covered in a thick layer of dust.

Kunal ran his finger on one of the machines as he looked vaguely at his dusty hands. The factory which once bubbled with life stood dead silent. With his father’s demise, the factory too appeared dead.

“We are going to have a small celebration son. The machines have been installed and the test run has been done,” Mr. Singh’s exuberant voice rang in his ears.

‘The test run has been done!’ suddenly Kunal was brought back to life with a jolt. He hurried towards the huge machine. Standing in front it, he saw rows after rows of foam displayed in front of him.

Kunal touched the foam and took a vow, ‘I will fulfill my father’s dreams. Just like Baba, I will become a foam manufacturer.’

The products that lied in front of him was the result of a successful test run. It also made his heart heavy as he concluded from the rows of foam that his father had died just at the final stage of realizing his dream. Mr. Singh was only a step away from his destiny.

Kunal was once again feeling emotional. Waves of memories surged through his mind, and images of his beloved father danced in front of his eyes. He was about to break down in bitter sobs once again but this time he decided to hold himself back from crying. He had decided not to shed any more tears.

As he came out of the factory, Ram Dayal blocked his way. Folding his hands, he requested, “Chhote Malik, everyone left the factory after getting the news of Bade Malik’s death. I did not leave because this job is all I got. I have to look after my family. Please, Malik, give me my salary.” This goes without saying that Kunal was an extremely sensitive person from a very young age. He was deeply moved by the sincerity of the old caretaker. Taking out five hundred rupees note from his pocket, Kunal said, “Ram Dayal, keep this for the time being. Nothing is hidden from you. You are well aware of the condition of the factory. I promise you, once the factory restarts, I will settle all your dues.”

Soon, Kunal created a list of all the business consultants who used to work with Mr. Singh or give him business advice. He decided to meet them up one by one and take suggestions from them on how to successfully run a foaming factory to be a world renowned foam manufacturer.

Majority of the people he met seemed to have changed overnight. None of them were willing to extend a helping hand to a young enthusiast who was left all alone in this whole wide world without any aid or support.

All of them wanted a fee for their consultation services. Kunal was not in the position to pay them anything. Hence one after another, each and every door appeared to shut on his face until one day he met an honest gentleman.

This man sympathized with Kunal as he heard his entire story. That day Kunal was able to take his first step towards realizing his father’s dreams. He booked a train ticket to Punjab.

The gentleman he met that day advised, “In order to run a business successfully, you should be well acquainted with the A-Z of that particular industry. You need to know the intricacies of the machinery, learn how to quality check a foam to ensure that your company produces the best type of foam. If you know the production details then you are the master of the game. A good product knowledge entails equally good marketing skills.”

The kind gentleman explained all the intricate details of foam industry to him. At the end of the entire conversation, Kunal asked him, “But how will I do all this? Who is going to teach me such important details?” he looked at him nervously and confused.

The man smiled and confirmed, “Relax son, nobody is going to teach you all this. You need to learn each and everything on your own,” Kunal looked doubly confused.

The men then cleared his doubts, “Go to Punjab. It is the hub of foaming industry. Join any of the foam factories there as a labor and start your learning process. This way you will not have to pay for the classes, rather they would pay you as you learn potential stuff.”

Kunal rose from his seat and shook hands with his advisor enthusiastically. The man hugged him affectionately and said, “Best of luck son!”

Lying on the top berth of the two tier coach, Kunal projected his days ahead in the foam factory. To appear like a labor, Kunal chose to pack only the clothes that had been earlier discarded by him. He was to be in the skin of a factory worker which is why he had taken the engineering garb off his back.

The past few months had not been easy on him. Right after a few months of his third semester, Mr. Singh had departed for his heavenly abode. After completing his fourth semester, which means right after appearing for the final exams of the second year of his engineering degree Kunal left for Punjab.

**Chapter 19.**

**The Lonely Labor**

It did not take him long to score the job of a labor in one of the renowned foam factories in Punjab. Despite wearing drabs to conceal his reality, his polite demeanor was enough to speak in his favor. He told the recruiting manager that he belonged to a decent family but with the death of his father he was left penniless. The manager assigned him the post of a foam factory labor.

“How soon can you start?” the man was taking his interview asked him. “I am willing to start right away,” Kunal replied sincerely. The man called up the floor supervisor and told Kunal that he will be working under him. “This is Surinder, he will assign you your duties in the factory,” the manager told Kunal.

The manager told Kunal that his job was to operate the foam machinery located at the left wing of the factory. “You will have to work here from 9.00 a.m. to 19.00 p.m. There will be two 15 minutes break and one half an hour lunch break. Payment will be bi-weekly,” Surinder explained him his job details.

“Sir, I don’t know anyone here, where will I stay?” Kunal asked his supervisor embarrassed. Giving him a hard pat on the back, he said warmly, “Don’t worry dude, you can be a part of our mess and stay with us in the factory after it closes down.”

Punjab is the land of warm and loving people. Many people from different parts of India throng to the state of Punjab to earn their livelihood. The people of Punjab are extremely hardworking and have immense respect for those who work hard.

The brutal twist of fate had turned his life upside down. The boy who once lived the life of a prince under the protecting shade of his father now toiled from morning till night without any kindness and affection. He lived with the men who would later on work under him. There was a time when Kunal used to throw tantrums and plead his Baba to take him out for dinner or eat roadside junk foods. Today, he had no idea about the taste of the food he ate. He only ate to keep a straight back. Nutrition was important to stay strong and slog like a labor in the factory which is why he ate without fuss.

No sooner did his head use to touch the floor, he used to fall instantly to a deep sleep. Kunal is an extremely intelligent man. It did not take him long to learn the details of the foam industry inside out.

He slogged like an ox for three consecutive months. There was a time when his health had deteriorated due to working in a foam factory. Since his childhood, Kunal was prone to dust. It used to elevate his respiratory issues. Many at times, Kunal’s work used to get hampered due to asthma attacks every now and then. At one point in time, Surinder had suggested that he leaves the industry and join some other factory. Kunal refused him straightaway. It was the foam factory where his future rested, he cannot work anyplace else.

Three severe months of extreme hardship came to an end. Kunal had saved enough money at this time by working overtime. Now, he was ready to start working in his own factory. He returned home and straightaway went to his factory.

He had also promised Surinder that soon his life would take a U-turn and requested him not to change his phone number. On his last day at work, he had disclosed to Surinder that he was an engineering student. He was there to learn the details of a foam factory thoroughly. Kunal was a sardar himself and speaking the local language provided him with extra advantage during his stay in Punjab.

On knowing the truth, Surinder had hugged him and promised, “Yara, call me whenever you need me. I will land in Bhopal by taking the earliest train.”

Once in Bhopal, Kunal realized that he had lost three important months of his third year. A good part of the syllabus had been covered. He cannot afford to leave his engineering degree at this juncture of life when he was losing everything one after another.

The factory was in a sorry state. Ram Dayal was all by himself, it was not possible for him to clean such huge machinery single handedly.

Kunal called up his maid Sushila Bua from the factory. “Hello Kunal Baba, how are you? Where have you been all these months Baba?” The tearful voice of Sushila oozed affection. “Bua, please send Kishor to Mandideep,” Kunal came straight to the point after exchanging greetings with her.

Kishor was Sushila’s son who was older than Kunal. “Kishor, I want you to work with me in my factory,” he told Kishor when he met him.

Soon, he created a team of factory workers for KunSar. To start the production once again, he had borrowed money from a few relatives and friends. Kunal had not called me all this time. He did not share his financial problems with me.

Soon, the work in the factory started. Just like the machinery, Kunal too worked tirelessly. He had joined his college once again and recommenced his studies after a three months gap. The watertight schedule of Kunal during those days appear to be humanly impossible. Maybe he was driven by the furious desire to fulfill his father’s dream which is why no amount of exertion or stress was able to bring him down. Nothing could tire him or halt his ascension. The ascension that would startle everyone with its luminous light.

Kunal attended his college during the morning and concentrate on his studies. Followed by his regular classes, during the recess and off period he did his best to catch up with the syllabus that he had lost while his stay in Punjab. This means, during the college hours, he did not even have a minute’s time to spare on him. There were huge dark circles under his eyes followed by night after night of little or no sleep.

Once his classes used to finish, right from the college he used to head towards his factory. The production had started in the factory. Many at times, Kunal used to work side by side with the factory workers and motivate them to strive harder. There were a few huge orders that he was to deliver next week. The production had started on a loan that he had borrowed from a few people he knew. Some were from the men he was dealing while the members of his extended family also gave him a loan on handsome interest.

Kunal used to stay in the factory throughout the day. There were times when he slept in the factory. The Punjab experience had taught him how to sleep in a factory. Kunal did not maintain any gap between himself and his employees. He worked with them like they were his family. They participated with him to deliver his new orders with the same vigor and enthusiasm as their employer.

The finished products were delivered on time. But as the trade of the treacherous goes, many of the people he worked with did not make the payment in time. Kunal was faced with another task. Along with factory duties, studies and barnstorming new ideas to successfully run the show, he was faced with a new burden – the collection of dues from the clients who owed him the payment.

Soon, the lenders started to pester Kunal to repay them the money he had borrowed from them. The creditors from all the sides surrounded him. Kunal was finding it very difficult to cope with the surmounting problems that seem to be suppressing him to go deeper into the pit of loss and failure.

One fine day, as he returned from a long and tiring day at the college and factory, he saw an envelope stuffed inside his mailbox.

Kunal tore open the letter and was shaken to see that it was a legal notice from the bank. The bank had clearly instructed that they would auction his house and factory to collect the loan that Kunal, after the demise of Mr. Sarvadeep Singh, owed them.

**Chapter 20.**

**Darker Than Black**

Holding the legal notice Kunal enters his home. As usual, there was no food in the kitchen. Kunal had stopped using the refrigerator, washing machine, television, and similar such electrical devices to cut down on the electricity bills. The cumbersome life dragged on at its normal pace.

The money lenders hounded him every now and then. The factory and home were about to get auctioned. The legal notice meant that he had to go to the bank as soon as possible. He made sure that he would be there during the first hour and request them to provide him with a grace period.

Sleep was a distant dream to him. Kunal tossed and turned throughout the night and finally slept somewhere around dawn. Within a few hours of disturbed sleep, he woke up to the shrill noise of the alarm. That day, Kunal did not receive any grace period from the bank. They had, in fact, filed a case against him. Now, this was another issue he had to deal with.

Those were the months Kunal used to go for days without food. Many at times, he visited his relatives posing to be just crossing by the street and dropped in to say hello. He always made sure to drop by during the dinner time so that they can spare him a roti or two from their dinner.

His aunt, Mr. Sarvadeep’s sister had understood that Kunal purposely comes to have dinner. It is human nature to take undue advantage of people during their trying times, Kunal’s aunt was no different. She always demotivated Kunal by comparing him with her sons and say how good his cousins were doing while he just wandered aimlessly throughout the day.

Although Kunal had cleared his fifth semester at that time but somehow her aunt never failed to degrade him. In that house, he never ate anything like a nephew or a family. He had to literally earn each morsel of rice or each bite of roti he ate there. He used to run errands for his aunt after a long and tedious day in college followed by the factory work. Nobody around him ever bothered to share a few kind words with him. After the demise of his father, the whole world appeared to have turned against him.

Devika too was slowly moving away from him. After that fateful accident, Kunal was never the same happy go lucky teenager Devika had fallen in love with. Those days, the romance was the last thing on his mind and Devika was too immature to empathize with his situation. To her, she still deserved to be his priority.

“All you can ever talk about nowadays is debts, moneylenders, factory or simply remain silent,” Devika accused him. Kunal chose to remain silent. Not getting any reply from him, she screamed over the phone, “You know what Kunal, you are an extremely self-centered and selfish person. You did not even meet me before you left for Punjab.”

This time Kunal had to say something, “Devika, I did not go there to enjoy myself. I was slogging my ass off in a foam factory. I can do baby baby baby throughout the day. My life is a living hell and you are not being any help.”

Devika was hurt by the bitter words of her boyfriend, she just mumbled in a low voice, “You have changed Kunal. You are not the same person anymore.”

Kunal flared up, “Oh yes! I have changed. I am not the same person anymore because my goddamn life is not what it used to be before. Everything has changed. Everyone has changed,” he too sounded frustrated.

Devika banged the phone on his face. Kunal also did not call her back. The rift between the two was growing very fast. It was only a matter of time and they would go on different directions.

One day, Kunal visited his aunt. The reason was evident, he was there to eat dinner. “I know you have come to have dinner with us. No need to be so formal and you don’t have to make any story,” his aunt humiliated him with harsh words. He did not sit for the dinner until and unless his aunt made sure that all the tasks due of a house help were executed by him.

From past few days, Kunal was having weird ideas. His life was completely bleak. Suicide appeared like the only favorable choice to him. There seemed to be no end to his miseries. To top everything, his aunt’s constant digs at his failures and Devika’s perennial accusations added more troubles to his already troublesome life.

As Kunal sat to eat his dinner, his aunt took a sigh and said, “Why did my brother have to die so early. He never saw a happy day in his entire life. Carrying a burden around his neck like a noose stripped him off of all joy and happiness. My brother was so dignified, he never took any favor from anyone. He would have died a thousand times before being an unwanted burden to someone,” his aunt continued to humiliate and torture him by her indirect remarks at his poverty.

Kunal had somehow managed to finish his dinner and straightaway went to his house. The suicidal ideas once again began to parade inside his head. He started to think of all the adversities in his life at once. The electricity bills have not been paid for past so many months. The college dues are increasing after every semester. They would soon kick me out of my college. This house would go away soon. The factory would be lost too. How was he able to pay back his debts? How would he repay the bank loan? No degree, no money, no family, Kunal had no reason to live and nowhere to go. His life was meaningless and he was tired of carrying such huge burdens all by himself. He had so many reasons to end his unwanted life.

For a long time, he contemplated different ways of putting an end to his meaningless life. For a long time, he listed end number of reasons to end his life. Kunal felt completely defeated that day. Not being able to take all the trauma anymore, he burst into bitter sobs. He cried his heart out and screamed Baba, Baba for a long time. He sat in his father’s chair and cried his heart out. “Why did you leave me all alone, Baba? I am so lost and lonely without you. Call me to yourself Baba. Please call me, Baba. I don’t want to live anymore.” Kunal continued to call his father’s name and prayed for death till the time sleep engulfed him.

The next day, Kunal woke up with a start. Another day of humiliation and trauma awaited him. He was not happy to be alive. Kunal rose from his father’s seat and moved towards his father’s desk. Automatically, he shuffled through various documents. In the midst of all the papers, his eyes caught sight of a land deed. His eyes widened in excitement as he held the documents of his paternal land in Gwalior. It was a huge plot registered under his father’s name. Kunal decided to sell the land and repay his loan and clear all the debts from it. That way at least he would face some relief.

His days of struggle were to get over soon or so he thought. The land which belonged to Mr. Singh had only one problem. It was under the possession of some local goon of Gwalior. They had forcefully captured the plot which legally belonged to him.

Packing a few of his clothes in a travel bag, Kunal left for Gwalior that very moment. Once, he reached the spot where his land was located, he saw a couple of men already there. Kunal decided to talk the matter out with them. “May I speak with the concerned person here? Who is your head?” Kunal asked the group.

A dark complexioned broad man with a gruesome scar stood in front of Kunal, “What is it that you want?” Despite the fact that Kunal was all alone and he stood among a group of lethal opponents, he was not intimidated, “This entire plot that you have captured forcefully belongs to me. I am not here to fight or argue with you. We should sit and discuss the matter. This issue needs to be resolved today. We must reach a conclusion that would be favorable to both the parties,” he was there to make some negotiations with his adversaries and tried his best to put across the deal to them.

The man standing opposite to Kunal guffawed insolently and said, “This is a land kiddo and not the toy that you will beg and I will hand over to you. This place where you are standing right now is under my grip. It may belong to you but only on papers,” he laughed and everyone laughed with him. There was nothing funny about what he said but his intention was to pressurize the boy who stood in front of him. His laughter did not reach his eyes. His eyes were an opaque pool of black water without any humor or life.

Kunal was a young boy and it was only natural for him to react to his provocation. Rising to his bait, he retaliated, “The land may be in your possession but legally it belongs to me and I will not allow you to take away something that is lawfully mine.”

This infuriated the men who were till now laughing at him. The man who appeared to be the group leader said by gritting his teeth, “Listen you fool, this is a matter of land. Anyone who dares to stand opposite me either chooses to step back peacefully or we make sure they retire. FORCEFULLY!”

“This is my land and I will not move an inch from here neither peacefully nor forcefully,” Kunal was not swayed by the threat of his adversaries.

Soon the situation slipped from the hands of Kunal and the atmosphere became extremely heated up. The men were waiting for some signal from their leader and the moment he said, “Teach this kid a lesson that he would always remember and never dares to visit this place or claim his land ever again.”

No sooner had he said this, more than 15 men pounced on Kunal. He did get any chance to attack or defend himself. The men started to punch and kick him from all sides. Snatching away his bag, they also grabbed his wallet. The men were out of control. They were beating him mercilessly. Taking the return tickets from his wallet, they tore it into pieces. They had looted his money and clothes. Kunal could not keep a count of their blows. He was being outnumbered by his enemies. The men asked his hooligans to stop because he did not want Kunal to die and create problems for him.

Kunal had somehow managed to reach the railway station in the evening. His entire body ached miserably. He saw his reflection on the opaque mirror of an air-conditioned compartment. A boy in tattered clothes with a bloodied face and swollen eyes stood in front of him. Kunal himself was horrified at his poor condition. He did not have anything on him with which he would return to Bhopal.

Somewhere around 12.00 a.m., his train was scheduled to arrive. Kunal looked at the platform clock, it was only 9.00 p.m. right now. Kunal decided to sleep at the platform till the time his train arrived.

Somewhere in his destiny, it was written that he would not receive any sort of solace whatsoever. There seemed to be no end to his problems. Suddenly, a policeman arrived out of nowhere and became suspicious of Kunal. He began to ask him all sorts of questions, “What is your name? Who have you been fighting with?” Kunal paled in front of the uniformed man and did not have any idea how to plead his case in front of the person who was in no mood to sympathize with him.

The man continued to bombard Kunal with one after another question. His voice became feeble as Kunal heard the blaring signal of the train that was about to depart. The signal continued and soon the engine slowly came into action. The train started to leave the platform.

Kunal decided to run away from the spot because in case that man got hold of him, the matter would stretch further. He took a dash from there. The policeman began to chase him. Even though Kunal was badly hurt and every inch of his body was in excruciating pain but he was an athlete. Despite all his efforts, the policeman was not able to catch up with him because Kunal climbed up on the train that had now increased its speed.

Once inside the train, he asked one of the men where it was going. That was the only thing that happened in his favor that day. The train was running towards the same direction as Bhopal. Kunal decided to spend the night on the train. Now, he was faced with one major problem, he did not have any tickets on him and neither did he have any money. How was he supposed to cover the whole distance? The train was scheduled to reach Bhopal the following morning.

At that time, Kunal had an idea. He locked himself up in the washroom of the train. Once inside the small washroom, he decided to remain cooped up there till he reached Bhopal.

Kunal washed his wounds with the water. He had not eaten anything for almost 20 hours now. His stomach growled hungrily. Kunal bends himself in the washbasin of the train toilet and put his mouth against the tap. He began to drink the tap water of the restroom. After filling up his stomach with enough water he sat on the floor of the toilet.

The night ahead was too long. Kunal had to make sure that he spent the night without getting caught. Quite naturally, Kunal will have to face serious consequences if he was caught traveling without a ticket. So, hiding in the toilet was the best option. Kunal continued to drink from the tap water of the train toilet and sit either on the floor or the commode of the train.

Somehow, the long night ended and he reached Bhopal. The situation in Bhopal also was not very different. The moment he arrived at his home, he came to know that the court has given its verdict in favor of the Bank. There definitely was no respite for Kunal whatsoever.

The court has strictly instructed Kunal not to miss a single EMI of his loan. This clearly meant that he was to let go of his home and factory. There was simply nothing he could do to turn the situation in his favor. He had confined himself in his house.

His mind was constantly raided by the negative thoughts. There was nothing going in his stride at that time. Devika was going away from him or maybe she already did. Their relationship was nothing like what it used to be. He was neck deep in debts. The condition of the factory was not praiseworthy. There was not a single source of income. His relatives only rubbed salt to his wounds. Kunal was once again feeling suicidal. The present phase of his life was truly darker than the blackest shade of the color black.

**Chapter 21.**

**Looking Back In Agony**

Kunal had finally managed to shun the idea of committing suicide. He had already suffered for a long long time. He felt that things cannot get worse than this. He was prepared to let go of everything. If the bank had to capture his house and factory then so be it.

One morning, Kunal tried to assess the entire situation. He was flooded with all sort of memories. Sitting in his father’s chair he recalled the good old past.

“I will take up engineering and after that, I will do MBA. Baba, we will go to the U.S and get settled there. Baba, you will date the *goris*.” Kunal recaptured the promise he had made to his father on clearing his class X.

“Kunal, you truly are like a boon to me. I cannot imagine my life without you.” Devika’s voice rang in his ears. He also thought of the promise she had made to him when Mr. Singh had died, “No matter what happens Kunal, I will always stand by you. I will never ever leave your side.”

He smiled painfully as he thought of her favorite dialogue which she so often repeated, “Always remember Kunal, you jump, I jump.”

There was a heavy slab on his chest that caused him intolerable pain. A big lump formed in his throat as he thought of his father. Night after night Mr. Singh used to sit next to his head whenever he fell sick.

“Kunal is not an orphan, his father is alive. As long as I am there, he will never be lonely. He would never feel alone. I will make sure my son receives all the luxuries of the world. I will be his mother who would always shower affection and love over him. I will smother him with irritating kisses. I will be the best father. I will guide him and aid him at the time of need. I will be his advisor at all walks of life. I will be his sister. I will conceal all his mistakes and fight him throughout the day. I will be his brother who would share clothes with him. We will play together and create a ruckus. I will be the friend he needs. I will be his confidante and ally. Kunal would never feel lonely as long as I live.” The memories of the day when his stepmother had abandoned Kunal and his father was still very vivid.

Mr. Singh had denied his mother’s emotional statement that ‘Kunal was orphaned again.’ That was the day when Mr. Singh had taken the pledge to fill all the lonely gaps of Kunal’s life and make sure his life feels like heaven on earth.

Verily, Kunal’s life was heaven on earth but with the departure of Mr. Singh, he fell from the heaven. The great fall from the heaven, that his father had created for him, landed him in the world of miseries, trauma, tragedy, and humiliations.

The world that Mr. Singh had created was so perfect that Kunal had no idea what loneliness was. Kunal was unaware of the feelings one experiences when faced with any trouble.

There were two phases of his life, before Baba and after Baba. Before Baba, everything was heavenly. It was a dreamlike world of happiness and joy. There was nothing that went against him in that era.

The situation completely reverses in the second phase. The phase without Baba, here everything was ghastly and gruesome. Nothing ever went in his favor in this phase. Everyone seemed to stand against him. Be it people or situation. Nothing ever worked for him.

The world that his father had created for him was so perfect that even the smallest of distasteful incident would have appeared exceptionally problematic. But as luck would have it, right from the heaven he had been shifted to a living hell. The situations that he was faced with was gruesome even to the strongest of backs. The tragedies that he faced on a day to day basis, if someone was to live his life for a single day, the person in question would have given up within hours. But Kunal was different. He was a man of exceptionally strong character and iron like personality.

The more force destiny applied to bring him down. Kunal always resurfaced and fought it off with unmatched ferocity. Every adversity instead of breaking him, only made him a lot stronger than before.

It did not really matter to him anymore that he was left without a father or a well-wisher. Everyone who promised to stick to him at the time of need had taken a flight at the first sign of distress. Kunal was a one man army. He was running the show single handedly.

He had submitted the papers for his fifth semester. He studied during the night and ran the factory during the day. The rigorous hard work had finally landed in the third year of his engineering degree.

The most traumatic phase after the death of his father was the visit to Gwalior. The whole episode there was chill worthy. Even though he was badly injured there but on his return, he did not have enough money to get himself treated. To evade the privy eyes and fake concern of the people who crossed his path, he decided to stay at home and nurse his wounds all by himself.

A week’s self-imposed confinement at home had somehow healed his wounds marginally.

The days continued to drag by without any change. Kunal never had enough money so there were times when he skipped meals by a day or two. When the hunger pushed him to his limits, he visited his relatives on the pretext of simply meeting them. They used to feed him, sometimes willingly and most of the times unwillingly.

One fine day, he received an invitation to attend the housewarming party from one of his relatives. Kunal did not want to miss a chance mainly for the simple reason of having a stomach full of meal.

The traumatic condition in which he led his life was not hidden from his relatives. As he sat in a circle with a few of his cousins. Each one of them voiced their plans for the future.

“After completing my MBBS, I will apply for a Canadian visa,” one of his cousins said. “But why would you want to go there? Even India is coming up with great hospitals with advanced technology,” the other cousin interjected.

“Listen, dude, I need to get some added degrees in my field. The Indians have this preconceived notions of trust and confidence towards the Doctors who have foreign degrees. Such degrees add a credibility to us,” his would be doctor cousin forwarded his excuse.

The group continued to chat animatedly till someone addressed Kunal, “Why don’t you say anything? You have been silent whole evening.”

Kunal simply smiled and shook his head. There was a time when Kunal used to reign over such discussions. He was the most jolly and lively person one could across with. He still is the center of attraction and steals the show wherever he goes with his charm and humor. However, at that time, he was not his true self. The traumas of life had sunk his spirit. He had lost his spark then.

“Come on now, say something,” his cousins goaded him.

“Well, I really don’t know what to do. Forget about the future, I am finding it extremely difficult to deal with my present. My house and factory are at stake. The bank authorities have already put it on auction and the moment they get a suitable buyer, my properties would be sold. Whoosh! And everything would slip away from my hand just like that,” he joined all the five fingers of his right hand and blew on it. His assets were now serving the purpose of a liability and would vanish into the thin air like smoke anytime soon.

“Even though I have completed my fifth semester, only I know how I have managed to come this far. But I really have no idea whether I will be able to continue with my degree or not. There seems to be so many things going against me. At times I feel, everyone and everything has conspired to bring me down. The college dues do not seem to decrease but pile up with every semester.”

Kunal was speaking his heart out with his cousins. They were struck by the hard life he lived. At that time, one of his cousins said, “Why do you stress yourself so much? Either you change your situation or change your life,” his cousin advised.

Kunal did not understand as to what his senior cousin was talking about, he asked, “What do you mean?”

His cousin said, “What I mean to say is, first of all, you cut out all the useless expenses.” Kunal asked him, “How?”

“Don’t you think that the house you live in right now is too big for you? The maintenance of your bungalow is too high to be undertaken by a student,” his cousin stated. Kunal nodded in agreement because his cousin had a valid point there.

Kunal asked him, “But where would I live if I leave my house. I don’t have any place to go.”

His cousin smiled and patted him on his back affectionately, “It will be better if you join some place as a PG or rent a room. This way you will just have to pay for the rent, there will be no other added or extra expenses.” Kunal was giving some serious thoughts to what his cousin said. He then asked him, “But from do I pay the rent?”

His cousin was an extremely wise person. He had been independently taking care of his family from a very early age. He knew a lot about the ways of the world. He was a pro at cutting down unnecessary expenses.

At that moment, he offered Kunal a brilliant idea, “Listen, buddy, your house is too big for you. Your factory is not running as per the requirement. All the men you have dealt with so far in your foaming industry have duped you. None of them have made any payment whatsoever to the products they bought from you. Moreover, everyone who had ever lend you any money hound you hungrily. My friend, the trade business is not a piece of cake. I agree that you are an extremely hardworking lad. As far as the production is concerned you have been able to successfully manufacture best quality foam. What you lack is PR, you have not been able to mix with the right men in this trade. The business is run by extremely cunning and sharp minded rascals and not someone as innocent and transparent as you.”

Kunal’s spirits were once again dampened by his cousin’s criticisms. He said in a low voice, “I know I have failed. This means I have no way out,” before he could utter any more words, he interrupted him, “No, no I did not mean any such thing. I have not yet finished.”

His cousin once again continued, “Now that it has been affirmed that your house is too big for you, therefore, it is decided that you will shift to a rented flat. Now, as far as how do you pay the rent and your factory goes. I have already highlighted the fact that you have not been able to do the business properly. You lack the basic business skills. Hence, I would suggest that you take up a job a somewhere.”

Kunal’s head shot up and he looked at his cousin. He was wondering how come he did not think of this earlier. His cousin continued, “You are in the third of your engineering degree, you can easily score a job somewhere with a moderate salary. From the salary, you can pay the rent and save some more money to make sure that you clear your dues slowly.”

The advice that his cousin gave made sense to Kunal. If he shed the burden of house and factory, then a great deal of his problems would get resolved. As it is he did not have any way out of the vicious cycle where he was caught. By working in a company, he would not have to starve himself for days. Moreover, the working hours would be set which means he would get enough time to study.

Kunal thanked his cousin profusely. One of his uncles came to the group and said, “Come on you people, how long do you plan to sit here. The food is ready. Everyone got up to take dinner. Kunal smiled to himself thinking today was the last time he would depend on someone else to feed him out of their pocket and not his own.

Kunal thought to himself, “Tomorrow the sun would rise to a new morning. I will start my life all over again. Today Bhaiya has turned a new leaf in my life. From tomorrow, I will turn the table in my favor. There will be no more tragedies, traumas, heartaches or failures. I will make sure that my new life is full of new adventures sans poverty.”

Kunal went to the food stall with his cousins. Today after a long long time he enjoyed his food. He did not feel any lump in his throat as he ate. The food tasted delicious. Life felt good. He was relaxed and much at ease after months or trials and tribulations.

**Chapter 22**

**Light At The End Of The Tunnel**

Kunal woke up with a smile. After a really long duration, he was finally at peace. His first stop was to score a job suitable for him. He needed something that would pay him a nice some and also help him gain experience in his engineering field.

He always made sure that he never missed any of his class. Kunal decided to finish his classes first and then he would prepare his resume. The classes continued as usual and soon after it was time for him to go prepare his CV.

Kunal came back to his home and turned on his computer. These were the few things Kunal could not do without. He needed to be at par with changing trends for which an internet connection with an up to date computer was extremely important. Although his computer was outdated with a tiny black spot in the middle of his computer screen. Just like everyone else, his system was also giving up on him. Those days, the desktop had a major hardware issue named BSOD - blue screen of death. He feared his desktop soon would die on him.

Kunal browsed through his system and out of normal routine logged in to check his mail. During those days, businesses were still done the traditional way - meeting the buyers in person. He always had the tendency to think out of the box. This was the reason why he had sent out his company’s introductory to various buyers by taking out their information online.

A long time ago, he had emailed one of the biggest foam companies in Bhopal. That day when he had logged into his email account, there he saw an email that awaited him. It was in reply to his introductory note. They had enquired about his contact number to set up a meeting with him.

Kunal forgot all about the main person of turning on his system. He dialed the number attached to the email. “Hello,” the man from the other end of the line answered the call. “Good afternoon Sir, my name is Kunal Giani, I am calling you from the foam manufacturer company KunSar,” Kunal introduced himself over the phone.

The man on the end was equally polite and accommodating. Both of them were in need of each other. Kunal desperately needed new orders to restart the stalled work. Hence, as per his request, the meeting between the two of them was scheduled the very next day.

Kunal completely skipped the entire idea of applying for a new job. He shut down his system and directly went to the factory. Once in the factory, he enquired about the workers. He had a team of loyal employees. They somehow managed to stick to Kunal against all odds.

The condition of the factory was ignoble. Kunal was satisfied with the condition in KunSar. Happily, he returned home and eagerly waited for the morning. That night Kunal did not even feel hungry. His excitement captured a good part of his brain. Making great plans for the future. Going over and over again the meeting in his head, things he would say, his presentation, marketing strategies and several such things ran through his mind. Soon, the sleep came over him as his tired body and excited mind relaxed.

The next day he woke up with a start. Kunal had kept his clothes ready the earlier night. He wanted to look presentable so he had already decided what exactly to wear. By default, he is good looking and handsome so everything looks good on him. That day also he looked extremely presentable in blue jeans and white shirt. He always likes to dress decently. Till date, his preference in clothes is casual and comfortable.

Quite often his friends and those who meet him say, “You are in the wrong profession. With those looks, you can easily give Bollywood actors a run for their money,” and Kunal just smiles politely. When we were together, I often used to tease him, “Why do you worry about your looks. Bugger, you look good on any and everything. Even if you dress up like a clown, girls would still swoon over you.” With me he is totally different, when am there and tease him about his good looks, he does not smile politely, he gives me his traditional smack at the back of my head and says, “Yeah, even when I dress up like a clown I won’t look funny, I would rather look like The Joker/ Heather Ledger of The Dark Knight.” Kunal is an extremely jovial person and when he wants he can make everyone around him roll over with laughter.

Kunal did not want to be late for the meeting with his client so he reached the location before time. He eagerly waited outside the office premises till it was five minutes to the appointment.

The gentleman sat opposite him and offered him coffee. From the look of the entire infrastructure it did not take him long to realize that he was sitting in one of the best companies in Bhopal.

“Kunal, I am a man of principles and there are two things that I liked about you which is why today you are sitting opposite me. Firstly, the Indians are still not ready to embrace the kind of technology which the western world has taken for granted. To most of us, the internet is still an alien concept. It is only the youngsters who are into internet and technology and it is no secret what exactly the youngsters do online. Same old pornography and cyber sex,” the man continued to talk to Kunal and he simply nodded in agreement from time to time.

The man then asked him about his company and the machinery that KunSar works with. Mr. Singh had installed all the latest models of advanced technology machines. On learning about the models, that man was very happy. Kunal had done his homework properly, he said, “Sir, I will not let you down. I don’t wish you to be just a onetime client, I am looking forward to establishing a long term business bond with you wherein both of us would be happy and satisfied.”

The honesty and enthusiasm of Kunal fetched him his biggest order that day. When he looked at the order details, his heart beat accelerated violently. Even though he was shaking from within with sheer happiness but somehow he managed to maintain a calm exterior.

The order that he had received from his client was his biggest order till date. Kunal raced towards his factory from there. Once he reached there, his spirits dampened a little. There hardly was any material with him by utilizing which he would fulfill the supply order.

The consignment order was humongous and Kunal was hoping that if he is able to turn this client into a returning customer then things would definitely take a U-turn as far as the business front was concerned. Kunal was a little bit disheartened by the fact that he lacked the sufficient fund with which he would supply the consignment. But he was someone who had not learned to give up. He had this never say die attitude. Kunal always invested his 100% and put in his best effort in anything that ever came his way.

Kunal straightaway went to his grandmother. “Dadi, a really big consignment has come my way, this would turn a new leaf in my life. Until yesterday, I had given up all hope. I had come to the point of accepting the fact that the house and factory would go away soon. I had stopped worrying over the two and had decided that I will not struggle anymore to save it. It is really not in my capacity. You know Dadi, I had also decided to take work independently and join some office so that I can complete my engineering degree peacefully. I might have applied to a few companies today itself. I would also have looked up a new rented space and would have shifted there. Everything was set in motion to start a new life with a brand new start. But do you know what happened today?” he asked his grandmother with hopeful eyes and excited voice.

“What happened sweetheart?” his grandmother asked him affectionately. “Dadi, I have received a really huge consignment today. If I fulfill this order successfully and they continue to give orders for similar consignment then everything would change for good. Dadi, I have not come today to borrow money, I know your financial status,” his grandmother averted her gaze regretfully. Her heart went out to her grandson. His sorry condition broke her heart into many pieces but she was helpless, she could not help him even if she wished. He had other children and grandchildren also and they would have accused her of being biased had she expressed her true feelings for Kunal.

“Please don’t cry Dadi, things are about to change now. All I want from you is your kind blessings. Keep me in your prayers,” Kunal said wiping off his grandmother’s tears.

She patted his head affectionately and said, “You are always in my prayers my prince. I wish and pray that you become extremely successful. I want you to shine like the sun and moon. Maybe, your dadi will not be with you when you are a big man but I will always look at you from up there. Sigh! Saru passed away so soon. It breaks my heart every time I think of him. You look just like him. My eyes feel so peaceful when I look at you.”

The two of them continued to have a heart to heart talk for a long time. Soon, it was time for Kunal to leave. He had to start looking for someone who can lend him enough funds with which he would start manufacturing the foam for his consignment.

Kunal went to a few of his relatives and put forward his request to lend him some money. It did not take them a second to turn him down. Next, he went to the previous clients who owed him money. “Mr. Kashyap, it has been more than three months you have not paid me anything,” Kunal told one of his clients. “You can see the market yourself son, there is simply no profit. I myself am running my entire business in a total loss,” he gave him an excuse. Kunal knew it way too well that that man was just giving him a cock and bull story simply to avoid making the payment he owed Kunal.

Not just Mr. Kashyap, all the other clients gave him some sort of excuse or sob story but did not make any payment to him. There was a gentleman who blatantly refused to make any payment. Either way, Kunal returned empty handed. From there, he went to arrange some funds by borrowing from the people he knew. Unfortunately, most of them had already lent him money in his earlier endeavors. They were not willing to lend him any money until and unless he repaid his previous debts. Here also, he did not get any success.

Kunal continued to wander here there and everywhere to make arrangements for his big consignment. But soon, the opportunity appeared to slip away from his hands. Ultimately, the date of delivery arrived and Kunal failed. The one ray of hope that had appeared in so many months had finally disappeared. Kunal could not make it. All his hopes and aspirations of turning his life around sank. Kunal was once again back to the square one.

The date to make payments for the EMI to the bank came near and passed. The bank was now in the position to place his house and factory in the auction. Kunal started to have sleepless nights thinking the house that his father had built so affectionately would be sold on the open market. There would be people who would place their price on his house and factory. Both his house and factory was the dream of his father. Now both of it would be gone for good. Kunal decided not to worry so much.

A few weeks back he had come to terms with his current life situation. But with the consignment order that had come his way recently had once again sparked some new hope within him. With that opportunity gone, Kunal was back to being the same. His problems had resurfaced. All the problems remained the same. There was simply no way out for him. No respite, no solace, only tension, and tragedy.

**Chapter 24**

**The Heartbreak**

One fine day the angel who was responsible for writing Kunal’s destiny decided that he is not doing a good job. The angel thought he has written all sorts of tragedies in the book of life of Kunal so far but there is one thing that is missing. The boy has not been heartbroken. His love story has plenty of drama but no real tragedy. Hence the day finally arrived when Kunal was to have his heart broken by the girl whom he had fallen in love for the first time.

Kunal was yet to appear for his sixth year. His third year was still not complete. In the meantime, Devika had already started to appear for the campus interviews. She was an intelligent girl with a pleasant personality. It did not take her long to land a suitable job to kick start her career. Everyone around Kunal was shooting up while he was constantly spiraling down.

It was during one of those times, Devika asked Kunal to meet him, “It is important for both of us. I think we owe this much to all the time we spent together. To our relationship. I request you to meet me Kunal,” she said over the phone one morning. Kunal was on his way to the college. As it is, he had been avoiding her, not intentionally, for a long time. Kunal was going through the toughest phase of his life, he did not have any time for dating or going out. His schedule and problems did not allow him to lead a normal life. But his girlfriend at that time was not able to understand his situation. She was too young to empathize with his trauma.

There was something about the way Devika spoke with Kunal that day, he was able to sense the change in her tone and kind of understood what was in store for him in that meeting. It would only be appropriate to call it a meeting because Kunal and Devika had stopped going out on dates. How can a person who barely has enough money to eat and survive be able to go out on a date? Kunal was full of chauvinism when it came to his male ego, he was not like the easy going carefree metrosexual men to whom eating from a female’s pocket was acceptable. No matter what he went through, how badly he suffered, Kunal could never ever think of involving Devika in his personal matters, especially the ones related to his finance. His self-respect did not allow him to stoop below his dignity.

The two of them sat in a park, “How are you?” she asked him formally. “I am good, thanks,” he replied, his tone was equally cordial.

“How about the things at home? Is everything fine?” her next question was no different from the first. She was speaking in the same flat tone using boring syllables. “No, I am not fine. My life is totally fucked. I am just a few steps away from total destruction. MY LIFE SUCKS!!!” Kunal wanted to scream and take out all his frustration but he maintained his calm and said, “Yeah, all cool. You tell me what is it you wanted to talk to me about?”

Devika was a year senior to Kunal because he had taken a year’s gap due to his obsession with IIT. This was the main reason why Devika was near to her eighth semester or final year. Her campus recruitment was over. Now, all she had to do was clear her final year and get going with her life.

“Kunal, my campus recruitment is over. I have scored a job in Bangalore,” she informed him. “That’s nice. Where will you go, I am sure it must be in some IT industry. I am glad you chose the Silicon Valley to start your career,” Kunal expressed his happiness. Although he was forcing himself to look happy as he smiled. Maybe Devika was not able to see the sadness that lurked in his eyes at that time. She said, “I think it is best for the two of us. Today, I have called you here Kunal because I am tired of pretending to be your girlfriend. I am tired of faking. I cant pretend a minute longer and say everything is alright. Can’t you see nothing is alright. We don’t meet, we don’t talk. You went to Punjab without even meeting me and stayed there for three whole months. I don’t even know what you did there. You never share any of your problems with me. I really have no idea where we are heading,” she had her list of complaints out in the open.

It was really not her fault if she felt that way. Had it been anyone else in her situation, one would have behaved in the same manner as she did. They did not part ways because they were bored with each. Both of them were victims of time. the time was not on their side. It was the situation of Kunal that drifted the two of them apart.

Kunal silently listened to everything that she had to say. He understood that Devika is fed up with him but is not being able to tell him. She did not want to hurt him. This time too he had to take hold of the situation and take all the blame on his head. He looked elsewhere as he said, “Devika, I am sorry for causing you so much of trouble in these months. I know I have not been an ideal boyfriend. You have suffered a lot because of me. No matter how hard I try but I cannot undo the pain that I have caused you,” his voice quivered a little as he said, “I have decided to release you from this traumatic relationship.”

Devika started to cry as he said about the breakup. Kunal had to do the needful. Their relationship was over long time ago, today he was making it official so that the two of them can be at ease.

Painful tears of sadness rolled down her cheeks as Kunal continued to say, “This is for us Devika.”

At that time he took her hands in a friendly manner, his touch lacked the warmth and love. The coarse skin of his palm holding her soft hands made him realize that Devika was not meant for the hardship and tough life which Kunal had become accustomed to.

Neither of the two wanted to part ways but their fate was sealed. “You will not hear from me ever again. I wish you all the very best in your life. Your future will be filled with success and joy,” it broke his heart into tiny little pieces as he said, “I will always be there for you as a friend. Maybe, I am not in the condition to promise you anything but you have my words. At any point in time, if you are ever in need of something and I am in the position to assist you. I request you to let me know. You have my words Devika, I will be there for you. As of now, I think we should part on mutual grounds and start our life afresh.”

Kunal mustered all his strength to maintain a tough exterior that day. Devika could not imagine the way he was breaking from within. He smiled as he held back his tears. He had both her hands in his left hand and patted her folded hands with his right as he said his final words before parting ways. “Goodbye Devika. I wish you all the very best for your future.

Kunal skipped his classes that day. He did not attend his college but straightaway went to WALMI dam. There, he sat at his favorite spot and cried his heart out. Kunal was free of the guilt that he was dragging someone else in his pit of sorrow and tribulations. His conscience did not allow him to play with the career of someone he truly loved. Kunal chose to hurt himself rather than become a cause of grief to someone else. He had been trying to end the relationship for a long time for Devika’s sake but the thought of causing her a heartache was unbearable to him. But today when Devika herself summoned him to call off the relationship. He instantly freed her from it.

Kunal sat there for a long time and licked his wounds in isolation. Another beautiful chapter of his life ended on a sad note.

**Chapter 24**

**An Engineer Running Errands**

Kunal did not have any idea how long will have to suffer. There seemed to be no ends to his miseries. Every other day a new twist awaited him. Kunal did everything he could to keep his back straight. He could do all he could in his capacity but did not give up.

Every time he felt on the verge of quitting, his father’s words echoed through his head. “Winners never quit and quitters never win. The moment you accept your failure you become a loser. Nobody can defeat you but your own self. Learn to conquer your own fears first. All those who are not scared of anything have nothing to lose. Don’t halt keep moving ahead. Life means movement and death means stagnancy. You don’t quit as long as you live.”

Despite the fact of Mr. Singh being dead and gone, he lived in the memories of Kunal. His teachings supported his lonely son even though he had departed from this world.

Mr. Singh had mad many loyal friends during his lifetime. His lawyer was definitely one of them. He had already lost his house and factory to the bank. They had already decided to kick him out of his own property a long time ago. Thanks to his honest lawyer, he had advised Kunal, “Son, don’t worry it is only the session court that has passed its judgment. We can still stretch our case to the high court and then to the Supreme Court if the need be. I have to make sure that we get the stay order on your properties.”

“How will a stay order help me, uncle?” Kunal asked his lawyer. “Son, stay order would help you buy more time. This may you can turn the table and clear your loan amount. It only takes a second to change the course of one’s life,” his lawyer sounded hopeful.

Kunal thought unhappily, ‘Yes, it only takes a second that changes one’s life. My life turned upside down and changed completely in just a fraction of a second. All it took that truck driver that day to lose control for just a second and that one second totally twisted the course of my life’.

“Yes, I know uncle. A lot can happen in just one second. The concept of black holes, the law of motion, gravity, divine revelations and breakthrough inventions for the development of human civilization are a result of a second’s thought. It took the great men of the world to change the course of human history in a matter of one second,” Kunal pretended to sound optimistic as he continued to express his philosophical side to the lawyer who sat opposite.

The same day, his lawyer had sent out a request for the stay order to the court. Fortunately, the court had passed the verdict in his favor that day. The plea of his lawyer was accepted and they had been lucky enough to get a stay order from the court. This concluded that Kunal still had some chance to get back his lost glory.

So far his fate was going entirely in the reverse direction. He was with great difficulty swimming against the tide. The stay order came as a small respite to him.

Kunal with day and night of struggle had finally been able to stabilize his feet in the field of education. The three months gap when he was in Punjab had increased his burden. He attended his college during the day and studied a good part of the night.

After undergoing great difficulties, he had finally managed to complete his sixth semester. Kunal was happy that his education was not getting hampered due to his problematic life. Unfortunately, this small bit of happiness was also short lived. After clearing his third year of engineering degree, Kunal was summoned by the College authorities. Despite the fact that Kunal was a brilliant student and he would have been able to do a great deal of benefit to the society with proper education. But as a wise man once said that talent is not dependent upon any sort of degree. If you have it in you then nothing can stop you from acquiring the post you rightly deserve.

There are end number of uncouth, uncultured officials who hold prestigious degrees. Whereas it so happens, at times, a man with no education, from an extremely humble background can teach you the lesson of life. Once it so happened with Kunal, he was sitting outside a building under construction. That day was not very different from the rest of the days of his life filled with ever popping troubles. Kunal was feeling extremely low that as he sat among the rubbles. A dark skinned man who was perspiring profusely sat next to him.

There was something about the way Kunal looked that day, the labor working in the construction site was able to understand that the boy who sat there alone and forlorn was facing some crisis situation back home. During his struggling days, Kunal had realized that those with humble background are most often more generous than those who are stuffed with wealth and status. Kunal’s three months stay in Punjab had taught him a lot about the kindness and generosity. Even now, Kunal does not hesitate to mix and mingle with those who work under him. His employees are family to him. Employees and officials ranking from the top to bottom are treated with same compassion. He never discriminates or differentiates.

The man struck a conversation with Kunal and Kunal also did not feel anything against him and the two of them spoke for a long time. The man that day said something to Kunal which is still very close to his heart. “Never lose hope bro, hard work never goes astray. What you sow so shall you reap. Everything that you have done in your past will payback. I am sure you will make it really big someday. And bro, never ever give out clarifications. You don’t need anybody else to give you a note of appreciation. Remember, always let your work speak for you.” His words filled him with new found spirit. His college had given him the notice that he would not be able to attend his fourth year classes until and unless he clears his previous dues.

That day, Kunal did not have second thoughts before he quit his engineering. It must have broken his heart when he had to quit his studies just a year before his engineering graduation. But Kunal had decided to move forward now and not look back.

He surfed through the newspaper in the career section looking for any openings matching his credentials. His eyes caught the sight of an ad published for Dainik Jagran newspaper. They were on the lookout of an H.S (Higher Secondary) pass candidate in their office.

Kunal headed to the Dainik Jagran office right away. Even though he was overqualified for the post but he convinced his interviewee that he was perfect for the post.

This is how Kunal had to quit his studies after clearing the third year. He started to work in Dainik Jagran. His duties were not fixed. Calling him an errand boy of Dainik Jagran will not be an overstatement. The factory remained shut. His life dragged at a snail pace.

**Chapter 25**

**An Aimless Shooting Star**

The already sad life of Kunal became drearier after he joined the Dainik Jagran. Even though he lived in the same house but now he had come to terms with the fact that his stay here was only short lived. The constant struggle and hardship had made him snap from within. He started to carry this devil may care attitude, and did not bother about anything.

The boy who at one stage of his life had put his life at stake to save his father’s house and factory had become totally careless about each and everything. He had made some new friends in his new office. The frustration had finally taken a toll on his psyche.

Slowly and steadily he was on the verge of total breakdown. The boys who worked with him were not as refined as him. But Kunal was like water. He was extremely adaptable. He could take the form of any situation he was thrown in to. This is why he adjusted himself so nicely with the boys he worked with. His colleagues knew a little bit about his condition. They too had their own set of problems to deal with. But as one can see, there are many men who take an easy route. The boys with Kunal always relied on alcohol to vent out their stress.

One day, he went to a local pub with his friends. They sat there for a long time and drank alcohol. This experience was nothing like the beer experience during the farewell of standard XII. This time he was not tasting beer like a teenager. It was not something out of fun but Kunal was actually depending on alcohol to soothe his tired nerves. This was definitely not a good sign.

One of his friends Rakesh said, “*Ek botal of Old Monk, bhool ja sarey gham.”*

A bottle of Old Monk is good enough to delete all the pain and glum

In India, if you are a rum person then Old Monk is your thing. That day that one bottle of rum helped Kunal forget everything. He was devoid of all pain and sufferings. All the negative emotions evaporated in the thin air and a sense of euphoria overcame him. Kunal felt a strong surge of strong emotions. He was oscillating between overwhelming desires to be happy and then at the same time, his mind was raided by all the trauma and tragedies.

No matter which feelings he underwent. Regardless of the fact of the degree of his emotions. One thing was for sure. Kunal’s mind was completely benumbed by the effect of alcohol. He was not being able to think straight. For once, his over active brain was able to slow down. He was induced with a sense of fake peace.

The next day, Kunal woke up with a severe hangover. The excruciating pain in the head compelled him to make a promise to himself that he will not consume alcohol ever again. But once you are walking on the wrong path, the promises are supposed to be broken. For Kunal too, the promise that he made to himself that morning was broken after a few days.

Every time he thought of his home or factory he muttered nonchalantly, under his breath, ‘fuck it.’

He was under the impression that finally, he had everything under his control. He was able to take care of his own life. There was no more tension and no more trauma. His life was finally on the right track. The menial job in Dainik Jagran seemed like ‘be all and end all’ of his life. This was his biggest mistake. Kunal had no idea that he was finally deeper into the pit of failure. He was not meant for such an aimless low life. His father had raised him to be a man of caliber and he was slowly turning in to a scum.

His routine had become so ghastly that soon he started to consume alcohol every single day. Whenever one of his acquaintances asked him, “What have you decided to do with your life?” he always gave the same reply, “I really care a fig about anything now. I did all I could to make ends meet but,” pointing towards the sky, “That guy up there does not want me to rise. He has accumulated all his strategies to bring me down.”

Kunal then shaking his head in denial, “I am not so strong. I cannot fight a superior entity. I give up.”

Maybe he had given up on his hopes and dreams by then. He had decided that his job at the Dainik Jagran was suitable for him. He was not to be some world renowned entrepreneur but just an office staff in a newspaper company.

There were nights when he used to stand in front of his father’s picture and have a heart to heart talk in a slurred voice. “Baba, this is your son. The great Kunal Giani. The topper Kunal Giani. The entrepreneur of future Kunal Giani,” and then banging his chest with his hands he used to add in a broken voice, “The loser Kunal Giani. The alcoholic Kunal Giani. The quitter Kunal Giani.”

He then used to break down as he used to say, “The scum of the earth – Kunal Giani.”

Kunal had completely given up on his life. He had decided that from now onwards he would continue to live like this.

His daily routine was to go to his office and work there from morning till evening. Followed by work, he spent hours drinking Old Monk. He used to earn enough money to earn a bottle of rum every single day. He might have turned into an alcoholic soon. The house and factory were surviving on stay order. He did not know how long he would continue to reside in his bungalow. He was well prepared to evacuate it when the time came. In simple terms, he had accepted that he had lost and he was in no mood to fight the losing battle anymore.

**Chapter 26**

**A Breath Of Fresh Air**

Kunal’s life continued at a normal pace. His routine was set, a regular job in the newspaper office named Dainik Jagaran. Dainik Jagaran is one of the leading newspapers of Madhya Pradesh. Kunal was responsible for handling the media department. In the two years’ time, he had secured a reputation in the eyes of his senior authorities.

Life was pretty much the same, work during the day and inebriation during the night. Kunal was living the perfect life of an aimless man. The legal battle with the bank continued in the court. They were yet to get hold of his properties and auction it publicly.

All dreams of entrepreneurship, making it big or shining like a star had finally gone into an oblivion. Mr. Singh had wished for Kunal to reach for the sky. He wanted the moon and stars for him. Everything had changed now. Instead of shining like a star, Kunal plummeted into a whirlpool of alcohol and failure.

The alcohol provides a person with induced happiness. The happiness or the feeling of insurmountable power is nothing but the adverse effect of alcohol. Kunal had started to depend upon alcohol and he was drowning into the poisonous liquid. His life was moving on a linear motion.

Kunal did not know but he was not meant to lead an ordinary life of an average man. He was special from the very moment he was conceived. Mr. Singh was a man of extraordinary personality and he had imbibed extraordinary ideals and principles in Kunal. For the time being, he had fallen into darkness but he was not to remain there forever. The dark night was about to disappear. A new morning had dawned. The sun smiled upon Kunal with fresh rays of light. Kunal did not know but his life was about to change. He was to soon shed off the garb of failure and put on the armors suitable for a warrior. The hero was about to rise. The mortal curse would see be lifted. The spell of failure was to break soon. The lady luck had decided to smile upon Kunal and so it did.

That day when Kunal entered his office, he had no idea that a new life awaited him. He was to walk back to the same old roads he had decided not to traverse ever again. Kunal was to step into the world of success and prosperity. The time had come. His time of change had arrived.

Kunal was completely occupied selecting the appropriate images suitable for the news to go by it. At that moment, Mr. Kashyap hurried out of his chamber and called Kunal. “Buddy, I have to rush to an urgent meeting. There is an interview scheduled at 11.00 a.m., I am running out of time. I have to go through the script and news report before I approve the journal that is to be published this weekend,” he informed Kunal. “What do you want me to do?” he asked his boss.

Mr. Kashyap was racing towards the lift as Kunal walked next to him. Kunal too was taking long strides to keep pace with Mr. Kashyap. His boss had a tendency of forgetting trivial things. He looked at Kunal trying to remember what it was that he wanted Kunal to do. At that moment his face lit up as he recalled the task, he said “I want you to take the interview of the new recruit and assess the candidate,” he instructed him. Before he could rush off to the meeting, Kunal called him from behind, “What is the name of the candidate?”

He literally hated such out of the blue tasks. Kunal had already been assigned with the giant workload and now it was this new task that needed his attention. There was one good thing about him that everyone in the office loved about him, Kunal never said no to anything. He was always more than willing and ready to accept any sort of job thrown his way. Although many things had changed about Kunal but there was one thing that still remained the same and it was his hardworking nature. Even now, Kunal was the first one to enter the workplace and last one to leave. He was an extremely dedicated and hardworking boy. This was one of the main reasons why all his seniors relied upon him heavily for quality work.

Mr. Kashyap who would not have imagined in his wildest of dreams that he was playing cupid that day. It was he who had unconsciously introduced him to the love of his life, his lady luck.

The cupid in suits turned on his heels and said in a matter of fact tone, “Geetika.”

The very name has a musical feel to it. Kunal went back and sat in his cubicle. Before starting his daily task, he had instructed the receptionist that an interview is scheduled at 11.00 a.m. for Mr. Kashyap. There was a slight change in the program. Now, Instead of Mr. Kashyap, it is he who would take the interview.

By the time it was 11.00 a.m., Kunal had completely forgotten all about the scheduled interview as he was totally engrossed in his job. “Sir, the candidate for the interview has arrived,” Hari, the office boy arrived and informed him.

“Do you have the bio-data with you?” Kunal asked him. “No Sir,” Hari replied in negative. Irritated by the callousness of his office staff, he rose from his seat and went to the conference room where the interviewee waited for him. By this time, Kunal had forgotten all about the name of the candidate. He did not even know that behind the closed doors, there was a girl who awaited him.

Kunal entered the room. He was taken aback by a girl attired casually in blue faded jeans and off white kurti. His eyes were locked to the beautiful face of the petite girl who was almost his age or a year younger than him. She stood up nervously as he entered the room. The girl stretched her hands out to him and greeted, “Good after noon sir,” she said and flashed the most beautiful smile Kunal had ever seen in his life.

The doe eyed girl with a waist length pin straight silky hair smiled at him. No wonder she was drop dead gorgeous but there was this extremely peaceful aura around her which that very moment had a calming effect on him. Kunal thanked his lucky stars that his boss had assigned him the task of taking her interview. He wanted to know everything about her and the interview provided him the perfect excuse to know as much about her as he could.

The interview questions ranged from a formal introduction to personal questions like hobbies, interests, family life. Despite the fact that all these questions fall into the regular pattern of interviews yet Kunal felt elated the more he knew about her.

Geetika had completed her engineering degree which made them share common viewpoints regarding various things. Kunal was mesmerized by this beautiful girl with a breathtaking smile. Geetika, on the other hand, was completely smitten by the handsome boy who asked her various questions and made her feel so comfortable. The two of them did not realize but they shared an undeniably strong chemistry. The spark that they felt in that very first meeting was enough to draw them extremely close to each other in a very short time.

Geetika was selected by Dainik Jagaran and soon the two of them started to spend a lot of time together. Kunal was never the kind of person who mixed his personal and professional life. This is the reason why he never had any flings or affair in office ever since he joined. But this new recruit was an exception. She made him change his workplace resolution of ‘no office romance.’

Love was in the air and soon the office romance blossomed between the two. They started to have their office breaks together. The two of them used to have lunch together in the secluded section of the cafeteria. They had become good friends by now. One fine day, Kunal asked her in a matter of fact manner, “Are you free this weekend?”

“Why?” she asked him a question instead. Geetika enjoyed to tease him. She knew what was on his mind yet she wanted to pull him out of the shell of shyness.

Even though the two of them were friends but Kunal felt a lot more for her than just a friend. So did Geetika but she preferred to conceal her feelings for the time being. Kunal finally mustered all his courage and said, “Can we meet over dinner this Friday?”

Geetika simply smiled her heartwarming smile, the smile that had brought a new light to his life. She then said, “Yeah, I think dinner would be quite a change of scene after having lunch every single day.” It was her wit and humor that had brought him close to her.

The two of them finally met at a cozy restaurant and ordered dinner. Although Kunal had not disclosed anything to Geetika till now. She had no idea about his financial constraints, the tragedies he had faced all his life or his daily struggles. By default, she was a selfless and fiercely independent person. That day when they sat with the menu, she had told him flatly, “Kunal, we will share the bill, if you agree then I will order else it will not take me a second to leave the table.” Kunal was a chauvinist, his male ego did not allow him to agree with her, he said, “No way, I have never allowed any girl to touch her purse in my presence.”

“I don’t care how you have been with other girls in your past. You need to know I am not them, I am me and you need to sacrifice your male ego if you want to enjoy the presence of my company,” Geetika is this strange mix of beauty, brains, wit, and dignity. One cannot help putting down all sort of self-defense in front of her. To others, she might appear dominating but it was her utter care for Kunal that made her act domineering and strict. She always puts across her message with a hint of comic humor, one has to helplessly surrender to her charm with a smile.

Kunal realized that she mattered more than his ego so he agreed to share the bill with her. “Hi buddy, how are you?” Kunal’s college friend Rohan came and slapped him on his back. Kunal met his friend with much enthusiasm and introduced him to Geetika. Rohan was into his family business of automobiles. Their family was one of the sole proprietors of luxury cars in Bhopal. The boy was expensively dressed and smelled of very strong perfume. Geetika remained seated at her place and let the two friends speak for some time.

Soon, the dinner got served and Rohan left. Geetika and Rohan asked him to join them but he was wise enough to understand that the two of them were out on a romantic date. He did not want to disturb them. Geetika is an amazing hostess, that day too she genuinely wanted him to join them for dinner but he left the two of them alone.

Kunal had been observing for a long time, or rather ever since he met Geetika. Whatever Devika did in a particular situation, Geetika did just the reverse. She never had any problems when Kunal’s friends used to intervene. She never complained, had minimal or no demands. Her only demands were Kunal should not waste money and must do more with his life.

Geetika was busy enjoying her dinner. By now, Kunal had finished a bottle of beer. He was not high but a little elated. Looking outside the blank expanse of the road ahead, Kunal said, “You know Geetika, once I had gone to a party of my friend Rohan, the guy who just left.”

Geetika understood, Kunal was about to open his heart out to her. Alcohol brings out the senti-MENTAL or as she likes to say SEMI-MENTAL within the person. Kunal too was feeling a little bit emotional at that time. He said, “He is stinking rich. There simply was no big occasion for the grand party. But the rich are always on the lookout to spend their money. I had also gone to that party.” Kunal gave a painful smile as he said, “I looked around myself. There were stalls after stalls of foods, delicacies, bling, and glitz. People were busy talking to each other with partially filled glasses in their hands. Those days, alcohol did not attract me.”

Kunal looked disdainfully at the drink in his hand. He poured out more pain as he filled his glass, “Those days, I used to go for days without food. The reason for me to attend that party was simple. I wanted some food to eat.”

Taking a big gulp from his glass, he continued, “I have seen some extremely difficult times in my life. I used to panic thinking about how to satiate my hunger or travel from one place to another. I used to walk for miles without any food.”

Geetika held his hand and said, “You are truly an inspiration Kunal. To me, I used to consider my trivial problems as matters of great concern. Never did I think that there are people who have to struggle for standard meals. To me, the beggars on the street or those without shelter were the needy ones. You made me realize that there are people around us who out of their self-respect do not allow others to peep into their lives and know of their problems. Now, I know Kunal there surely are people with far more greater problems than ours.”

The two of them then left for their homes. That day, by disclosing just one percent of his problem to her, he had pulled Geetika a lot more closer to him than before. One day as the two of them sat talking, Geetika asked him, “Why don’t you have a girlfriend?”

This question brought back painful memories of his past relationship. He answered her question with utmost sincerity, “I am not entitled to have one. The very basic desire of a girl is security, I am not able to fulfill even that. Forget the things about luxury.”

Geetika wanted to know each and everything about Kunal. Much to his surprise, he found himself opening his heart out to her. This was something he had never done before. He told her about his poor financial state. The legal battle with the bank that he will lose any day and would be on the streets soon. Geetika was breaking from within as she listened to his painful story but she did not let it show. Her expressions did not give away anything. For a long time, she held a reign over her emotions and did not allow it to defy her. Her eyes were brimming with tears but she did not allow it to break the barriers and roll down her cheeks like a defiant child. But the moment she heard that Kunal had to leave his engineering half way due to his problems, she burst into tears.

“Geet, baby, please stop crying like this. Please don’t do this,” Kunal tried to console her. Theirs is a strange love story. It does not follow the set pattern of ‘Boy meets girl. Boy proposes. Girl accepts. The two become couple officially. The relationship starts.’ Kunal and Geetika’s love story developed in the most unnatural natural manner.

The two of them were drawn to each other by some extremely strong magnetic force, right from the day one. Geetika acted as the catalyst to his success. After the two of them got together, she decided to streamline his life which was going haywire. One day as the two of them was returning from there office together, Kunal was lost in his thought. He asked her casually, “Geet, can I ask you a question?”

“If you want to shoot, shoot. Don’t ask,” her jolly mode is always turned on. By now, she had been able to de-stress Kunal marginally. She always cracked jokes, acted filmy or simply made him feel at ease. She was like a breath of fresh air in the claustrophobic life of Kunal.

He never received a straightforward reply from her whenever he wanted to talk about something serious. She always made things very light for him which made him open up to her more freely and easily.

This time however contrary to his reactions to her jokes, he did not smile. He asked her in a very grave tone, “Why are you with me?”

“What do you mean?” she asked him hurt.

“Can’t you see I am broke? I don’t have anywhere to go. You don’t really have any future with me. At times I feel, I am being extremely selfish, I must not have involved you in my pit of shit.”

The very fact that Geetika did not ever demand anything from him. She was more than happy just to have him in her life. He knew that this innocent girl loved him unconditionally and selflessly. He felt like a cheat to strip her off of the luxury, and a lavish life she so rightly deserved. Kunal felt he was an obstruction in her path to happiness. But Geetika felt otherwise. She very strongly believed, ‘behind the success of every common man, there stands a loving woman, gritting her teeth and rolling her eyes.’ Well, that’s Geetika, the one to present most serious matters in the lightest of ways and of course the one and only who could stand in front of the toughest of situations with a million dollar smile on her beautiful face.

She stopped in the mid-way, hands on her hips, she asked him, looking straight into his eyes, “What are you going to do about it? Leave me huh!” she demanded.

Kunal averted her fiery gaze and said in a low voice, “I love you so much Geetika, for your happiness, I can even let you go.”

Geetika gave him a hard push as she screamed, “COWARD!!!”

She stormed away from there, leaving him all alone in the street. Kunal returned home with a heavy heart. He was not prepared for another heartbreak. But his life had taught him only one lesson – Stay Strong! Tragedy can strike any time. Just like lightning, trauma can appear out of nowhere.

Kunal had decided to nurse his wounds all by himself without the aid of alcohol. For the first time, he did not wish to depend upon the bottle to give him strength. He wanted to forget all the good times he spent with Geetika in these few months. The magical voice of Geetika haunted him. The laughter like the sound of silver bells and wind chimes made him aware of the death like silence of his house. The silence that was making him deaf.

At that very moment, there was someone banging on his door. It was past midnight. Kunal had turned off the lights, he was sitting alone in the dark. He has a habit of opting for darkness whenever he feels low. He thought, he may have switched off the doorbell also. Furious at the person who banged violently at the door, he raced towards the door.

“Who is th…” his sentence was caught in his throat as he saw Geetika standing at his door with two large suitcases by her side. She looked at him with a mock anger, “You wanted me to leave you, I left everything else and planned to stay with you. I was given a choice between the whole wide world and Kunal, I made the best decision of my life. I chose Kunal.”

Kunal was filled with overwhelming emotions for this stupid, crazy, and amazing girl who had decided to stand next to him when each and every one had left his side. He moved forward to hug her, she stepped back. “Not here you fool,” and then she said animatedly, “*log kya kahenge* (how would the society judge us).” both of them burst into hearty laughter as the two of them entered his house.

Initially, Kunal’s routine remained pretty much the same. There hardly was any change in his life. Geetika had blown a new life in his dead world. This was a positive development. But his routine pretty much remained the same.

One day, as the two of them sat and watched a romantic movie. Kunal thanked his lucky stars for smiling at him finally. He had recently read a book by one of his favorite authors Paolo Coelho. Taking her hands in his, he repeated one of his favorite quotes from the book, “And, when you want something, all the universe conspires in helping you to achieve it.”

“You know babe, you are the gift of God. I have got you as a compensation for all the tragedies and trauma I have faced,” Kunal confessed.

“Really?!” she sounded sarcastic. Kunal’s head shot towards her. He did not expect such a reaction from her at such a romantic moment. She then elaborated, “You always purport about your struggles, trauma, and hardships. I never tell you anything because till now I have been waiting for you to see things objectively. Today, when you relived Baba’s tradition with me on your birthday by clicking our picture together. I decided to tell you what Baba would have thought of you if he was alive.”

Kunal had told Geetika about Mr. Singh and his ritual on Kunal’s birthday. Every year on his birthday, the two of them used to take a picture together. Kunal still has those photographs neatly stacked more securely than Kohinoor diamond.

Today when Kunal repeated the same ritual with her, she felt more strongly for the man she madly loved. Geetika looked at him and said, “Firstly, this ritual is something that the two of you used to share. I am honored you did it with me but I request you to continue it with your children and not your life partner. Now, Mr. Kunal Giani, let me tell you one thing, I respect your hard work and agree that you have been through a lot but I also feel you have not given your 100%. You always say you feel Baba has not left you. But tell you what, you don’t believe what you say. If Baba was alive then you would have been either a successful businessman, a great engineer or a renowned entrepreneur and definitely not some average man working in the media department of Dainik Jagaran. He would not have approved to see his son whose sole concern is to be satisfied with paying his electricity bills, taking care of household expenses and drinking alcohol. If you really feel Baba has never left you and is always around then trust me Kunal you are being a great disappointment to him.”

Today, she was in an extremely serious mood, “Kunal, do think things all over again and give yourself another chance.”

Kunal smiled at her and said, “I will think things over but before that, I must also tell you something. In this one year, I have tried to confess it to you but never had enough courage. I will do as you say, I will not pose with you on my birthday again, I will make sure that I continue Baba’s ritual with my children,” grinning naughtily he added, “Our children.”

He knew whatever Geetika said was cent per cent right. He decided to make new strategies that night.

**Chapter 27.**

**Hallucinating The Reality**

Kunal returned that night slightly high. Sitting in front of his late father’s picture, he began to drink alcohol. In his state of inebriation, he started a conversation with Mr. Singh.

“Baba, where are you? Why did you leave me all alone?” he was carrying on with the same monotonous dialogues. The same old questions and melodrama were about to get repeated before Kunal would fall off to sleep. But this time the pattern changed.

There was no one-sided chat with Mr. Singh this time. This time his father chose to give him the answers to all his questions. Till this day, Kunal does not know whether it was his hallucination as a result of intoxication or just a dream. Be it a dream, hallucination or an impossible reality, that night changed the course of his life – COMPLETELY!!!

“I did not leave you, I had to go because my time had come,” Mr. Singh told him in a grave tone. There was a white blinding light all around him. Kunal was finding it difficult to look at his father from the dark pit where he remained slumped due to excessive drinking. He would have sunk deeper in his shit had Mr. Singh not chosen to pull him out.

“What have you done to your life, son. Just because I was taken away from you, you decided to remove all the real benefactors from your life. Look around yourself, is there one single friend whom you can introduce to me. Geetika is with you out of her undying love. But do you love her the way she does or deserves? No.”

Mr. Singh shook his head disdainfully as he said, “This is not you, son. This is really not you. You are my flesh and blood. I have raised a hero. A warrior. Show the world that you are a phoenix, the one to rise from its own ashes. You will get out of all this Kunal. Nobody can pull you out if you don’t wish. Make up your mind, you will not rot away like a bad apple. Rise and shine beta, rise and shine. I am with you. I am always watching you.”

“Can I hug you, Baba? Just for once?” Kunal implored. Mr. Singh held his hand and picked him up from his chair. Kunal hugged his father will all his life. The light from Mr. Singh lit up his son from inside out. Kunal has no idea what exactly happened that day but the fact remains – he was definitely touched by an angel. After that day, Kunal turned into the Midas of foaming industry.

Kunal opened his eyes and found himself standing all by himself in front of Mr. Singh’s photograph. Luckily, the man who had arrived at Kunal’s house after the death of Mr. Singh to report that his bike was not found. The shattered state of Kunal at the loss of his father, kind of moved him. He had decided to make sure that this boy gets his father’s bike. Even if he has to go out of his way to bring a smile on that poor boy’s face, he would do it.

The handsome but sad face of Kunal with a look of loss in his tearful eyes haunted him. After a relentless search, the bike was finally retained. The kind gentleman had also repaired his father’s bike. He still remembers the joy on Kunal’s face when he handed him his father’s bike keys and removed the cover from Mr. Singh’s bike.

Kunal was beyond himself with extremely strong emotions. He hugged and kissed the bike as the tears of joy and sadness rolled down his cheeks. The man hugged him when Kunal thanked him humbly with folded hands.

The night when Kunal thinks he hallucinated or dreamt about his father, he woke up with a start. It was raining cats and dogs as he stepped outside. Till date, he does not know how come he did not feel inebriated when he woke up. He felt totally fresh and alive.

The very same night Kunal went towards his father’s Java and took it out. Everything was finally falling into the right places like a solved jigsaw puzzle. The dream that night when his father had died, Kunal had seen himself riding a bike with his father next to him. In that dream, no sooner did Mr. Singh arrive, the racing truck that was moving towards him vanished. Mr. Singh with his presence had made the path ahead even for him. Today, as he rode his father’s bike, he felt his warm presence all around him.

Kunal had gone to Mandideep that rainy night. He stood outside his factory. Two years of negligence had left the building in a completely dilapidated state. It was his delinquency that has literally turned KunSar into ruins. The building was covered in vines that had slithered up to the roofs. The pathway leading to the building was lost in the wild grass that had grown in abundance. As he moved towards the building, something crawled under his feet. The scorpions had formed a home outside his factory. Kunal was ashamed to see how he had poisoned his life and ransacked his father’s dreams.

On entering the factory, he was shocked to see that the rust was formed over the machines. On any other day, Kunal would have felt sorry. He may have felt defeated but today was different. The emotional side prevailed one last time. That was the last time he had cried. Till today I have never ever seen him cry except for the fateful morning when Kunal stood in front of me with Mr. Singh’s remnants.

Kunal smiled as tears of inexpressible emotions drenched his face. “Baba, your son is back. I will rise and shine. I am a survivor, I am your warrior son. Now onwards I will not be ashamed of the company I keep. There will be only those you approve of. My life would be the way you wanted it to be. Your dreams of unmatched entrepreneurship, luxury cars, and lavish lifestyle would be realized. I will lead the kind of life you wanted to give me, Baba.”

As Kunal made promises to his father, the dawn set in. A new morning broke. The warm rays of the fresh sun brought a new light in his life. Kunal raced towards his home.

He sat in his father’s chair and the road ahead appeared hassle free. All the obstructions, hurdles and negativity had completely vanished. His plan of action was crystal clear.

It was time to set the table. The ball started rolling with his resignation letter. Kunal sat in front of his boss. “Buddy, what is the problem. Is it the post or the salary?” Mr. Kashyap asked him. He never treated Kunal like his junior or a subordinate. Kunal had earned the respect and trust he so rightly deserved.

“No Sir, there is nothing of the sort,” Kunal replied.

“Then what is it? Why have you put down your papers? Why do you want to leave?” Mr. Kashyap was not willing to part with one of his best team members.

Kunal assured Mr. Kashyap that he was not doing it for increment or promotion. “Sir, it is not what you think. I have my own personal reasons to leave Dainik Jagaran.”

“But why, if I may ask?” Mr. Kashyap questioned him.

“Sir, the cubicle of Dainik Jagran is a sweet place to work but it is not where my future lies. I am a falcon who wishes to soar highest. Your office is a secure nest. Sir, I am meant for tough mountains and not delicate nests. This life is meant for hardships and adventures. I am sincerely thankful for gifting me two years here. But this is where my journey here ends. I need to explore and fly now. My father’s factory is calling me. I need to turn things around for good this time. My lodestar thinks I did not invest my 100% last time. This time it is either do or die but no lying still. I refuse to be stagnant.”

A warm smile danced across Mr. Kashyap’s face. Rising from his seat, Mr. Kashyap came towards Kunal and gave him a hug. Patting him on his back, he said, “Rise and shine, Kunal. Rise and shine.”

For a moment Kunal was taken aback by his words but then he realized, it was a green signal from the supernatural that he is on the right tracks.

My phone vibrated in my pocket as I was busy working on my system. This was the first time in so many years Kunal had called me during the day. At that time I was employed in IBM. Initially, my career started with Wipro after campus recruitment. After working in Wipro for almost a year, I chose to shift to IBM.

“Yeah buddy, wassup?” I asked him casually.

“Bhai, this is important. I need to speak with you. Do you have time?” Kunal sounded serious and a little formal.

“Cut the crap and come straight to the point. What happened?” I asked him in the same brotherly tone.

There was something about the way he spoke I understood it is important. I left my cubicle and stood outside the office floor to speak with him.

“Last night I went to my factory,” Kunal said. “The factory is in total ruins,” he informed me over the phone.

“I will not beat around the bush Rahul. Coming straight to the point, can you lend me 10 lac rupees to restart my business?” he asked me blatantly.

Before I could say anything, he said, “Bro, I don’t even know whether I will be able to pay you back or not. But I need to fulfill Baba’s dreams. I am not a loser nor an alcoholic. These two years have taught me many things in life. Last night something strange happened to me. I am feeling high voltage energy motors running inside my system at the moment. Bhai, I need to cannel all my ideas and energy to make sure that I soar higher and higher. You will be taking a great risk by lending me this money. But I assure you I won’t be putting it into any wrong use.”

At that time, all I could say, “Bro, I will leave for my home right away and tell my father everything about you.”

Hanging up the phone, I dashed towards my father. This needed to be sorted out as soon as possible. That was the first time Kunal had asked me for some sort of help. I cannot let him down. I had to make sure that Kunal did ‘rise and shine.’

**Chapter 28.**

**One Way Ticket To Success**

As I sat opposite my father, I struggled with accurate words to put across my message. Although my father knew Kunal really well but he knew the Kunal who used to monkey around with me. He had never seen him after we shifted back to Jabalpur. There was a time when Kunal had moved away from me. His self-respect did not allow him to share his financial constraints with me. He was too proud and too stupid to have waited so long.

Nevertheless, I told my father, “Papa, Kunal called up today?” Luckily, that day my father was home at that time. He was getting ready to go somewhere. Nose dug deep into some documents, he nodded. That was a signal to go on. He wanted me to continue talking.

“Papa, Kunal has asked me to lend him ten lac rupees. He has also said that he may or may not return this money. This is going to be the biggest and final venture of his life to pull back his battered life.

My father lifted his head from his paper and looked at me, “When does he want the money?” he asked.

“As soon as possible, Papa,” I replied instantly.

“I trust that boy blindly. Not that he is your friend or anything. I keep receiving news of his struggle and hardships. Despite the fact that he had been through real hell, the boy never gave up. He has always held his head high and did not waver from the right path even for a second. Had he chosen to take a different route, he would have made it real big long back ago. But Kunal is his father’s son and I have full confidence in him. Not only will he return the money, he will also earn marginal profit from it. This is just the beginning.”

Papa was talking about Kunal but his praise was filling me with happiness. Papa then said, “Call him up and ask him to share his bank account details.”

That very moment I rushed to my room and called him up, “Hi,” he sounded nervous. “Share your bank details bugger,” I was laughing. There was a second’s silence on the other end, “Don’t you dare say a word else I will come right away and screw your sorry ass.” I did not want him to feel emotional at that time. He has always been a brother cum friend to me. It was my duty to lend him the much needed support to him at that time and I do not see any reason as to why would he consider that I was doing him some sort of favor.

In two days’ time, Papa transferred the sum of rupees ten lac in his account to start everything all over again. The moment he received the message of money transfer, he called up Surinder in Punjab.

“Surinder paji, your time has come to land in Bhopal. How soon can you make it?” Kunal asked him. “Buddy, I will board the earliest train to Bhopal,” Surinder confirmed with equal enthusiasm.

“Paji, bring along a few labors also if you can,” Kunal requested him. “Don’t you worry bro, I will be there with a few honest boys,” Surinder confirmed.

Kunal disconnected the call and dialed Geetika. “Babe, how are you?” he asked her lovingly. All these days, Kunal had barely spoken to her. He used to return late at night and stay occupied with the cleaning of his factory. For more than two to three days he had hardly had any time to even exchange a few syllables with her. Kunal felt apprehensive assuming that she might be pissed at him. “Is everything okay?” she sounded concerned from the other end.

“I am fine hon. Thought you must be mad at me,” he voiced his fears. “Why would I be mad at you?” Geetika asked him surprised. Kunal replied sincerely, “I have not been able to give you time.”

“Come on, don’t be a fool. I am happy to see you busy,” she assured him. The more Kunal knew her, the deeper he fell in love with Geetika and his respect for her increased.

“Aren’t you feeling neglected?” Kunal asked her surprised. Geetika’s reply filled him with the kind of inspiration and motivation he so rightly needed at that time, “Please don’t worry about me. If I have to stay away from you for some time in order to spend my whole life with you, I have no problem with it. Plus, as of now, I don’t want you to worry about things that don’t really matter. At this time, your factory needs your undivided attention. So you better concentrate there Mr. Romantic. We have our whole life ahead of us to romance,” the smiling voice of Geetika on the other end of the call filled him with excessive happiness and peace.

It was at that time, Kunal expressed his gratitude to her, he said, “Geet, you are an amazing human being. All I have in my life is you and that asshole, Rahul. You stood by my side when everyone else had discarded me. And that stupid boy showed faith in me at such an hour when I myself had lost faith in myself. Had it not been your grueling lecture on my birthday, I might have never come out of the dark abyss where I had decided to sink.”

“Are you done now?” Geetika asked him in a mock bored voice. “What do you mean?” he sounded confused.

“What I mean to say is that GO BACK TO WORK!!!” she screamed animatedly.

Kunal smiled on the other end and hung up.

He then placed an ad in various newspapers for foam factory workers’ requirement in Mandideep. He needed to create an entirely new team of hardworking employees who would be dedicated and loyal just like him.

Six years ago, one fateful morning Kunal decided to call me and sought my help. After that, there was no looking back for him. He created a fresh team of efficient workers. This time he had to start everything from the scratch. The situation, problems, and everything remains the same. His life poses big and small problems from time to time. But this time there is a difference – a major difference. Kunal has a total change of attitude. There is an inner spark and drive which motivates him and assures him that he can do it. There is definitely no stopping him this time. His entire personality has changed.

Six years ago, when he restarted his work. There was a new vigor and robust enthusiasm that not only motivated him but he also pulled everyone within his effervescent energy who got in touch with him. Be it his employees, clients or contacts, everyone felt positive and energized. Soon, the ball of success got rolling in full swing.

For the first six months, Kunal had no idea about the sunrise and sunset. His factory operated around the clock. Kunal had his own team who used to work in shifts. But for Kunal, there was no shift. There was nothing to hold him down or pull him back this time. His mind was devoid of any negativity and pessimism. He had full confidence in him that he can pull it off. His positivism and confidence worked in his favor whenever he met his clients. They were sure that this boy is the new rising star in their industry and to be with him would benefit them excessively in the long run. Moreover, Kunal was honest, transparent, and responsible. These elements worked in his favor.

Within three months the company graph shot up in the market. The lady luck had finally smiled at him. The bank was unable to find suitable buyers for his home or factory. Moreover, there was no need for it now. One fine day, Kunal decided to meet the concerned person from the bank. The one who was assigned his case. “Sir, I have decided to clear my debts. My factory is finally in a stable position and I would like to discuss the matter of my house and factory.”

Kunal wanted to know how would he clear the debt of 50 lac rupees (interest included). He needed to know the entire process. To begin with he deposited 20 lac and cleared a good part of his loan. The new manager, naturally, was working in the favor of bank but this one had made the process of loan repayment quite flexible. Since there have been no buyers till now for his property. The bank was not able to claim his home and factory. Moreover, with the handsome payment in their account, the bank withdrew their case against Kunal.

The culmination of his legal battle with bank brought great relief to him. The newfound joy added more to his vigor. He worked with fierce passion. His relentless work around the clock. The sacrifice of Geetika. The faith of his friend. And most importantly the extreme hardship of Kunal finally paid off. In less than two years’ time, his company started to make a turnover of more than 1 crore rupees!!!

**Chapter 29**

**The Great Bells Of Ecstasy**

All this time when Kunal was occupied with his factory. Geetika did not bother him with household expenses. There was a time when he stayed away for days. In his absence, it was Geetika who managed everything.

The day when the bank withdrew their case. Kunal decided to celebrate it with her. After all, it was his first step towards success. It was only natural to celebrate it with someone who trusted him blindly and supported him relentlessly. As per Kunal himself, if it was not for her support and motivation, Kunal may have never been able to pull it off. However Geetika chooses to differ with him on this, she says, Kunal had always had it in him, all he wanted was a gentle push. It maybe Kunal’s love for Geetika or Geetika’s humility, none of the two is willing to take the credit for all the success. Each one is willing to owe it to the other one. Well, this is the kind of love they share. Their love is like no other. There are many tales of heartburning romance, blockbuster love stories or legendary tales of undying love that goes way back in the history. However, these two are modern day lovers, there was no professing of love, vows of eternal togetherness, promises of till death do us part. Kunal and Geetika are way above all this. Their love does not need the support of great words to emphasize their feelings. These two are people of actions.

Their vows, promises, and bonding are way above shallow words. There is a saying when poverty stands at the door, love flies out of the window. But contrary to the belief, their love story started right in the middle of poverty. Kunal did not have anything on him when Geetika decided to spend her life with him. Unlike the majority of so called sensible girls, Geetika chose to behave foolishly by giving preference to heart over brain. She decided to go for mental peace instead of financial security. By trusting and supporting Kunal with eyes wide shut, she received all that which many cannot even dream of.

As the two of them sat in a cozy restaurant enjoying a romantic dinner. Kunal held her hands and said, “I am really thankful to you Geet. This would not have been possible without your love and support.”

Geetika smiled, “*Yeh toh mera farz tha* (this was my duty).”

Kunal burst into a hearty laughter on hearing the popular Bollywood dialogue prevalent during the seventies. She has a natural gift of cracking outrageous jokes in the most serious of times, just to make everything light and happy.

“I want to tell you something,” she informed Kunal.

This time he joked by mimicking another clichéd dialogue of the seventies’ melodrama, “Please don’t say *main tumhare bachey ki ma banne wali hu* (I am pregnant with your kid).

Geetika slapped him hard and said, “Shut up you dumbo. I have put down my papers at Dainik Jagaran.”

Kunal was taken aback by her announcement, “Why? What happened? Is everything alright?” he asked her a series of questions in a worried tone. Kunal thought Geetika is facing some problem at the office.

She rested her back at the seat and said, “I am joining a new company.”

“Wow, that’s great news. Which one? You never told me about it before?” Kunal felt relaxed on realizing that his girlfriend was not in any sort of trouble.

“I have joined KunSar,” she smiled and confirmed.

“But Geet, my love, why? You are an engineer, why do you want to take such a big risk,” Kunal was touched by her offer but at the same time, he was concerned about her career. He knew that this girl sitting next to him can go to any extent for his good but Kunal was not selfish, he wanted the very best for his better half.

“KunSar is not enough baby. We need to grow and I want to be a part of the success process. I want to stand by you and make sure you don’t worry about the operations. You look after productions. I will take care of the rest,” Geetika was not just a good sport but was an extremely sensible and responsible girl. She had already planned everything beforehand. All these months she had left Kunal to handle things singlehandedly. She never demanded anything of him or had any sort of complaints when he could not keep his promises and show up for movies or similar dates. She was way above the puppy romance. Her love was selfless and generous at the same time.

Kunal said, “Your wish is my command. If you want to be a part of KunSar then so be it but then you will have to share an equal partnership of all the burdens both at the work front and home front, are you game for it?”

This time it was Geetika who looked confused, she asked him, “What do you mean?”

“I want to officially announce that in good times or bad, in sickness or health, in poverty or wealth, we are going to be side by side. I want to marry you Geet. Will you be mine?” that was the first time when the two of them decided to act normal. So far their love affair started naturally, Geetika stood by him without any vows. Till date, he never had to tell her anything. She simply placed everything in the right place in perfect order. Kunal wanted to make sure that the marriage happens in the most romantic fashion. He wanted to take the traditional route.

“Tomorrow, I will come and meet your father. I want to ask his daughter’s hand in marriage to me,” he announced.

“But Kunal, why? This is not necessary. Daddy knows all about you. The two of you are so familiar with each other. Why do you want to create a Bollywood wedding out of it?” Geetika was happy and concerned. She did not know how Kunal would manage everything, how will he do everything all alone, what is the reason behind all this. She voiced her concern and questions.

“Geet, my love, instead of asking me so many questions and showing your fake concern, why don’t you simply say you are shy?” Kunal smiled naughtily as he teased her.

“Dog,” Geetika said in her love filled voice and pushed his hand away. She was blushing crimson red at that moment. Kunal was overwhelmed by his Indian babe with a spine of steel.

The next day, Geetika ran around the house frantically making sure that everything was in place. Her father was a much revered scientist holding a respectable post in his industry. She actually comes from a highly educated family. Her intellectual background was a matter of great concern for Kunal when he was getting ready to meet Geetika’s parents.

Just before he would leave, he called me, “Bro, I am nervous,” he stated blatantly. This was the fifth time he had called me that day. Seeing him nervous was filling me with an extreme sense of joy. The further a friendship goes back in time, the more sadistic a friend grows. Seeing him stammer nervously was making me euphoric, “Bugger, take a pint or two of the elixir of confidence and you are good to go. Simply barge into their house and tell Geetika’s father that you love her daughter and want to marry her. If he agrees, well and good or else simply take out your water gun and aim it at your father-in-law,” I guffawed like a devil as I took his trip.

“You bugger, I would kill you. Wait till we meet at my wedding,” Kunal threatened.

“You sure Uncle would say yes?” I asked him innocently. Kunal fumed with rage as I played with him.

“You are a dead meat,” he said gritting his teeth.

“Look who is talking. As of now, you are literally shitting in your pants,” I joked.

“Stop it now, will you. I am leaving for her place now, wish me luck,” he sincerely sounded desperate and in great need of luck.

Kunal had never felt so nervous. As per his own words, even the biggest of deals did not affect Kunal as much as that meeting with Geetika’s father that day.

Kunal had no idea how to dress up for the occasion so he had simply come wearing casual jeans and formal black shirt. Geetika winked at him as she opened the doors for him. She teased, “Looking sexy in black,” Kunal chose to ignore her.

He sat opposite to Geetika’s father. “How have you been, son?” her father tried to break the ice. Kunal did not want to beat around the bush so he decided to come straight to the point, he said, “Sir, I am a class XII dropout. I had to quit my engineering during the third year, after the sixth semester. My father was the only real family I ever knew. He too left me when I was in the second year. Sir, your daughter is an engineer. She is smart, intelligent and extremely sensible. Geetika is an ideal wife material whereas I am not as educated as her. At the moment I am running a foam business. My future is uncertain but compared to my past it is heavenly. Had it not been because of Geetika, by now I would have been a certified alcoholic without any home or factory. It is your daughter who pulled me out of that dungeon. I give total credit to Geetika for making me get back my house and factory from the bank. Sir, I may be a nobody right now and definitely, I am not the suitable match for your daughter. But I assure you, Sir if Geetika stands next to me, I can actually be the king of the world in terms of career. Sir, I request you to give your daughter’s hands in marriage to me,” Kunal bared his heart out to his father in law.

“First of all Kunal, I must tell you this degree does not matter to the talented ones. The degree is just a piece of paper that an ignorant man can flaunt to the world. It is for the narcissists. This does not mean that all those who hold a degree are ignorant. But in my view, all those who flaunt it or judge a person’s intellect by the degree one holds. Well, to me such a judgmental person with a standard set of rules is definitely an illiterate. To me, the strength of character, moral values and behavior matter the most. In this field, you are an A+”

Geetika’s father smiled affectionately as he looked at his daughter wearing a white colored cotton *salwar suit* with a silver *bindi* on her forehead. Both the men who loved Geetika with all their heart looked at her at the same time, the white color added an extra glow to her ivory skin. The *bindi* sparkled on her forehead giving her the appearance of an ethereal angel ready to spread her wings and take a flight.

“I choose to differ with you Kunal that you are no match for her. As far as my experience in life goes, you are the perfect, and only and only match for her. I can see in your eyes not just excessive love for my daughter but I can also see the immense respect and care that you have for her. Trust me, son, I would have never been able to find someone half as good as you. As far as my eyes can see, I see an extremely bright future that awaits you. If Geetika stands by you in your journey to success then trust me beta, I would definitely be the happiest.”

At that moment, Geetika’s mother who had been listening to everything with an extremely gentle smile on her face looked at her daughter and teased, “Enough of your fetishism with whites. Get ready to be wrapped up in red,” this made Geetika’s cheek turn red as she blushed at her mother’s flamboyant remark.

Now, it was Kunal’s turn to face her attacks, “Kunal beta, why don’t you hand over the packet of sweets to us that you have been clutching with all your life since past one hour.”

Kunal with hurried hands handed it to her as all of them burst into laughter.

The two of them soon tied the knot. Geetika’s parents were every bit like her. When Kunal did not have anything on him, Geetika stood by him. She supported him blindly. The very same way, even though Kunal had told everything about himself to her parents. A scientist chose to give his engineer daughter in marriage to someone who, in the name of degree, just had the certificate of Class XII.

His parents were sensible and practical people. Just like Geetika, they too had complete faith in him.

Kunal and Geetika had a simple wedding ceremony. They chose to invite the real close ones and not those who would arrive, hog, and complain. Kunal was of the view that it is not the wedding but marriage that really matters.

Although Kunal was of the view that they should go to someplace romantic on honeymoon but Geetika refused to leave. She said, “As of now let our honeymoon destination be KunSar.” Regardless of the fact that he tried his level best to change her mind but she did not budge.

The very next day of their wedding, the two of them were found working in KunSar.

Within a span of a year and a half, Kunal with his maddening passion to run his business successfully had established another plant. It was his idea to manufacture rebonded foam. Here what his company had to do was manufacture foam from the damaged or wasted foam. He efficiently manufactured rebonded foam by reusing waste flakes of foam. The new business of rebonded foam was all about recycling.

As mentioned earlier, Kunal had turned into the Midas of foam industry. Whatever he touched turned into gold. This is the main reason why he started to make profits even from the waste materials. The rebonded foam created from efficient re-use and recycling of waste consumer durables and flakes of foam was then sold to the clients at a subsidized rate.

In the next year and a half, Kunal cleared his loan and retained his factory and home from the bank. He had established two successfully running factories of foam and rebonded foam. The second factory faced a major setback before it finally took off. Kunal literally had to rebuild it from the scratch. The next chapter would narrate the entire incident in detail.

The business that he reconstructed from the ten lac rupees, the very same business now gives him the total turnover of rupees 1 crore a year. But Kunal does not want to sit back and relax now. His ride has just started.

**Chapter 30**

**Rising From The Ashes**

The second company did not take off smoothly. For Kunal drama is a part and parcel of his life. The plant for the rebounded foam was set up. He had hired the very best of team members for his new venture. The machinery was installed. The factory was completely in the running condition.

On one fine day, Kunal called up Geetika and said excitedly over the phone, "Hi love, what are you doing tonight?"

The reply from Geetika stirred the feelings of dejavu. She asked him, “Why what happened? Are you going to be late?" Her reply disturbed him a little. Shrugging away the disturbing feelings, he continued, “No sweetheart, I will be home before you reach there. I want you to be free. The new company's inauguration date has been set as two days from today. I am planning to have a small celebration with you. We are going to eat out tonight. Think of someplace cozy for the two of us."  
"Wow, that's great news baby. See you soon hon.”

Her reply only elevated his fear. Kunal tried very hard to divert his mind but he was constantly having an extremely strong premonition that something tragic is going to happen.

That night, the two of them enjoyed their dinner. Kunal did not disclose his fears to Geetika thinking that he is simply nervous. He also assumed that this must the trauma of his past. It was before the inauguration of his first factory, Mr. Singh had met with an accident that took away his life. Kunal could never emerge out of the tragedy.

“All this looks like a beautiful dream,” Geetika voiced her happiness dreamily. Kunal nodded distractedly. “What is it with you this evening? You are looking so lost since the time we met?” she asked him concerned.

Kunal shook his head, “Nah, everything is fine. I am just thinking about the new factory. The rebonded foam would skyrocket our business.” He assured her but Geetika could make out that Kunal was not himself. His mind was lost somewhere. Physically, he sat opposite her and enjoyed their dinner but mentally, he was far away. He was lost in some other world. Geetika never pestered him with questions or nagged him like a typical woman when he chose to withdraw to his shell.

Geetika knew him way too well. She knew he is not going to share what exactly is worrying him but would definitely come back to her when the storm would pass. She knew Kunal relied on her completely.

Taking her hands in his, Kunal said, “I don’t know why I have been missing Baba whole day today. I am also feeling very heavy. There is some sort of fear that is haunting me ever since we did the test run. There is an extremely strong premonition that is killing me from within. I fear that a great calamity would befall and turn everything upside down,” his voice shook with fear as he expressed his premonitions nervously.

Geetika consoled him and assured that nothing bad would happen to him now. She believed in him and said, “Your past is the proof that you can face anything. Those days have passed and no matter how bad the situation is, it can never be as traumatic as those days. Relax baby, you are simply nervous nothing else.”

The evening continued at its normal pace. The two of them returned home. Kunal resting his head on the pillow looked up at the ceilings and whispered to himself, “Tomorrow would be a new day. I will make a fresh start.”

The next day Geetika and Kunal both were supposed to leave for the factory together. “I need to go and meet Mr. Shah to finalize the deal of rebonded foam. I will reach the factory by 12.00 noon,” he informed Geetika.

The day which started like any other day soon turned ghastly. Kunal was busy with discussing the business with Mr. Shah. That very moment, the sky literally fell upon Kunal when Surinder called him up from the factory, “Veere, everything is lost. We are finished Veere, we are finished,” the sturdy man was howling like a small kid on the other end of the line. Kunal was finding it difficult to understand what exactly he was saying. He could hear great noise and chaos from behind.

Suddenly Kunal rose abruptly from the chair and dashed out of the room. He went racing towards the elevator. Kunal drove towards his new factory like a mad man. Surinder had informed him that a fire had broken out in their new factory. This was like a really terrible blow to him. Just two days before the inauguration of his factory, the news of the fire was more than shattering.

No sooner did he reach at the gates, he halted his car and raced towards the factory in sheer panic.

A huge crowd consisting of all the factory workers, Geetika, and Surinder stood outside the building. They cried violently as they saw the furious flames eating away their future. Kunal moved towards the group with heavy steps. The moment they saw him arrive, their helplessness and grief elevated. Tears of utter grief and panic rolled down their cheeks as they looked at Kunal with lost hope.

The pyre of his father burned as he stood near his feet. The angry flames lashed around the handsome body of Mr. Singh as inch by inch he was consumed by the fire. Kunal’s eyes were red with memories of his past. The picture of his dead father danced in front of his eyes when he saw his factory torched.

The flames leaped up in the sky as rows after rows of rebonded foams were lost in the fire. Kunal could see his dreams of a new company getting shattered by the fire. He was losing everything in the black flames that rose towards the sky.

After years of rigorous hard work. Days of around the clock struggle. Right at the moment when he had thought nothing would go wrong now, Kunal was pulled back in time. All the painful memories, the most bitter experiences surfaced as he stood outside his burning factory.

Everything that he lost in fire elevated his pain and trauma. Initially, Kunal along with other factory workers tried to desperately throw sand at the fire to stop it from spreading further. But all their attempts were in vain. The fire slithered stealthily to every nook and corner of the building. It had the entire factory within its gruesome embrace.

The sense of loss stirred another memory within him. The flames punched Kunal brutally with the memories of Gwalior. He was reminded of his greatest failure there. Kunal shuddered with fear as he recalled one of the most painful and traumatic experiences of all. The kicks, punches and the humiliation of the hooligans who had illegally captured his land. The racing laborers trying to extinguish the fire vainly reminded him of his desperation to board the moving train in order to escape the inquisitive cop at the Gwalior railway station.

The gushing water poured over the flaming factory futilely brought back the memories of that fateful train trip from Gwalior that scorched his heart. How he managed to pass that longest night of his life by drinking tap water from train toilet gave him chills.

Amongst the chaos, Kunal stood like a stone. He was surrounded by crying men, the laborers were shaking him out of desperation, clinging on to him for support, Geetika looked at him, her face fully drenched in tears. But he remained unmoved. He had turned into stone.

Kunal stood there for as long as the fire had died out. The boy who used to break down at the smallest of events now stood expressionless. It was only recently he had taken off but even before he could spread his wings and soar high, his wings were being clipped. Kunal had come crashing down on rocky grounds.

For the time being, Geetika was worried thinking Kunal had gone into some state of shock this is the reason why he was not being able to react. She wanted him to cry, scream and howl in pain. Whereas, contrary to any such thing Kunal did not move an inch from his place. He stood there transfixed. Once the fire had completely consumed his factory, Kunal had stopped making any more vain attempts to save it.

It was not just the building that had been consumed by fire. Kunal had already installed the machinery as well. This means his machinery, products, waste materials from which the rebonded foam was to be manufactured had been lost in the fire too.

Kunal requested everyone to leave. He stood there oblivious to the dispersing crowd. All the laborers departed one by one looking at him with helpless eyes. Kunal had not shed a single drop of tear that day. The last time he had cried was the day when he had made a comeback to his previous factory. The night of the heavy rain and hallucination as vivid as a reality had changed him completely. That night, when he had stood at the factory which was in great ruins, he had cried his eyes out. That night was the last time he had cried.

After that incident, Kunal had faced numerous setbacks in life but he had not cried. He was never shattered or felt broken. He had left behind his days of miseries in the lost pages of the past. This was an all-new Kunal. An updated version of the overly sensitive guy. This Kunal was practical, meticulous and completely collected.

Kunal had not moved an inch as long as his factory burned. The moment the fire died out. Kunal’s body gave a jolt. He came back to the present. The first thing Kunal did was he called up Geetika, “Hi baby, good morning!” he sounded extremely casual. From his tone, it felt as if last night was just a bad dream. Nothing had happened. For a moment Geetika thought that the fire was her imagination. She was taken aback by his calmness. The truth dawned on her. Last night was no dream. Their new factory had actually burned down to the ashes.

“Baby, are you alright?” she asked him concerned. “Geet, I am absolutely fine. I am standing in front of the rubbles. That’s all that is left of the factory. There are ashes all around. Baby, time and again I have seen this. Time and again I have proved. I am actually the Phoenix – the immortal bird that rises from its own ashes. Sweetheart, I will rise from the very same ashes,” his confidence defied the great setback he had faced. There was no sign of trauma or grief visible from his voice. His voice did not give a hint of his tragedy.

“How?” she asked him in a feeble voice. Geetika for the first time was not so sure. In her heart of hearts, she knew that he would pull it off. He was Kunal Giani, nothing was impossible for him. But the giant flames of the fire the previous night had dampened her spirit.

“Listen to me sweetheart, I want you to be very very strong at this point in time. I want you by my side. KunSar is in need of your strength and optimism. I have the entire plan ready,” he said.

“What do you have on your mind?” she asked him. “Not so soon,” he smiled on the other end. Call up all the employees at home. They are my family. They are the limbs of my factory. I want to discuss everything in their presence,” Kunal confirmed.

The entire crew, he loves to address his team members as crew, family or brothers, was present at the lawn of his house. Everyone was nervous and grief stricken. Kunal entered the group wearing pajama and a casual t-shirt. Surinder and everyone present were taken aback by his casual attire and devil may care attitude.

Standing amidst them, he rubbed his palm enthusiastically and said, “We did not lose anything in the fire yesterday. It is just a loss of time, little bit of money and a lot of greenery,” he smiled. “The fire last night created a hell lot of pollution,” his team member had no idea why he was talking in such an optimistic manner. How come he was so normal, they wondered.

Kunal continued in the same manner, “Losing money, machinery or materials does not matter to me. There was a time when I had lost everything. I had gone for days without food. I have traveled on foot because I could not afford to get up even on a public transport. I had lost everything but I never felt like a loser. But there was a time when I had lost all my dreams, hope and aspirations. That was the time when I had actually lost everything. Losing your dreams and confidence is losing everything. Nobody gives up on you till the time you don’t give up on yourself.”

Looking at Geetika, he smiled affectionately and said, “After two years of leading the life of a loser, this woman here turned a new leaf in my life. I could finally see some beacon of light at the end of the tunnel.”

Kunal then once again addressed his crew, “We have not lost anything last night. All that can be retained. We have not lost our hope or dreams. I got in touch with the insurance company. I had already insured my factory against the fire or any such unnatural calamity. They are going to recompense for the things that we lost in the fire. Till the time, the new factory is not set up, we are going to invest all or time and energy in KunSar, our first baby. I am sure, we are going to generate enough revenue from it. The revenue from KunSar would help us establish the factory with double strength.”

Kunal screamed with vigor and enthusiasm as he asked his team member, “Are you willing to live my dream?” he asked his people. Everyone cried in unison, “Yessss!”

“Do you wish to invest all your hopes and energy to KunSar for the biggest venture in foam industry?!!”

“Yesssss!” Everybody cried in one voice.

He then made a chain with all his team member as each one of them held each other’s hands. All the hands were raised in the air and all of them screamed at once, “Together we stand and together we will rise!”

It was the relentless effort of Kunal, Geetika, and their entire team, Kunal was finally able to recover everything. He conquered his fear and failure one more time. The Phoenix did rise from the ashes of the factory that was burned down just two days before its inauguration.

It is the never say die attitude of Kunal and his tireless work. Kunal his company finally reached the zenith of success it so rightly deserved. Today, he has built the empire worth of four hundred crores with only forty crore rupees as debts. He is the proud owner of world’s best foam factory. He is a visionary, a warrior and a survivor. The life has served him severe blows and still does from time to time but it could never knock him out. Kunal always comes back with a bang and annihilates all the adversities with a blink of an eyelid.

**Chapter 31.**

**The Bud Of Prosperity**

The period when his second factory had burnt down to the ashes. Kunal had chosen to stay strong. The only reason why Geetika felt nervous because she was six months pregnant at that time. The heartwarming slight bulge that used to fill her with sheer joy just a while ago. For a brief moment became a matter of concern to her. She felt worried and wondered how would she give her 100% to Kunal and his dreams.

After the meeting, all the employees returned with a satisfied smile on their face. As Kunal entered his bedroom, he was aghast at seeing his wife. She sat on the edge of their queen bed hiding her face between her palms. From the surface, Kunal is always calm and collected. No matter what happens, nothing can budge him. But he cannot bear to see Geetika in any sort of distress.

She is his greatest strength and biggest weakness. Kunal, taking long strides sat at the foot of his wife. With gentle hands, he removed her hands from her face. he was much pained by the sight of the tear streaked of Geetika.

The intense pain visible from his eyes, he asked her softly, “What is the matter, sweetheart?”

Geetika shook her head violently and sobbed more fiercely. “Hush hush hush! No baby no. Calm down,” rising from his place, he sat next to her and took her in his arms. Kunal patted her head as he made her rest her head on his chest, “What is wrong hon,” he asked her affectionately.

Initially, she shook her head refusing to say anything. Kunal knew that Geetika was worried about him. She was a selfless person who never gave much thought to her own needs and wishes. If there was anyone who can make Geetika share her problems, it was Kunal himself. He knew that she would voice her concern sooner than later. It would only take a few minutes for him to bring her around.

Lifting her face by holding her chin, he looked into her eyes and said, “Won't you share your concerns with me? Am I not entitled to know what is troubling you?” his voice was soft and gentle.

Geetika hugged her with all her might and burst into stronger sobs, “How am I supposed to stand by you at all times in this condition?” her sorry pout and childlike sobs provided Kunal with a comic sense of relief. He burst into laughter. Geetika looked at him incredulously thinking he had gone mad and asked him in an awkward tone, “Have you lost your bloody marbles? Why are you laughing like a fool?” This time her tone was stern without a hint of grief or worry.

Kunal and Geetika have many things in common. The biggest of them being, their mercurial personality. Both have terrible mood swings. Nobody is to know how they are going to react next. They are extremely unpredictable. I am no exception and this must be the reason why we are so thick. Our friendship goes way back in time. It has been more than sixteen years now since the two of us have been together.

Touching his forehead with the back of her palm, she asked, “Are you alright?” Geetika had forgotten all about her worries by the weird behavior of Kunal.

This made him laugh out louder than before. Circling his arms around her, he said, “You are such a darling. I couldn’t help control my laughter at your sad catlike face,” mimicking her he repeated, *“How am I supposed to stand by you at all times in this condition?”*

Geetika pushed him away in mock anger. Refusing to let go of her, he continued, “What makes you say, you are not with me now? You are with me at all times. Had it not been because of you, I would have not made this far,” “But baby, the company needs me. I should be there at all times. It needs double attention now. At least until the time, we get out of this problem,” she interrupted him.

“Then you be there, I am not stopping you. But just like the factory,” placing his hand against her bulge, touching her gently, said, “The one that is breathing inside you is equally important. It has not come inside your womb out of its own accord. The two of us have pulled it in our lives. Now we are duty bound to look after it.”

Kunal consoled her in a voice filled with sheer love and affection, “As long as you look after yourself and our kid, I don’t expect anything more from you.”

Geetika shook her head in negative and stated, “You know that is not going to happen.”

Raising both his hands in the air helplessly, he said, “Do whatever you want but make sure you don’t stress yourself. As long as both of you stay healthy and fit, I do not want anything else from you.”

Holding her hands, his face looked pained, in a grave tone, he voiced his feelings, “Geet, you happened to me at the darkest most phase of my life. You filled my life with light. I cannot bear to see you in distress for something that is not impossible to achieve. You will see babe, the two of us can pull it off. This is nothing but a temporary setback. We must not let it overpower us. No matter how tough the situation is, I always face it with a smile on my face. Do you have any idea why you stupid woman?” he asked her adoringly.

Geetika shook her head innocently.

“It is your presence in my life that makes me smile. You are my strength and happiness. I am what I am because if you. Do you want me under duress and depression?” he asked her, looking deep into her eyes, locking her with his intense gaze.

Geetika once again shook her head obediently and hugged him back. The two of them stayed silently feeling the calmness engulf her.

The initial period of the post fire trauma did pose problems in his life but Kunal did not let it bring him down. He continued to work in double shifts, and worked around the clock to make sure that he creates the very same factory at the very same location.

The ashes were soon replaced by a new building. The insurance company was taking extra time in repaying him the money he so fairly deserved. The tedious paperwork and verification process appeared to go on and on and on. At times, Kunal used to feel extremely frustrated at their callousness. Despite the fact that he needed the funds on an immediate basis, the insurance company chose to stretch the ordeal endlessly.

One fine morning, Kunal disconnected the call angrily. He had just finished a harrowing argument with the officer who was in charge of his insurance. They were pushing him to his limits. KunSar was generating appreciable revenue but that was not enough to run two factories. Kunal needed more. So much more. Geetika continued to work and look after the factory for more than eight months of her pregnancy. It was only after the completion of eight months of her pregnancy, Kunal had to blackmail her into staying back at home. He had threatened if she does not stop coming to work regularly, he would go on a leave. After much cajoling and wheedling, he was able to make her sit at home.

Even from there, she continued to operate. Geetika until the time of her delivery chose to work from home.

The moment Kunal hung up the phone, he ran his fingers through his thick manes out of frustration. His phone rang out. It was from Shanti, their help at home. “Hello Shanti?” Kunal answered his phone instantly.

“Sahab, please come home immediately, Madam wants you here,” she informed him worried. It did not take him a second to rush towards his home. Once home, he ran towards their room. There he saw Geetika lying in bed with a warm smile on her face.

There was black under eye highlighting her pain. Kunal knew it was time to take her to the nursing home.

“Bro, where are you,” Kunal called me from the backseat holding Geetika in his arms as his chauffeur headed towards the nursing home.

“I am at work,” I replied casually. “Come right away, I need you here,” his voice sounded anxious and nervous. It did not take me long to infer as to why he needed me there. Boarding the earliest and quickest flight I headed towards Bhopal. I was to reach him by 8.00 p.m. that evening.

The doctors had attached the channel to her wrist. Soon, Geetika was taken inside the labor room. Kunal stood outside the operation theatre as he waited impatiently with bated breath.

That was the moment he was beyond himself with nervousness. Kunal paced outside the corridor impatiently. Every time the door opened, for any reason, he rushed towards the person who emerged. The nurse finally asked him to relax. Geetika had been given an injection to induce labor pain. He was keeping a track of each and every move. After two hours, another nurse emerged and informed him that she had been given an injection to anaesthetize her below the abdomen.

Kunal was extremely nervous and had no idea how to cope with such a situation. So far there were no complications. He felt grateful. The doctors and nurses continued to console him that Geetika was in excellent condition. Kunal has no idea after how long the doctor finally emerged at the door with a tiny little baby wrapped up in a thick towel.

“Family members of Mrs. Geetika Giani?!!” the doctor asked. Kunal stumbled as he raced towards the doctor.

The doctor removed the cover from the baby’s face. He stood still as he looked at the angelic entity in the arms of a doctor. “It’s a girl,” she announced. That was all Kunal heard, he could not keep a track of what she said next. Kunal slumped on the floor as burst into tears of joy. He was relieved, ecstatic and totally euphoric. The doctor said, “You cannot touch the baby now,” Kunal did not wait for her explanations. He said, “No, no, I cannot hold her now, she is so pure and delicate. I have not even taken bath. My hands are not sanitized. I am coming straight from the factory. I work in a foam factory, do I have to take bath? Do you want me to change my clothes?” Kunal was hysterical with joy and happiness. The doctor smiled and went inside.

Kunal wanted to race after her but then stopped. He had no idea how to react. Kunal had not yet recovered from the ecstatic experience, his phone rang.

“Hello, Sir. Are you Kunal Giani?” a girl from the other end asked him. Kunal replied, “Yes it is. Who is this?” he asked.

“Sir, I am Shefali from your insurance company,” she introduced herself. Kunal said, “Yes?”

“Sir, your insurance claim has been approved and we have to start the procedure of processing the amount you owe us,” she informed him.

Kunal smiled to himself as he asked her, “When do you have to start?” The girl in her crisp voice replied, “You need to sign the documents and we will process it instantly.”

Kunal replied enthusiastically, “Today, it is not possible for me. I will meet you tomorrow,” he confirmed and disconnected.

“Where are you?” I called him from the gates of the nursing. He directed me to come to the maternity ward.

The moment he saw me, he ran towards me and hugged me tightly. He was beaming with happiness. “It’s a girl buddy,” he informed me with an ear to ear smile.

By that time we had created a ruckus by talking loudly and screaming with joy. The doctor came out and reprimanded us for our uncouth behavior. That day we felt as if we were back to college. Same old excitement, indiscipline, and childish misdemeanor.

Geetika was shifted to her room. We waited agitatedly for the nurse to call us in. “Mr. Kunal Giani, come and meet your wife,” the golden words were finally uttered.

Kunal entered the chamber taking soft steps lest his daughter might get disturbed. Geetika looked serene and defied the pain that she had undergone with that sweet smile of hers. There was black under eyes clearly visible.

Holding her hands, he said in a choked voice, “I love you hon. Today you gave me the best gift of my life.” Geetika smiled back but was not able to speak much.

The nurse then entered with their bundle of joy and all of us in that room felt benumbed by the heavenly presence of their baby girl.

Taking her in his arms, he took a sigh and said, “My angel!”

**Chapter 32.**

**Make Attempts And Not Excuses**

The news of the birth of his first daughter opened doors of success and prosperity to Kunal. There was simply no looking back for Kunal after the birth of his first daughter. She had literally wound him around her little finger. His world rotated around the two angels in his life.

Geetika joined back after a month of her delivery. After the birth of their little angel, Geetika was not able to regularly visit the factory but nothing could keep her away from the work. Even then she administered everything remotely from the home.

Kunal is a doting father and in his own words, after the birth of his first daughter, Myra, his business expanded exponentially. His world rotates around her.

“Will it go live on the internet?” Geetika asked him as Kunal got ready for his first motivational speech. Kunal was invited by one of the best management colleges of Bhopal to narrate his life story and fill the audience with the hunger and drive to move ahead in life.

The college had chosen him as the honorary speaker not only because of his success and growth but his inspirational life story. Kunal’s life story is not a figment of imagination where the life of the protagonist is smooth. His life was never a bed of roses. The roads that he had traversed so far had many twists and curves. There have been many obstacles and hindrances. Kunal, with his perseverance, had been able to overcome all the adversities. He had overcome all the hurdles bravely with his head held high.

Today, the reason why I chose to write his story is mainly because I want the whole world to get inspired by him. Kunal has literally lived the famous humorous quote that makes rounds in social media, “When life gives you lemons, make lemonade.” This is a proverbial phrase that has been used time and again to motivate the ones who face bad patches in life. This phrase motivates a person to turn the misfortune and adversities in his favor. It oozes optimism and encourages a person to stay strong in all walks of life. Life for sure is not a bed of roses. Kunal’s life is exemplary because, in his life, there was a time when he had faced innumerable problems. He was struck by misfortune, grief, and tragedies of the highest order from all sides, left right, up down, front back, wherever he looked, all he ever saw was difficulties and trauma.

Kunal did not choose to give up. The ride so far was bumpy with various obstructions. But Kunal never stopped. For him, there was never a dead end. He is the man who has a solution for all the problems.

Now, he is completely absorbed in work. He is an ideal husband and a perfect father. Kunal does not consider himself to be a boss. He never really did. To him, his employees are family. And to his employees, he is their leader.

Kunal has been gifted with amazing leadership qualities. His employees never hear him use authoritative terms like “Do it,” he is someone who readily says, “Let us do it.” He believes in working together. Teamwork is of great importance to this man.

If something ever goes wrong, he never holds the other person responsible. He would rather come up with a plan B to bring things around.

This man is not just my best friend and brother. He is the fountainhead of inspiration to me. To me, he is the origin of motivation. To build an empire of four hundred crore rupees from minus forty lac is in itself a nearly impossible and completely unbelievable task. But at times, one has to surrender to the fact that “Truth is stranger than fiction.”

The reality of his life is actually stranger than fiction. That day as he was getting ready for his first ever motivational speech. It was Geetika who was utterly excited. Kunal was not too sure about the recording or the telecast of his speech and Geetika did not want to miss seeing her husband on the stage. Hence the arrangements were made for the seating of Geetika as one of the guests of honor.

The students clapped happily as Kunal stood on the podium. After greeting his audience, he began his speech. The entire auditorium was spellbound as he narrated his life story, “This feels really absurd to stand in front of so many intelligent people. Many of you must be senior to me as I could not go beyond the third year,” he laughs while many gawk at him surprised.

“Yes, it is true, I never really got a chance to complete my studies. My engineering degree never really got completed and I still address myself as a college dropout or Standard XII passed.”

Kunal by default is a restless person. His mind and body cannot remain fixed at one place for a long time. To him movement means life.

“My story does not start from the crib or the college I dropped out of. My story starts when my life had come to a halt and I had put a full stop to my struggles. In Gwalior, I was beaten up by goons who had illegally captured my land. They had my land in their possession and I could do nothing in spite of being the legal owner of the high-value land. That was the day I had to run away from a cop like a criminal and board a moving train. That was the night I traveled without tickets on a train from Gwalior to Bhopal. That was the night I traveled without food. All I survived on was the tap water of the restroom of the train.”

Everyone present was spellbound by his straightforward description of an event that defined him. He continued to speak in the same cheerful tone. He said, “On my return, I did not hit back like a hero. At that time, I was struck by lethargy. I had never given up but for two years I lived the life of a loser. If it was not because of my wife who was my girlfriend then, I would not have been standing here today. She dug her nails into my conscience and pulled me out of my dark zone.”

Kunal paced from one end of the stage to the other in an expensive blue suit with thin stripes and an off white silk shirt. The bohemian patterned tie accentuated his aura and charm. The girls looked at him with starry eyes and boys looked up to him with much respect.

His presence and personality literally mesmerized everyone present in the huge auditorium that day.

“The road so far had been really bumpy but I did not give up. Today I am going to share with all of you the three golden rules of success.

To begin with, the first golden rule is, determination. Keep walking ahead without coming to a halt. Movement is the sign of life whereas stagnancy indicates death. If you have set your aim, if you know your goal then keep moving towards it with relentless vigor.

No matter what problems you face in life, learn to move forward. Never ever give up. There was a time in my life when I used to go to my relatives’ homes and friends parties solely for the sake of food. A full course meal to satiate my days’ of hunger was the only purpose or excuse for me to pay such visits. It is a different story that after the meals I used to receive humiliations as dessert,” Kunal highlights his painful moments in the comic light.

Everyone presents smiles while some laugh. Kunal continues with his first golden rule of success, “Never ever let anything bring you down. What doesn’t kill you only makes you stronger. My problems were many but it failed to kill me. Surprisingly enough, at one point in time, I had also developed suicidal tendencies. The strong and inspirational Kunal Giani that stands in front of you right now was once on the verge of giving up. Do you know something, nobody can defeat you until and unless you do not accept your defeat. You become a failure the moment you consider yourself a failure.”

“Coming to the next golden rule of success. Well, to me a strong will is of great importance to achieve your goal. You need to dedicate your life to your dreams and believe in yourself that you can do it.

If you have confidence in yourself that yes I can, yes I can do it and I will do it then there is nothing that can hold you back from realizing your dreams.”

Kunal stands in the middle of the stage for some time and asks everyone present in the room, “Who all of you feel you can do it?” Most of the hands were raised in the air. Kunal smiles and says, “So many enthusiasts under the same roof. I am glad you believe in yourself. This is really nice.”

Looking at the audience intently he asks, “Now, kindly tell me, how many of you are of the belief that yes I will do it?” This time there was a murmur and laughter among the youngsters. Kunal smiles at them as he becomes aware that his message has been put across. They had realized their mistake and within a second they reached the concrete decision. This time not a single hand was resting on the lap of the people present in the auditorium.

Kunal laughs and confirms, “There you go. It is good to have faith but it is even better to be confident. I am happy if you will believe in yourself, I would know that you will make it in future. But if you have confidence in yourself and repeat it over and over again ‘I will, I will, I will,’ then trust me you will.”

There was applause from everywhere as they clapped. Kunal raised his hands and asked them to stop, “No more clapping till I finish my speech. Come on peeps, that would make me feel that I am a big bore and you want me off of the stage,” everybody laughed at this.

Kunal then addressed his audience with a solemn face, “Damn, now we are at the third and final golden rule of success,” there was more laughter.

“Followed by the dedication and will, the final element to achieve great success in life is passion. You need to be passionate about what you want in life. Raj was passionate about Simran and he was finally able to compel the strict, orthodox and archaic minded father to finally let go of his daughter and break all the legal barriers. Did I say legal barriers?” he asks in mock surprise, “Oh yeah, his daughter too traveled without a ticket,” once again there was sincere laughter in the crowd.

Rubbing his palms, he said, “Jokes apart, Raj was passionate about this girl and continuously strived to bring her father around and give her hand in marriage to him. He did not leave any stones unturned and finally, he was successful.”

“All of you young people who have gathered today with big dreams and strong will power, make sure you don’t stop dreaming. Don’t stop, keep striving, and keep moving until you achieve what you want. Trust me, nobody can claim that their life was bright and rosy. Nobody can prophesize that they will never face any calamity, tragedy or misfortune. The wheel of life keeps rolling. It has many ups and downs. The successful ones never give up. They never stop.”

Kunal finally reached the conclusion of his speech as he said, “I will try. Trust me, I literally hate the term TRY. Till date anyone who has claimed to have tried, never achieved anything. You need to give in your best and leave the rest. I never give my 100% to anything. Do you know why? It is because I always give my 200% I expect the same from you. If and only if you invest 200% then only you would be able to shine and fly.”

“In your life, do not make excuses. Make attempts. All the successful people make attempts and not an excuse. Keep on moving and making attempts till you achieve what you rightfully deserve. What you rightfully are meant for. You don’t live only once. You live each and every second of your life. So make sure that you utilize each and every second of your life. You die only once and accepting your defeat is embracing death before your time. Do not be a dead meat. Keep chanting, ‘Yes I will.”

Kunal raising his hands over and over again repeated, “Yes I will!” “Yes, I will!” “Yes, I will!” “Yes, I will!”

Soon the entire auditorium thundered “Yes I will!” “Yes, I will!” “Yes, I will!”

Everyone stood up to give him a standing ovation. Kunal bowed in humility and left the stage.

Followed by that speech, Kunal received various invitations from colleges all over the nation and globe to speak and motivate its students. Kunal works tirelessly for his progressing empire. He continues to motivate and inspire millions of people all around the world with his life story.

Kunal and Geetika are being blessed with two beautiful daughters. Their laughter makes his world blossom. Kunal is the torchbearer of the entrepreneurs of the future generations.

**Epilogue**

Myra Giani and Ayaanah Giani, the light of his eyes. Kunal kisses the forehead of his five years old princess Myra. Kunal still chooses to live in the very same bungalow built by his father. It is small in size with just one parking space. The garage accommodates his red BMW. Myra refuses to leave the bungalow of her Dadu because she was born here and love the cozy little hiding spaces scatterd at the different locations of the house.

Ayaanah who is lying next to Geetika is fast asleep. She is just a month old and her hands are smaller than Kunal’s finger. He smiles peacefully as he looks at the three of them fast asleep. On Myra’s insistence, they had come to Dadu’s house where they spend most of their time.

Kunal never wanted to leave his childhood house. It was the dream of Mr. Singh that Kunal builds a grand residence and owns luxurious cars. Kunal made sure that his father’s dreams and desires come true. He has now built a lavish bungalow and has named it “Parishram!”

Parishram is the result of his *parishram* (hard work).

Kunal sitting in his red BMW, a reminder of his red CBZ drives towards WALMI. There he sits at the place that was frequented by Mr. Singh and Kunal when he was alive. Coming out of the vehicle, Kunal sits on the floor and looks out at the vast expanse of greenery spreading far and wide in front of him.

Now, Kunal has all that his father ever wished for. Success, fame, and respect. Kunal has everything. He is the undisputed king of the foam industry.

Looking out at the night sky, Kunal sees his father smile at him. He looks happy and content. The white light around him sinks in his senses and has a calming effect on him. Kunal tells his father everything about his life, family, and business.

His father replies, “I am so proud of you son,” Mr. Singh expresses his joy to his son.

Standing on the topmost spot of the dam, Kunal stretches out his arms. The cool breeze surrounds Kunal as Mr. Singh hugs his son.