

"Prof Veera is right Hari," Ryan said, "you bring Cherian's family into this and he may withdraw. Last thing he wants is everyone to know that you are his daughter's boyfriend."

"But this will let the whole world know," I said.

"You don't have to tell the whole story. Just say Neha is a recent friend of yours. I am sure Cherian will not dispute that," Alok said.

"Alok, even you think this is the way?" I said.

"Yes, we have to save our ass right? C'mon, it is just a last-ditch survival strategy. Last-ditch survival," Alok said.

I hated myself for agreeing to that story. What would Neha think when she heard what I said? That she helped me by giving the keys? She'd probably hate me forever. The clock struck ten, and it was time to go to the departmental committee room.

Romance was secondary to survival right now.

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The Longest Day of My Life V

THE IIT DISCO IS ABOUT AS FAR AWAY FROM DANCING AS it can get. Here the lighting is dull, the room dead silent and almost everyone elderly. Around ten profs sat around a semi-circular table, while the accused students were bang in the centre. Profs fire questions at students from all directions, the location placing us at minimum distance to each one of them. It is essentially a more efficient design of a courtroom, I guess, Indem-inspired.

Dean Shastri asked us to take our places. Dean Shastri, Director Verma and Prof Cherian formed the co-chairpersons. Prof Veera was one of the other seven profs who mattered little in the scheme of things. A lot of them yawned, probably used to being in bed at this time. Of course, for their students,

dumped with another set of assignments, the night would have just begun.

"May the disciplinary committee begin, fellow co-chairs," Dean Shastri said in what I felt was a complete waste of courtesy.

"You may begin," the Director and Prof Cherian said. I guess this formality gave them an extra sense of power.

What if I was speechless today, I thought and sweat broke out all over me. All the profs opened the special Disco file, which contained a description of last night's shenanigans.

Ryan noticed my nervousness. It is amazing how people who know you well can sense everything. "Hari," he whispered.

I looked at him.

"I know what you are worried about. Remember, this is not a viva. If you don't open your trap here, you will be in deeper crap than a bloody zero. You understand, don't you?"

"Uh, yes," I said.

"And I want you to know that even though I hate to admit it, you are a bloody stud," Ryan said.

"Why?"

"Because, in front of you lies a man who controls your future right now. Yet, whatever he may do, he can't take away one fact."

"What?"

"That you went and slept with his only daughter in broad daylight. That my friend is a true stud," Ryan said.

"You think so?" I perked up.

"I do. I salute you man. I am proud to have a friend like you," Ryan said.

I beamed.

"No talking amongst the students," Dean Shastri said and looked up from his file.

"Sorry sir," I said. Ryan and I pointed thumbs at each other. Damn it, I could answer these old bozos any time.

"Mr Hari Kumar, the files here state that you were found in Prof Cherian's office last night with two friends. Is that right?" Dean Shastri said.

"Yes sir," I said.

"Ryan Oberoi, we learn that security found you with a candle, wax seal and the packet of major papers in hand. Is that right?"

"Yes, sir," Ryan agreed.

"Alok Gupta, we learn that it was you who was making a call from Prof Cherian's phone last night."

Alok nodded.

"Do you boys realize the gravity of this incident?" the director said.

"Yes sir, we got carried away sir," I said. Man, I was surprised I was taking the initiative to answer these questions.

Other questions were part-rhetoric, part-moral in nature. I can't even remember all of them now, it was about integrity and strength of character and all that stuff. We just apologized, probably a million times. Ultimately they asked the question we were waiting for.

"How did you get into my office?" Prof Cherian said.

"We had the keys, sir," Ryan said.

"How did you get the keys?" He looked baffled.

"Sir, we sir..." I said and turned silent. No, I couldn't do this.

"Hari's friend Neha gave it to us," Ryan supplied.

"Who is Neha?" Dean Shastri asked.

"Neha Cherian is Prof Cherian's daughter. I know her as a friend for the past three months," I said.

The room fell silent as Dean Shastri and Director Verma's mouths went slack. They turned toward Prof Cherian, as if he was next in the firing line. But that was not Disco protocol.

"What? You sure of what you are talking about?" Dean Shastri said.

"I am. She was upset with her father and wanted to get even. She offered the keys and we got carried away," I said.

There were not too many questions after that. But somehow, every prof wanted to talk to their neighbour. Even the seven sleepy profs woke up; this was more interesting than a simple caught-red-handed case.

Cherian whispered something in Dean Shastri's and Director Verma's ears. Dean Shastri nodded and made an announcement.

"We are done with investigating the students. I think we now need to deliberate in the committee to come up with the important decision. This may take some time, even a couple of hours. But once we finish, we will have a final decision. No appeals, no pleas. The students may leave now."

Dean Shastri signaled us to leave the room. We left the Disco room and came out to the campus lawns.

"How do you think that went?" Alok said.

I shrugged my shoulders. The thought of Neha kicked me in the stomach.

"Who knows? Let's wait near here," Ryan said, sitting down on the wet midnight grass.

"It could take hours," I said.

"What else do we have to do? But let's not wait near here.

Let's go to the insti roof," Alok said.

I liked the idea of the insti roof. It was the one place where we felt secure now, as even Kumaon was difficult to be in right now, with a million eyes on us.

"How will we find out they are done?" Ryan said.

"We'll keep looking down. The corridor light is on. When they come out, we should be able to see something."

"Fine, let's go up," Ryan said.

We sat on the roof of the institute building, each of us five feet apart at the ends of an imaginary triangle. The moon shone too audaciously for what is, after all, just reflected light. It was different on the roof that day. I hated myself for dragging Neha into this. In fact, I hated myself for being a cheat. And for everything else – agreeing to duplicate the keys, being a part of Operation Pendulum and bringing my life to this. *How did I get here? I was a topper in my school all my life. That is how I got into IIT, right? But then why am I now a low-performer, live-point something cheat sitting on the insti roof at midnight, unsure of my future?*

It is funny how your mind comes up with questions. Damn it, it is up to the mind to come out with the answers, so why can't it just keep its doubts to itself? I realized I was not making sense. Two sleepless nights in a row didn't help. But the questions would not stop.

I looked at my friends. *Friends? What the hell is that anyway? Who is this Alok? And what the fuck do I care that his father is half-dead and his sister can't be married without cash?* Then I turned to look at Ryan. Yes, the stylish, smart and confident Ryan. The man who was so sure of himself, he could

take on the world. He wanted his revenge on Cherian. *Now what exactly is the point of that?* Doesn't seem like all his ideas are quite so smart after all. *Why do I listen to him and not Alok? And why is everybody so quiet now?*

I bent my head to check the time on Ryan's Swiss watch. It was three in the morning.

"Tea?" Ryan said, rubbing his hands.

"No, I'm already wide awake, thank you," I said.

"Yeah. I am fine too," Alok said.

Tea. That is the best Ryan can come up with right now. A shot of caffeine as compensation for throwing away everything that mattered to us.

"It's cold here," Ryan said.

I nodded my head. Yes Ryan, it is miserably cold, in fact, almost like a December night in Delhi, I wanted to say. But you know what, I don't feel it. There are more important miserable things happening right now. Like we could be thrown out of IIT in a few hours, and may never find a respectable education or job again. I chose another response. "Yes, must be five degrees," I said.

Half an hour passed. Ryan stood up and walked to the precipice of the roof. Nine stories high, this is the highest point in the institute. Yet, there is no parapet, as the roof is officially out of bounds. One step more and Ryan could enjoy his last few seconds of free-fall weightlessness. He stands on the edge and bends forward to look down. He extends one leg out.

"What are you doing?" Alok said.

Yes, what exactly are you doing Ryan, I thought. Haven't we lived on the edge long enough? Isn't our life screwed up enough already? Can't we wait for the Disco results in silence without engaging in attention-seeking behaviour, please?

"Come back, Ryan," I called out.

He turned around. "It is really high here." Slowly, he retreated and came back to where he'd been sitting.

Yes, it is high. Yes, it is cold. Any other insightful statements, sir, I wondered.

If there is one thing men completely lack, it is the ability to communicate during tough moments. Alok and I have no words at all, while the best Ryan can come up with is comments on our thermodynamic and spatial state. So different from Neha who always has something appropriately verbal for any occasion. But there won't be any more Neha after this, especially after Alok's so called "last-ditch survival" strategy in the Disco interview. No more Neha – my stomach churns as the fact finally registers. So here I am, sitting with my two best friends, one will get me thrown out of the college that I worked two years to get into and endured for another three years. The other has ended whatever semblance of a love life I ever had.

"You think the Disco might be lenient?" Alok said.

"It is the disciplinary committee, not a joke. You know the Disco never spares," I said.

Disco, what a name, I find it funny even at this hour, even when I am in the middle of it.

Ryan looked up at both of us. "This was all a bad idea," he said.

Thank you, Ryan. It is cold, it is very high and yes, Operation Pendulum was a bad idea. Just keep these obvious statements coming.

We heard a noise downstairs at four-thirty. A few scooters started, as tired profs wanted to rush back home. That was our cue; the results were out.

"C'mon guys, we need to race down," I said.

"Yes, let's go. Prof Veera should be there," Ryan said.

"I am going to stay here. Just come back and tell me," Alok said.

"Just come down, Fatso," Ryan said.

"No, I can't face the profs when they tell me," he said.

"Whatever then. Let us go, Hari," Ryan said.

We ran down the stairs. Most of the profs had left. Dean Shastri, Cherian and Veera remained.

"Prof Veera sir," Ryan said as he approached him from behind.

"Ryan," Prof Veera said, "just a second."

Prof Veera spoke to Cherian and Dean Shastri for a few more minutes. Soon all of them wished each other good night. Cherian went to his car, the one that had allowed all this to happen.

"Sir?" I said.

"Ryan and Hari, you have not been expelled," Prof Veera said.

"Really? So what was the decision?" I said.

"We talked for hours. There was divided opinion, but ultimately the Disco decided that the three of you are suspended for one semester."

"Sir?" I said.

"I tried guys. But the Disco doesn't go easy. You lose a semester, which means you have only one last semester to do fourth year courses. Also, you get an F in Indem, and you have to repeat it again. Not to mention the final year project. As of now, insti rules do not allow to take that much course-load," Prof Veera said.

"So we have to do courses next year. And we can't sit for job interviews either," I said.

"I am afraid so. I tried talking to Prof Cherian about allowing some project credit in the suspended semester. I asked if you guys could work with me. But he just said no. Suspension means full suspension."

"It's over. Our grade sheets are ruined. We can't get a job. And we have to wait an extra year to get a useless degree," I said.

Ryan kept silent.

"I am sorry it turned out this way guys," Prof Veera said, patting our shoulders. He walked past us to his scooter. A few seconds and some exhaust smoke later, he was gone.

We climbed up to the insti roof, where Alok waited with his hands folded. Maybe he was praying. Or maybe he was just cold.

"Kicked out for one sem. F in Indem. Need to stay until next year to complete course," Ryan said, summing it up for Alok.

"What?" Alok said, coming out of his trance.

"Prof Veera tried, saved an expulsion. But it is still pretty screwy. I don't know what we'll do," I said.

We sat down again. It was five a.m., just one hour before daybreak.

Alok stood up without saying anything. I wished he would, as his face seemed tense as hell. He walked to the edge of the roof where Ryan had stood just an hour back.

"You were right Ryan. It is pretty high here," Alok said.

"You okay Alok?" Ryan said.

"Yes. You think only you can stand on the edge of the roof?" Alok asked.

"No. Just come back and let us go down. I have had enough," Ryan said.

Alok continued to look down as he replied, "For once Ryan, I agree with you. I've had enough too. I think I'll just go down."

There was something messed up in the tone of Alok's voice. I turned around to look at him. He stood straight, then one jump up and then straight down. In half a second, he was out of sight. Gravity had done its job.

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The Longest Day of My Life VI

I HAD NEVER BEEN INSIDE AN AMBULANCE BEFORE. IT WAS kind of creepy inside. Like a hospital was suddenly asked to pack up and move. Instruments, catheters, drips and a medicine box surrounded two beds. There was hardly any space for me and Ryan to stand even as Alok got to sprawl out. I guess with thirteen fractures you kind of deserve a bed. The sheets were originally white, which was hard to tell now as Alok's blood covered every square inch of them. Alok lay there unrecognizable, his eyeballs rolled up and his tongue collapsed outside his mouth like an old man without dentures. Four front teeth gone, the doctor later told us.

His limbs were motionless, just like his father's right side, the right knee bent in a way that would make you think Alok