

PRINCESS *of* FALCONS

*A Journey for
Love & Redemption*

Himani Vashishta



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Dedication

All around there was a gloomy darkness,
Eyes filled with tears, life filled with sadness,
Life seemed to me meaningless.
With their whole heart and love that was selfless,
Their kindness bridged my loneliness.
They worked day-night to erase my all bitterness,
And helped my writing talent to harness.
If I dedicate this novel to someone else than it will be surely
biasness.
I dedicate this novel to My Parents for all their graciousness!



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Twenty years ago

A middle aged woman in an obscure region in North America, holding a baby girl in her hands was running towards seashore very fast. That baby wouldn't stop crying. Some tribal soldiers were chasing them and asking the woman to hand over the baby. The woman was numb, disoriented, but she had to run, and so she did. She ran until she felt dog-tired and was unable to take another step. The woman still very away from the soldiers was suddenly shocked to find one of the attackers in front of her. One second he was standing one foot away from her, the next he had his hand around her throat. A jiggle of uneasiness shot through her to see him standing there. Now that she was looking at him again, she could see death floating in his terrific eyes and still he was chuckling. His smile was more like the baring of his teeth, and the air fairly vibrated with menace. He snickered under his breath, "I ask you last time. Give this baby to me."

Shuddered to think of next moment, she firmly replied, "Listen, I shall die, but will never give her to you."

He moved fast, hit her and pushed her back, away from the seashore.

His mouth was so close to her face, she could smell his foul breath. She saw his sharp teeth as he coiled his lips back and hissed a terrible threat. "Hand over the baby to me, otherwise you'll be watching me eating your princess' juicy little heart."

That baby was continuously wailing in her arms, but she didn't say a word.

She didn't care for her own life; all that mattered was keeping the baby safe, as that baby was not an ordinary one rather a gifted child. And so she didn't dare do a thing, not even when those poisonous teeth lunge toward her and warned to bite down hard into her neck.

She stood utterly frozen with terror, clutching the baby close. Now the attacker gripped her head and shoulder, the tips cutting into her like a demon's claws.

Her eyes were wide open in horror, her vision was going dark, her thoughts beginning to stumble, rupturing into pieces.

Her wooziness ended hearing a voice from some distance, "Mother! Please save yourself and save my daughter."

She saw the attackers dressed in black killing her only son and his wife mercilessly. Her heart sank horribly.

Everything around her was growing dark like those black dressed attackers.

Attackers were killing her family. This one is killing her. And then he will kill the baby, too, she thought for a while.

"No." She grind her teeth and cried.

With a desperate burst of will, she snapped her head at him, cracking the side of her skull into her attacker's face. Till he could balance himself, she tore out of his grasp. She stumbled, nearly falling to her knees before she balanced herself. One arm wrapped around her wailing baby, the other coming up to insert her two fingers in his eyes to blind him.

She edged forward, away from the attacker that suddenly turned itself into a fierce snake.

It lifted its hood and hissed at her with bleeding eyes, the hiss that sounded from between its huge, gleaming fangs promising death.

"Oh, God, Not again" she grumbled, sick at the sight, shrugged, too tired and anxious to deal with this crap.

She took her steps back, and ruthlessly crushed the blind snake, putting her right foot firmly on its hood.

She could hear more footsteps of the attackers approaching her, to snatch the baby. Hysteria clawed at her, making every noise, even the sound of her own running feet seems monstrous and deadly.

"Take the child, and go," her son, confronting with attackers shouted from distance.

His appeal seemed to cutting through the murkiness of her mind. It came again, sharper now, "Mother, please save my daughter" spurring her into action. She ran.

Blind with panic, her mind frozen with fear and bewilderment, she ran away towards the seashore and anyhow got on the ship passing near by, watching with unexplainable pain, her only son and daughter in-law dying.

Little girl in her hands was crying constantly, as if she could understand the misfortune which was confronting her family that time.

"Be quiet now, my princess. Be quiet! Be quiet! Be quiet. . ."

But the crying kept on. It didn't stop.

The man who had helped her to get on the ship probably was thrilled seeing that unusual sight and the woman in unusual old fashioned clothes.

"I'm really sorry about your misfortune, but may I know where would you go?" He asked with surprise and confusion.

In a very sad tone, with a dry voice she replied, "*India*."



Silviya's Nightmare & Relationship with Her Grandma

Present Day

Somewhere in the center of a city 'Ajmer' a district in India's Rajasthan state, in a majestic 'Haveli', surrounded by a spacious garden, lived blue eyed Silviya with her grandmother Trisha. Her other family members died in an accident a long time ago, and in fact it was so long that she couldn't remember them. Although, her real name was Silviya, but to everyone she was simply 'Silvi', the shorter version which was easy on the tongue. That didn't bother her because somehow the name suited her down to the ground.

Silviya is twenty years old, a tall, slim and extremely beautiful girl, very brave by nature yet used to get terrified in her dreams.

It was still dark when Silviya awoke, but the sky had already turned from black to dark blue behind the silhouettes of the mountains, announcing the imminent sunrise. Silviya was lying in an uncomfortable position on her bed, but she didn't have the strength to move as if she had struck into sleep paralysis. She was dreaming, hearing voices, footsteps, and then suddenly felt a gentle hand on her shoulder, turning her over. She nearly jumped on her bed and saw her grandmother sitting nearby, reassuring that everything was alright. Fear gripped her, twisting in her gut. Silviya was still breathing unsteadily. A trickle of sweat dripped down her forehead.

Grandma wiped the sweat on her face with a fold of her Sari, and Silviya let out an involuntary sigh. But she didn't move, and she rolled her back grandma's side, grandma's eyes fixed at her.

Her grandma Trisha was a woman in her late sixties; an icon, well-loved and incalculably wealthy. Grandma had a whitish, soft-looking face and she looked around forty. Her eyes looked older than that, but her cheeks were still smooth as a girl's. Only a few of her once-dark black hairs were turning silver as she seemed to defy her age and her famous visage reflected a lifetime of wealth and a vigorous intellect.

The horror of dream had made Silviya's face pale for a moment; droplets of sweat clinging to her shoulders, under her hair at the base of her neck.

"Why don't you sleep, you should take more rest?" Silviya asked sluggishly, still fighting draw breath, but the expression in her eyes hadn't changed.

"It's already sunrise; I do not feel the need to sleep, so left the bed to see my baby rest well. Why are you so scared honey?" Her grandma asked following her gaze suspiciously.

Silviya's Nightmare & Relationship with Her Grandma

Silviya who seemed confused by the sudden interruption released a windy sigh before she told her grandma about the dream. "I saw a mirror like blue lake, reflecting the scattered fir trees around its shores, the mountains behind it, and the waterfall which fed it. Beyond were tree-covered hills, then higher blue-grey mountains; and behind these, looking like a line of tiny, pointed clouds above the haze, were the snow-covered peaks of the Great White Mountains."

Suddenly her mercurial mood changed to fear, she felt a tremor; pursed her lips, terror struck her eyes, she let out a deep breath and then muttered "Then suddenly I found myself near a sea, wearing somewhat unusual dress, an apron and a basket hat and was confronted with snakes. Then I heard sound of footsteps loud as galloping horses in the quiet night, the smell of blood and death, and the stomach-churning fear that accompanied it.

Some people who wore facial tattoos depicting snakes, armed with bows and arrows and buffalo-hide shields were chasing me. My attacker's jaw dropped open, and I caught a glimpse of misty white breath brushing past my cheek. He shot an arrow which hit me and I...I died. Then suddenly I woke with a shrill cry." Silviya's hands had gone cold, but the words came out quite steady as she looked at her grandma.

Raising eyebrows her grandma stared at her in suspicion. "So Silvi, don't tell me that you didn't watch any horror movie last night."

Knowing very well that admitting the truth means her grandma was going to be harsh on her, Silviya preferred to be silent—getaway was impossible. There was no way she could. It was of no use to tell a lie, her grandma must know that she was watching Scary movie.

Trisha looked at her, eyes hard in her sweat-smearred face.

"How many times I have told you not to watch such kind of horror movies. Why don't you concentrate on your studies? Now get up and get ready for your maths tuition," said Trisha angrily while leaving the room.

For a split second, visions of mysterious land, unfamiliar people, some tribal settlements, merciless attackers and snowy mountains danced like sparks before her eyes. Silviya was still not convinced with her grandmother's plea that she saw such horrible dreams because of these horror movies; she had been having such kind of dreams since her childhood. It was not because of these movies she had such dreams rather she took interest in these movies because since her childhood she had these terrifying dreams. Except that it wasn't a dream. Not really. It was just part of the nightmare that had taken over her life. But that was gone now. She could feel the words wanting to spill out of her, telling all that to her grandma but she wasn't in a mood to argue with her undefeatable grandma, so she again collapsed back in bed, covered her face with quilt and pretended like sleeping, burrowed deeper under the covers, not willing to wake.

Silviya was living in Ajmer, a very beautiful city, surrounded by the spectacular Aravalli Mountains, once ruled by Prithveeraj Chauhan.

Princess of Falcons

Silviya was told that her grandma was an only heir of a royal Rajput family from Ajmer. Grandma always felt very proud by the fact that she was a Rajput, which was considered as the bravest caste. But Silviya wasn't too enthusiastic for this because for her, grandma was the most lilyhearted woman on this planet.

Although her Haveli was big, cozy and pretty, yet most of its rooms remained locked, due to lack of dwellers to live in. Silviya's room was upstairs. Downstairs there was a spacious kitchen-dining room. Next to that was grandmother's bedroom and her 'everything room': a big closet full of old, useless stuff like an old-aged museum.

It would, of course, be exaggerating to say that Silviya's regal room usually looked clean and tidy. With the help of grandma and her servants she managed to keep it in some kind of order, but only on days better than this one. Today her room looked as if a flock of frolic baby elephants had just charged through it. There were books, DVDs, pens, pencils and crayons strewn all over the desk. Several unfinished drawings in which she tried to paint an enchanted castle and landscape, which she usually saw in her dreams, were lying on the floor next to an overturned chair. The contents of the shelves and boxes were scattered over the floor after she'd rummaged through them looking the tools for building a landscape project. Her poor, forlorn tools for making her project, most of which were in a very sorry state, lay heaped all around which she used in making sketch of every imaginable or unimaginable place. Her grandma never liked her habits and always warned her to mend her ways.

Silviya closed her eyes and sighed, her mind still lost in the thoughts; suddenly her cell phone rang. She rose from her lounging position on the bed, stretching after being curled up there for the whole night, and then happened to catch a glimpse of the clock. "Oh no, I'm late!" she gasped in dismay. She was supposed to meet her best friend Veerendra in ten minutes. Her heart felt squeezed tight in her chest.

The call was from Veerendra, he asked her to make it fast as he had already reached the meeting place. With the speed of light she quickly took bath and pulled on a clean set of jeans-top, tugged a brush through her dark brown hair a few times, grabbed her jacket and handbag. While she was going down the stairs, trying to stuff her hanky into her bag and her arms into her jacket at the same time, noticed her grandma repeating the same unusual prayer (*Dear God, I thank you for your miraculous free gift of long life. I know that I am a sinner and can never earn my way to your approval.....*) which she muttered everyday, Silviya hurriedly dashed out the door.

She again made a call to her best friend Veerendra Singh Rathore, whom all used to call Veer, a very close friend of her, so close that sometimes both of them were wrongly taken as lovers.

Veer is a young, tall and a good looking boy of twenty-one whose ancestors were loyal to Silviya's family, who had served the royal family of Silviya's grandma from generations, had a well built body and a courageous heart.

They planned to meet at city museum. Veer had already reached there and was waiting for her.

Silviya's Nightmare & Relationship with Her Grandma

Veer, a fitness freak guy was still doing push ups on the outside grass floor of city museum just for time pass.

By the time Silviya also reached there. "Sorry to tell you, but the woman under has left," her voice sounded loud but humorous sort of.

Veer grinned, stretching his long legs out in front of her. He looked up at her, with the same look in his eyes as a man might have when he inspected a weapon to be sure it was sharp. He smiled and asked her "So Mam what is your new excuse for coming late today?"

Breathing in the air, she whispered "Oh! Sir, I am so sorry. I was in so much hurry that I forgot to think of any excuse for today."

Veer had a attractive face. Not handsome, exactly, but strong-looking, with dark eyes and a good firm chin, and lines about the corners of his eyes when he smiled. She knew his expressions, too. And the one on his face as he looked at her now was the expression that meant he was reading something behind her cool blue eyes.

"Silvi you were supposed to be attending maths tuition, then why have you asked me to meet at this time?" Veer enquired.

"I just... I just didn't feel like attending it," she said with pauses.

She stopped and stood quiet for a long moment.

"You look somewhat frustrated today, what's the matter?" Veer said to her, putting his hand on her shoulder.

"Leave it, you won't understand." Now she took a breath.

"Oh! Great, I won't understand. I am your best friend, sweetie."

She came close to him and put her head on his shoulder and said, "You know Veer, sometimes we feel very heavy from inside but have nothing to tell others."

Veer gazed her for a long moment as if trying to make out something. "Ok, now I guess that you must have had the strange dream again or there must be a fight between you and your grandma."

She swallowed and said, "Hmm! You are too smart."

"Yes, I am. That's why all girls are behind me." He said blinking his eyes.

"h..hh..he he... good joke." She broke into pills of laughter.

"Whatever, at least I am better than you, my Tom boy." Veer sneered at her.

Silviya felt her cheeks go red.

"And I am better than those stupid girls, whom you guys call 'sexy babes' and chase them like doggies," she said sounding sheepish.

"We chase them because they want us to chase them; you girls always have dual policy. On one hand girls spend thousand bucks in beauty parlours to look more attractive to guys and on the other hand pretend to ignore us."

"When have you seen me in a parlour?" she spoke quickly.

"Actually, I am talking about girls,.....h..he.hh..he he," Veer replied in a mix sound of coughing and laughing.

"Actually your body is demanding some good punches," she said to him while putting her right punch on her left palm.

“Oh! I forget that I am talking to a black belt winner,” He said mockingly.

“Now a days you have started forgetting so many important things,” She said somewhat angrily.

“Now what have I forgotten ... hmm.... let me remember... today can't be your birthday..... then today is..... oh! Today is your Martial Art competition.” His chest was heaving, and the words came out in whispery gasps.

To hide his folly again he said sheepishly, “Actually I knew it, but I preserved my best wishes for your opponent, God knows, what will you make of her.” Silviya slapped at his hand.

“I wish grandma would be there.” Suddenly seriousness floated in Silviya's eyes. She swallowed and felt as if a knife bob up and down on her throat.

Silviya sometimes spent a whole day in practicing for martial arts but without knowledge of her grandma. Trisha wasn't actually happy for her such kind of activities. She just wanted Silviya to concentrate more and more on her studies to get admission in a reputed B school, secure a good job and then get married to a sophisticated guy. Silviya was never too enthusiastic about her grandma's instructions. Like today's youth she had her own whims and fancies but had little real choice to disown her grandma's orders because Trisha had a much more powerful weapon, that was tears. She was impossible to argue with; whenever Silviya wanted to do anything of her own interest she hardly gave her permission. Silviya always felt herself different from her grandma in her views and choice. In fact her interests were somewhat unconventional to modern views as she liked horse riding, archery practice, swimming, martial art, Judo, sports, etc., contrary to Silviya, grandma wanted her to learn cooking, painting, sewing, dancing and whatever required for becoming a good Indian housewife. Once grandma told Silviya that her body was so flexible that if she would try she could be the one of best dancers in India.

Trisha was very obdurate that she never settled any dispute to save her own demands. Silviya had always found unable to move grandma from her stand. Whenever Silviya put any such kind of demand in front of grandma she gave the impression that she was not listening, whatever grandma said intent on her wishes only. So Silviya knew that her demands were already a dead horse and was more convinced than her past days that it was not possible to defeat her grandma in any argument.

As her grandma wanted her to read well and inculcate traits of a good housewife and a cultured woman she was doing all those. But sometimes reality appears as duality. The fact was that she was much cleverer than her grandma. Without the knowledge of her grandmother she had joined equestrian club and martial arts club. Silviya was a freedom loving girl and always did what she really wanted to do. But on the other hand she didn't want to arouse the wrath of her grandma who was the only relative of her in this big world. Silviya's eyes had gone distant, like she was seeing something a long way off.

“You know that your grandma doesn't like all this then why to complicate the matter by inviting her.” Veer tried to bring her back to sane reality.

Silviya's Nightmare & Relationship with Her Grandma

She shook her head, and her eyes came back from wherever they'd been. She managed to nod.

"I know Veer, I understand my limits but it hurts me somewhere inside when I lie to her, I tell her that I am going for tuitions and go for martial or archery classes."

Veer stared at her, her eyes flat as metal, giving her an upset look.

To throw away her sadness Veer thought of a prank. A day before while lightning a candle accidentally he had got a minor burn. He showed that to her and said, "Do you know how this happened?"

"How?" she asked anxiously while examining his burn.

"Yesterday I went to an office to seek a job. There I was told by one officer that I could easily grab that job if I could warm his pocket. I utilised my mind and finally came to the conclusion that how could I warm his pocket.

I brought burning coal from neighbourhood and in this whole process I got this burn. Alas! Still that notorious officer didn't offer me that job. Instead of respecting my sacrifice for him he started shouting at me and threw me out from his office." He chuckled at his own joke.

Silviya's mouth dimpled at the corners, and then she laughed. She'd a pretty laugh, pretty as her speaking voice. "How foolish are you? I have already read this joke in yesterday's newspaper."

A bearded guide caught a look of Silviya. Due to Silviya's extreme fair colour and foreign looks he took her as a foreign tourist and offered her his guidance.

With his face full of expressions, eyes focused on her, he started repeating his standard language, "Mam, The Magazine, the city's Museum, was once the residence of Prince Salīm, son of the Emperor Akbar, and presently....." And didn't stop until both the friends started speaking in chorus with him "and presently houses a collection of the Mughal and Rajput armour and sculpture.... Blah blah.." When they stopped they found the guide invisible like ghosts. This made them laugh like anything.

Silviya wasn't visiting this museum for the first time; in fact this was her thirteenth visit. She was always fascinated about the idea of visiting far distant places, historical museum, palaces, monuments, etc. But except Rajasthan she had hardly got any opportunity to visit outside. In fact her own home looked more like anthropology museum than a home. Its shelves were packed with Artifact from around the world, a golden idol of an eagle, rare woven dress of old times, unusual kind of symbols and idols, etc.

After a hearty laugh their voice was quieter, now, and before they started their talks a blind beggar appeared before them requesting for some money. Silviya gave him a note of Rs. 5, the blind beggar said, "May god bless you beautiful."

Musing over a breath she asked Veer, "How come he knows that I am beautiful?"

Managing his voice from shaking due to his laugh Veer mumbled, "This proves he is really blind," and his teeth flashed in a grin, white against his black turning lip because of excessive smoking.

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Silviya ran behind him shouting, "I am gonna kill you idiot."

Veer knew very well that Silviya was really a paragon of beauty with a toned, five-foot eight-inch, and athlete physique. Although she was damn beautiful but she did not look like a typical Indian beauty. The twenty year old Silviya was called by her friends 'tourist', because of her foreigner looks, her thick brown hair, probing blue eyes, a dauntingly deep voice, and the strong, carefree smile of a collegiate athlete. Many of the guys of her city were crazy about her to a great extent.

Kicking his bullet Veer held his one hand above to say *bye* to Silviya, who had just sat in her Mercedes and heading towards her Club now.

"Hey Silvi! See you at the martial art club in afternoon." Veer shouted in a loud ear-piercing voice. 'God this girl is P.T. Usha or Michael Schumacher, always walks and drives in such a speed' Veer thought in his mind.

"Ok dear," she too shouted not less than him. In a matter of seconds, Silviya raced out of sight. Veer gnashed his teeth together while he watched the performance.

His words made her think of her today's fight competition. It was a national level competition organized by the club. There was fire in competitors' bellies when more than 100 of National's martial artists converged there. The result was one of the most exciting and competitive multi-style martial arts competitions. It was a huge event that brought together practitioners of many different styles to compete in a friendly but very competitive event that showcased excellence in disciplines ranging from traditional karate, kung fu and taekwondo to kenpo, tang soo do, silat, hapkido and freestyle martial arts. That was the final day of the competition.

Veer, who himself was well trained in martial arts was giving his best last moment tips to her. Yet he was fully confident that she was certainly going to win the match.

Before the competition started the Sports minister came on the daïs to speak the so called 'two words'. Those two words which mostly magically itself convert to an hour long speech. Earlier the trend was to give such long speeches during prize distribution or at the end, the time when audience could afford to escape, but like smart audience now orators have also become too smart.

As soon as the minister uttered the first word the mike went out of order and produced a very harsh sound. The sound of it was now so loud that everyone was clapping their ears in pain. This made his speech impossible, so the competition started soon.

It was an incredible afternoon to begin the championship fights. Everywhere poise, focus, dedication and determination were on display. With some fine performances on every ring, the audience were enthralled and entertained wherever they looked.

The furious action began with the girls in the 19-23 years light weight division, who enjoyed loud and animated support from an enthusiastic crowd. This Black-

belt event was particularly challenging, with a count-back of scores being needed to separate some superb up-and-coming athletes. Bout after bout they were eliminated until Silviya faced off with Babita of Haryana in the final. The Champion of Champions elimination bouts were tough, hard-scoring affairs, with each fighter acutely aware of what lay on the line.

Now all the eyes were on Silviya and her opponent Babita, the two strongest contenders. Both the girls were new to this level of competition and started cautiously, testing each other out.

Both the girls were standing face to face. There was an uncomfortable pause as the two stare eye to eye; then the ring master whistled and everyone present there became silent and cautiously started watching the fighter girls. Showing amazing dedication and skill, these 'fighter girls' displayed their skills with loud support and applause from every corner.

Silviya directly fell on the floor in the very first attack by Babita. Babita's breath was coming shorter and shorter as she grew more excited by continuously trouncing her opponent. Oh, she just loved this show of fear, loving the power she thought she wielded! Silviya looked forward to turning the tables on her. Veer licked his lips in worry. He looked into Silviya's eyes and was surprised by what he saw. Her eyes showed a calm confidence.

Now the scene changed. Silviya recovered quickly struck with the intensity and speed of a rattlesnake. Her hand shot forward, grabbing Babita in an unbreakable grip. Silviya's furious action began again and she enjoyed loud and animated support from an enthusiastic crowd. Silviya was able to use her long legs to her advantage and score with some excellent kicks to take the points. Babita consciously widened her eyes and made her lower lip tremble, trying to protect. With not long to go, Silviya took control with some high kicks to the head and it was enough to claim the Championship. Silviya's incredible speed and strength forced the spectators for nail-biting.

Veer rushed to Silviya and grasping her by the waist, he lifted her. He was overjoyed to see her winner. He wiped the beads of sweat off her brow.

On that particular evening both Silviya and Veer were in high spirits. Veer was even happier than Silviya on her success.

Holding his hand tightly Silviya told Veer about her last night dream.

"I felt like death experience. I was running till my lungs burst, but those attackers approached and killed me." She stopped and squeezed her eyes tight shut. Silviya opened her eyes and realised that Veer had put his second hand over hers.

Thinking for a minute he told her that it might be possible that her grandma was right, because dreams reflect inner desires and he knew that she always wanted to do something adventurous.

"So, Mam are you participating in coming horse riding race which is going to be organised by 'Jaipur Equestrian Club'." Veer asked her, while sitting in Silviya's Mercedes driving seat.

With the starting sound of the Mercedes Veer also heard Silviya's indrawn breath, a sharp gasp as of excitement and anguish.

Veer could understand the meaning behind her gesture as he could understand all the words unspoken by her. Her excitement of participating already got dull thinking of her grandma, whose permission was impossible to seek. Her mouth was suddenly too dry to speak. But the competition fascinated Silviya that much that she had decided to persuade her grandma anyhow. Today's grand success had raised her spirits.

Entering into the magnificent outside garden of Silviya's house Veer found her grandma sitting in it on a chair giving instructions to the gardener for next day tasks. Trisha became happy seeing Veer because she always loved him not less than Silviya.

After having dinner together Veer winked at Silviya. She held her breath and tried to seek her grandma's permission for participating in coming horse riding race. Her lips tightened as they always did if she dared to ask a question like this one. She argued that she was doing well in her studies and was top ranker in her college, so her grandma can't confine Silviya anymore by the plea that it will effect her studies.

But Trisha was adamant as always and argued too, "You might consider me a dictator, but actually I am not allowing you because horse riding is not good for your health."

As Silviya and Veer swapped hopelessness, Silviya tried not to look at her grandma, at the fine features, the sparkling dictator eyes, the determined set of her chin.

Sounding more reasonable grandma muttered, "It might cause severe injuries to you and your exams are also near."

For a moment all rested in silence, evaluating each other's thoughts with secret gazes, then Silviya smiled-a fake smile yet and argued in favor of horse riding.

She started to speak about its benefits in an emotionless bookish tone, her voice sounded almost computerised and precise, "Do you know grandma, Horse riding is a great form of exercise which has both cardiovascular and muscle conditioning benefits. Although it may seem as though the rider is not engaging in any physical exercise, an hour's activity can burn similar calories to that of a thirty-minute jog (6mph) or cycle ride (9mph). Therefore, all the health benefits associated with engaging in regular cardiovascular exercise are gained. After your first ride you may feel muscles that you never knew you had. This is due to the movement of the horse and its affect on the rider during the ride. As the rider reacts to the horse's movements to avoid becoming off balance, the deep postural muscles of the trunk and pelvis and the adductor muscles of the thighs are continuously being conditioned."..... "Stop! Stop this nonsense!" Trisha shouted. Silviya stopped and did risk a glance toward her grandma, holding grandma's gaze her mouth twisted just slightly. Veer cackled in glee.

She had over-acted the speech so badly that even a two-year-old child would have seen through the lie or hidden motive behind.

Silviya's Nightmare & Relationship with Her Grandma

Silviya and Veer exchanged conspiratorial looks and she winked, "Even this would make my figure better and this will help you grandma in finding suitable match for me." and then the three started laughing.

After the departure of Veer her grandma told her flatly that she was not going to allow her for participating in that race and gave her new books of Brilliant Tutorials for MBA entrance exams, which she had received same day by postal service. Anger soared through Silviya, making her already sore muscles tighten. Fighting for rights had become part of her life.

Trisha cocked her head, frowning for a moment. Silviya opened her mouth to speak but saw her grandma's eyes were stone-cold, floating empty in the angry face.

She looked back before leaving for her room, at grandma as if she wanted to say something to her, but thought better of it to remain silent. Grandma could feel a whine pushing its way up Silviya's throat, wanting to creep into her words, but Silviya clamped her jaw shut. She didn't say another word on the subject as she went upstairs to sleep. Heat burned her cheeks. Embarrassment and frustration rushed through her.

Silviya lay in her bed with great despair, couldn't fall asleep quickly but lay awake, turning it all over in her mind. She yawned and turned over, it couldn't affect her. She felt mentally still, and very low almost to her bones. In her reminiscing mood she remembered her childhood days. Her all classmates had parents but she was the only one who had never known the joy of having a father and mother.

Silviya thought for a moment 'My parents must have loved me very much.' She swallowed. Her heart swelled painfully. She wished she had memories of her parents. There were no images, no memories, nothing anywhere in her deepest thoughts that she could pin as a vague recollection of her parents. Yet her grandma did everything for her what she could do but still Silviya always longed for her parents. Except her grandma she had no one in this world to say of her own.

'Tourist! Tourist!' she heard the words from her school days memories, the words went into her head deep, rattled around, and then left her with thoughts how in school days her classmates made fun of her by calling her hybrid and denouncing her status of being an Indian. Her grandma always loved her but she too never tried to understand Silviya. These all events made Silviya somewhat introvert, a girl lost in her dreams only.

'If my parents would have been alive my life would be very different from what it is now.' She told herself.

Silviya shut her eyes and took a deep breath. She opened her eyes again with the conclusion that her grandma couldn't be blamed for the pain Silviya went through her life. She could understand grandma's situation. She was the only hope of her grandma, might be because of that grandma was strict to her. She remembered the tragic incident told to her by her grandma that how her parents and grandfather died in a car accident while coming back home from a party in US. Silviya and her grandma survived because they did not attend the party, as she

was an infant at that time, so her grandma remained at home to take care of her. Her grandma had told her that due to taking alcohol her father lost the balance of car and met with death and that's why she wanted Silviya to always refrain from alcohols. In her deep thoughts she didn't know when she slept.

"Silvi, my child! We love you sweetheart." In her dream Silviya felt a gentle touch on her forehead. In that blissful dream she opened her eyes to meet the gaze of a heavenly woman with the same face and features as she had. The love in that woman's eyes and serenity on her face made Silviya forget all her pains. As the heavenly woman bend to kiss Silviya's forehead, recognising her Silviya cried "Mother. I know it's you." Breaking her dream Silviya instantly opened her eyes to see for her mother, but she was present nowhere.

"Mom! Mom! ...Mom!" she uttered these words three times, bewildered, until she came back to sane reality that she was just dreaming. Silviya's breath went out in a rush that felt like a bellows. She thought for a moment; her eyes looked shiny with tears. But then she smiled—a real smile, this time. "And I love you too Mom," she whispered.

In the morning when she met grandma on breakfast table she was taken aback by grandma's proclamation. In a dry voice her grandma said to her, "You can participate in the coming Horse riding competition."

Silviya felt her mouth tilt up into a half-hearted kind of smile; she swallowed, and then nodded, "Thanks! Sorry but now I am not interested in that." Actually due to her last night thoughts she was feeling very sorry for the grief's and troubles which her grandmother had faced and she no more wanted to hurt her.

Still with that little wrinkle of surprise in her eyes, Trisha looked at Silviya deeply as if measuring the validity of her statement.

Falling in love is awfully simple, but falling out of love is simply awful, this Silviya realised when she was going to college as she passed by the grandma's room there she saw grandma holding a fur hat passionately, which Silviya knew belonged to her dead grand father Raymond. She stopped to listen the poem grandma was reciting for her dead husband.

*"Years have passed without seeing you,
But Time Cannot Erase True Love!
Life is about love, and that's why I Love you.
You look so handsome all the time,
Even I don't have words to write the best rhyme.
You are so lovely; I want to stand by you closely.
In my life I have never wished for fortune or fame,
My Only wish was to be your wife and to share your last name.
I made you my Husband, with love and respect.
To spend with you the rest of my life,
Alas! Our Destiny made us grow apart,*

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*Still I assert Time Cannot Erase True Love!
Love only comes once, so don't miss it.
When you find it, don't let it go.
Trust your love; your love will trust you.
Don't let it go, things will be all right.
Time Cannot Erase True Love!
For when hearts beat together,
Eternal love glows forever.
I will love you for the rest of my life,
Coz Time Cannot Erase True Love!
Years have come and years have gone,
Still in my heart your place is high.
It's true that I have grown older,
But our love will never die.
Bcoz Time Cannot Erase True Love!
The language of true love is forever
That's why love goes away never!"*

Silviya rubbed her eyes and realised there were tears on her cheeks, though she didn't quite know why.



Chapter 2

Silviya's Friendship with Veer & her Preparations for Hostel

It was evening time; Veer was waiting for Silviya in a park nearby her home. From some distance she was now visible, jogging in her blue track suit. Silviya had noticed Veer much before Veer noticed her as she possessed incredible eyesight. Silviya wasn't unaware of the gift of exceptional sight by Mother Nature but she intentionally never gave this idea a second thought.

"You are late again, so what is your today's excuse Mam?" Veer commented while showing his watch to her. He scowled at her and she scowled back. His anger was much more impressive than her.

Her brow puckered for a moment and eyes shined in a mischief. "Today.... This day... I...I am... well prepared with the list of excuses, you have to select yourself anyone of them you think will work today," while thinking of some absurd excuses in her mind she uttered.

"Sir, select from anyone of these excuses and forget others so that I can use them for coming days." Veer grinned, sensing her new fangled mischief.

Counting her excuses on fingers one by one Silviya gave him a mischievous look, but her eyes were too innocent.

"My dog died...umm... arrived earlier then you and decided I just didn't feel like waiting, so I went home before you arrived....My neighbor's father died, and I had to console my neighbor....I overslept....I took the wrong way and got lost, half an hour wasted in finding the right path....I know we had decided to meet at 6 :00 P.M., but I went out to a movie at 3:00 P.M. and had such a good time out after meeting some friends at the movie that I forgot all about our date and in this way I got late....My grandma was not feeling well and I had to take her to the doctor."

She pleaded, clasping her hands in front of him. "Stop it! Stop it! I would never ask you again ...you are really impossible. So... tell me what's new?" Veer frowned as he spoke. His expression darkened, Silviya's expression was triumphant. She wrinkled her nose at him.

Suddenly Silviya looked away, her eyes wandering in some deep thoughts, uncomfortable and dissatisfied. "Aey Silvi, where you lost?"

"Nothing as such, was just thinking how much grandma has suffered throughout her life. You know today I felt, how much she loved my grand-Pa." Silviya wanted to look away, but Veer's gaze held her.

Pouring a few words from her mouth Silviya told him about all the happenings, how grandma allowed her and then why she refused. Very much moved by

grandma's deep and immortal love for her grandfather, Silviya's face tightened as she explained.

She said in a deep emotional voice, "As people grow older, as they continue to change with age, there is one thing that never changes that is true love. Like one of my grandparents." She continued sounding more emotional, "Pleasure of love may last with a moment, but Pain of love lasts a lifetime." She heaved a sigh as she spoke.

For the first time Veer had heard anything about love from her mouth and she knew he could see the emotions and love that filled her eyes. But Veer found her brilliant obsidian eyes somewhat unreadable for the first time, as love, emotions were something unfamiliar to his 'Tom boy'.

Veer squeezed his eyes tight shut, nodded, "you know in spite of the fact that my parents always keep on arguing they love each other very much. The couple that fights the most is the one most in love... it shows they care enough to notice the other one and care enough to mention it so they can fix it. When you stop fighting it means you stopped caring."

Veer noticed Silviya becoming emotional, a very unusual thing to listen her talking anything about love. Up to Veer's knowledge for Silviya whom friends called Tomboy, love was a very complicated topic, not her cup of tea.

Veer grinned on his next thought about her. Whenever any such kind of crisis occurs like any boy proposed her, anyhow she wanted to escape the situation either by punching that guy or running away from that place, defying the speed of P.T. Usha.

Veer was now staring at the Silviya, yet he kept silence. She was so tender looking and looked like such a girly girl. It had pissed her off when her fellow guys underestimated her, but it wasn't a bad thing at all, when she enjoyed punching the guys hard who tried to flirt her. That's why her all comrades kept on commenting on her that "she has a body of Miss World but a heart of Hercules." Veer smiled, a crook smile thinking of the times when Silviya talked about fights, WWE matches, wars her blue eyes become brighter.

Silviya felt shy as she deciphered his expressions. Her ears went pink. She seemed to think she'd said too much, that too on her most disliked topic. She sat staring off in different direction, avoiding Veer's gaze.

Silviya broke off a moment silence and made a strange noise under her breath. It was almost a hiss. Regaining her Herculean spirit she muttered, "You know to me love is malfunction of the heart which weakens the brain, causes eyes to weaken due to tears, cheeks to sink, blood pressure to rise means a menace to mankind."

Veer wanted to laugh at himself for expecting any more talk about love from her. "Oh! Really thank God you told me all that in advance otherwise....otherwise..." Veer paused to let the fire rose high.

"Otherwise what?" asked Silviya anxiously.

Silviya felt his eyes on her face but she couldn't look at him yet, afraid he might read something in her eyes.

"Hmmm.. otherwise I would have proposed you today," His face was smiley but to Silviya he looked stupid.

"You u.I'll kill you" and again Silviya ran behind him with her fingers dug in her palm ready to punch him well.

"Kill Me honey! Kill me Silvi...kill me.....!"

Fighting and running idiotically they didn't realise that they had already reached outside Silviya's 'Haveli.'

"Okay Silvi! Bbye dear. Take care of grandma." Veer whispered through clenched teeth.

Silviya smiled and her twinkling eyes become brighter by sense of being naughty. "Do you think my grandma is old?"

Making some comparisons in her mind she again muttered, "Still Grandma looks younger than your Mom who is around twenty years younger than my grandma."

Her words left Veer with no plea. Indeed the truth was very near to Silviya's words, it seemed that even time had failed to touch her grandma, who still looked so young and beautiful.

"See you tomorrow." She entered in her home wishing him God Bye.

Veer stared at her. She left without another word; her walk was so fluid, so graceful that he felt a sharp pang of liking for her. Something touched his feet when he turned his back towards his home.

Silviya had slept well but her sleep was disturbed by the bell of her mobile. Blinking her eyes furiously to open them fully, she peeped on the mobile screen; this call was from Veer, he asked her what she was doing.

Breathing deep she shouted "Sir, What one can do at 1 Am in the night?"

"Ops, I thought you must be thinking of me like I was thinking of you," his voice depicting his idea to flirt with her.

"Oh! Really darling you love me that much, so why don't you come and ask for my hand to my grandma," Silviya gritted her teeth in irritation.

Veer's tone changed abruptly. "Marriage and that too with you...ha ha ha ...do you think that Veer is Insane. I want to marry a girl not a Tomboy ha.. ha.."

Silviya's jaw hardened. A strong urge to punch on his face made her grin on her own thought.

Veer didn't stop teasing her here and he added more spice. "By the way I think my chances are rare because your grandmother married to an American man and your father married to an American mistress, so history of your family depicts that you are also going to marry any American. So why to take a chance?"

"Now I am really gonna kill you," shouted Silviya, fully irritated now.

"Ok..ok don't kill. You look like a sensible girl. Would you like to marry me?"

Her natural urge was to tell him to butt out. Instead, she said bleakly. "No way. Because I'm quite as sensible as I look!" She nodded glumly.

Veer asked her that before killing him she should check her pendent which she always wore. Silviya's heart felt squeezed tight in her chest on the thought of losing her eagle-shaped pendent, the only gift she had received from her dead father. At first she tried to feel it against her chest, without touching, then her hands reached to her throat in fear of losing it, alas! She again felt nothing. Before she could speak any word Veer's voice came as a great relax "Don't panic, it's with me. I found it outside yours 'Haveli' gate."

"Oh Veer! Thank you very-very much," she breathed cool air.

"Now listen carefully when you wake up in the morning don't forget to wish my parents as they have their marriage anniversary and silver Jubilee too and you and grandma are cordially invited for the party," he whispered yawningly.

His voice turned naughty again. "It seems that you were right that the love is malfunctioning of heart."

"How," she asked him surprisingly.

His voice was very lucid now. Lies were coming out of his mouth naturally.

"Today when I went to downstairs seeing my father sitting with a glass of wine in front of him. He appeared to be in deep thought, just staring at the wall. I saw tears rolling from his eyes as he sipped his wine."

"What's the matter with you, Dad? Why are you down here at this time of the night?" I asked him." Silviya believing on his joke asked curiously, "Then what happened?" "My Dad muttered glumly—Twenty five years ago I was dating with your mother. Her father caught us while dating and asked to marry your mother or spend ten years in jail," told my father.

Then he wiped another tear from his cheek and said, "You know... I would have been released fifteen years back."

Before Silviya's mind-bulb could turn-on, Veer laughed frantically and said, "So Mam' I am taking my marriage proposal back and now you go to sleep."

After they hung up their conversations, Silviya's last thought was dwelling on Veer; she remembered whenever anyone teased her or made fun of her, how he always stood by her to defend her. Veer was very precious to her, the only one with whom she could share all her feelings.

Then suddenly a thought of her perfect man engaged a part of her mind. Images of her perfect man, muscles all over him like the strongest warrior, a man of distinct personality, look anything like the masterpiece of masculinity, ready to lay life for her, someone with eyes only for her, who would know her needs, know just how to make her scream his name.

Spending a few moments thinking over her womanly desires, again she came back to reality and now this time started thinking about her career. She pledged to concentrate more on her studies as date for the MBA entrance exam was very near.

A few minutes later, now she was in a confused state of sleep and consciousness until she felt herself locked in a dark room at a strange place. She wasn't seeing this dream for the first time in her life. Rather it was one of the sequels of dreams which had followed her throughout her life.

“Silvi,” a middle-aged man said her in a firm tone of voice. “It’s time for you to come back now. Your family needs you.”

She tossed on her bed, then woke up to have some water, and then thought over her dream for a few minutes, again dozed off.

The coming hectic days of graduation final year exams and MBA entrance test curtailed Silviya’s all other activities, now she preferred confining herself to studies only. Her hard work and exceptional intelligence helped her to secure first position in her college and crack CAT entrance in her first attempt.

After a few slower, steadying breaths, Silviya showed her grandma the call letter the postman had given her a few minutes back.

“Wow! Finally you have got admission in Bangalore. You did it.” Trisha hugged her from one hand, reading the minute details of the letter, holding the letter in other hand. Like grandma Silviya was excited too but not much for getting admission in a reputed college rather to get an opportunity to get out of the grip of her grandma. She thought that hostel life is the most pleasurable period of a student’s life. The students who do not get a chance to live in a hostel miss a valuable and memorable piece of experience. Hostel life produces in the students a sense of confidence and self-help. They are not under the close check of their parents. This freedom was something which she was looking for. The screen of grandma’s strict disciplined life flicked off from her mind and went to the images of free life on beaches of Bangalore. She was going Bangalore in five days only.

Next morning when Silviya entered her home along with Veer, she felt amazed to see her grandma busy with packing for her coming Hostel Life. As her grandma had also stayed in the hostel, that too in America so she had an experience. So here started her guidance. In a lively voice, full of gestures grandma muttered, “There are several essentials every hostelite should have in her room. That is in addition to your books, stationery and all the stuff you’d need in school. You need food. Sure, the hostel might provide meals, but mealtimes tend to be fixed and if you miss the set meal time, too bad. It happens. Staying late in the library to study, late lessons, extra curricular activities and the like could make you miss your dinner. Oversleeping might mean you have to go without breakfast if you depend on the hostel for your meals. If you have a hot plate you can cook over, that would come in very handy in the hostel. With that, you can stock up on instant noodles, canned food and get your friends to join in. With everyone contributing something to the food supplies, no one need go hungry, even if they return late because of some project.”

The sight of the grandma stuffing a bag with eatables churned Silviya’s stomach. “Bangalore does have human population, not all people are vampires there. Eatables will be available in shops at Bangalore.” Silviya filled her mouth with these words but couldn’t gather the courage to pour them out.

Veer suppressed his laugh meeting Silviya’s bemused gaze.

Trisha tossed an arm around Silviya’s shoulders and guided her to show the clothes she had selected for packing. Trisha squeezed her eyes tight shut and kept on speaking while keeping those lucky set of clothes in a suitcase, which she had

selected. "Clothes wise, you will need jeans. Unless you wear a college uniform, jeans are the staple in hostel life during fall and winter. Get a few pairs in different shades and cuts to vary your look. They'd go with everything. Your tops, sweaters, jackets, skirts, just be sure to get all your clothing in colors that do something for you. If an outfit you love is in a colour that doesn't do anything for you, as if it makes you look dull, chuck that aside. Pick clothes that bring out the best in you. These are all you need for your hostel life."

Trisha paused for a moment, Silviya feel relaxed thinking her lecture was over until grandma again started muttering with full enthusiasm. "For bed time, nothing beats a super comfortable set of pajamas or night gowns. Get a few sets so you needn't have to keep worrying about the laundry. Then you need some cleaning supplies for your laundry and dishes (you'd have to wash your own cup at least), a water bottle and lots of coffee if you need that to stay awake."

What a topic??.. This was like Mama telling her newly married daughter that how she should behave and live in her In-laws house.

Now it was the turn of her one and only friend Veer to give tips to new bride, whom she hadn't expected to speak much, until he opened his big mouth to speak. He started giving tips to new bride –"If you staying in a hostel with your seniors, never try to make them realize that you are carefree or enjoying your newly earned freedom in a manner that the whole world is able to make out. You are calling for trouble. Keep friendship with one and all. You never know who will help in need... I mean who will pay your bills in your dire situations. After fifteenth of every month, you are sure to run out of your pocket money (no matter, how much ever your grandma may be sending you)."

Having known Veer most of her life, his presence didn't usually bother her but his long lecture made it unbearable for her. Silviya could understand that Veer was indirectly taunting on her lavish life-style. Now his next taunt was on her habit of sleeping for long hours. She could feel a whine pushing its way up Veer's throat, which creep into his words.

Silviya didn't realise she was holding her breath. Exhaling, she scowled at Veer, "Don't you have somewhere to go?"

"No, until I finish." He chuckled under his breath.

"Unlike here don't to go to bed early as you will hardly be given a chance to sleep early in Hostel. Apart from that, there will lot of funny and informative things that you will lose if you don't get rid of that early to bed syndrome. Try to follow the timings of the IN and OUT of Hostel; else you will end up sitting outside begging the watchman to get you IN without the knowledge of the Warden."

Knowing that Silviya's patience was fading now Veer winked at her, "One way to convince is to learn the basics of bribing the watchman. Your warden will still come to know. That he will use in your academics. Now that will keep you to find avenues of dealing Warden/Academician and my last advice to you is when eating food, never ever bother to investigate how the food is prepared, otherwise you will never be able to enjoy it." His voice sounded soft, shaky and very unusual sort of.

Princess of Falcons

But Silviya was still thinking that there could be no set of rules for leading a Life in Hostel. She thought how could a newly wed bride learn something from her parental house about how to deal with all the silly people in the new house? Even then, she was given some tips.

She felt gazes of both grandma and Veer on her face.

Silviya smiled at both grandma and Veer, yet a fake smile it was. Suddenly realising just how much she would miss them when she left Ajmer, her tummy twisted into a knot thinking about it.

