

INCOGNITO



LATA GWALANI

foreword by Sathya Saran

PART I

THE CONFESSION

1

“Age?” the man behind the desk asked without looking up.

“75,” she answered.

He slowly looked up at her, his pen poised mid-air. A moment passed – still and awkward.

“Haven’t you ever seen a 75-year old woman?” she snapped angrily. “First, you make me wait for almost half an hour, and then you take your own sweet time to fill out a simple form,” she rebuked.

“Oh! Sorry ma’m!” he said, quickly looking back into the form in front of him.

His desk was a mess. She could never imagine herself working in such clutter. “I am sure he spends half his working life just searching,” she thought disgustedly. She swept a glance across the desk from left to right. Her mind went into overdrive.

Well, all that he had to do was to stack all those papers into a neat pile on the left side of the desk and keep the files piled up on the right. The two phones could well get into the niche between the two piles. And, over there, there was even some space for a nice little vase. She decided to bring him some orchids and a good vase on her next visit.

“Please wait,” he told her. He picked up the phone and announced into it: ‘Anjali’.

“Please come! Sit,” the man pointed to the chair across his desk. He was smiling.

Anjali slowly shut the door behind her and cautiously walked towards the desk.

She studied him as she walked towards the chair.

His bald head framed a face dominated by chubby and rosy cheeks. Round steel rimmed glasses complemented his circular features. His broad smile was the only linear line across his face. If they make a movie on Winston Churchill, this man would fit the bill for the lead actor, she bemused!

She pulled out the chair and sat. She gave him some time to study her before she began.

“Hello,” she said.

“Hello Anjali!” he said cheerfully. “What brings you here?” he asked.

Anjali let a few moments pass as she gathered herself.

“I have a confession to make,” she said haltingly.

He smiled and nodded encouragingly.

Her tongue froze, stuck to the roof of her mouth. She opened her mouth a couple of times, but no sound emerged.

He pushed a glass of water towards her.

“Thank you,” she muttered and sipped the water watching him over the rim of the glass.

He sat patiently, watching and smiling.

“Murder,” she whispered.

His face was a sea of calm. His nod prodded her on.

“Four of them,” she continued to whisper.

He nodded again.

“But... but..., *I didn't kill them,*” she added hurriedly.

“But,” she looked earnestly at him. “*I know who killed them,*” she said in a hushed tone.

“He leaned forward and said, “Oh?”

“*They* did it. But, *I* feel guilty, because...because *I* know they did it,” she said desperately.

“Who are *they*?” he asked in a whisper.

A few moments passed in silence.

“They are people very close to me,” she said.

“Shailee, Rachana, Anuradha and Shakti,” she revealed.

He was looking at her. There was much warmth in his gaze. She felt comfortable.

“How well do you know them?” he asked softly.

“Very, very well,” she said.

There was silence.

“Would you like to tell me about them?” he asked.

“I want to tell you everything,” she said looking into his eyes.

“Well Anjali, where would you like to start?” he asked returning her steady gaze.

“Shall I tell it to you the way *they* told me?” she asked.

“That’s a good idea,” he smiled settling back comfortably in his chair.

“Thank you, Doctor,” she sighed.

PART II

SHAILEE

1

I stepped onto the moving walkway. I was bedazzled by the shimmering interiors of the Dubai International Airport. This was the 4th walkway I was riding since I got off the bus at the arrivals gate. I had a 3 hour transit time before I boarded my Emirates flight to Rome.

Dubai international airport was ostentatious – grandiose. I had read that this was the 4th busiest airport in the world going by international passenger traffic.

I was in Terminal 3 – which is exclusively for the hub of Dubai’s international airline – Emirates. I had also read that this terminal is the largest building in the world by floor space, sprawling over 370 acres.

I was spellbound.

I stepped off the walkway right in the centre of the concourse that played host to the famed Dubai duty-free shopping. It felt like walking through the hall of fame. The who’s who in the glitzy world of glamour and fashion screamed from atop their signature brand names, luring the faint-hearted.

Sprinkled amidst these brand palaces were designer lounges, dining courts, gyms and spas. What struck me was the never-ending space.

I walked on purposefully, looking for some quiet place where I could spend some leisurely time, eating and doing what I loved the most - observing people.

The luminescent 'Cold Stone' caught my eye. Except for a family of four, Cold Stone was peacefully inviting. I walked up to the counter, peered into their dipping cabinet and then pored over their long list of mix-in offerings.

I ordered a strawberry and banana smoothie garnished with roasted almonds. A meal in itself! I settled into a cozy deep lounge chair and waited to be served up the ultimate indulgence!

Speaking of indulgence, I was already on the first leg of my much deserved vacation. A European sojourn.

I am in my early thirties. With a sound career as a secondary school teacher in a reputed establishment, I am an enviable young woman of the new millennium. I am a private person, with no great inclination to play the social butterfly. I am content and reveled in the company of my three good buddies – independence, fiery spirit and, unwavering determination. I must confess, at certain times, I do attempt to mingle and create relationships, but honestly, people always disappoint me. I am quick to discover that they are too loud, too artificial or too smothering, at various times. All of which is despicable to me. Undying loyalty is a value I cherish.

When my family launched the drive for recruiting a suitable bachelor, I did not protest. In fact, I even examined a few *candidates*, but while all of them fit the position quite well, quintessentially, I did not feel okay about them. When I realized that my family's efforts were leading to despair and disturbing discussions, I decided to move out.

I am house proud. My cozy haven is a canvas of my inner self. A neatly appointed apartment with things in the right place. Hues and shades that bring out the best in me. Potted plants with bursts of green adorn the corners of my home. Watering my plants and tending to them is an immensely pleasurable activity for me. I even talk to them as I rearrange them around the house, which I do frequently.

People who visit me always remark how well organised and planned my home is. "Well, that's just me," I would shrug nonchalantly.

Why, even this vacation is the successful outcome of long-term precision planning! My mother was appalled when I announced that I had booked myself on this tour. "Don't go alone, let me come along with you," she had pleaded.

"No!" I had resisted. I couldn't think of sharing a room with someone for almost a month, even with my mother. I am a bit fussy about certain personal habits. I believe in the principle, "to each his own," well, fine with me as long as they keep to their own!

I am an avid reader and a movie buff. Almost each night before I fall asleep, I either watch a movie or read. A die-hard romantic, I have a long list of personal favourites – Howard Roark is an all time hero for me. I own *The Fountainhead* and often reread portions. Julie Andrews, as sister Maria, in *The Sound of Music* tugs at my heart strings each time I watch the movie.

Scarlet O'Hara is the epitome of passion for me. I remember how upset I was when my cousin to whom I had lent my copy of *Gone with the Wind*, had misplaced it. I was enraged at her callousness and even demanded that she replace the copy. I never borrow books, I always buy my own.

“So here I am,” I smiled to myself as I picked up my bag from the luggage carousel,
“Rome, here I come.”

The red flag of my tour operator greeted me near the exit gate of Leonardo Da Vinci International Airport, also known as "Fiumicino Airport". I could see some more Indians gathered around him.

I had been a wee bit apprehensive about taking a group tour. But, later decided that it would be far safer and secure to travel in a group. So, I had mentally prepared myself for a month-long group experience.

“Hi ma’m,” greeted the young man holding the flag. “I am your tour guide – Mike.”

“Hi, Mike”, I acknowledged.

“Hi, I’m Swati,” said a voice beside me.

“Hi”, I responded with a smile.

“You alone?” she enquired.

“Yes”, I smiled again.

“Oh,” she said condescendingly. “We are on our honeymoon,” she proclaimed pointing out to a young man standing a few steps behind, and struggling to keep a baggage strap from sliding off his shoulder.

“Congratulations,” I smiled as I politely turned away to take in the sights at the airport.

Forty-five minutes later, we checked into our hotel. I walked into my compact room and straight away walked towards the French window. I threw open the doors and stepped onto the balcony. My room overlooked the sprawling lawns surrounding the hotel. I looked at my watch. It was 4 o’clock in the evening. I had already set my watch to the European time zone as soon as I had boarded my flight to Rome.

The sun was shining brightly. A light cool breeze swept through the balcony, making the sun seem all the more endearing. I went back into the room, fell back on the warm bed and looked up at the ceiling.

“I was here, at last!” I knew it in my bones that this trip would add a new dimension to my life. Smiling to myself, I got up, unpacked, set things properly in the wardrobe, and showered. I changed into a comfortable pair of jeans and a light top and threw a shrug around my shoulders. With my camera around my neck, I stepped out of my room. My

heart beat in anticipation of a great Roman holiday. My mind was all set to capture memories for posterity.

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The first couple of days in Rome were a whirlwind tour of the iconic tourist attractions of Rome – the Colosseum and the Arch of Constantine, the Trevi Fountain, The Spanish Steps, The Vatican city, and Michaelangelo's Last Judgement fresco in the Sistine Chapel.

In the evening of the second day, we strolled along the Via Condotti, Rome's main upscale shopping street.

This was a memorable walk, indeed, because, this is where I met Vikram.

I had noticed him at the airport, when we were waiting for the coach to take us to our hotel. Strikingly handsome with sharp features, he had a crop of salt and pepper hair that curled softly at the nape of his neck.

Once we had settled on the coach, our tour guide had introduced himself and our itinerary to the group. He had then invited each of us to introduce ourselves. Vikram had come up to introduce himself, right after my introduction. I liked his voice. It had a ring of naughtiness to it. When it was his turn to answer the question, "Why are you on this tour?" Vikram had looked around the bus, winked and said, "to find love." This was greeted by a thunderous round of approval.

When the claps had died, the guide teased him, “looking for an *angrezi mem* or what?”

“Ha! Maybe not,” Vikram had said with a shrug of his shoulders. That’s when I had noticed his hand, rather his wrist. He wore his watch on the wrist of his right hand - just as I did. At the end of that toned hand, I saw well manicured fingers – slim and long.

“Are you alone, Vikram Sir, like Shailee ma’m?” the guide had enquired.

“I am alone”, Vikram had nodded, “like Shailee ma’m”, he had said after a pause, his dark eyes lingering on me.

I had smiled in acknowledgement.

“Are you planning to go shopping?” Vikram’s voice cut into my flashback.

I didn’t even know he had joined me as I had walked away from the group along the Via Condotti.

“Well, not planned anything as such. If I spot something good, then maybe,” I smiled looking up at him.

“Well, if you don’t want to shop, would you like to come up the Spanish Steps once again?” he asked.

The “Yes”, slipped through my lips, a little too soon I thought.

“Ok, just wait,” he ordered.

I saw him sprint up to the guide and say something to him, pointing towards me and then towards the Spanish Steps. I watched him as he sprinted back towards me, the wind billowing his jacket. His body was lean and athletic. His nose was sharp and striking. He could easily pass for an Italian.

“C’mon!” he urged with child-like enthusiasm.

We walked towards the Spanish Steps. Twilight did beautiful things to the Spanish Steps. The earlier day, when we had visited the steps around noon, we were greeted by a burst of bright pink – the azalea flowers that adorn the steps. Now, the evening hues blended with the pink colour to reflect shades of violet and purple. Vikram and I went about clicking a lot of pictures. I wanted a picture of myself with the flowers. I handed my camera to Vikram. As I posed for him, I recalled what I had read about the Spanish Steps. In the 18th century, the most beautiful women and men of Italy gathered here, waiting to be chosen as an artist's model.

As Vikram focused on me through the lens, I felt like the Chosen One.

“Let me help you with that,” Vikram said as he took my bag from me, when we checked out of our hotel the next morning.

“Oh no!” I protested.

But, he had already taken it from me and had started walking ahead. I ran a few paces to keep up with him. “Oh really, I could have managed,” I protested mildly.

He loaded the bag in the coach, turned towards me and smiled, “purely my pleasure, ma’m.”

That day, we sat next to each other in the coach. At first, we exchanged pleasantries. Then, we commented on the scenic drive, then on the climate, then on the cleanliness and then on the road discipline. Finally, we got down to things closer home - things that both of us were impatiently waiting to know.

Vikram Bajaj lived and worked in Chennai. His parents lived in Indore. An IIT graduate from Chennai, he had gone on to do his MBA. He had taken a liking to the city and had decided to stay on. He spoke a smattering of Tamil. His family had given up on him; they thought he “took life too lightly.” They lived with the hope that one day there would be an awakening of sorts in his head and he would also go off to the US, as all his cousins had dutifully done.

“But now it’s almost a decade to all this. A couple of friends and I have put together this engineering consulting firm, and we have offices in Chennai, the US and the Asia Pacific Region. So, I do go to the US often, and my parents are quite happy,” he chuckled.

“So what tongue do you speak?” he turned towards me. “With a Tamilian mother and a Sindhi father, is it ‘*aiyyayo* or *eh chariyo*?”, his mouth broke out into a silent applause, revealing a perfect set of teeth.

“Oh, much more than that,” I giggled back. “I have a way with languages, you know. I can speak Tamil, Sindhi, Hindi, Marathi, Gujarati and French...some German, too,” I said.

“Hey great!” He exclaimed.

“You know what,” he said, lowering his voice as he lowered his head to almost touch mine. “I’m going to stick around with you on this trip. With your language skills, you can help me get around.”

Language skills! A big fat excuse! I knew it. But who’s complaining!

With each passing minute, I was drawn closer to Vikram. We always sat together in the coach. We got photographs clicked together. We laughed together. Vikram’s presence gave new meaning and dimension to my vacation.

When I undressed at night, I would feel the lingering fragrance of his after-shave on my clothes. I always wished for the night to pass off soon and would eagerly wait for daybreak, so I could get dressed and rush down for breakfast and watch Vikram as he breezed into the restaurant, his eyes searching for me.

And, when he would spot me, his mouth would break into a grin that made me go weak in the knees. He would then stride towards my table, waving and smiling at others in the room.

Vikram was very friendly with others. I didn't quite like that. I did speak occasionally to some of them. Swati would come up to me every now and then. But even these infrequent interactions had stopped ever since she saw that Vikram and I were together most of the time. I could sense that she disapproved of this. She was now bonding well with some other couples in the group. I couldn't care less. As long as I had Vikram by my side, I didn't feel the need for anyone else.

I was already storing beautiful memories...

If Rome was foreplay, Venice was consummation.

It was love at first sight. I stood on the deck of the cruise liner as it cut its way through the waters of the Adriatic. Ahead, I could see the skyline of Europe's most romantic city come into focus. I couldn't wait to get off and set foot on the land where Shakespeare had set his *Othello* and *The Merchant of Venice*; where several Renaissance and Baroque buildings house today's Louis Vuitton masterpieces.

"Venice is world-famous for its canals", came the clear voice of Mike. "It is built on an archipelago of 117 islands formed by 177 canals in a shallow lagoon. The islands on which the city is built are connected by 455 bridges. Venice is Europe's largest urban car free area," he finished pompously.

"That tall red tower you see there is the St. Mark's Campanile – the bell tower of St. Mark's Basilica – located in the Piazza San Marco. That's where we will get off", Mike announced.

We ferried past the majestic Stucky Hotel and onto the water's edge, gliding past the two columns of Venice's patrons – Marco and Todaro. On one is the lion of St. Mark and on the other Saint Todaro standing on the sacred crocodile of Egypt. "These columns

constituted the official gateway to Venice. When there were no official guests in the city, gambling was permitted in the space between the columns,” finished Mike.

Vikram was among the first to get off the cruise and was waiting for me at the waterfront. We had taken separate seats on the cruise. En route, I had seen him writing away in the small red book he had been carrying with him all through the trip.

“I write travelogues,” he had explained earlier, when I had caught him seated cross-legged on the greens in front of the Leaning Tower of Pisa, and writing away furiously.

“I am in the mood to write today,” Vikram had announced to me as we had boarded the cruise. I had pretended not to mind. But, I was shattered. Vikram was occupied with his notes during the entire cruise. A choppy sea of emotions consumed me. I felt neglected... I was terribly hurt.

But, when Venice unfolded its enchanting canvas before me, I pushed these feelings deep down, for later retrieval, I promised myself.

“Thanks for noticing me,” I remarked sarcastically, as I got off the cruise and walked towards him.

“Oh! Sorry, but this is my dream place, Shailee. I had always wanted to write about Venice,” he said.

“I suggest all of you take a gondola ride first,” announced Mike. “Six persons in one gondola, please.”

The group scooted ahead to get into their gondolas. Vikram and I lingered at the back....my silent prayers were answered when I realised that we were the only two remaining – we had a gondola to ourselves!

Our gondolier held our hands and helped us step into the bobbing gondola. It was lushly appointed with crushed velvet seats and Persian rugs.

“Where will you take us”? Vikram asked the gondolier, as he once again pulled out his red book and pen.

“Oh, a 35-minute *giro* around some canals,” the gondolier replied in thickly accented English.

Vikram turned towards me and smiled. “We are in the Queen of the Adriatic on a gondola serenade,” he said softly, content writ large on his face.

The gondolier was far from what I had read in books. No, he was not warming up his vocal chords to *O Sole Mio*. Instead, he was filling up Vikram on the history of the place,

the clock tower and how the ‘moors’ – two great bronze figures, he pointed out, strike the hours on a bell. *Who cares even if they didn’t strike the bell*, I thought to myself.

Vikram was thoroughly impressed. He devoured the gondolier’s words, and preserved them in his book.

I was annoyed. I had become invisible to Vikram. I watched his long slender fingers on the pen as his hand smoothly glided over the page. I longed to feel that hand. I ached deeply. I wanted to snatch the book from his hand, tear out its spiral binding wire and scatter the pages and watch with glee as the wind carried them far, far away.

With a hopeless sigh, I turned away to take in the sights.

Venice is beautiful, except for the water. I found it depressing. I could never imagine myself living in a place like this. When you open the windows and look out, all you see is water. When you step out of the door, you step into a gondola, because there's water all around. The buildings were all moss layered and looked slimy to touch. I looked up at the buildings all around. People were always looking out of the windows. Something in their faces caught my eye. I was puzzled, I didn't know what it was. Then, like a flash, it came to me. Fear. Yes. They all looked scared. They were smiling, alright, but it was not that bright sunshine smile you normally see. It was fear in disguise. I knew it was the water they feared. It was almost as if they were taking turns at the window to keep watch, to keep a fearful eye on the water, just in case...

How would the nights be here, I wondered? In the dead of the night, all you would hear was the water gnawing away at the walls of your home. Horrendous!

As a kid I had watched the movie *The Ten Commandments*. The famous *parting of the sea* scene was indelibly imprinted on my mind. I remember the roaring sound of the sea as it cut itself through the middle, into two gigantic waves that curled themselves up high in the air, to create a path for the *good* people to pass through. I also recall the horrific way in which the sea came crashing down and closed itself on the *bad* people. "How does the sea know who is good and who is bad?" I remember asking my father. "Oh, nature knows everything," my father had replied in a matter of fact voice. I had never been sure

of that answer. The movie scene plagued my mind, and each time, it came back to me, my stomach would tie up in knots, and I would gasp for air.

“We should go here,” Vikram’s voice cut into my thoughts, pointing to a coffee bar along the waterfront, “Caffe Florian”, he said. “It looks like a great place to unwind.”

“Hmmm,” I acknowledged coldly. How do you unwind a wretched bundle of nerves, I thought.

“You *are* enjoying this, aren’t you?” He turned towards me with a quizzical expression.

“Of course,” I shrugged.

After what seemed like a never ending journey, I finally saw the waterfront appear in front of me. Vikram held out his hand to help me get off the gondola. “I might as well have gone alone on the ride,” I thought bitterly to myself, as we walked along the waterfront, past the cafes and trattoria, and the colourful boutiques displaying the handmade masks worn during the Carnival of Venice.

The afternoon went by in a whirlwind of sightseeing. Venetian gothic architecture greeted us everywhere. Approaching late afternoon, Vikram and a few others went off to witness some Murano glass work masterpieces. I, along with the rest of the group, decided to wait at a waterside café.

“You sure you don’t want to come along,” Vikram had asked for the tenth time.

“Sure,” I had replied, defiantly.

From my cozy chair at the café, I could see twilight slowly enfold Venice into her embrace. The ornamental wrought iron street lamps were gently stoking the fire in everyone’s heart, I was sure. Strains of music from the numerous cafes that dotted the waterfront, blended into a heady concoction that lined the air with a mellifluous orchestra.

I got out of my chair and strolled over to the waterfront. The breeze teased and tossed my hair. I lifted my face up to the sky and took in a deep breath. My eyes took in the fading shimmers of an orange sun as it melted into the arms of the darkening sea.

“Beautiful,” I felt Vikram’s warm breath gently brush my hair.

My heart skipped a beat. After a pause, I whispered, “Yes.” I turned and looked up into his eyes. “The setting sun is...,” I continued.

Vikram’s finger on my lips silenced me. “Shhh!” He held my gaze. Moments glided by.

The golden hues in the sky behind him became diffused images, the strain of music grew

softer, the people around were now a blur. A long deft finger gently pushed away a lock of hair from my forehead.

“I am talking about you,” he whispered. “Beautiful”.

I felt a lump in my throat. My heart was racing and my temples pounding. I felt the slight brush of his hand on my thigh as he took my hand.

“Let’s walk a bit,” he invited.

Holding hands, fingers entwined, Vikram and I strolled along the waterfront. We walked in silence. A warm golden glow enveloped me from within. I felt secure, I felt close and I felt protected. I cherished the feeling. The silence between us kept us engaged in a conversation at the metaphysical level. It was spiritual. Slowly, the silence gently gathered us in her palms and placed us in a cocoon of enchanting togetherness.

“You must visit the Bridge of Sighs,” Mike’s voice startled me out of my reverie. He was right behind us. We stopped and turned.

“Legend says that lovers will be granted everlasting love and bliss if they kiss on a gondola at sunset under the bridge,” he said with a wink.

Vikram’s grip on my hand tightened.

“Let’s go,” he urged.

Minutes later Vikram and I were sitting in a gondola. This time, we sat close, very close to each other. I could feel his thigh against mine. We held hands. I took a deep breath. My eyes closed, my lips smiled, and I was immersed in total bliss. A few moments later, I opened my eyes to see a sky aflame in passionate glow as the gondola slowly glided towards an enclosed bridge.

The Bridge of Sighs is made of white limestone and has windows with stone bars. It passes over the Rio di Palazzo and connects the old prisons to the interrogation room in the Doge’s Palace. The view from the Bridge of Sighs was the last view of Venice that convicts saw before their imprisonment. The name, given by Lord Byron in the 19th Century, comes from the suggestion that prisoners would sigh at their final view of beautiful Venice out the window before being taken down to their cells.

“Lovers! Now you kiss!” called out our gondolier as we approached the arch.

In a flash, Vikram drew me closer, bent his head and rubbed his cheek on my cheek. At first, the corners of our lips met in a feather touch. I was trembling in his arms. His hands around my waist drew me closer to him. I heard him moan as his mouth took mine completely. We kissed passionately. I threw my hands around his neck and pressed myself against him.

Time stood still. A billion stars shot across the skies in a celestial celebration.

Vikram lifted his head, his face flushed, and looked into my eyes. We held each other's gaze.

"I love you," I heard my voice say softly.

"I love you," Vikram whispered.

"Happy loving!" sang out the gondolier's voice. He maneuvered the gondola from under the bridge. Vikram and I sat silently holding hands till we reached the waterfront. I wanted this sonata to go on and on forever. I wanted to be the world for Vikram. I wanted him to be mine. I took his hand to my lips and planted a kiss on the back of his hand. I felt his lips on my forehead.

Vikram stepped out first. "Come", he said as he stretched his hand out for me.

As I stood up, I saw his red book fall off the seat and land silently on the carpeted floor of the gondola. I looked up at the gondolier. His back was turned towards me. I looked at Vikram. He also didn't seem to have noticed the book. I stood still and held my breath. Then, I turned towards Vikram, gave him my hand and got off the gondola. We walked

away from the gondola - and the book, arm in arm, towards the group. We climbed aboard the cruise liner and waited for it to ferry us back.

On the cruise, we sat together. Vikram drew me close with his arm around my shoulder. I rested my head on his shoulder. We were immersed in our own world of love, totally oblivious to the world around us.

It was almost an hour later when we were back in the coach that Vikram realised the book was missing.

“Oh no!” he cried out in anguish. “I have to go back,” he told Mike.

“But sir, where will you search for it?” Mike asked, a bit annoyed.

“You must have left it at the Murano workshop, because it was not with you when we took this gondola ride,” I said softly yet emphatically.

“Oh! The Murano people close shop at 7.30, sir. Now it is almost 10.” the captain said putting the coach back in gear.

Vikram sat down dejectedly beside me.

“It’s OK Vikram,” I consoled. “You can always get another book.”

“You don’t understand!” he snapped at me. “There were so many important notes. Shit! How could I be so careless!” he cursed.

His hand was lying on his lap. I placed my hand on his hand and whispered reassuringly, “I will help you recollect everything, I promise. Together we will bring back the memories,” I smiled.

“Thanks, Shailee,” he mumbled pressing my hand.

The journey back to the hotel was spent in silence. I held Vikram’s hand throughout the ride.

6

Two days later, Vikram had forgotten all about the book. He had a new book and was happily capturing memories. He was doting on me. I had his complete attention, and whenever he wanted to write, he would give me an apologetic look which I would approve with a nod and a sheepish smile. I felt good, I felt respected. I knew I was actually helping him become a better human being.

“I want to ask you something,” Vikram whispered in my ear one afternoon in the coach.

“Oh!” I looked up at him expectantly.

“Not now, when we reach Innsbruck,” he smiled as he took my hand to his lips.

These days, Vikram looked so much happier than ever before, I reflected. I basked in his attention. I lost count of the number of photos we got clicked together, more than the honeymooning couple Swati and Shekhar, I bet!

When we reached our hotel that night, Vikram lingered a while longer at my door. As I turned to unlock my door, I felt his lips on the nape of my neck.

“I spoke to my mother about you,” he said. “I want to go back to India soon,” he moaned.

“Me too,” I giggled happily as I went in and shut my door.

I leaned against my door and held myself in a tight embrace. My happiness knew no bounds. Vikram and I were made for each other. We complemented each other so well. I could spend the rest of my life with him.

Suddenly, I felt a shiver go down my spine. Oh no, it was that feeling again. That cold feeling. My head was spinning. I held my head between my hands. The image of the red book lying on the gondola seat seized my head. This was not the first time. In the past few days, this kept happening to me. The book shadowed me all the time. I was tortured, I was tormented.

I moved away from the door. I sat on the bed and took a few deep breaths. Five minutes later, I felt better. I went into the bathroom, undressed and stood under the shower. After a long slow hot shower, I slid under the warmth of the blanket, and slowly drifted into sound sleep.

First, it was a faint muffle. Then, I heard the voices.

“Quick! Everyone out of the rooms!” called out the voices.

This was followed by the sound of pounding on the doors. I jumped out of bed, hurried to the window and peered out into the dark. First, I could not see it, and then I froze. Water, everywhere. The *calli* (narrow alleys) leading to my hotel were flooded. Oh, the *acqua alta* I realised panic-stricken!

Acqua alta is high waters in Italian. It is the exceptional tide peaks that occur periodically in the northern Adriatic Sea. The phenomenon occurs mainly due to astronomical tides. The sea water comes into the canals during high tide.

I looked up at the surrounding buildings. Terrified white faces were peering from windows, like ghosts. Lightning was tearing the skies apart with its silvery veins. The sky growled angrily.

I shuddered. I swiftly reached for the phone on the bedside table and with shaking fingers dialed Vikram's room number. The phone rang for a complete minute.

"O, pick up the phone Vikram!" I pleaded aloud.

There was no response. I panicked. Where was Vikram? I flung the phone down. Then, I picked it up again to call the tour guide's room. The phone was dead. I cursed. The sky revolted in a loud roar, and instantly the room plunged into darkness. I was terrified. I could barely move.

I knew I had to do something. I cautiously groped my way to the door. My fingers were so unsteady that I could hardly turn the knob. Finally, I managed to pull the door open. I was sobbing loudly now. Water was filling into the corridor. I started screaming for help. I groped my way along the wall.

“Vikram! Vikram!” I was screaming now.

Suddenly, I remembered that there was a huge window at the end of the corridor. Vikram and I had stood there a couple of nights ago, hand in hand, as we looked up at the moon. If only I could reach that window, I could call out for help, I thought. I groped along the wall and waded through the water. After what seemed like ages, my fingers felt the window ledge. I frantically groped around for the window. It was ajar! With both my hands, I pushed it open.

Just then, the lights came on. I turned around and looked behind me down the corridor. There was no one, only water! I was scared. I turned and looked out of the window. The moon lit up the world outside. I could clearly see the silhouettes of the buildings, they were floating on water.

I raised myself on my toes, leaned farther and peered below the window. First I didn't see it clearly. Then, I saw the silvery outline of a gondola making its way under the arch that led out of our hotel, the gondola was hardly a few metres away...And then I saw him. I gasped. The gondolier...it was him! The same guy whose gondola we had ridden

to the Bridge of Sighs a few days ago. I waved out to him frantically. The gondolier was laughing out aloud and saying something to someone sitting in the gondola...I couldn't see who it was; he had his back to me. I waved out to the gondolier once again...The man seated there slowly turned his head. I was aghast...It was Vikram! But, this was definitely not the Vikram I knew, because this one had a sinister smile.

“Vikram!” I called out in an unsure voice.

“Vikram!” I sobbed, “help me...”

Vikram was waving something at me. I strained my eyes to see it. It was his red book! The book that had been haunting me...He turned towards me and said,

“No! I will not help you. You deserve to suffer.” Vikram's voice was menacingly low.

The gondolier burst into laughter. That deep-throated, wicked laughter cut through the air, tore through the water and pierced my ears.

I bolted up in bed, my hands covering my ears. I was sweating profusely. I was gasping for air. I heard voices...I looked around the room and realised I had left the TV on last night. I reached out for the water bottle on the bedside table.

This was not a dream, a little voice inside me warned me.

This was a premonition.

The sound of the ringing phone startled me.

“Hello?” I croaked into the phone.

“Still dreaming?” Vikram teased.

Coincidence?

My mind thought otherwise. And then it dawned on me like a veil slipping off my eyes. Vikram knew about the book all along. He was testing me. He was waiting for me to own up. And all this while, he was putting up an act of loving me, of caring for me. How dare he? How unscrupulous! All for a book!! How fortunate I was to have discovered this about him, before I committed deeply into this relationship. How I despised him! Now I know what he wanted to ask me in Innsbruck. The cheat, the coward, why couldn't he ask me right away. There was no way I would have anything to do with men like this in my life...

“Hey wake up!” Vikram's voice coaxed.

“Of course! I’m wide awake,...I can see everything clearly,” I replied without any feeling in my voice and hung up.

I went through the morning like a robot, physically. But, my mind was racing. I was hurting deep down in my heart. I showered thrice, and would have taken another one had it not been for the ringing phone. It crashed into my thoughts and scattered them as smithereens around my feet on the bathroom floor. I slowly picked up my thoughts, and carefully strung them into a series of actions that I would take.

That’s when I decided to kill Vikram.