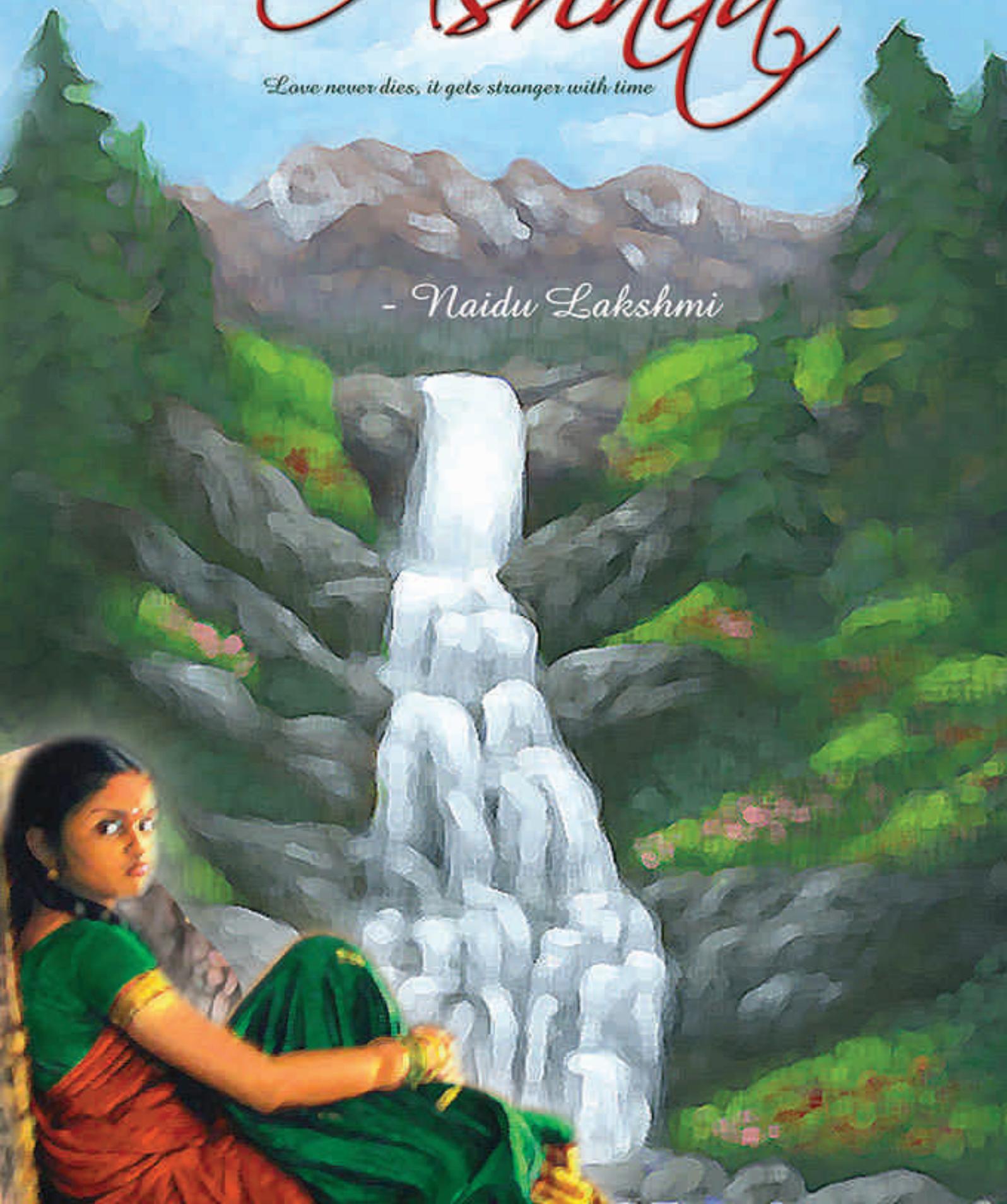


Ashwini

Love never dies, it gets stranger with time

- Naidu Lakshmi



Ashnita

Love never dies, it gets stronger with time

Chapter 1

Me & My World

The Doctor's job is so boring and monotonous. It is equal to manual labour. I hate doctors. I hate the word doctor. I hate to get up early. I hate to dress up plainly and I hate to go to hospital every day. At the end, I hate the person who forced me to become a doctor and that is my Mom. She thought saving people's lives and earning big bucks are cool. But she didn't foresee the fact that being a government physician, (Who usually gets their postings in villages) I have to miss city life, family, fashion, friends and everything. By the time I realised what I missed, I was stuck here in this godforsaken place (this village is actually called Chinturu) where all I see is sick villagers coming for medical help and 2 medical assistants.

I don't mind helping sick people, but what about my life? And how am I supposed to find a groom here anyway? I tell this to my family and they laugh at my face. This is so not fair. I am rebelling against this whole system. Doctors should be in a position to decide where they want to live and do their practice. They should send those good old doctors who want to be in villages and eat *gaas poos*, not gorgeous young girls like me.

But this story is not about my problems. In fact this is about the miracle of my life which, I never expected would happen. So let's start. As usual, I went home from the clinic while the sun was setting slowly. I don't have the luxury of using a bike to go home since my home is within one kilometre from the clinic. I slowly unlocked the door after wishing Rangamma, who was patiently waiting for me to come home so that she can clean my house and do the dishes.

She is my maid who comes twice a day and to do the dishes, laundry, cleaning and cooking. She lives nearby and never misses her work. So poor me never gets to do any work at home. Rangamma was recruited by my Mom who comes to my place once in two months in order to see that everything is as per her liking. Moreover, I strongly suspect that Rangamma also acts as a spy. You know, informing my Mom about my daily activity and what rules I broke, etc. I don't have any proofs though.

Right now Rangamma is carrying all those vegetables given by the villagers, who are my patients. I never get to go to market and buy vegetables and milk because of these silly fellows. When will they understand that they don't have to pay anything to a government doctor? Anyway, I let Rangamma clean my house, do the dishes to her utmost satisfaction and shooed her away. She packed rotis & curry in a hot pack before leaving. So I have to eat them right away. God, how many things can a girl do?

I called my Mom and listed all my complaints and as usual she rubbished them. According to her I am lucky to get a job like this in a place where pollution cannot affect my health and I don't need to shell out for anything and my big salary is safe in the bank. She is in search of a *bali ka bakra* groom who is also a doctor and who works in a place near to my place. It is her plan to trap me in this village forever, but I am not going to let her do this to me. Though I don't know how right away, I will figure out something. I intend to include my Dad in my rebellious plans. I just can't spend the rest of my life in this out-of-the-way area minus all the fun.

For now I just listened to her and said *ahhs* and *ohhs* when required. She is so excited about all those sarees and jewels she bought for me. She is piling all these items for my wedding. She bought sarees, jewels, furniture, kitchen utensils and even zeroed in some function halls also for wedding. All that is lacking is the groom which she will get very soon she assures me. According to her, she already has some nice boys put aside for me to check, as if my opinion mattered. If I know her, she must be checking their background before coming to a decision.

At the end, she concluded saying that I have to apply my annual leaves along with my weekend holidays this time. So that she can show those nice boys to me and decide. "Ashnita, why can't you listen to your parents? Whatever we do is for your future. Look at your cousins and friends, they all married the boys their parents selected", she yelled at me when I tried to say something about leaving the job and postponing marriage plans. Against my heart's strong defiance, I said okay and cut the call. I will think about it later.

For now I opened the novel "Life of Pi", which I bought during my last visit to city. Poor fellow, Pi is also facing problems like me. He also has to spend days alone with animals. I can understand his situation. It is actually little better than me. Animals won't speak and demand answers. I heaved a sigh and ate my dinner.

Other than my Mom and Rangamma the only person who comes to my house is my friend Maria. We were classmates and benchmates at school. Though our careers took different directions after school, we remained close mainly due to Maria. I am always this hot tempered, aggressive and foot-in-mouth girl, whereas Maria is smart, charming and speaks all the right words at the right times. She makes me happy with her witty talk and affection. She works as a HR in a reputed corporate company in Hyderabad and is the mother of a cute child. She visits me whenever she gets little time out of her hectic city life and brings her kid whenever her hubby is too busy to babysit.

I always look forward to her visits and pour my heart out to her. She gives me right advices and it soothes my nerves. At times she acts as bridge between my mom and me. Amazingly, I was always able to open up and accept my mistakes in front of her, but never with my mom. Her last visit was four months ago and I miss her terribly.

Just before sleeping I called her and made her promise that she will visit me soon. I asked her to bring her son Chris this time. He is such a delight to be around with and I want to show him the lotus pond and sugar cane fields situated just outside the village. I can hear her husband, Sam, laughing in the background. My state of affairs and my grumbles are always a laughing stock for him. Men are always the same. I muttered angrily before going to sleep.

Chapter 2

The Jungle

I was in the middle of the dream when someone rudely pressed their stinking handkerchief against my mouth and tied my hands behind me. Before I could understand what was happening, I was in a dirty van which was moving very fast. At this point, somebody tied a cloth around my eyes. This is also dirty and releasing a horrible smell. I can't even guess how much time passed like this and suddenly the van stopped. I was dragged out of the van as if I am a goat ready to be slaughtered.

They made me walk and didn't even care that I am not wearing slippers and I am sure that my fine night dress must have appeared like a dirty rag by now not to mention my hair. It was a rough path and my feet hurt badly. I never walked without footwear before. I was ready to curse when they finally untied eyes and hands. But the scene in front of my eyes took my breath away. I am standing in front of waterfall in the middle of the jungle. Everything around me is bright and shiny and I belatedly remembered that today is a full moon day. It is so beautiful that I forgot my annoyance for some time.

By the time I looked around, I can't name the individuals who abducted me. That word Kidnap suddenly brought me to reality and I started yelling and crying. I even tried to run, but a girl in olive green uniform came forward and caught me. She looked so small and thin but she is so strong that I couldn't move an inch. I looked around wildly and continued my screams.

I can't believe that this is actually happening to me. Two more girls came and dragged me towards a small hut nearby. I felt as if my brain is exploding. Who are these people? Are they part of some girl trafficking gang? Or they are going to steal my kidneys? My nerves are so tight that I wondered how they managed to stay together. I repeatedly cursed my Mom in my mind all this while for sending me that village to work. (God only knows how far I am from that Chinturu now. That is a heaven compared to this jungle.)

Later on an hour or so, I leaned against a tree trunk and went over the incidents that happened today. It feels like as if I am looking at some other person going through a very bad time. I removed two bullets from the arm of a giant man, bandaged it together and tended all other wounds in his body. That savage I mean my patient wouldn't hear of Anastasia, though I insisted so much. My hands were trembling so much all the while, but he sat there as if he is made of a rock. And he has the gall to suggest another method to remove a bullet from his arm, though I refused to listen to him. He is rude, rough, terrifying and I don't know. Everything about him scares me. It is like a Rambo movie or something. Everybody around me has guns or some other weapons. I am so tired and frightened at the end, I didn't have the stamina or the courage to ask them to let me go.

"Ashnita, where are you and what are you doing here?" I wondered myself. I desperately want to go to Mom now and cry. I always complained about the patients who were very meek and took whatever medicines I gave them as if they are divine. But in comparison with this bear like fellow they are saints. He is so huge with thick curly hair and dark too. These people know nothing about manners and politeness. It's been more than 2 hours when they finally recognised that I am also a human being and I need a spot to slumber for the remainder of the night. The same girl who caught me at first gave me a blanket and told me to sleep in that hut where the patient is sleeping. I am not very sure that I wanted to do that, but I had no choice. She also informed me that I have to be there for at least one more day so that I can keep checking him if there is fever. After that she promised me that she will drop me till the village outskirts. From there they expect me to find my own transport. I mood was so bitter, I didn't even feel like replying to her.

Mosquitoes are more or less the size of house flies here. They didn't let me sleep at all. Moreover, that fellow is turning and tossing all the remaining night. He asked for water once. I couldn't help but marvel at his voice. It's kind of deep baritone and

very rich. While giving water I noticed that his thick curly hair was still matted with blood. I felt little guilty for not cleaning it properly, but I also wondered about what exactly happened to him. He has several serious injuries and he should be in hospital at least for 15 days not in this mosquito infested jungle. Everything around him is dirty and dangerous for his health at this stage.

Then I scolded myself for thinking about him instead of me. I need to think of some way to get rid of them and go home. What if they don't keep their promise and kill me afterwards? With all those guns, killing me is an easier thing to do than sending me home and leaving an eye witness to tell the story to the cops. A shiver ran through my spine and my throat felt sour. I need to do something quickly before dawn. I suppose a person with multiple bullet injuries and a head injury at the top of it can't be able to stop me if I want to run, however huge and muscled he is. I slowly tilted backwards and attempted to get a short nap till I get a chance to launch my escape plan.

Chapter 3

Abhimanyu

I never knew that early mornings are so stunning in the forest. The beauty of the sunrise in front of a waterfall and the birds flying around it temporarily made me forget my failed escape attempt last night. Having failed grandly in my escape episode, now I am tending my bruises caused by him when he caught me. I should kick myself for even attempting this. He growled at me as if he is some wild animal and the whole camp is awake within a second. Stupid fellow. What does he think of himself? I should treat him with veterinary doctors' instruments and medicines as well. I would give anything to get access to those things right now. Angry tears ran down my cheeks.

I am concerned for my Mom and Dad. By now she should have called at least twice and worrying about me. Rangamma must have informed somebody about my absence. People might start a search. But I don't know how far I am from Chinturu. Therefore, I have no hopes about my dumb patients finding me.

After five days, I came to know that my patient Abhimanyu, is a leader of some terrorist group and is injured during a conflict against another group. This makes me what? Whoever helps these kinds of criminals are also tagged as criminals by police. Isn't it? Still, these people put me in this situation. How can they do this to me? I am so outraged; I didn't notice that Abhimanyu stood in front me. He is much better now. Apart from the medication I am giving to him, he is using some herbal medicines also. I am not very sure of which one of these medicines made him capable of standing and walking within five days of time. He had some serious injuries. I would have made him to go through a lot of medical tests and bed rest in normal conditions.

His face is as impassive as usual. He gestured for me to follow him and walked towards the isolated hut. He is around six feet in height and wore khaki trousers and shirt, which fits to his body as if tailored especially for him. Even from this distance I can see how strong he is. Everything about him spells danger and I want to run in an opposite direction instead of following him. Anyway, I followed him to the hut.

"I am very sorry for the inconvenience, we caused to you. I wouldn't have allowed it in the first place, if I was conscious at that time. At any rate, I should agree that it was smart move. If not I would have been bedridden or died." He drawled. Though his voice is mesmerizing and appealing, I am one hundred percent sure that he is not feeling sorry. His eyes told me that, however beautiful they are.

I was absolutely enraged. "You call this inconvenience? Your people kidnapped me, held me here in this horrible place against my wishes and forced me to treat your injuries. And you call this inconvenience? You nasty brute".

"Madamji looks like you forgot that you are still under our custody. I advise you to control your tongue. It will not do any good to lose your sweet temper," he informed me. Those beautiful black eyes suddenly became menacing.

Now I actually lost my temper and my eyes blazed with wrath. "You think by threatening me like this you achieved something great? At the end you are a terrorist, an anti social element, who kills innocent people and a pest to this society" I shouted at him.

His eyes slowly appraised me. His muscular hand suddenly shot out and caught my wrist. The grip was too painful. "One more word and I will make you sit on your knees and apologize. Do you understand?" That deep voice I marveled at earlier is frightening now.

By now frustrated tears streamed down my cheeks. I no longer trusted my stupid tongue so I just nodded my head. I vowed to get even whenever I get a chance. I am not going to forget this arrogant fellow and not going to let him get away with the insults he is hurling at me. I just tried to look innocent and obedient. I don't think that my pretence fooled him. He threw a suspicious glance at me and rubbed his chin. God only knows when he shaved it last. His whole face was covered with rough black hair and he almost looked like a cross between bear and man.

"You have a huge knack of diverting the conversations completely and making people forget their good intentions. I never saw such temper in any woman before. As a doctor you should know that it's not good for your health." He smirked.

"I guess you have a split personality or some other personality disorder. One moment you act like a wild animal and the next moment you are sweet. You expect me to take all this crap? I am only human" I retorted angrily noting that he was still holding my hand.

He put both his hands up and tried to look apologetic, but such behaviour doesn't suit him at all. Instead he looked like a bear ready to attack. This fellow can work in the movie industry and happily apply for villain roles. He will get plenty of offers.

"See, all I wanted to tell you is that, tomorrow one of us will take to Chinturu, before you distracted me. So get ready and don't be afraid. You are free to tell the police whatever you want if they interrogate you, which I am sure they will". He went back to his usual expressionless look and strode off.

I sat there in the hut, feeling relieved. At last I am going to go home. After five days I am going to get out of this hell hole and see my world. Mom must be panicing imagining all sorts of bad things that might have happened to me. I have to console her and tell her that nothing happened to me. This thought suddenly brought me to earth. I have to agree that these people didn't harm me. In fact, they treated me with respect after the first day. Except for the dreadful conversation I had with Abhimanyu, everything was smooth. I get to see the other dimension of these people.

Contrary to public opinion about them, these people are actually humble, polite and educated. Though I was not eavesdropping, I overheard their conversations about tribal villages' welfare and the things to do to improve tribal people's living standards. There are three girls in this group who are quite friendly and tried to reassure me about my situation here.

One girl Vijaya, brought me food and water and accompanied me to the other side of the waterfall to take bath and other necessities. She told me that she is an engineer and joined this group when her parents were killed by their landlords over some money dispute. Authorities never bothered to help so she sought the help of this group and eventually joined them. She is very proud of the path she chose and doesn't regret it at all. But I somehow feel that this group is in some serious tension or in a huge problem. They constantly kept vigil and always looked worried. There were some really long meetings with Abhimanyu though he was in severe pain. And they constantly tried to keep this secret from me. Maybe they are afraid that I will inform Police about it if knew.

Anyway I have nothing to do with all this. Hopefully by this time tomorrow I will be at home and I have no doubt that Mom will listen to me now. I will use this kidnap thing as a weapon for my escape from Chinturu. Either she has to use her influence and secure a transfer for me to the city or let me resign my job. I am confident to get a job in any corporate hospital in the city. The doctors who worked in villages for years are hot cakes in the city. We are more knowledgeable and supposed to show more patience towards our patients. So I have nothing to worry about. I might miss Rangamma a little, but it's okay. I will buy her a nice saree as a parting gift. Come to think of it, I can take her along with me if she is willing. She is a kind woman and can be a great help in the city.

Chapter 4

New Life

I was in this trance like happy daydreams when I first heard the sound of firecrackers. I came out of the hut to see what happened but what I saw made me tremble with terror. To my horror, it was not firecrackers, but guns. Abhimanyu's people were defending themselves from an attack coming from the trees surrounding the camp. Everybody was ducking for cover and one big hand dragged me behind a tree trunk. Without even looking up I knew it belonged to Abhimanyu.

"What's happening?" I tried to ask him.

"Quiet" he snapped. His eyes focused and his body alert, he was like a wild beast ready to attack. I can see a big gun in his hands and it was emitting smoke already. "We are under attack and we might have to run for our lives since our ammunition and man power is very less than them. What we see is just the initial attack. Their main batch is behind the waterfall. It will take some time for them to reach here. And that's the only time we have here. Be alert and follow me." He whispered and all the while his eyes never left the trees.

I can see Vijaya firing her gun at the trees. She was crawling slowly towards the hills just behind the camp. I turned around and saw each one doing the same. This is not a win or die kind of war we normal see in movies. They know where they stand and just using their weapons to get the cover till they are safe. I felt sorry for the girls especially. They are all younger than me and yet to see the world. All they knew is sorrows and hardships in their lives and there is a big chance that those lives might end now in this clearing before achieving anything they so strongly set out for.

Abhimanyu mercilessly dragged me out of the clearing in jet speed, ducking bullets at the same time. I ran with him as fast as I could, which I never did in my whole life and Vijaya was right behind us. My heart was thumping so loudly, I was afraid that others might hear it. I put all my concentration into moving my legs. I didn't even allow my mind to think anything and after few hours or so we found ourselves hiding in a cave like thing. According to Abhimanyu, though it is not a big one, we three can protect ourselves from enemies and wild animals for this night. By this time darkness set in and the jungle was alive with sounds of animals all night.

Morning came with a lot of hope and we set off to Chinturu. It was like hiking and trekking and I am proud of all those trekking trips that I went to during my collage days, which gave me enough knowledge about what to expect in a situation like this. I am not some delicate damsel who can't do all this. I was eager to prove this and got many bruises on my hands and legs as a result. Even when they noticed my brave act, they didn't comment. I was grateful for that. Abhimanyu was leading the way and Vijaya was taking care of the rear end. We travelled like this till afternoon and halted for a brief lunch. I was surprised to see that amidst all this, they managed to carry their backpacks. They laughed at my expression and said experience. I should have known.

After lunch Vijaya explained that she has to go in a separate route, in order to meet rest of the group and arrange things. Though I never realised this before, I guess she is second in charge or something. She told me that she would like to accompany me, but it is safer with Abhimanyu. I agreed reluctantly and bid farewell to her. In this short span of time, we become close and friendly. I liked her no nonsense kind of attitude and she was kind to me all these days.

He simply drove me on without stopping for rest. I tried my best to walk fast and keep up the pace, but I know that I am not doing very well. I fell several times, but he simply hauled me to my feet and went ahead. My only saving grace was that he

was not rude. I was tired, frightened and often looked back to make sure no one was following us. I was not very positive that we got rid of those firing squads, whoever they were. By evening, we were still surrounded by dense forest and it was getting dark. I tried to put up a brave face and informed Abhimanyu that I can still go on.

"All I need is a ten minutes rest and after dinner I am ready to walk till dawn", I told him while leaning against a tree trunk. In what looked like a blurred imagery, he suddenly pulled me away and in less than a second I was unceremoniously dumped on ground, that to upside down.

"You manner less brute", I started but words died in my throat when I saw the snake. Its angry hood was swinging wildly from one side to another. Its body coiling and uncoiling rapidly, it looked ready to attack. And more importantly it was lying in the same spot where I intended to sit few moments ago. Abhimanyu moved little closer and tried to block me from the snake's view. Everything was very quiet and I could hear the angry hiss very clearly. It rocked its hood front and back and jumped into air unexpectedly. Abhimanyu caught its head just below the hood with his right hand and took its tail into the left hand. My mouth dropped open and I could not close it. He winked at me and threw the snake away. I heard the thump from the trees a little away from us.

I trembled all over and fell to my knees. I couldn't believe my eyes and never imagined that he will save me from something like this. Apparently, it's a child's play for him, but a little mistake and he is gone. I looked at him and murmured a thanks. He was not looking at me. His eyes intent on the spot where he had thrown the snake, he gestured with his hand for me to stay put. After a few moments, he turned toward me and grinned. This was the first time I actually saw him smile and it was nice. It transformed his features drastically and made him look good and attractive. I stared at him for an instant and offered my thanks again. He took my hand and pulled me up.

"The angry young woman image suits you better. Go back to that mode", he drawled and picked up his backpack and gun which he left while catching the snake.

"What do you think of me? I am not a robot to switch my moods according to your tastes. I told you thanks and you are making fun of me. Stupid Man", I shouted at him.

"That's my good girl", he mocked me and resumed his walk again.

I stood there for some time fuming with rage, but at the end I had to follow him. He is very arrogant and too confident of himself. All he needs is a good lesson from me. I just want to kick him in the butt and if possible kill him. For now I tried to control my anger and went after him.

It soon became dark. When we reached a small stream, we stopped there and drank our fill. He filled his water bottle and put it in his backpack. Then he suggested that we make a camp somewhere around it. I was so tired and really wanted to sleep, wherever it was. But my pride stopped me from admitting it. I didn't want look weak in front of this stupid fellow. Given a chance, he will mock me again. I put up a brave face and said that I can go on.

"Courageous, but dishonest. You need to rest and sleep", he commented and started looking up at the trees. I expected him to look at the earth and not at trees. What is he going to do? Make me climb trees? I looked at him wildly. And he smiled again and it said what I thought was accurate.

"What are you thinking? Are you gone out of your mind? I can't climb trees. I never did in my life", I yelled at him.

"If you sleep on the ground, you can say hello to the animals that come to this stream to drink water. Are you an animal lover? Do want to talk to them? As far as I know, you are not. You never liked animals. Not even dogs", He shocked me.

A shiver ran through my spine. He was right. I never liked animals. Somehow they managed to make me queasy whenever I saw any. I never let my mom get a dog, even though she wanted one. And he is talking about wild animals. I looked at him desperately.

"I don't know how. I never", I stopped talking and looked at him. Something flashed. "Hey how did you know that I never liked animals?" I confronted him. Who is he? Have they been stalking me for a long time? I was confused and shocked.

He laughed at me. "You are a big nuisance for such a small object. Climb the tree like a good girl and I will tell you the story", He teased me.

He was already pulling a rope and some food out of his back pack so I thought it'd better if I waited a little longer. We ate in silence while I thought of all possible solutions to this riddle. After dinner, I went to the stream once again to wash my face and hands. He stayed back and selected the tree we have to climb. By the time I finished, he moved all his gear to the middle branch of the tree and was waiting for me. He helped me climb the tree and I somehow finished that task. We settled on one sturdy branch and he tied a rope around me and secured his backpack as well. I looked at him suspiciously.

"Why is this rope tying luxury is only for me? Why aren't you tying it around you? Aren't you afraid of falling from the tree? What if someone comes in the middle of the night and I can't even run because of this bloody rope? What if you leave me here and go away while I am sleeping? I know sleeping in this branch is unimaginable, but your camp was not so better than this and I am tired too. And what about my previous question?"

"Hello! Take some breath. Look at your lovely face. It's going red without the proper amount of oxygen. Please pause, breath in and ask one question. Then again pause, breath in and ask another question. That's the way you should follow. Don't try to imitate super fast express", he mocked me again. His face was alive with humour and eyes were twinkling. With his deep voice and this talk, he almost looked appealing.

I kicked myself mentally for that thought. What am I thinking? He is a terrorist for crying out aloud. I need to be careful and keep an eye on him all night. Like I said before, he can leave me here in the middle of the night and go away. With this rope tied around me and nobody to hear my cries, God only knows what might happen to me. I should have persuaded Vijaya to accompany me and not this arrogant fellow. Moreover, I just realised that he is capable of arousing strange feelings inside me and that is too dangerous.

Chapter 5

The Cross Roads

I stared straight at him and Abhimanyu sighed deeply.

“See I don’t want to complicate things than they already are. So why don’t you just forget my slip of tongue and sleep? Believe me that’s good for both of our lives and saves us from lot of trouble”, he requested.

His voice is so alluring, that I had to fight hard to get a grip on my control system. He clearly knows how to play the game, but not with me. He is pitted against a winner and I am not going to leave the only one chance I have. So I didn’t change my expressions and just continued my stare.

He settled himself exactly opposite to me and started. “I was your super senior in the medical college. I know you, but you never noticed me. One of my classmates had a crush on you and I wrote the love letter he gave you. You didn’t even read that damn letter fully because I made the mistake of describing you as cute Pomeranian puppy in the initial lines. I am a dog lover you see. He cursed me for that till the end of the college.”

Each of those words exploded like atom bombs in my mind. For some time I was not able to respond. I clearly remember that letter and that awkward looking fellow too; at whom I aimed all those curses I learned from childhood, the moment I saw the word puppy. That’s not what bothering me. This whole thing makes Abhimanyu my super senior and a **DOCTOR** too. Isn’t he a terrorist? How can he be a doctor? How is this possible? I was so confused that couldn’t even form a sentence to question him further. He clearly understood my plight and explained further.

“Yes I was a doctor in my former life, but like Vijaya and everybody else in my group you saw at waterfall, I followed a different path after studies. Though I studied in a very reputed medical college like you, I achieved that because of the good rank I got in the entrance exams and hard work, not because my parents had money. They were poor and they remain so because their only son, on whom they had lots of hopes, betrayed them and took a gun instead of stethoscope”. His words were very bitter and filled with pain. I understood that it hurts him so much to talk about his past. I know better than to probe him further. I just nodded my head and looked away and he closed his eyes and leaned against the tree trunk eventually.

The thick canopy of the tree protected us from prying eyes, if there were any. All night I couldn’t sleep and kept looking at him every now and then. I sensed that he didn’t sleep either, but never looked at my direction. I read it somewhere that life has a way of tying the loose ends. May be this situation is something like that. We started in same collage, took two completely different paths and now sitting on a same branch without knowing what would happen next. I don’t know what led him to take this radical path, but I believe that he is a good man at heart and I sympathise with his situation. I am glad that whatever the way it was, life gave me this opportunity to meet him. I would be happy to help him if there is anything in my limits and I intend to inform him that next time we talk.

I didn’t realise when I slept while thinking of all this. But I woke up with an alarm when Abhimanyu dragged me towards him and closed my mouth. He gestured with his eyes to look down. I followed his path and saw two men in olive green uniforms standing right under the tree. Their guns were shining brilliantly in the moon light. I tried to tell him that I wouldn’t make any noise but he didn’t look at my direction and the grip on my waist was too painful. Abhimanyu watched their every movement

carefully. Much later, he whispered "Cops" in my ear and at once looked as if he regretted telling me. The grip on my mouth tightened too. I know that I should be afraid of this but strangely I was enjoying it. Instead of trying to make some noise to get cops attention, which is the most logical thing for a person kidnapped by terrorists do, I stayed calm and kept my mouth shut. I convinced my mind that this excitement is caused by the adventure not because of Abhimanyu's presence. Though the cops left within 10 minutes, it took another 15 minutes for Abhimanyu to release his grip on my mouth and waist and one more hour to finally relax. But he didn't go far like he did before, instead he just sat next to me. I could see that he was in deep thought but couldn't control my curiosity any longer.

"Why didn't you pursue your career in medicine like everybody else?" I whispered.

"Don't you think that it is none of your bloody business?" He instantly went back to his savagery.

But that doesn't terrify me anymore. Like he said before, his small slip of tongue proved to be a big slip. And that changed my perspective of him completely. Why will I be afraid of a mere doctor? That to my super senior? NO WAY. More over a person who wrote love letters (whether they are for him or not that doesn't change anything), cannot be a savage. Above all, I understood his trick of pretending to be angry to make me shut my mouth. And I am not going to shut it. I would rather make him open his own mouth. Wow this sentence has a double meaning. I will get to that later. For now I wanted to hear his story. I turned my determined eyes towards him and smiled.

He instantly detected the change in me and his expressions changed. "What? You think just because I was your super senior, you can ask me anything? Are you mad? Hello miss, I am a terrorist and a manner less brute to quote your exact words. So back off before it's too late".

I didn't let him finish and did what I so wanted to do for a long time, though I didn't even admit it to myself. I took his head in my both hands and kissed him on his lips. He froze for a moment, but immediately took me into his hands. His curly hair felt so nice around my fingers and I tightened my grip. We lost the track of time and didn't know how long we were in this blissful state.

It took some time for us to recover our wits and we didn't talk to each other after that. I was too shy to talk and he became moody. He just pulled me into his embrace and closed his eyes. I was afraid of closing my eyes, thinking that he might disappear, if I close my eyes even for a moment. Something like this never happened to me. I always kept boys at arm's length and never allowed them to get too close. I can never forget this day and this heavenly moment. I rested my head against his chest and clutched his shirt with my hands.

People branded me as a feminist from the first and I too think that I have at least some shades of it in my mentality and that is why my thoughts were always rebellious for general liking. At school and college, I was a magnet for trouble and always fought with boys no matter what. I stood up for my rights and made sure everybody, especially boys respect me for that. I worked hard in my studies just to make my point. And at the end I fell in love with this stupid person who was a terrorist. I didn't even know whether he loves me back or not. He didn't utter a word after that, though he put his comforting hands around me. That didn't help at all.

We set off immediately after dawn. My eyes were red because of lack of sleep and my body had given away. But I didn't let that show and walked with him in silence. I just concentrated on counting my steps and this way succeeded in brushing aside other thoughts. Abhi was unusually calm throughout the journey. Around lunch time, we reached the outskirts of the Chinturu. We stopping instantly and looked at each other. Abhi took out a letter from his back pack and offered it to me.

"Ashnita, just give this letter to police and tell them what happened. Don't go into too much of details. That will lead them to come up with lot more questions and will complicate things for you. Just tell them that we blind folded you all this while" he said.

When I didn't extend my hand to take that letter, he grabbed my hand roughly and pressed it into my palm. He eyes were full of sorrow and were red in colour. "I don't know if I will see you again. In that case...." He didn't finish his sentence and looked away.

"In that case...?", I insisted. My throat felt constricted and tears filled my eyes.

"Forget about me and go on as if something like this never happened in your life. I am not worth remembering and dangerous too. I don't fit anywhere in your life. We are from two different worlds which never meet. I want you to be happy and have a normal life. All the best"

Within a few moments he was out of sight. I just stood there for a long time looking at the direction he went. Tears streamed freely from my eyes. And I know that like he suggested our worlds will never meet, but I can't forget him either. I just hoped that time might heal the pain. It's too much to live with.

Chapter 6

Dawn to Dusk

“Aunty come and see me dive” Chris shouted from the dive board.

I put aside the novel I am reading, and went to watch him dive. Indeed, he was an excellent diver. At his age I never went near to water. Maria and Sam were looking at him proudly. There was a wide smile on Maria’s lips and Mom & Dad were also grinning too from their lounge chairs at pool side. The weather is just right for a spa day and we were all enjoying the day so much.

I went back to my chair little later and put my newly massaged feet up. The massage was divine. Good that I listened to Maria and came here for an outing. She pestered me like a bug from last one month and my normally strict mom also couldn’t say no to her and here we are at Leonia Resort for the weekend.

I recently realised that my mom and dad didn’t have a life of their own at all. Their lives are woven around my life. All they want in life is my happiness. After I became conscious of this fact, I decided that they need an outing like this to sooth their nerves. They were in lot of tension over these 6 months.

It’s been so long that I saw smiles on their faces. Maria came to me and gave me a look which says “I told you so”. I have nothing to retort her. Of course she is right but that doesn’t mean that I should marry and produce children right away. I still have time. I just need to relax and explore my life before getting back to responsibilities.

I played chess with Chris in that Harry Potter like giant chess board, where chess pieces are almost of my size and the board is bigger than my bedroom. Chris is a bright child, very clever and lively for a third standard school boy. He is constantly into something or other and Maria is always behind. She is a very good mom, always takes care of him and gives priority to his needs than hers. I don’t believe that I can ever be like her, if I ever have a kid. The benchmark she set is very high. Instead of complementing her for her good qualities, I keep teasing her saying it was all possible because of her husband’s co-operation. She doesn’t mind though. She is preoccupied with putting some sense into mind brain now.

Like I said, it’s been six months after that ill fated day. I just gave the letter to police and they didn’t bother me much questions. They were relieved that I came back at all. My mom harassed them like hell till I come back so they were actually thankful to those terrorists, for releasing me. I followed Abhi’s advice and told them that I was blindfolded. As a result they expressed their heartfelt sympathies and let me go. Miraculously I didn’t even have to say anything at all. Mom applied for a long leave on my behalf and took me Hyderabad to our home. All these while, she cared for me as if I was a small kid. She interpreted my silence as a result of the kidnap and told me constantly to get over it. Just when she started thinking of taking me to a physiologist, Maria interfered. She knows exactly what happened and couldn’t offer any solution to it.

I started painting again to pass the time and amazingly did many landscapes which resembled the waterfall and the forest where I spent the longest one week of my life. Some of them come out well and dad is suggesting me to take painting seriously. He passed this art through his genes to me. He, his father, his grandfather were into paining but never thought of taking it as a career.

As per me, I was always afraid of Mom to declare my feeling about becoming an artist. She always thought that all these arts are good for nothing and nobody proved her wrong. Now that I took up painting again, I realised what I missed. It was a great

support to my broken heart. I can always forget my pain and anguish when experimenting with colours. They have become my life now a day. I set up a studio next to my bedroom at upstairs and only come down to eat. I used to do portraits before but now I am afraid of them. I was worried that I might draw Abhi, if I start a portrait. For now all my canvases are filled with landscapes and I was proud of them.

It might look strange but I have a longing for villages now. If possible, I want to go back to Chinturu and work there, though Mom will never allow me now. Now that the bubble of providing healthy and peaceful life to her daughter was burst, she is planning to keep me as close as possible. So she is using all her influence in higher circles to secure my transfer to city. She didn't dare to start searching for groom yet but I know that it won't take much time. She is just giving me some time to recover. I have no doubt that the moment I started showing signs of recovery, she will start her search with renewed energy. She is just tolerating my love for painting for the time being. And I am basking in that temporary glory. I want to enjoy it as long as it lasts.

This much needed outing did bring smiles on all our faces. Thanks to Maria. Her husband was also very helpful. He organised everything and didn't even let us to pay our share of money. He said that this trip is his treat. According to him, Maria was so distressed when I was kidnapped, she didn't eat anything for an entire day. That whole week she prayed like mad to God for my safety. So he decided to give me a treat once I came back. He joked that like the police at Chinturu, he was also relieved that I came back and brought his wife back to normal life.

We reached home just before dinner and Maria came to my room before going her home. Her eyes were filled with concern and I know that, though I managed to fool everybody else, I couldn't fool her. She knows what I am and worried about my wrecked heart. She is trying her best to cheer me up but she has her limits. She has to take care of her family. More over I am a big girl and capable of looking after myself.

"Ashni, it's been more than six months. You should get back to your normal life. At least for the sack of Aunty and Uncle you should forget everything. They are so worried about you. I want my old Ashni back. It's been so long that I heard a complaint. I can't take it anymore" her eyes were brimmed with tears.

"Don't worry *re*. I am not as stuck with the past as you tend to think. Look at my paintings, aren't they looking good. So far they are the best paintings I did in my entire life. I am even thinking of showing them. You know talk to some art gallery people and see if they think that my paintings are good enough for exhibition. I need to arrange for some more paintings of course" I tried to bring spirit in my voice.

Suddenly she looked so happy. "Really? I would love to see your exhibition. All these are so nice that no art gallery can refuse these beauties. I am very sure. I will find out the details and let you know tomorrow. By the end of this month, we will arrange something. Meanwhile like you said, do some more paintings." She is bursting with excitement now.

"Do you think mom will agree? She is just tolerating all this for the time being. She thought that this whole painting affair is a passing cloud. And wants me to wrap up as soon as possible"

"Ashni, you just don't worry about it. I know how to handle Aunty. I will take care of Aunty and Art gallery. You just concentrate on your paintings and give me some good results. Okay?" Maria is so animated now that her expressions are very comical.

"Slow slow madam. Take it easy. There is no need to hurry up. We can do this little slowly also" I advised her. I only meant to give her some hope about my condition. I was not serious about exhibition at all. But like Abhi, I also had a slip of tongue. Why am I going there? I shouldn't think about him. I lashed out myself for going back to that forbidden area and focused everything on Maria.

At the end she made me to promise her about my painting exhibition and left in a euphoric mood. She even managed to convince my mom. God only knows what she told her but I was amazed at her skills. That is why she was a perfect Human Resources Officer. She knows how to talk to people. I silently thanked her in my heart. Unlike her, I can't express my feelings in front of a person. It takes ages for me to talk about my feelings to anybody.

It took exactly one month for Maria to arrange for an art exhibition at Srusthi Art Gallery and the response was incredible. The owner of Srusthi Art Gallery was so impressed, he kept asking for so more of my paintings. I sold all my paintings and got so many orders for many more paintings. I agreed for all landscape themes but polity refused portraits. I just don't have that kind of control in my now. His features were so imprinted in my mind that my fingers almost etch with the desire of drawing him. I see those big, thoughtful eyes almost every day in my dreams. They never smile instead they were hostile. They look at me as if I did a big mistake by letting them to come into my dreams. God knows that I am trying but some part of me still seeks solace from those dreams. And that part is beyond my control.

Mom and dad were genuinely happy with my success in art field and mom is finally convinced that I can be a doctor and an artist at a same time. Besides she is getting a kick of taking her friends to my exhibitions. I have 3 exhibitions in my account now and all very successful ones. I was featured in Times of India and India Today and some of the renowned artists came to my house to congratulate me for reinventing myself after that dreadful incident. Everybody said that I got lot of self-confidence and willpower to accomplish all this and wished me best of luck.

After my third art exhibition, dad and mom came to my room that night. They were so happy with the tremendous success of my exhibition and proud of their daughter. My mom hugged and kissed me like anything. She every offered her apologies for not letting me do this earlier. Then they came to the point. They were successful in securing my transfer to city. My recent fame also helped a lot it seems.

So I have to join the duties with in ten days. I was not very sure whether I want to do it or not but I wanted to try. I think that I need to get out these four walls to get him out of my system. That's the only way left. So I just nodded my head and took the joining order from my mom's hands. I know that this was all I wanted so desperately 8 months ago but now I was not so sure. I am not that person anymore. This changed girl is no surer of her life path and emotions. Given a chance, this girl will run into jungles and settle there. I didn't let my feelings show and hugged mom.

Chapter 7

Rajiv, a Ray of Hope

The gynaecology ward in NIMS hospital is always crowded and needs attention. These days, I don't even notice days and months changing in the calendar. I was always busy and happily didn't get time to think about anything else. I get ready by 8:00 am in the morning and come home around 7:00 in evening. After dinner I just go up to my bedroom to sleep. Whether I get my sleep or not is a different matter all together. Sleep has become so scarce and if get some sleep also I still see those eyes and listen that deep voice. I have black shadows under my eyes as a result. I was forced to use sleeping tablets to get some sleep so often. As a doctor, I know it's not healthy habit but I have no choice. I just can't stay awake all night and work through the day.

Anyway my professional life is going great and patients love me. They wait for me adamantly refusing to go to another duty doctor, if I am on leave or went to rounds. And I still get some gifts from parents once in a while though I am in city now. They simply won't listen to me if decline them. Just to see the happiness in their faces, I accept their gifts but I normally give them to nurses. As a result there is always a tough competition among nurses to assist me.

So far I managed only 3 paintings out of 2 months thanks to my sleepless nights. I was doing most of my painting during nights and my mom is bitterly complaining about my lack of sleep. So no much progress in that area but it's ok because I want to paint for my own pleasure not necessarily for showing. Sundays are normally dedicated to Maria. We either spend our time with her family or in Koti. She will do her shopping and I roam around those small shops which sell lots of novels. I have a big collection of good novels as a result and I am proud of them. "Nothing like a romantic novel, to get you out of your gloomy mood."

My only concession in all this is "**Rajiv**". He is my colleague in hospital, an accomplished surgeon and most importantly chosen by mom to be my fiancé. Not that I approved him but he is a nice human being and fun to be around. My mom and his mom were friends and want to convert their friendship into a strong relationship. So mom very conveniently secured my transfer in the same hospital where he works. In a very short span of time, Rajiv became my friend and grew close to me. A very cheerful man, he has a knack of making people around him happy. He is always into some mischievous thing or other. Nothing escapes him; right from playfully ragging the house surgeons to playing franks on senior doctors he does everything. Compounders respect him and nurses drool around him. The only one human being who is not affected by him (at least to some level) is me. I know that nurses talk about how he is wasting his charms on me but I don't have a choice. I really like him but love is not something you just give to anybody.

This Sunday Rajiv used his charms on Maria and got himself invited to our sacred shopping trip to Koti. I know his ways, so didn't get angry on Maria but she should have used more brains. Anyway he tagged along suggesting handbags and bangles for Maria to buy. He even helped her in bargaining. She is so bowled over by him; by afternoon she started telling me that he is perfect match for a dull person like me. I just can't believe that Maria is telling that to me. She even had the gall to say that compared to Abhi's grump face, Rajiv is like an angel. I gave her one cold stare to make her shut her mouth. But there is no stopping for Rajiv. He understood what has transferred between us and doubled his efforts.

"Maria, you are the most amazing lady I ever met. I am so happy that we did this. We should meet more often and you should come home to meet my mom. I am sure that she will love to meet you. Let's say next Sunday? Please don't disappoint me. Bring Ashni also along. Poor thing what she will do without you? Okay? It's a deal. Please don't break my heart by declining it"

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