

A DRUNK TRAIN JOURNEY

CHAPTER ONE

He couldn't stand straight; the feeling of detachment – every motion of his a rip off from a black-and-white movie; the feeling that he was doing everything in a very slow motion – a couple of minutes to register every action of his; the hangover that said that he was doing every little thing like lifting his head, looking at one person to the next a bit too stupidly; the feeling in his gut that said, “Dude, there's a lot more to puke!”...Oh, man. He was drunk! The railway waiting room seemed to swirl around him in circles that seemed to sway him and make him dizzy. He vaguely remembered being called for by the officer and getting onto his train that would take him to Bangalore. The journey was thirty-four hours long and thankfully, his compartment was almost devoid of fellow-human contamination. The clock in the station chimed eleven in the night when the engine hooted and chugged along with gentle rocking jerks, the soothsayer for the intoxicated passenger in E24. His bloodshot eyes took in the dirty ambience, his olfactory system sensed the stench arising from the countless spit and innumerable other body fluids that had congealed to become a hard, irreversible mess on the walls and windowsills. The peeling leather of the seats and the uninvitingly shredded foam beneath did nothing to erode the sleep of our drunk friend and he plopped himself down heavily on the seat, rolled down the windows to keep out the frigid air and promptly snored his way to a dreamless sleep.

He awoke after what seemed to him to be a good eight-hour sleep, to find himself groping in the dark, struggling to see himself. The flashing moments of clarity that filled his head, coinciding with the passing flashes of light poles along the line told him through his wristwatch that the time was neigh on three in the morning. He groggily rubbed his eyes and yawned; stretching his tired body, he became aware of his stink. Beer, they say, seeps out through the sweat glands and dowses you with its characteristic stench. So, don't bother breath fresheners after getting sloshed – you'll stink anyway. Michael Papps stood up in the dark, swaying along with the carriage as the train hurtled along the alternating fertile woodlands and arid graveyards, flying south along the famed Delhi-Bangalore line, and switched on the overhead light. The dim white light flooded the cabin and revealed the drab features once again to the inebriated Papps. He just stood there, rocking as though in a bizarre mating-dance ritual, the human trying to woo the inhumane carriage, telling her: I made you, so now, make me...

The light in the cabin illuminated the only other passenger, sleeping in the berth opposite to Papps'. The old man was barely clad in his white linen *kurta* and an equally insufficient *dhoti*. Papps became aware of the loud snores of the old man between the niches of silence amongst the throbbing sounds of the train. The old man's eyes instinctively cringed against the light and he moaned in his sleep. Drunk as he was, Papps had the presence of mind to switch off the light, plunging the cabin into yet another cocoon of darkness – he was in no mood nor state to start a conversation with someone, lest the old man woke up. He sat next to his window and rolled it up. The blast of the frigid night air shocked him first, and woke him up. He looked out at the dark landscape flashing past him, his shirt flailing in the breeze. He smiled to himself and stared out the window. The drugged state of his mind left him and he found himself thinking clearly for

the first time since the night before. *Twenty-five more hours of this cabin and this window*, he thought. *I can survive that*. He saw a shooting star streak across the black sky, a momentary reminder of life's fragility – even the mighty stars die and fall down, how different are we? A mighty quake might not kill us, but the smallest of tremors from within can snuff out our lives in the blink of an eye. Michael Papps made a wish and said a small prayer to his god. He thanked Him for all his mercy and all the times He'd shown compassion when he didn't deserve any. He thought back to the previous day – the day when he thought his life was over, the day he'd lost his hope. And the day on which he'd regained it. As the first faint streaks of blood red peeped out from the horizon, as he heard the train rattle over a long, high bridge, with that perceptible change in the decibels of sound, he saw the game of hide and seek being played by the moonbeams and the black, calm waters of the lake a hundred feet below him below him. He leaned back in his seat, rested his head on the worn-out leather thingummy and thought back to the first rays of the sun the day before.

When the first of the golden rays looked out from over the horizon, it carried with it, some inkling of an impending phenomenon. It filled him with an overwhelming desire to sing out loud – something he'd always wanted to do. But the ray also made him realize that fragile as his life was, it was an amazingly beautiful one. He couldn't explain it at that time, but he had this feeling in the pit of his stomach that something was waiting to happen. As he turned back from the window from which he was staring at the rising ball of beauty, he was aware of transience filling his mood – from a moment of pure ecstasy to one of absolute disgust. For as he turned back, he took in the drab surroundings of the room, the peeling walls, the smell reeking of something which he didn't want to know, the disarray that was everywhere, and his mind went into turmoil all over again – the second time in two days. He didn't want to be here, he didn't belong here. His eyes took in the figure of his roommate sleeping under the covers, apparently unconcerned about his ambience at all. All that mattered to *him* was that he was here to study and he wouldn't let anything come between him and his books – least of all, the stinking accommodations. As that feeling in the pit of his stomach became less cryptic, he realized with a silent horror that he had committed a capital crime – something that many a student has paid with his or her life. He had let down all those who had believed in him; he had cheated himself. He held that damning document in his hands for the hundredth time and looked at it. The clock struck seven and the cuckoos outside his window started their cacophony right on cue. He was oblivious to these things as he just stared at those two words at the bottom of the page that threatened to seal his fate:

RESULT: FAIL

He didn't know when the tears came, but he didn't stop them. In fact, he never realized that he had been crying and did so only when he found that the piece of paper in his hand was wet. He sat down on the bed and clutched the pillow close to him and cried.

"There's no use crying over spilt milk," said a voice behind him. He turned to see his roommate up and staring at him, with a look that said very clearly, *You deserved it, you bastard!* He didn't say anything to him. Turning away, he looked back out the window to the sun, now making its way up the clear blue sky, silently driving away the last traces of darkness. There it was again, that feeling that said that something was definitely about to transcend into his already shattered life.

And transience it is, thought Papps. The ear-shattering scream of the train snapped him out of his reverie. His first exam as an exchange student at the Delhi University and he had bungled it. He had taken the procedure too lightly and he had failed – failed so that he now had a whole year to sit on his ass and do nothing. He had cried for more than four hours until he could cry no more. The tears refused to come. All hope had evaporated along with his tears – hopes, ambitions and courage. He didn't know what he was anymore, didn't believe in himself anymore, and didn't trust himself. He knew why he had failed, if that was any consolation; *yeah right!* Nostalgia can't undo your fuck-ups. When Love comes up to you and says, "I Hate You," you feel sad. But when Hate comes up to you and says, "I Love you," you feel afraid; scared, you question yourself, "Am I a sadist?" No, thought Papps. I am not a sadist. But what am I? A loser, the answer came instantly – a worn out loser, who's failed in every venture in life. A failed love life, pathetic academic career, a string of bad jobs – barely managing to hold on to the last threads of sanity, he decided to move to India to study journalism, something he had a passing interest for – his other interests had already passed him...

A miasmatic blend of bribery and begging later, he managed to convince an obscure university in his hometown of Memphis to fund his study in the *microcosm of global terrorism* – the subcontinent. The course was infidelity incarnate – the first day of classes had been called off due to a student union strike against the use of blackboards and their subsequent smog of chalk-dust. Apparently, ten students had to undergo medical treatments because of the inhalation of the allergic dust; the student union had filed petitions and the management had been either too busy or too oblivious to care. The result – another of the countless strikes. Education seemed to have accepted the strike as a part of its curriculum. Papps, being new to the system, had looked to his fellow classmates (Fellow sufferers? Losers?) for some explanations. "Welcome to India," one of them had said with a smile that said even more. It said, "You poor sod. How do you live with yourself?" Papps had smiled another seemingly innocent smile, but the subliminal message was conveyed, "It's not easy."

"Not bad, eh?" said a high-pitched, almost murine voice close to his ear, making him jump with fright. Jerking back from the window, he threw the light switch on. The harsh light hurt his eyes for a second and he saw that the old man who had been sleeping across his had woken up. The man was sitting up in his seat and grinning at Papps, who looked miserably ashen. The grin failed to hide the lack of the three front teeth, exposing the gums in an etiolated fashion. Papps observed that he wasn't really all that old – the clothing and the emancipated frame made him look old. The face still had the vigor of youth; the muscles of his limbs still held taut and more importantly, the eyes were alive with age. Some people are born with natural cracks in the facial skin that become exaggerated when they smile – sometimes it gives the appearance that they've wrinkled a bit early for their age. The old man's face had similar lines that Papps had mistaken for the folding of an old age. The man was probably in his late fifties, gray-haired and grinning his idiotic grin again.

"Scared you, did I?" he asked, without lifting the grin. He looked straight at Papps and winked. His grin grew wider, exposing even more unkempt dentals. "No, no you didn't," said Papps, regaining his composure. His head still hurt from his escapades the night

before. He looked at the toothless man sitting across him and said, "Why're you laughing?"

"I scared you, didn't I?" asked the strange man.

"A bit flustered, is all," said Papps. "You speak English very well."

"Thank you," said the man. "Its not often that I get to show off my vocabulary, what with me staying in the slum and all. But, it's always a pleasure to converse in this exalted language. British, are you?"

"No," said Papps, warming up to the geezer. "I'm American. I'm a student at the university. Or rather, was," he added heavily.

"Ah, the great temple of knowledge!" the man replied and started laughing. "I'm kidding, mister. Forgive me, but your choice of a place to study was pretty poor. True that this university was renowned once upon a time, but nowadays, it has transgressed into an abattoir of the innocent. Heh Heh Heh..." That toothless grin again.

"Oh, tell me about it," said Papps and fell back on the seat, sadness reigning on his face.

"Why the long face, mister? And why the use of the past tense earlier?"

"Forget it, man," said Papps.

"Bhaskar," said the man.

"What?" asked Papps, confused.

"My name. Its Bhaskar."

"Nice to meet you, I'm sure. But forgive my lousy mood. I just had a disgusting day."

"Oh, I'm sure you did," said Bhaskar and grinning, fanned his nose. "I can smell it!"

Papps smiled and nodded. "Yeah," he said. "Pretty bad."

"Care to share the burden?" asked Bhaskar. Papps closed his eyes and fell into rhythm with the gamboling carriage. The dawn was sneaking into the carriage through the window – the sky showed the first signs of a glorious day. The engine up ahead hooted and the scream seemed loud enough to scare a scarecrow. Papps opened his eyes and looked at Bhaskar. The Indian was studying him intently, with a lingering smile on his face.

"What happened, my son?" he asked. "Look, it's a very long way to go still and we're both stuck with each other for the next two days. So, I think it'd be better if you talk to me." The man seemed sincere enough, with his voice that seemed to reach Papps' soul and that look – oh; it was kindness, nothing else.

"I – I'm sorry. I happened to flunk in my first year finals. Being an exchange student called for, in the words of my dean, academic brilliance. Yeah, right!" he rolled his eyes and went on. "To expect that from me was insanity. Talking about madness, I think my coming to India to study was the biggest of the lot." He shook his head and smiled, despite the tears.

"I – I am sorry," he said and wiped them with his sleeve. "And – and then, well, I got drunk. That is my story. I'm on my way to Bangalore in the hope of working for a living. Fat chance!"

Bhaskar looked at him sadly. "And the blood?" he asked.

Papps looked confused. "Blood? What blood?"

"The blood on your shirt," said Bhaskar, wide-eyed. He sounded surprised. "You – you didn't notice?"

That was when Papps looked down at his own body and saw, in the light of the cabin and the insignificant twilight of dawn, that the left side of his torso, from under his armpit till his waist, was covered in thick, congealed blood.

CHAPTER TWO

Now, normally a person would panic on seeing himself covered with blood, which is precisely what Papps did. He saw the blood on his shirt and let out a stifled scream. He stood up and started walking around the cabin, trying to get a better look at the stain, while constantly mumbling to himself. “Oh my God! Oh my God! Oh my God! I didn’t hurt anyone, did I? I don’t remember! I don’t fucking remember! Shit! Why don’t I remember? Fuck! Fuck!”

“Hey,” said Bhaskar, trying to calm him down. “Hey, HEY!” he shouted.

That stopped Papps in his tracks and he looked miserably at Bhaskar. “I didn’t hurt anyone,” he cried. “I didn’t! Believe me, I didn’t!”

“I do believe you,” said Bhaskar calmly. “Now, sit down and we’ll discuss this.”

He obeyed him meekly, still looking as though charged of a crime he didn’t commit.

“Now,” said Bhaskar. “Obviously, this isn’t your blood, else you’d be in a great pain.”

“Obviously,” said Papps and he gently touched his side and felt for a wound, half expecting a bullet hole or a slash from a knife. He didn’t find any.

“So, now the question is: Whose is it? And more importantly, how did it get on you?”

Papps nodded dumbly.

“Think hard,” said Bhaskar. “What did you do yesterday? You told me you had a bad day, told me you failed in your exams and it’s glaringly obvious how you drowned your sorrows. (He smiled when he said this; Papps didn’t) So, after you got drunk, what did you do and how did you end up on this train? Oh, and you’re lucky that no one noticed the blood on your shirt at the station. You’d have woken up in a Delhi jail today, my friend, which isn’t such a nice place. Trust me, I know from experience.” His toothless grin filled his face. “That’s where I lost these.”

Papps considered this for a moment and said, “I really don’t remember what happened after the fifth drink. Of course, I know where I went – this place called the Pavilion, out on Chandni Avenue – “

“Yeah, I know the place,” said Bhaskar. “Go ahead.”

“Well, it was a decent place, you know. No dancing girls, no drugs and stuff – just a pretty straightforward pub, where people go once in a while to get sloshed. I had vodka and I remember calling for a shot of their rum. I guess my memory failed me after that. I just don’t remember what happened.”

Bhaskar looked unconvinced.

Papps spread his hands helplessly. “Honestly, the next thing I know, I’m paying for a ticket to Bangalore and was slouching in the waiting room – it was pretty dark, I remember. Then this uniformed guy calls my name and seeing that I can’t stand straight, helped me out into the cabin. I went out like a burnt matchstick, until I woke up today at around three. There it is, man! That’s all I know.”

“Wait a minute!” said Bhaskar. “Did you say the guard helped you on to the train?”

“Yeah, I guess so,” said Papps.

“*Do not guess, mister!*” growled Bhaskar. “Did he actually help you, as in you leant against him?”

Papps thought back. “Yeah, I did. I leant on him. He said something like *Fuckin Drunkards* or something. I remember because I wanted to tell him that I wasn’t all that drunk; it was a question of my self esteem, man!” he added when he saw Bhaskar roll his eyes.

“Ok, on which side were you on?”

“What?” asked Papps, getting confused.

The train screamed again. The hoot coincided with the breaking of the dawn. The morn had arrived and with it, the beauty of the Indian countryside had materialized.

“Was he on your left or your right?” he asked.

“How the fuck should I know?” asked Papps, annoyed with the interrogator. “Oh, wait a minute! He was on my left. Yes!” he said, with a glint in his eyes, now seeing where this was leading. “Yes! He was on my left, because I had to sign on the form he held out to me near the door of the carriage, and I signed with my right hand. So – “

“So,” said Bhaskar, smiling in unison with Papps, he should’ve noticed the blood! Which he didn’t, so obviously, you were clean when you got into the train.”

“Which means – “ said Papps.

The realization dawned on both men at precisely the same time. When the Indian Railways adopted the Broad-Gauge system thirty years ago, due to the increasing demands of the public, the capacity of a cabin had been increased from six to eight, sometimes nine, if you could adjust. Though, in general, this number was always tentative, because of the Indian citizen’s obsession for standing or footboarding, trains carried two, sometimes three times the required load of people. This system enabled the use of ‘sleeper’ cars with three bunks for sleeping – the lower one that doubled as a seat; the middle one that doubled as a backrest for the seated passenger; and a top bunk, that was placed very close to the roof, held up by strong chains.

Papps and Bhaskar looked up at the top bunk above Papps seat. There, in the light of the morning streaming in through the windows on either side of the aisle, they saw a huge, ovoid bloodstain, matted and hardened, and the obvious source of the stain on the American’s shirt. He hadn’t noticed it when the blood had dripped on him throughout the night. Neither man had noticed the occupancy of the top bunk. They stood up slowly, thankful that there weren’t many people in the carriage, and looked into the top bunk. There, lying incognito, oblivious to the happenings of the world, was a young woman of a divine beauty, her face radiant, though she was very much dead, the lips still red, the sari she’d been wearing failing to conceal the lovely figure – all these, the men noticed second; the first thing that caught their attention was the worn-out wooden handle of a knife sticking out of her heart, like an empty flagpole, devoid of the symbol of life. The woman, lying on her side, facing the two men, had been stabbed to death.

CHAPTER THREE

“This is not happening to me,” said Papps. “No, it isn’t. This is a dream! Yeah, that’s what it is, a dream! I’ve just had too much to drink and I’m still sleeping in the train, on my way to Bangalore. There is no toothless man in my cabin, there sure as hell isn’t a dead woman above me and I am damn Fucking sure that I am not drenched in her blood!” that was when Bhaskar slapped Papps hard on the right cheek. Papps went reeling onto the floor and fell heavily against the wall. His mind went berserk, still clinging on to the haziness of the alcohol-induced stupor and the slap-induced alacrity. The stinging slap

won and Papps woke up properly. He shook his head and forced himself awake. “Thanks man,” he said. “I needed that.”

“No problem,” said Bhaskar. He took his blanket from his seat and covered the dead woman without touching her. He climbed down and sat down. Papps dragged himself up and sat across him. They looked at each other.

“What now?” said Papps, fear in his voice.

“Now, nothing,” said Bhaskar. “By the way, what do I call you?”

“Oh, I’m so sorry. My name is Michael Papps. Call me Mikey, or Papps or anything you wanna call me.” He extended his hand and Bhaskar shook it. “Pleasure, Mikey,” he said.

“Same here, Bhaskar,” he said.

“Now that we’re acquainted, I’d better tell you that we’re both in deep trouble. If that woman is discovered, we’ll both be counting bars in the cooler by the end of the day. Forget Bangalore; forget your chances of going back to the States. A murder’s a pretty serious crime, my friend. And no diplomacy when it comes to murder, first degree.”

“But,” pleaded Papps. “I – I never touched her! Hell, I never saw her in my life!”

“I know that and you know that, Mikey,” said Bhaskar. “But, believe me, we’re gonna have a tough time convincing the authorities about that. I mean, how strong is your drunken alibi against my soporific one? Huh?” He smiled his grin again.

Papps joined in. “I get it,” he said. “We’re in deep shit, aren’t we?”

“You can say that again!”

“So, what do you propose we do?”

“Well,” began Bhaskar. “We could start by disposing the body – “

“What?” cried Papps. “Are you nuts? Don’t even think about it, man! We’re in a train filled with people, moving at fifty miles an hour and we’ve got a dead broad on our hands. And you wanna dispose of the body? I think you’ve lost it, my friend!”

Bhaskar just laughed and said, “Mikey, I think you better realize you’re not in America anymore. This is India, mister. Don’t worry about disposing the body. We can do it with one arm tied behind our back. But, what worries me is something else.” He frowned, trying to think.

“What is it?” asked Papps, still unconvinced about the plausibility of the body-disposal idea.

“I’m worried about the fact that if this woman’s been registered in this bunk, then, when whoever’s expecting her doesn’t find her may lodge a complaint. As the only other occupants of the bunk, our names will be drawn up and we’ll be called for questioning.”

“But, come on,” said Papps. “Get serious, man! I didn’t give any of my details when I bought the ticket. I just paid cash. How will they know who I am once I get down at Bangalore and bugger off into the crowd? How will they know who you are? To them, we’re just two names on a roll call, aren’t we?”

Bhaskar looked serious. He considered what Papps said and put in a loophole of his own. “But, what if she’s not going to Bangalore?” he asked. “What if she was bound to get down somewhere along the line, say the next stop for example? When they find her missing, they’ll just radio the train saying that such-and-such a person in E23 hasn’t disembarked. Please see to it that she does – blah – blah – and when the ticket guy gets here to see we both sitting with her dead body, I’ll be forced to bid you farewell.”

Papps thought about this. No matter which way he looked, he had to concede that the Indian was right. "Ok, I give up," he said. "You're right. We're much better off without the dead body. So, any bright ideas how to get rid of her?"

Bhaskar looked at him and smiled.

CHAPTER FOUR

Three years ago, if someone had told Papps that he'd be traveling in a train with a dead body, he'd have accepted it. But, if someone had told him that he'd be traveling in a train in India with a dead body and that he'd be involved in its disposal, he'd have laughed that person out of the room. Now, Papps didn't find this the least bit funny. *What the hell am I doing here?* he asked himself. *I'm just a student, having failed in the exams on my way to find myself a job. I'm an American citizen who shouldn't be involved in anything remotely illegal in other countries. Then why the fuck am I helping in the disposal of a Fuckin dead body??*

The answers didn't come. The train thundered on through the picturesque countryside, past the rolling fields of rice and ragi, the tall cane patches and the interspersed coconut groves. Orchards of mango and the famous vineyards of Central India flashed past as the mechanical worm ate up the miles on its quest to the south. The day turned out to be beautiful. The sun had reached its peak and started to heat up the cabin. The four windows didn't do enough to quell the heat. Sweating like a pig, Papps strolled up and down the carriage on his 'reconnaissance' of the carriage. All the cabins were filled on either side of theirs and though little, the number of people were enough not to attempt a daring dash for the door carrying the wrapped body. They had already decided that the best way to dispose the body was to throw it from the moving train. To do that, they had to carry it from their cabin to the doors, which, as luck had it, were four cabins from theirs on either side.

He came back to his seat and slumped down. "Jesus, its hot," he said and fanned his shirt for some air. he had long ago changed his shirt to something more casual. He was now wearing a Bahamas T-shirt and a pair of Bermudas. This was also a slight problem for the two plotters because of the amused looks that Papps drew wherever he went. Children especially followed him all along the length of the carriage and pointed at him and giggled, much to his dismay.

"Gotta do something about these kids," he said.

"I think I know what," said Bhaskar. "First, tell me what you saw."

"Ok, the train's not so full, much to our luck. But, that's the bad news," he said and smiled. "The really bad news is that there're at least three to four people in each cabin on either side. And there's a party of five youngsters – college kids, I think – at the last cabin, immediately next to the door."

"Shit," said Bhaskar. "What's the good news?"

"I'm pretty popular with the kids," he said and laughed.

"I don't think this is the time for any wise cracks, my friend," said Bhaskar gravely. "The next stop's about an hour from now. We have got to do it by then."

"Ok," said Papps. "I think your plan is pretty good. Lets go ahead with it."

"Yes, lets do it."

They both stood up and dragged the body of the woman from the top and placed it on the floor. Covering it with some baggage, it gave the impression to anyone passing by that

the two were getting ready to leave. Body properly camouflaged, Papps began his role. He strolled up to the door and opened it. The inevitable babble of kids greeted him when he turned back from the breathtaking scenery that flew past him outside the door. He crouched down among them and said with a huge smile, “You kids speak English?”

This drew even bigger giggles from them and finally one of them said, “Yes, I know!”

“Lovely!” said Papps, clasping his hands. “You kids wanna play a game?”

“Yes! Yes!” they cried. This is too easy, thought Papps.

“Ok,” he said. “I want everyone of you to run into the kitchen car at the end of the train and steal one vada each! Can you do that?”

They all started laughing excitedly and turned and ran the length of the corridor in a bid to be the first to please the white man with a stolen vada. As soon as they had exited the carriage, Papps drew his breath and walked to the first cabin. The four people looked up at him as he stood in the corridor, looking at them and smiling. A woman smiled back.

“Good morning, folks. I’m Michael Rodriguez, from the Railway security. There’s been a bomb threat on this carriage. Please move into the next carriage until I tell you its safe. Thank you for your cooperation.”

He was amazed at the response this little white lie received. One woman literally pushed him out of the way and rushed into the next carriage. The horrors of a life lead amongst terror, he reflected sadly – the very existence hanging in the balance, in the hands of a madman waiting to blow up a train today, a building tomorrow; lives are inevitably lost. And in the situation where someone comes up to you and says that there’s a bomb threat in your train compartment, you don’t really think about the feasibility of the claim – you just leave the compartment to be searched, unless its too late. This simple logic of Bhaskar amazed Papps as he saw it work miracles. In a few minutes, the carriage was empty and in a few minutes more, they both had dragged the body to the door and with one final look around and one look at each other, they hurled the body into the landscape and watched it bounce on the rough pebble-strewn mound before disappearing from view behind an electric transformer.

They both leaned against the door and looked at each other. Wiping their sweats, they both smiled and then, burst out laughing for no reason.

Papps went to undo the damage he had done in forcing the people out of the carriage and Bhaskar went back to the seat. Papps walked into the shaking, rickety shack that separated two compartments and opened the door. He stared into the anxious faces of twenty passengers and one stern face of a ticket inspector. The uniformed inspector told him in a soft voice, “I’ve been in the service of Indian Railways for thirty years and I’ve never known any Rodriguez who works for Security; certainly not one,” he said looking up and down at Papps, “who works in shorts and T-shirts. Will you come with me, please?”

It was more of an order than a request. As Papps followed the inspector, he knew he was in deeper shit than before.

CHAPTER FIVE

“Mr. Papps,” said the inspector once they were seated in the latter’s cabin at the head of the train, “sending the children to steal from the kitchen and then getting rid of the adults tells me that you wanted complete privacy to do something. If you don’t tell me what that was, then I shall have to remind you the seriousness of the crime you’ve committed.

Spreading false rumors, especially about bombs will draw a minimum penalty of three years in jail.”

Papps panicked. What in God’s name was he doing here? *I don’t want any of this, he told himself. Shit, I just wanna get to Bangalore and get a job!*

“Ok,” he said and sighed heavily. “I’ll tell you the whole truth.”

“Mr. Inspector,” he began. “I’m a loser...”

CHAPTER SIX

Papps descended from the train at Bangalore and looked about him. He smiled to himself and took in the rich, polluted air into his lungs and said, “I’ve made it! My new life begins here. This is one train journey I’ll never forget.”

He looked about him and saw the various stalls that sold an assortment of eatables and an array of drinks. The people milled about their heaps of luggage and talked excitedly to one another about their respective trips.

At one end of the train, he saw three policemen escorting a handcuffed Bhaskar to a waiting senior official. Bhaskar caught Papps’ eye and grinned his toothless grin again. Papps walked up to the convoy and called out Bhaskar’s name.

He turned to face Papps. “Played you pretty well, didn’t I?” he said, grinning again. “I almost got away with it too, you know. The moment I smelled your breath, I knew I had a scapegoat. Anyone that drunk wouldn’t remember a thing. Well, as it turned out, luck didn’t favor me. Pity, isn’t it?”

Papps didn’t say a word. He just watched the policemen drag a strangely passive and submissive Bhaskar out of the terminal and into a convoy of jeeps.

“That man was wanted in four states,” said a voice behind him. Papps turned to see the ticket inspector. “Its good that you didn’t get caught up in the messy business, Mr. Papps. The body is being recovered as we speak. The woman’s identity has yet to be established. I am sure you’ll not forget this journey in a hurry.” He smiled and added, “On behalf of the Railway Community, I wish to apologize for a lousy journey, Mr. Papps.”

Papps smiled and said, “Please don’t apologize. This is the journey that’ll make my career in journalism. I thank you, for believing in my story.”

The inspector smiled. “Of course, I had to believe you. After all, you were pretty drunk when I helped you on to the train back in Delhi and I’ve been drunk myself in my life a couple of times to know what it feels like and how deeply we sleep after that. A murder? No, Mr. Papps,” he said and laughed. “The only person you were capable of murdering was yourself and that too would’ve been a bit hard!”

Papps laughed and shook hands with him. “Enjoy your stay in Bangalore, Mr. Papps,” he heard the inspector shout behind him. He turned back and waved him goodbye.

Bangalore, he said. Here I come.