

Aymaran Shadow

HEMANTH GORUR

First published in 2013 by
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Bangalore, India

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ISBN: 149280231X
ISBN-13: 978-1492802310

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To all those ageless immortals whose souls have been
ravaged by time and destiny.

The author acknowledges all those who helped make this book see the light of day by way of interventions in editing, proof-reading, cover design, and publishing.

- PROLOGUE -

Somewhere in the Andes
Circa. 1782

The thundering hooves dug deep into the wet Bolivian soil as the swarthy rider from Caracas hunched into the beast under him. *Fie be upon that woman!* The passing underbrush swung back in rebellion as the maddened horse careened through the canyon that was awash with eerie darkness. Occasionally, the distant glow of burning villages served to heighten the rider's grim resolve. Calamarca was gone. Potosi and Sucre in the south had been razed to the ground. Oruro had been seized and the elders of the village annihilated. To the north and the west, Pilo Lajas and Chulumani had been bludgeoned into submission, while La Paz and El Alto had been under siege for four sunsets.

Still, there were pockets of fierce resistance from

tribal warlords who had not yet submitted to the rule of the Rosa. They had to be quelled. *Especially that Senorita from Cochabamba!* People would pay for their rebellion. With their lives. With their dignity, if necessary. The swarthy rider dug his spurs deeper into the beast's underbelly; time was of essence and there were conspiracies to be hatched. He was a conquistador, after all – a *capitán* at that. It was but his job to cull ignorant populations and exchange blood for gold from the Empire.

The beast responded to its master's provocation and surged forward as its sinews strained against the massive girth of the man straddling it. The flared nostrils of the thoroughbred betrayed the hours of tiresome running it had been subjected to across the barren Andean countryside. Its widened eyes conveyed a sense of fear. A fear of the unknown. A fear born of past traps.

And then it happened. No amount of preparation could prepare one for an Aymaran ambush. The first sign that it was one was that the galloping steed had no time to react as it was thrown off its stride and into the air. In a trice, its maned head came crashing down into the rock-hewn dust road as it pitched forward in a spine-crushing arc. It was an Incan sling, which could be used to launch man-made missiles or bring down speeding horses with equal ease and mind-numbing alacrity.

The swarthy conquistador had been thrown off his saddle and had landed on his back in the dark

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underbrush. He now lay in wait, motionless. It would be over soon. The Aymarans came in hordes. They were there for the kill. The *capitán* had blundered. If only he had listened to that irksome number two of his and not ventured alone. It was too late now.

A rustle of leaves in the distance indicated that either the Aymaran warriors were hunting for him in the wrong place or they were leaving their quarry alone for the night. *Unthinkable!* But it was not his to think about the unthinkable. It was his to reach the tavern and make sure his co-conspirators knew he was alive. An hour later, a shadowy figure inched its way into the sparse woods that bordered the Andean landscape.

The clutch of huts on the rolling highlands huddled together as if to ward off some great evil that lurked in the festering jungles below. All huts were dark and looked devoid of any human activity. The narrow muddy lanes were also bereft of people. This was Cochabamba. One did not invite trouble by venturing out or staying awake after dark unless one was a creature of the night. And the people of Cochabamba were wise enough not to violate this decree from Goddess Chasca, the protector of virgin girls.

There was one hut, however, that defied this collective wisdom of the ages. It was dimly lit by makeshift lamps that were casting macabre shadows through its lone window. Inside, a man and a woman hunched over a rickety wooden table that protested with

each shift of the woman's thick hands. They were joined by three other Aymarans – loyal minions – while one youngster stood guard at the door. He was being tested – he would be promoted as a scout in the jungles if his duties as a sentry satisfied Aymaran commanders such as the duo that now stood at the table.

The wooden table creaked. The Aymaran woman set down her hollowed gourd, which was holding a drink made of *chicha* and coca leaf extract. The gourd teetered. Cursing, she called the young sentry at the door and barked an order. The aspiring scout gingerly held the wobbling gourd while the woman turned to face the man across her.

“Let things be. I have foreseen what is to befall the cursed outlanders.” Her voice was even, yet quivering with suppressed disgust.

“But this is not the way,” the man across her muttered under his breath.

“There is a time and a place for everything.”

“You do not know these outlanders, *mi mujer*.”

“What is to know?” The woman's lush brows shot up.

“They are like bugs. They need to be squashed and offered to God Apu on first sight.”

“*Como he dicho*, there is a time and a place for everything. *Además de*, they are all after blood. They do not surprise us.”

“This one does. He comes from far. He hungers for your scalp. He thirsts,” the man hissed through gritted

teeth, the rage evident.

“I have foreseen a special end for this one.”

Just then, the glow from the single candle on the table flickered as three Aymaran warriors trooped in excitedly. They had put the scare of God Supay into the cursed outlander who came from far and left him bewildered. Just as they had been instructed. The man at the table instantly flew into a rage befitting an Aymaran commander. He stood up. It was a signal. The minions and warriors shuffled out of the hut chanting their Aymaran war cry softly.

“We will not live to see the end of this. This is a bad omen, *mujer*,” the man warned his compatriot across the table, who too stood up.

“I’m sorry, *mi amor*. But this is the way I want it. I want the *capitán* to see my face when I behead him.”

The Aymaran woman joined her compatriot who had left the rickety table and stationed himself by the window. The two faced each other as the man took the woman’s hands into his own. Minutes passed in silence. A silence born of understanding and love. The man realized why he had given in to her decision. He would give anything to be able to look into those beautiful brown eyes and caress those long flowing tresses of thick black hair.

At long last, the man drew the woman closer and pressed her to his chest. The Aymaran woman came willingly, her eyes closed in temporal bliss. The man’s eyes turned to the window and gazed blankly at the dark

nothingness beyond. *Tomorrow would see the insane death of that cursed mongrel!* It was a vow taken before God Apu. A vow that could not be broken, unless one wished the very plague upon oneself.

The tavern at Quillacollo was on the outskirts of Cochabamba, ten kilometers from the village square. It was a bustling center of decadence and vice. Ale and native liquor flowed till the wee hours. Drunk mercenaries and bored officers of colonial garrisons brought their whores to consort with and satiate their lust in unlit corners of the cavernous interiors. The place was also a transit point for raw opium and illegal coca. A setting that cradled conspiracy.

It was still dark dawn when the swarthy *capitán* dragged himself wearily in, his feet macerated by the tortuous walk over hilly terrain. As he stopped at the nearest table and inhaled deeply, he could feel the thirteen pairs of eyes boring into him. Eyes that were intoxicated by neither lust nor ale, but by unadulterated rage. Eyes that waited on his every move, for a single command that would galvanize them into action.

For, it was action that was needed now. Against one woman from Cochabamba who had dared to challenge the might of the Empire. The *capitán* had called for a meeting of his trusted lieutenants and fellow conquistadors to quell that challenge. That Anacondan serpent had to be crushed before it struck. *Humiliated and crushed!*

As the *capitán* looked around him, a smirk of satisfaction crossed his grey lips.

“*Caballeros*, the time has come. By evening, I want to see this snake writhing on this very same table,” his voice rose, sounding more ominous than commanding. But it had the desired effect.

“We stand by you. The woman shall curse the old hag who brought her into this world.” It was a huge mountain of a man whose balding scalp reflected the dull amber of the tavern’s wick lamps.

“She is popular. The elders will bring the numbers,” cautioned a wiry weasel-like man.

The *capitán* bristled. “There is such a thing as lure. And deceit. Use it. Serpents are not caught with open cages.”

“We should. And we will. But there is...” Wiry Weasel replied.

“We heard about the ambush,” broke in a thick voice. It was a quiet man at the back of the tavern whose eyes had not left the pitcher of bitter ale in front of him ever since the *capitán* had entered the tavern. The man’s thick hairy arms caressed a rust-colored musket as if it were a tool of sin. Two brothers at the next table, beefy and unshaven, smirked in unison at this open taunt.

The *capitán* glared but said nothing. Hairy Arms was a nuisance but was useful in battle. He would be needed in this game of strategy where a queen humiliated would set the foot soldiers and cavalry in disarray.

“There is one more thing,” continued Wiry Weasel.

“Speak your mind, *comarada*,” barked the *capitán*.

“It is difficult to catch this serpent.”

“And why is that so?”

“She changes her location every dawn and dusk.”

“Make one of the elders speak. Bribe them. Roast their genitals in *chicha* if they do not open their mouths.”

“The elders would rather die.”

“And they will get their wish. The Empire is paying you incompetent fools to conquer, not whine like pitiful whores.” The *capitán*'s eyes bored into each of the thirteen men sitting around him.

“There is a way.” It was Balding Scalp.

Ten minutes later, the tavern emptied as the mercenaries trooped out to their horses. A dull red glow in the distance signaled the onset of yet another Bolivian dawn. The dry breeze lifted gusts of dust into the tropical morning as, one by one, the horses broke into a canter and disappeared into the brush.

A lone figure remained on the porch of the tavern. At length, the hate-filled *capitán* started down the steps that led to the dirt road. The popularity of that *Senorita* had to be dismantled. Nothing could be done as long she had people to command – people who willingly surrendered their breath at her slightest gesture. *Suddenly, he knew.* Pausing to scratch his crotch, he took one last look at the tavern. *He had much to accomplish.*

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Cochabamba, Bolivia
Circa. 1782

The old woman was bent over with age and disease as she hobbled on the dirt roads leading to the village square, shielding her eyes from the noon sun. She carried a grotesque stick for support that creaked with every alternate step. The worn out cloth bag at her shoulder slung low with some rotten vegetables that were reeking of waste. As she ambled past the village square, two officers of the garrison watched her and chuckled.

“Don’t let anyone give you a tough time, you old hag!”

“*Sí*, show them the daughters and granddaughters in your house!”

“Hasten home now. Get home before it is dark!”

The officers of the garrison guffawed and slapped each other on the back. Bolivian natives were the perfect savages – unbridled in the wild, subdued curs in captivity.

The old woman rounded a hut and quickened her pace as she approached a large ramshackle tent made of animal hide and used cloth. She flung the stick and cloth bag aside as the inmates of the tent made way for her. The minions were in attendance, as were some elders of the village. The white hair and the tattered clothes came off as the Aymaran woman strode to the center of the tent and faced the elders. She now looked macabre with her olive dark hair and youthful body contrasting with the dark brown patches painted on her face and arms to portray age and illness.

“Come, *niño*, there is grave news,” welcomed the first elder.

“Yes, I came to know,” murmured the Aymaran woman.

“You have suffered. Yet, there is more suffering Goddess Chasca wishes upon you,” intoned a second elder.

The Aymaran woman fell silent. Her love had ridden out in the morning to a neighboring village to repulse a siege by the outlanders and had not returned since.

“We hear of strange things, *niño*,” the first elder continued gravely. “You have consorted with one of the outlanders, *no habéis?*”

The Aymaran woman's chin shot up sharply, her lips quivering with rage.

"Preposterous! I shall be cursed!"

"Our wisdom suggested falsehood. But people have seen you."

"Who blabbers such lies? They shall join their ancestors for this treachery! Wise one, allow me to hunt them down," thundered the furious Aymaran commander, her brown eyes flashing.

"May the great Goddess Chasca bring you peace. We have decided on a way to redeem yourself."

The Aymaran woman looked on defiantly.

"There is a place in Quillacollo that you must go to at dusk today. The people of Cochabamba shall be there, as will the outlanders."

"I do not understand," the Aymaran woman offered, softly.

"It is a test. You must confront your despicable consort there. The outcome of that confrontation will decide your fate. Redeem yourself, *niño*," the tribal elder spat with a finality that brooked no argument.

It was so not like *la amo* – her love. Why had not he returned? Why had not he sent a horseman to relay news of a successful repulsion of the garrison? Was he wounded? *Was he still alive?* The Aymaran woman tossed her dark mane and saddled her faithful steed as gory images of a slain warrior of Cochabamba tormented her.

The ride to Quillacollo consumed her from the

inside. Who was this outlander who portrayed himself as her ‘man’? Was she to trust the people of Cochabamba? *Was she to trust the elders?* As the Incan sun began its final descent for the day, the Aymaran woman broke her galloping steed’s pace and trotted up to a tavern that looked garish yet mysterious from the outside.

Tethering the horse, the woman felt a sudden twinge of terror. *Where were her people?* Suppressing a rising feeling of panic, she convinced herself that perhaps they were all inside the tavern waiting for her. She strode cautiously up the steps of the tavern leading to the entrance and pushed open the heavy half-doors. She took one last look at the setting sun and strode inside the tavern. Instantly, she knew it was a mistake.

It was a trap! The tavern was bereft of human life. A dull glint screamed for her attention from the dark corner directly in front of her. The glint moved forward slowly and stopped. It was a tall swarthy man with sideburns that hid stocky jowls. The glint was from the long blade of the machete that slung casually at the man’s side. The man’s lips were curled in lustful anticipation and made a vulgar noise as he nodded his appreciation. He looked like a conquistador – but was not one from these parts.

Suddenly, the Aymaran woman became aware of other figures which had emerged from the dark unlit corners of the tavern and surrounded her. Something told her that her exit had been already compromised.

She turned around slowly, hoping she was wrong. She wasn't. A man with hairy arms and a musket in hand was blocking the very entrance she had walked through moments before.

As she turned around again to face her rival, she let out an involuntary gasp and staggered back. The swarthy conquistador was eerily inches from her, breathing down her face and savoring every inch of her body with his lustful eyes.

The Aymaran commander was stockily built for a woman, but proportionately endowed. Her long flowing hair framed her radiant face, her full lips pursed into a defiant lock. As her eyes flashed in rage, her flared nostrils accentuated the heaving movement of her barely visible cleavage. Her shapely but strong thighs twitched as the tension in the air became palpable. Standing with her hands on her ample hips in the center of the tavern, she looked like a lioness surrounded by ravaging beasts.

Then, one beast made the move. The *capitán* had watched her for long enough. Now, he wanted her. His hate for this serpent of a woman who had tormented the Empire so much was rivaled only by his animal lust for her. *She needed to be silenced!*

As the mercenaries around cackled their approval, the *capitán* reached out to grab her lower back and yanked her closer. He was immediately greeted by a flurry of punches as the Aymaran commander lashed out with both her hands across his face and drew blood. Enraged, the lust-filled conquistador blotted his

bleeding face with his right hand while his left shot out forward like a battering ram, sending his quarry crashing backwards into the nearest wall as she tripped over the extended boot of one of the conquistador's henchmen.

It was a huge balding man whose scalp shone vulgarly. "That was for the sling, you filthy whore!" swore the man as he took a deep swig of bitter ale from his goblet.

As the quarry rebounded off the wall, her right leg caught the splintered edge of a wooden table and tore open a bright red gash on her thigh. Screaming with pain, she stumbled to the ground clutching her leg. The searing pain numbed her senses as she struggled to cope with reality.

The next few moments brought trauma and agony for the Aymaran commander. Her neck suddenly arched as her thick disheveled hair was grabbed by a powerful pair of hands and yanked up mercilessly, forcing the terrified quarry to ignore pain and obey brute force. She stood up, hopping to avoid aggravating her injury and shifting her weight to her left leg.

The powerful arms belonged to the man with hairy arms who had blocked her exit earlier. He now held her firmly against the stained wall, pinning her arms in an unbreakable hold. Expressionless, the man leaned closer and pressed himself against the Aymaran woman's heavily heaving bosom, taking in the odor of the sweat trickling down her dusky cheeks. As the woman recoiled in helpless repulsion, the man buried his face in the

valley between her neck and breasts even as she convulsed.

“Enough!” barked the *capitán*, as he pulled his man away.

The *capitán* proceeded to confront his hated quarry and lifted her chin so that she could see his face. A face contorted by a strange mix of lust and derision. *The serpent had to be humiliated!* The treacherous *capitán* pinned her against the wall and gripped the top of her tunic. Before the shocked Aymaran woman could react, he violently ripped off the upper vest, revealing her naked modesty. The Aymaran woman pried herself loose and turned to hug the wall in shame. A shame brought upon her by brutes intoxicated by machismo and vile power. A shame that descended upon her because she had chosen to stand for what she believed.

Traumatic moments passed. The woman’s convulsed sobs wreaked her young but weakening body as she tried to see reason in what Goddess Chasca was ordaining for her. Suddenly, a searing white heat ripped diagonally across her back. The pain was so acute that the woman collapsed to the wooden floor, unable to bear the agony which seemed like the stab of a thousand red-hot daggers dipped in frog venom.

The *capitán* stepped back, the blade in his right hand dripping with scarlet red plasmatic fluid. “Bring her to the table!” *He had so much to achieve.*

Two unshaven mercenaries dragged the nearly unconscious Aymaran commander to a specific table

indicated by their vile *capitán*.

“Stand back!”

As the mercenaries backpedaled, their faces broke into hyena-like sneers. What they were about to witness was reward for their long years of celibate toil in feisty jungles and humid battlefields to crush local rebellion.

The swarthy *capitán* wasted no time. *Humiliation!* He arched his right hand and slapped his quarry hard across her face with the back of his hand, immediately drawing blood. Pausing to regain his breath, he recoiled and slapped her again, this time his open palm connecting with her reddened cheek and making a sickening sound. As the Aymaran woman slumped on the table, exhausted, the *capitán* continued to batter her face with well-aimed slaps across her cheeks which had begun to hemorrhage.

He had toyed with her long enough now. He had to send her and the other primitive hordes a message. *Humiliation!* He groped the almost senseless woman’s bosom and squeezed hard. *She had much to pay for!* As the rabid mercenaries around him watched, the *capitán* ripped off the remaining vestiges of the woman’s animal hide garb that pretended to protect her half-naked body.

Time decelerated to an abominable standstill as the violated woman lost sense of reality and reason. The lust-ridden *capitán* ravaged her till his loins were satiated by the carnal misdeed. As he forced himself upon the Aymaran woman again, and again, the woman groaned pitifully under the weight of the trauma assaulting her

senses. A serene white light began to wash over her the eyes of her mind, as she tried to find peace. She had tried to serve her people. And she had paid. Goddess Chasca had been her constant companion in life. Through joy. Through pain. Where was she now? Had she abandoned her child? *Wait! The white light!* It was Goddess Chasca! The child had been beckoned into the higher realm.

As the night grew longer, so did the woman's groans and screams. Outside, the inky black horizon thickened into a sinister veil of darkness as the moonless night of Quillacollo seemed to conspire along with the perpetrators in the tavern. Abruptly, there was a resounding explosion from inside the tavern. An explosion that came out of the greased muzzle of a musket – a weapon that could obliterate human skull and flesh into a thousand shards at close range.

- 2 -

Bangalore, India
Present day

Her sleek blue Nokia Lumia almost fell off the table, vibrating with an urgency that Sanya Rawat had seldom seen. The university cafeteria was sparsely populated, with the odd yuppie group milling about with no express purpose. The late afternoon sun made the vintage glass windows sparkle like vertical walls of shimmering water.

As she uncrossed her legs and bent over to read the incoming number, Sanya's heart jumped a beat. The number was unknown, yet oddly familiar. She was sure she had known the number, but just could not put a face to it. Sliding the touch-screen interface, she pressed the phone to her ear as she reached for her mug of coffee on the triangular table in front of her.

“Sanya, Anuj.”

Sanya froze.

“Sorry, who again?”

“Anuj. Anuj Chaddha.”

The coffee mug almost slipped from Sanya’s hands. It could not be *him*. “Oh, hi, Anuj. I couldn’t recognize your voice,” she stammered, her mind racing, searching for things to say. It was her senior from college who had graduated two years earlier.

“That’s okay. How have you been?”

“Oh, I’m pretty good. I’m really surprised. Imagine getting your call after all these years.”

“Can we meet at UB Mall in half an hour?”

Sanya was bewildered. “Sure. Didn’t know you were in town. How’s everything?”

“Tell you when we meet. See you there.”

As she replaced her phone on the table, Sanya frowned. Anuj had been uncharacteristically brief. His voice had acquired a slight nasal twang. She didn’t like the developments. For a fleeting moment, she was transported to their days of unconsummated romance – a love that had not really blossomed. At least, Anuj had shown no interest, save the occasional indulgent glance.

Sanya had always mooned over her college hero whose wavy hair and dimpled smile somehow made up for all that snootiness. She had loved that the object of her desire was athletic, not beefy like most other guys in her peer group. And she had reconciled herself to the fact that her knees invariably went weak whenever she

heard his deep Germanic voice. Her idea of heaven then had been to allow herself to be cradled by his muscular arms and nestle into his broad manly chest, her fingers tracing every sinewy ripple on his back.

With a start, Sanya broke out of her reverie, unable to bear the scalding heat. She had tipped the coffee mug in her hand and the steaming hot liquid had spilt over, causing red welts on her casually manicured fingers. Sucking on them to ease the burning pain, she got up and opened the list of received calls on her phone to see the calling number again. *What did he want to talk to her about after all these years?*

Dodging late afternoon traffic on Lavelle Road, Sanya's cab swung right into Grant Road, a tony neighborhood in the Central Business District. As she looked up, a familiar sight greeted her – the towering UB City skyscraper – on her right. Pausing to let a gray BMW sedan pass in the opposite direction, the cab cut across the road to enter the mall complex and approached the glassed entrance.

The cab driver had just begun to lean across the window to converse with the security guard when a flash of green in front of the car caught Sanya's eye. *It was Tej's Chevrolet!* The dent in the rear bumper was unmistakable. Before she could react, the fast-moving hatchback had disappeared around the rear end of the mall complex. *What was Tej doing here at this time?* Furrowing her brows, she barked an order to the cab

driver to follow the hatchback. The cab circled the complex to reach the entry ramp of the parking lot in the cellar.

Paying the cab driver, Sanya ran down the spiraling ramp with more than the usual abandon, her mind racing. Level -2 would always be sparsely occupied at this time and that was where Tej would have parked his car. Easing into a light jog, she looked around swiftly across the expanse of Level -2. The Chevrolet was nowhere in sight. Time was of essence. Tej could wait. Sanya turned and headed towards the bank of elevators towards the north end of the parking area. She had a lot of questions for Anuj. Questions he had not answered two years back.

Sanya got off the elevator on the sixteenth floor and strode purposefully towards the end of the causeway. Sanya had been here a zillion times before. Skyee was a contemporary lounge bar with all the trappings of modern-day indulgence and opulence. It served as the meeting place for Sanya and her friends after a long hard day of Psychology and Behaviorism. On days, it also served as her haven of solitude when she needed to unwind and reflect internally. On that day, it was neither.

Dimly lit ambiances altered people's behavior in fundamental ways. Man ceased to be man. Deliberate acts were passed off as accidental mishaps. Dark conversations turned darker. Touch turned to caress in

the blink of an eye. Insistence turned to brutal assault with mind-numbing speed. It never ceased to fascinate Sanya that light, or the absence of it, could have such an unintended yet profound effect on human beings. As she entered the bar, Sanya smiled wryly to herself as she recounted her wild theories relating human behavior to darkness.

Not wanting to appear to be conspicuously searching for someone, she parked herself near the head of the bar and allowed her eyes to get used to the dim interiors. It was neither the outlandish buzz cut nor the ungainly swagger that drew Sanya's attention to a young Chinese youth sitting on one of the bar stools. His eyes were fixed steadfastly on Sanya's chest. His gaze constantly followed the twin movements her breasts were making as she shifted her weight on to one foot, and then on to the other.

Suddenly, Sanya became aware of more eyes. Buzz Cut was not alone. Three young men on adjacent stools had joined the staring and were watching her intently. Her striped spandex top and figure-hugging low-rise jeans accentuated her womanly curves yet conveyed a girlish charm that could grab attention anywhere. On that day, it had grabbed the wrong kind of attention.

Where was Anuj? Sanya swung around to search once more for her college heart-throb. As she began to walk away, she could feel the hungry eyes gaping at the undulating rhythm of her *derrière*. The fleeting feeling of disgust gave way to annoyance as she caught sight of

Shirin, Tej and Kanika at a table near the far side window overlooking the terraced section of the bar.

Sanya marched over to the table. “Hey, guys. We are supposed to meet tomorrow. What are you guys doing here?” She minced no words.

“Hey, beautiful. What brings you here?” Tej piped up.

“Yeah. Looking for someone special?” Shirin teased, with a twinkle in her eye.

“Ye... I mean, no. What do you mean?” Sanya shot back defensively.

“Well, we all know only three people on earth can make you run from A to B, no questions asked.”

Sanya crossed her arms and arched her left eyebrow, her eyes flashing in mock anger.

“Your mom, Bryan Adams, and...”

“And?”

“... Anuj!”

“And since the voice on the call belonged to none of the aforementioned three, it had be yours, Tej. Elementary, my dear Tej. Oh my god, Tej, you are such a jerk!” Sanya grabbed her long strap shoulder bag and pummeled her friend playfully.

“My, someone is really touchy today,” Tej guffawed, as he tried to parry her blows.

“God knows whose cell phone you wangled to make that stupid call. Okay, you guys. Hang in there, and order a Thirst Aid for me. I’ll be back,” broke off Sanya and headed for the women’s room.

The mirrors on the wall were oddly swinging from side to side in the form of a horizontal '8'. There was a strange haziness in the restroom that Sanya had not seen before. The lights embedded in the false ceiling seemed to pulse hypnotically. With a start, Sanya realized that the restrooms at Skye did not have lights in the ceiling. *Craziness had descended.*

Without warning, the wall at the far end of the tastefully done restroom came rushing towards Sanya. Even as she braced for the impact, her left hand appeared magically out of nowhere to cushion the blow and shield her face. She sunk slowly to the floor, using the wall as a support, and palmed her temples. Her head continued to swim. Disjointed and blurred images started flitting in and out of her consciousness.

The throbbing pain in her temples increased as she tried to hold on to the rapidly disintegrating images. Sanya took a deep breath, mopped her forehead and steadied herself. Even as the pulsating nausea in her head ebbed, a weird queasiness took over in her stomach. *The damn mayonnaise she had used in the morning!* Resolving to keep off garlic-based preparations, she stood up gingerly. In the few seconds it took to prop her hair and smoothen her top, she warily looked around. The room had stopped spinning. The mirrors were stationary. Everything was in order. It was probably nothing more than her stomach disagreeing with stale food.

Picking up her shoulder bag, Sanya took measured steps towards the door. A fleeting thought of Anuj kissing her made her smile involuntarily. Inhaling deeply, she opened the door. Instantly, she knew she shouldn't have. *It was craziness all over again!*

At first, she was not sure what had triggered the relapse of the swimming sensation in her head. As she peered into the dark confines of the bar, she spied Buzz Cut downing a huge mug of lager beer. The constant snicker on his face and his hyena-like cackle were enough to enrage a coy girl like her. But it wasn't him. Rage, and the consequent stress, wasn't what Sanya was experiencing. It wasn't Buzz Cut. It was something else.

As her eyes wandered searching for an answer, she looked at the silhouettes of the tables and booths as the eerie lighting cast their shadows in macabre fashion. Then it struck her. *The red fluorescent lighting from below the floor!* The throbbing in her temples shot up as she gazed at the muted light emanating from below the thick translucent glass floor.

Something told her she needed to avoid the red light and leave. As she turned to head towards the exit, she gasped softly as a figure moved in to block her path. It was Tej.

“Tej! It's you...”

“Of course it's me. What happened back there?”

“What do you mean?”

“I saw you wobble as you came out of the restroom. You were talking to yourself.”

Sanya looked on feebly, her head still hurting from the red light.

“Are you alright?” Tej persisted.

“No, I’m fine. I need to leave.”

“Hey, do you need us to drive you home?”

Sanya’s gaze had turned to Buzz Cut, who was gesticulating wildly to his equally frenzied band of inebriated washouts.

“This guy giving you any trouble?” Tej was now looking steadfastly in Buzz Cut’s direction, following Sanya’s gaze.

“No, no. Tej, listen, I got to go...”

“Hey. You just got here. Besides...”

“Tell Shirin I’ll call later.”

As dusk cast its sly shadow over the Central Business District, Sanya entered the teeming Bangalore Metro subway station on Mahatma Gandhi Road and maneuvered herself to the ticket aisles. The station was experiencing rush hour, with harried office-goers returning to their homes or boyfriends for the night. As she swiped her smartcard at the turnstile and pushed through, her Lumia began to buzz. It was another ‘Friend’ request on Facebook.

Taking out her phone from its leather pouch, Sanya peered at the impertinent device, one eye on oncoming human traffic. There were three requests. The first two were from unknown male profiles. Or at least, they appeared to be males from their names. With no photos

on their profile pages and corny introductions, theirs were the typical requests from single boys looking for quick no-strings-attached relationships with willing females. *Boys! If only they would evolve!* Sanya was only too familiar with such requests and did not waste her breath on them.

The only reason she even chose to look at the third 'Friend' request was that it was from a profile having a girl's name and had a profile photo. The profile belonged to a 'Ramona'. The throbbing in her head was threatening to return. Sanya flung her phone into the open bag by her side and mildly massaged her temples. Ramona could wait till she got back home.

