

(SAMPLE CHAPTERS)

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**Racy, unpredictable, romantic, and inspiring,
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When gamer and entrepreneur Rishi Rai sets out to revolutionize the gaming industry, something somewhere goes terribly wrong and, like dominoes, the blocks of his life fall down one after the other.

An unexpected meeting with Alex, an unpredictable, crazy American hippie, changes his life forever, as he decides to quit everything and join him on an unplanned, uncharted journey across India.

From getting irrepressibly high in the mysterious Malana Valley in the Himalayas to starting a shack on the bewitching Om Beach on the West Coast, they do it all. But their adrenaline-charged adventure takes a turn when Rishi meets Kyra, a beautiful and enigmatic gamer. As passions surge and sparks fly, Rishi gets drawn to Kyra . . . unaware of who she is and where she comes from.

What follows next is something nobody could have ever dreamed of . . .

Who is Kyra and why are the paparazzi after her?

Can Rishi connect the dots in his life to protect the love of his life?

*While the world becomes a spectator,
can he mastermind the fall of a ruthless
giant to become a global icon or will he
become the biggest loser?*



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PROLOGUE

The history of the world is the history of a few men who kicked ass whenever the situation called for it. It was time to kick some ass.

It was time to create history.

This was the land where it would all be decided.

Rishi's hands folded into a fist and his eyes took on a gleam of anticipation . . . mentally preparing himself for what awaited him. He looked up at the New York City night sky. It was the same old sky with the same old stars looking down on earth, but tonight, he felt that even they, like million others, were wondering what he would do at the break of dawn.

It was a warm spring night, with the breeze blowing every now and then. He stood on the east wing terrace of the heavily-barricaded mansion, looking across manicured gardens and well-lit fountains. He could hear the whirring of the choppers that hovered above him. But that didn't distract him a bit.

He turned around as she came to stand next to him, and looked at her. Her blue-green eyes were lost deep in thought, and tension was writ large on her face. He knew she was stressed, much stressed. Who wouldn't be? It had been a totally unprecedented set of events that had unfolded since the Maha Kumbh Mela.

His eyes then sought out Alex, who sat at a distance on the edge of the terrace—a leg dangling in the air, a joint pressed between his lips. He puffed unperturbed, like he didn't give a fuck about the world. Which, in fact, was true: he didn't really give a fuck, ever. His face showed no hint of anxiety . . . no concern, whatsoever, at the prospect of entering the battlefield tomorrow.

In exactly nine hours, millions of viewers across the world would watch them live on the cult reality show. No one in their right mind could have imagined this turn of events, but the unthinkable had happened. And Rishi knew he had brought it upon himself.

He had done what he had felt was right. He had braved, and braved well. *But now what?* He had no clue what it would take to bring down a giant. The media had its own opinions: *'It is not a question of whether Rishi Rai will lose, but how badly he will.'* *'Does he have it in him to at least give a fight?'* *'It would be interesting to see whether he'll end up becoming a global icon or if this gamble will make him the biggest loser.'*

The thought of the media reports inflamed him further. Though he didn't know what he was going to do next, he knew he was not going to blink in the eye of the storm. His body was whirring, matching the thundering

sound of a chopper that came too close to them—briefly putting them in spotlight and streaming it live on a national television channel—before it climbed up.

Rishi looked up at the chopper in the sky. He then looked around . . . everything seemed bizarre. His mind was a maze. Nothing seemed real. He thought of his life and how it had changed in the last year. It had been nothing less than a frigging roller coaster ride. *None of this would have happened had I not gone for a drive that night in Bangalore*, he thought. He would probably have been just another failed businessman. But that night did happen. And it was on that fateful night that his life changed forever.

CHAPTER

1

January 9

6:30 p.m.

Bangalore

Rishi Rai held the gun in his hand.

Standing in the centre of the swanky meeting room, his fingers pressing hard on the Beretta, he cut a dangerous figure. The room, which was bathed in an eerie blue glow from the projector screen, had just two occupants—two men who stood across the conference table facing each other.

One, a fallen entrepreneur, who was desperate for money. And the other, an investor who was loath to part with money.

Together they formed an intriguing tableau.

The investor looked at the gun, startled. He didn't know how to react; his heartbeat had climbed up alarmingly. He had turned down thousands of entrepreneurs with business plans

in his life before, but no one had reacted like the crazy man standing in front of him.

‘Y-you can’t be serious, Rishi . . .’ he finally uttered, his voice coming out like a squeal. As if it was a plea for mercy.

Rishi looked at his gun and kept it on the table, keeping it pointed towards him. *I didn’t have a gun in my pocket. Where did this come from?*

‘It’s . . . it’s nothing personal, Rishi. Please try to understand . . .’

Anger surged through him again, and he picked up his gun. ‘Business is always personal. Always,’ he growled, and inched closer to shoot.

‘Don’t shoot, Rishi, don—’ shouted the investor, trembling. But Rishi didn’t listen.

He fired the shot . . . and woke up.

Holy shit! Was I daydreaming? He got up breathing heavily and sweating profusely. Pushing himself up on the accent pillows, he strained his eyes to make sense of where he was, but could barely determine anything. His head felt as if it had been bludgeoned to a pulp, and his eyes—bloodshot red—burned like embers on fire.

Running a hand through his dishevelled hair, he forced himself to look around . . . and slowly came to the realization that he was at Natasha’s place.

It was after sunset. The noise of the unending rush-hour traffic could be heard through the window. The cool

January breeze ruffled the curtains, bringing along with it soft dusk light into the semi-dark room.

He had reached here sometime in the afternoon, and let himself in using the spare key she always left under the mat. Since then he had done nothing but lie down on her bed and let his mind play up his fears. He had drifted in and out of sleep, which was weaved with nightmares.

Just then he noticed movement behind the bathroom door; the faint light coming from the crack right at the bottom hinting that Natasha was going to emerge soon. She had come home a short while ago. He recalled mustering a faint smile in acknowledgment of her arrival, and closing his eyes right after. The mere idea of seeing her now, of having to talk to her, filled him with bitterness. *You are in her house. Easy on the resentment.*

Lately, he had started losing patience with the world around him at a much more alarming rate than before. Granted he had never really been the indulgent type, but he had also never been this bitter, impatient, intolerant man. Nowadays, a sneer seemed to be the only look he wore. And it suited him just fine.

Lost in sepia-tinted thoughts about his life, his eyes caught the blinking red light on his smartphone, indicating that he had received new emails. He groaned inwardly, trying his best to ignore the impulse that was gnawing at him, but gave up within a minute. He quickly scanned through the six new emails and replied to the important ones at a frantic pace without once glancing at the keypad. Over the years, he had mastered the art of typing this

way—focussing his eyes solely on the screen and nowhere else. He often thought of his smartphone as an appendage; he could lose his right arm but not his phone.

The bathroom door opened and Natasha emerged—wrapped in a towel, smiling seductively. ‘Ready for me, baby?’ she asked.

Not finding the level of excitement she wanted to see on Rishi’s face, she decided to up the ante, and dropped the piece of cloth covering her. Her sumptuous curves could be seen silhouetted against the dim yellow light. She slowly began walking towards the bed, and coming to sit next to him, pressed her slender body against his.

All Rishi offered her was a disinterested face.

‘What’s wrong?’ she asked, disappointment lacing her tone.

‘I can’t. I’m sorry,’ he said, and got up.

‘I undress and you lose it? How embarrassing is that!’ she exclaimed.

He didn’t reply and went to stand near the window, looking outside.

Of a lean, athletic built, with deep-set eyes and a strong chin, Rishi always cut an impressive figure; his tall frame adding to his charisma. But right this moment he belied that very impression.

An era had come to an end for him this morning when he had finally signed on all the paperwork. He thought back on the endless meetings he had had with his lawyers to stop this ordeal . . . or to salvage some bit of it, at least. Just some bit of it. But nothing had worked out.

Like dominoes, the blocks of his life had fallen, one after the other and in perfect synchronisation, leaving him with a defeated sense of being.

His mind was now a mixed bag of emotions. On one hand, he felt relieved: he had fought the battle too hard and for too long and knew there was nothing more he could have done. But on the other hand, he felt a sense of emptiness: after all he had fought the battle too hard and for too long to not care.

Exhaling slowly, making a conscious attempt to not stoke his already ravaged feelings, he forced himself to think about something else, but questions about his future flooded his mind. *What next?* He banged his fist against the wall next to the window in frustration.

'I'm still alive and in the same room, you know,' muttered Natasha, interrupting his thoughts. She sat reclined on the bed flipping through the pages of a glossy magazine—stark naked save for a deep red colour that now tainted her lips. The effect was nothing short of stunning, and she knew it.

Jolted back to reality by her voice, he turned and said, 'Hey, listen . . . I'm sorry. Let's . . . let's, uhh, let's start over again? I'll make it up to you.' He had barely glanced at her bare body, but as he walked towards her, he realized that he didn't want the day to end badly; it was still one of his best days in months.

'No, not now. I don't have an on-off switch. Get me a ciggy!'

He went ahead and lit her one. As Natasha took a

deep drag and exhaled, she asked, 'What's going on? You wanna talk?' Something akin to concern flitted across her face.

Rishi and Natasha had met a few months ago at a pub through common friends. She worked with Radio Vertigo, a local music station, in its creative team. Their relationship was meant to be a casual affair and had remained just that. No strings attached, they both had decided. Such affairs were commonplace in Bangalore, the IT outsourcing capital of the world, which had once been a conservative pensioner's paradise. The youth believed they didn't have time to invest in serious relationships while they were busy chasing their dreams. Rishi and Natasha were no exceptions.

'No, nothing. The usual stuff,' responded Rishi, producing an evasive reply as his eyes traced the deep stain of red marking the ends of her cigarette butt. He had never really bothered to disclose the gory details of his life to her, but he knew she had read everything in the newspapers today. He had known it the minute she had entered; it was written all over her face. It was a different story that she didn't broach the topic with him. He knew she wished they shared a relationship where he would share all his thoughts with her, but in the past few months they had never been able to reach that level. Or maybe just he hadn't. His cell phone rang right then and he moved forward to pick it up.

'Good evening, Rishi. It's Poonam again.'

'Hi, Poonam,' he responded disinterestedly.

‘Sorry about what happened,’ the caller said, without wasting any time on pleasantries. They were well past that.

‘Sympathy is the last thing I need, Poonam. Let’s get to the point, shall we?’ He spoke in measured sentences. Too measured. A nerve ticked in his jaw.

Poonam was a headhunter from an executive search firm, and had been chasing him relentlessly for the last few months for a deal. XingLabs was a renowned US-based Internet company that was setting up a software centre in Bangalore, and it wanted Rishi as its global CTO. It was a great offer, and Rishi knew it.

‘I didn’t mean to . . . but have you taken any decision on XingLabs’ offer?’ asked Poonam.

‘I need some time. I haven’t really taken any decision,’ he shared. *You are a fool to be even asking for more time! Why are you saying this? You should have taken a call on it weeks ago. What’s stopping you?*

‘Don’t think so much about such a top job, Rishi. XingLabs is *the* brand! They are ready to offer you a twenty percent annual bonus, *plus* a handsome joining bonus and stock. And you know what the salary is like. To top it, you’ll be getting a key global position being in India. And that is next to impossible, that too at your age. You *have* to say yes, Rishi. If you want I will arrange another call with the CEO.’

It was true—it was a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity to lead the technology efforts of a global brand; that too at twenty-seven. But something held Rishi back. It wasn’t that he hadn’t been tempted. He had been. Sorely, in fact.

In his mind, he knew that most of his present problems would be sorted if he took up that job. But he hadn't been able to make himself do that. Yet.

'Got it. Let me get back to you in a couple of days. I know it's a great offer, especially at this juncture in my life. But I need to figure out a few things. I am sure you understand. Talk to you soon,' saying which he hung up, not giving her any chance to reply.

'You got an offer? Are you getting a job?' asked Natasha, as she applied a fresh coat of gloss to her lips.

'Maybe,' he replied, shrugging with indifference.

'Wow! That was quick. So, what are you going to do?'

There was silence.

'Say something for once, Rishi. It's not like I don't know anything now—' His cell phone buzzed again, irking an already annoyed Natasha.

The screen flashed the name: KARAN. Rishi's good friend. It cheered him up a bit.

'Is the party on?' Karan asked. Rishi had called his close friends to catch up tonight.

'It's on. I'll see you at 8:30,' he said, and hung up.

'Oh, there's a *party*? Where's it? Why didn't you tell me before?' asked Natasha, positively glowing at the prospect of partying.

Rishi stroked her hair absent-mindedly and kissed her, but didn't say a word.

'*What?* I'm not invited?' she questioned, clearly hurt.

'It's a guy thing, Natasha. You know our talks bore

you to death. Why don't you hang out with your gang tonight?' he asked in all seriousness.

Her mouth puckered tight, and she stared at him. Then with a shrug, said, 'Fuck it, but will you leave so soon?'

Rishi looked at her for a second or two, and then said, 'Come to think of it, I do have some unfinished business here.' And with that he climbed into the bed and on top of her.

CHAPTER 3

Waking up to the worst hangover of his life wasn't exactly how Rishi wanted to start his day, but, well, he didn't really have a choice. As the mild morning sun fell square on him, he fluttered his eyes open and looked at his watch. And immediately scrunched his mouth into a scowl. It was just seven-fifty. He had barely slept for four hours.

Knowing that he wouldn't be able to get any more sleep, he sat up and took in the unexpected beauty of the scene in front of him.

Against the backdrop of coconut trees and between smooth black rocks flowed the Cauvery; its bed a mosaic of green algae and brown sediments. He spotted a few young men sitting on rocks with rudimentary fishing gear by their side, a herd of goats grazing in the nearby area, and a ramshackle establishment that went by the name of "tea-shop" which was slowly coming to life. There was no other sign of movement anywhere close by. It suited him perfectly.

He fumbled his way to the river and splashed water on his face, then walked to the tea shop. His head hurt as if it had collided with a speeding truck on an expressway. He needed coffee. Badly.

The shop owner was busy lighting incense sticks while worshipping photos of Hindu deities. In the background, *Suprabhata*, the religious hymns, could be heard playing from an ill-sounding speaker. From somewhere deep inside him, the thought gurgled out: *God doesn't exist! They have fooled us for thousands of years. Don't you get it?* You wouldn't be in this shithole if he were real, he was tempted to tell the owner, but contented himself by just saying, 'One filter coffee.'

Taking his drink in a cup, he wound his way back to the river bank, content with the thought of idling away the next few hours here. The coffee made him feel a little better; the headache was reducing. Spotting a fisherman close by, he went to sit by his side, observing the way he fished. The fisherman, a man named Ganesh, offered him his spare fishing stick and began sharing tips on how to fish. Although Rishi had never done angling before, he decided to give it a try.

An hour passed but he had no luck. *Can't even bait a fish now, can I?* The first signs of frustration were becoming evident on his face. Not wanting to let this slide without at least a fight, he persevered, relentless in his zeal to emerge victorious. A figure came and stood in his peripheral vision, asking for a light. He mouthed 'check the jacket' and didn't let his hands or eyes leave the rod even for a

second. *Hold on, who was that?* the thought struck him, once the stranger had turned his back. Turning his head, he looked at the person who had interrupted him.

It was a man carrying a backpack. He had long, curly blonde hair—that had probably not been washed for weeks from the looks of it—and tattoos everywhere on his arms. He looked somewhere around five-nine . . . five-ten, had a medium built, and seemed to be young. Somewhere in his late twenties. As the foreigner took the matchbox and went to sit under the shade of the large tree nearby, Rishi saw him take out something from his backpack and begin rolling. *A junkie . . . I wonder how these people know the right places!*

It was a brown-coloured thing. *Weed . . . marijuana?* Rishi observed the foreigner's movements; his fishing rod now forgotten. The man seemed very pleased and happy with himself for some reason. *Maybe because of what he's got.*

By then the man had moved to the river and had begun creating quite a scene. Rishi finally put his rod down and began enjoying the entertaining performance.

The foreigner, or junkie as Rishi thought of him as, was trying to perform yoga in the water. He was executing a pose that required standing on one leg and stretching the arms above the head. Apparently he was a seeker of thrill; for why else would he be smoking a joint with one foot in cold water, the other dangling in air, and his hands clasped high above his head?

‘Are you sure of what you doing, man?’ asked Rishi, approaching him from a distance. The junkie looked back at him and dragged in a puff.

‘Totally! It’s incredible. And then some. Marijuana and yoga in cold water with a mild sun up there. All these elements in one go! Know what I mean? It’s quite surreal. You gotta try it too,’ pat came the enthusiastic reply in a heavy American accent.

He is a goner. ‘I’m not sure. I am fine here. You be careful with the stones there. They are slippery, and the current is dangerous.’

‘No problem,’ the junkie replied, a maddening smile plastered over his face.

Rishi stepped back but continued watching him as he continued to stand in that pose with his eyes closed. He took a puff of his joint, and before Rishi knew what happened, slipped into the river with a thud.

He instantly ran for help while calling out to his newly-formed friend Ganesh. Meanwhile, the junkie desperately tried to get hold of a rock to climb back on, but missed repeatedly.

Rishi extended his hand to him while Ganesh held Rishi from behind. After a brief struggle in which the damned hippie did everything but extend his hand to him, Rishi was able to successfully pull him back to the bank. There was blood on his face. From the looks of it he had hit his nose with some force on a rock. *Ass.*

‘Man! You are heavy! Are you all right?’ he asked, annoyed with the carelessness of the foreigner.

‘Yeah, thanks. For a second I blacked out, I guess. Couldn’t balance. Blame it on the grass I smoked, but thanks for the help,’ laughed the junkie, bleeding from his nose. He was panting for breath.

Rishi got some cotton from the first-aid kit from his car and gave it to him.

‘Pretty nasty, huh?’ the junkie said, holding it against his cut. The water had acted like a cushion and the cut was not major, but still the cotton was seeping blood. ‘Didn’t expect that kinda kick. I got this grass last night. *Very impressive!*’

‘Take some rest. I think you should be fine,’ replied Rishi, and helped him back to the tree.

It’s almost noon. I should probably get going. But he felt terrible even with the thought of going back to Bangalore. Unwilling to move, he sat motionless on the rocks, thinking of what he should do next. The same thought cycle was playing on loop in his mind. He had an option to work at XingLabs’ US office in San Jose. It could be a good chance to get away from Bangalore and experience a change. But the only problem was that he was certain he couldn’t work for anyone else. He had *never* worked for anyone in his life, and he was in no mood to start doing so now. He was his own boss and always did what he felt like. So, that option had to be scratched out. But the choice of starting another business had to be scratched out too; he was bankrupt and too exhausted to start something anew. *What a mess I landed myself in . . .*

‘You want some weed?’ interrupted a voice. It was the junkie, holding a joint and a pack of beers.

‘No, thanks. I don’t do weed.’

‘Of course,’ he drawled, and withdrew the offered joint. ‘I betcha won’t say no to beer but.’

The corner of Rishi’s lips turned up a little. ‘That would be hard to say no to even when you have a terrible hangover,’ he said, and took the beer. The junkie chuckled.

‘Hey, am Alex. Alexander Long. Thanks for your help back there.’

‘I am Rishi Rai. Glad I was there to save you, though what you did was silly in the extreme. Not to mention reckless. What were you thinking?’ The last line was spoken with so much anger that even Rishi was stunned. *What’s come over me? Why am I getting angry at a stranger?*

They both sat in silence after that, quietly sipping the beer after Rishi’s part dressing down. Trying a topic of conversation, he asked, ‘Are you on vacation in India?’

‘Yeah . . . kinda,’ grinned Alexander, or Alex as he insisted on being called. ‘It’s been over four months now. Am havin’ a great time experiencin’ your country, man. Am from the States, by the way. What about you?’

‘I am from Bangalore. Came here on . . . on a drive, actually. My city is around a hundred and twenty-odd kilometres from here. Say . . . eighty miles.’

‘Swell. You sure came a good distance!’

‘Felt like getting some fresh air.’

Hearing that, Alex nodded. ‘I hear you, man. I hear

you.’ Eyeing his fishing rod, he asked, ‘How many fish in your net?’

‘Don’t ask. Not even a bloody one,’ smiled Rishi, ‘I give up!’

‘Yeah. Fishin’s a bitch, man.’

‘Ever tried?’

‘No, just seen people do it. In the movies.’

Really now! There was a long silence after that. Rishi didn’t know what to say to him. Come to think of it, he was not even interested in saying anything to anyone, let alone a junkie stranger.

The silence was broken in between by Alex—as he chatted about his experiences in India—but that was all. For Rishi, he was just another hippie maniac wanting to travel through India to escape his miserable life back in the States. *What’s the big deal?* But he wanted another beer—it seemed lovely with the kind of scenic beauty and cool water flowing in front of them—so he let him ramble on.

‘What’s your story, Alex?’ he asked once he was done with his beer and was looking for another one.

‘Well, you can call me a globetrotter,’ began Alex, passing him a can, ‘a traveller . . . or maybe just a pothead. Am always lookin’ for peace, weed, music, and good sex. Am perpetually happy and broke.’

Before Rishi had time to reply to that, he continued, ‘I call myself an Omega Male—the bang opposite of an Alpha Male. An Omega Male’s cool, chilled out, and doesn’t care too much about things. Unlike an Alpha Male who wants to, you know, dominate and prove himself

every single minute. Life's not meant to be taken so seriously. When'll people understand?'

Despite himself, a wry smile formed on Rishi's lips. 'What do you do for a living?' he asked, for the first time wanting to actually talk to him.

'Nothin' much. Photography comes in handy to make a quick buck. Ages ago I had heard this song. *Another Brick In The Wall* . . .'

'We don't need no educa—' began Rishi.

'Yes, and I was like I really *don't* need no education. Know what I mean? I never wanted to do anythin' serious in life to make money. Ever. I guess I showed more interest in understandin' the meanin' of it through weed and music, and not by buildin' a secure future by goin' to college. I grew up in San Fran, in Haight-Ashbury, where the hippie movement actually started. Hippie's in my effin' genes!'

'That's a gift. Why did you choose to come to India?'

'Been meanin' to come here since forever, to experience the famous hippie trail, as they call it. Plus, India is cheap, man. That's a good reason to be here,' he laughed. 'In the last few months I've travelled a lot. It's strange how the journey surprises you with twists. There's always a hidden purpose that's not always clear on the onset. That's the adventure in travellin' without a fixed plan. Like, I was supposed to go to New Delhi directly from Chennai. But I felt I should go to Bangalore and Mysore first. Just on a lark. And see, here I am chattin' you

up. Had I not come to Mysore, I wouldn't have met you. When you look at it, life's a journey too.'

Rishi nodded his head in agreement. *Junkie turns guru, eh?* Alex was someone different from the regular software and business crowd he was used to but fed up with. This man here looked calm and relaxed with no sense of urgency whatsoever. *How is it even possible?*

'Photography's my passion,' Alex continued. 'Have done all sorts of assignments—news, wildlife, modellin' . . . The most interestin' one was coverin' the Iraq war for a paper.'

Rishi narrowed his eyes in suspicion. 'Iraq war, you say? How was it?'

'Technically, the war was over when I landed there. But there was still a lot of blood and gore. Different groups killin' each other, our soldiers killin' rebels and in the process killin' innocent people and children. It was hideous, and I captured it all through my lens. Once, a bomb exploded and cut an Iraqi rebel in half as he tried to escape. I saw his torso gettin' ripped and fallin' behind, while his legs continued to run for a few steps . . . The legs didn't know the upper body wasn't there anymore. I still feel uneasy in my stomach when I think about it . . .'

'I feel queasy just listening to you. How long were you in Iraq for?'

'Six months. I used to stay in bunkers with soldiers and go with them on operations. Lots of cloak and dagger stuff. But I just *loved* it. I could have died . . . At times I wonder how I came out alive.'

‘What made you go in the first place?’ Alex was beginning to seem more and more interesting in Rishi’s eyes as the time passed.

‘Dunno. It’s like this pull from within. It dragged me. Like death was callin’ me to embrace it, you know . . . After that, I began to value my philosophy even more. This is who I am. I like bein’ this way.’

Death calling me to embrace it! Who the hell talks like that?

Without missing a beat, Alex asked, ‘What’s your story?’

‘My story?’ *Go get yourself a newspaper.* ‘Some other time,’ he muttered, ending the conversation effectively. They continued sipping beer, and smoking up, in Alex’s case.

After a while, Rishi spoke up, coming up with a question that surprised even him. ‘Tell me one thing, Alex. What should one do when one is totally confused about what to do next for the first time in his life? I mean for a person who always knew his purpose and had absolute clarity on his path, suddenly losing . . . ?’ Rishi’s voice became softer and quieter with each word till in the end he just trailed off. Having voiced out his personal plight so bluntly in front of a stranger, that too a junkie, made him feel stupid and pathetic about himself. *What has happened to me?*

‘I feel that every day. Never know what to do next,’ responded Alex cheerily.

‘So . . . what do you do in that case?’

‘Travel from one place to another. Let life take me

wherever it wants me to go. Have never had a set path in my life. I was born lost and I love it,' he chortled.

Rishi nodded, keenly hearing Alex talk. He was taken aback when he realized that for some weird reason his words soothed something in him.

'Listen, am headin' towards Bangalore. Can I hitch a ride with you?' asked Alex. 'We could have lunch at a *dhaba* on the highway.'

No way, Rishi wanted to say instantly. *This is where it ends.* 'I'm actually going to Mysore,' he said, getting up, 'so, I am sorry.' He was in no mood to take three more hours of Alex, no matter how interesting his life story was. He wanted to be alone.

'No problem, man. Was great meetin' you. Peace.' Alex made a V sign with his fingers.

'The feeling is mutual. Travel well. Bye.'

CHAPTER 9

‘Two goats will decide our fate? *Goats?*’ asked Rishi, when he overheard Ram Singh instructing Laxman to find a brawny goat to defeat the complainant’s goat.

‘Yes, sirji.’

‘Whoa! That’s insane. I wanna call the cops. Police,’ demanded Alex.

The priest heard the word police. ‘Police or outside rules do not apply in Malana. It has been like this for two thousand years. You will be on trial according to the judiciary of Malana. No police.’

Rishi understood the last two words and felt like bashing the man’s skull. ‘No police? What kind of a place is this?’ he shouted, losing his cool. This was becoming a serious affair.

‘There is police. That guy is police,’ said Ram Singh, and pointed to a frail man wearing a faded khaki uniform, with a lathi in his hand. He was chewing tobacco and smoking a *beedi*.

'I'm police,' said the man in Hindi. 'This case is no case for police. Gurr is judge here.'

The crowd applauded. The policeman raised both his hands and acknowledged their appreciation. *What a fricking circus!*

'Ram Singh, there has to be someone who can help us.'

'No, sirji. Look at crowd. We no do anything now. We go to Chhabe Pona,'

'What on earth is Chhabe Pona?'

'Because they reach no decision on what to do, the people want to appeal in Darbar of God, which is Chhabe Pona. They will bring one goat and you will bring one goat. Goats tied on two sides of stage and covered with cloth. Gurr will sing songs and put rice in goat's ears. The goat who move first, loses. It will be cut and thrown into stream. Winner goat is cut and give to all here. Winning goat's party wins case. Decision is final,' shared Ram Singh.

'They can't be fuckin' serious. How can a pair of dumb goats decide our case? And how can this Gurr, who gets possessed by their Jamlu God, possibly be in his senses while puttin' rice in the ears of the animals?' questioned Alex.

'This is Malana, Alexji. I tell you every time be careful ...?'

'What's the possible punishment?' asked Rishi, hoping to prepare for the worst.

'One, they throw you out of village. Then you never come here.'

‘Hey! That doesn’t sound so bad. We’ll simply never return,’ said Alex, looking hopeful.

‘The other?’ asked Rishi.

‘The other, they tie huge stone on you and push you into river.’

‘WHAT?’ said Rishi and Alex together. They were dumbstruck.

‘You can’t be bloody serious!’ said Alex.

‘I very serious, Alexji. They do it in Malana. And they hold bad feelings for you.’

Drums and loud noises could now be heard coming from around the corner. Everyone turned towards the street to find two hefty, decorated goats being followed by a group of Malanis who were playing drums. Children ran helter-skelter, cheering and whistling; it was a celebration for them. Laxman was holding Rishi’s goat. It was well-built, Rishi noted with relief. But the opponent’s goat was equally muscular. The entire population of Malana was present to witness a scene they had not seen in a long time.

The goats were produced before the Gurr. One was for the village council and the other for the accused. The Gurr offered prayers to Jamlu Devta for over ten minutes while drums played in the background, and then covered the goats with a piece of cloth.

Rishi and Alex were made to sit on their knees beside their goat. ‘Never thought I would see such a day,’ said Rishi, sitting next to the goat.

Because of the sound of drums, their goat got nervous and urinated. ‘Mother of God! It only gets better,’

added Alex as he tried to move away. The men who had complained sat alongside the other goat.

The Gurr recited hymns to the Gods and started putting rice grains into the ears of the goats. Everyone stood watching in complete silence.

‘Don’t flinch, don’t flinch,’ muttered Alex. Their goat was looking strong until suddenly it flinched and shook its body vigorously, as though struck by lightning.

They lost. The crowd cheered.

They looked at each other in disbelief. Alex swallowed hard and said, ‘We’re fucked!’

There were fierce discussions in the jury and various people spoke.

‘They want to give you strong punishment to make other tourist learn from you. They want to scare everyone who visit Malana. They say it’s no right. School teacher speak for you but he no convince them. Look, *saab*, one, Malana welcome tourist, they bring money. But, two, they no want tourist to dirty their civilization. They are now talking this only,’ Ram Singh explained.

‘Debatin’ over the punishment? Are they seriously considerin’ throwin’ us down the river?’ asked Alex, drops of sweat beading his face.

‘Every option they see. These people no care for Indian law. No one know if they push you down river. It just become *pahadi kabaani* and scare all tourist.’

‘We haven’t done anything criminal. Can’t we convince them somehow?’ asked Rishi.

‘*Saab*, they talk about that only. But many tourist come now, so they want to be strict. And they say you do many many crime. Steal and temple damage. Too much Rishiji, too much. They say they sure Alexji steal *charas*. You no touch their *charas*, never.’

‘That’s ridiculous! What about some other policeman? Can we not inform Inspector Dogra somehow?’ asked Alex.

‘No, sirji. No other policeman in Malana. This place, self-govern, self-rule. Dogra no reach.’

Rishi and Alex cursed the day they had decided to visit Malana.

By now it had started getting dark, but the elderly man had still not pronounced his verdict.

Rishi and Alex waited to hear from Ram Singh whom they had sent to find out what was taking so long.

‘They continue tomorrow. No result now. We three lock in guesthouse tonight,’ Ram Singh shared on coming back. He looked sad.

‘Can’t we just run?’ asked Alex.

‘No, sirji. No do that. No one escape valley.’

On his way back to the guesthouse, Rishi recalled what Viren had said that night at the pub. “The idea sounds fun, but it could turn into a disaster before you know it.” *How your words are coming true, Viren!*

They were locked up in the room. Everyone sat silently at different corners. They had to think fast. They had to act.