



# Restoring Trust

In her first twelve years of life, Ruti learned more about how not to trust anyone than anything else. When her brother is suddenly killed, her life takes a turn again, this time it appears to be for the better. But her memories are still there, her emotions still rule her decisions, can she ever learn to trust, truly trust another person again? Especially, a man.



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Ruti receives a text from a good friend, possibly soon to be boyfriend, telling her that he has the opportunity to drive a limo tonight from one party to another and he wants to pick her up so she can come for the ride. He told her he is allowed as long as it doesn’t interfere with the timing for the people renting the car. He assured her, that picking her up, is on the way to the party.

She immediately writes back that she will meet him at the corner of her street because she is out for a walk anyway and she starts to walk quickly to the end of her block where he said he will pass in a few minutes.

Ruti has had a lot of trust issues when it comes to the men in her life. The people she lives with aren’t her biological family but they treat her like she is, always have. As a matter of fact, they aren’t even her foster parents, simply put they are her legal guardians. Foster parents are watched by social services, she has never been visited by them since being here. Ruti is older than their other children and gets along with the mom as if they are best friends. Keri, the mom, understands where Ruti has come from and never asks her to share more than she is ready to. Keri encourages her to reach out and become friendlier to the people she is around most. This year Ruti has done that. She now has a healthy group of friends at school and even at her part time job at the fabric store. But for her to have a man/boy that she considers a friend, and a close one at that, is more than she had ever expected to see again in her life.

The first twelve years of her life Ruti lived with turmoil as if it was another sibling, living with Keri has given her the responsibility of having real siblings to care for and about. It is something she has grown to love. Keri’s husband, Luca, is often away on business and her being there makes it easier on him knowing there is help for Keri. She has room and board in exchange for family and responsibility and she is finally enjoying life. A far cry from what she had as a child.

Seeing the limo come down the block, Ruti becomes a bit nervous because the driving doesn’t look smooth, the car actually looks a little jerky as a new driver would be, this seems odd to her, he is a good driver usually. She is immediately on guard for something, she doesn’t know what but she knows she will find out soon. Ruti has been conditioned by her upbringing to look for the small things around her, to trust only her instincts, it’s an unfortunate effect of being the daughter of the parents she had. That needling in her side, the back neck hairs standing up, it always seems to mean disaster is about to happen. She is quickly deciding if she should get in the car with him at all, Ruti can still change her mind she tells herself.

He pulls over to the corner she is standing on and rolls down the window. “Get in love, I’m on a time schedule,” he smiles. Ruti quickly sends Keri a text as to what she is doing so someone knows her whereabouts. By the time she gets into the car and has her seatbelt on Keri writes back, ‘I’m here if you need me, don’t hesitate to call.’ This puts her at ease as the car pulls away.

Still uneasy, Ruti watches Casper as he maneuvers the limo, she sees he is still adjusting the seat and the mirrors and is watching the road almost as if he is watching over his shoulder for something. It’s a look she has seen many times in her past. He is constantly checking the review mirror, the side mirror and his speedometer. Before Ruti got in the car, she was only nervous, but now she is angry. She should have known better than to trust a guy. It has never worked in her life, sans Keri’s husband, but he belongs to Keri, nothing to worry about, not in all the years she has

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been with them, he has proven his worth. Although, he may be the only man on the planet to do this. Ok, possibly her math teacher too, he appears to be a genuine person as well, so now there are two on the planet, she thinks to herself.

After a couple minutes, Ruti quickly assesses where they are and figures out that in another mile or so she can get out of the car and walk to a friend who lives on the other side of the median near this road. She texts her friend and asks if she can stop by, she knows Keri will pick her up there. The response is a resounding yes.

“Casper, what are you doing in this limo?” Ruti asks cautiously.

“Driving it, what do you think? I have to take these people back there over to Rockridge Country Club, wait for them there for a couple of hours and then drive them back. Simple enough and I get paid for it too. Nice gig to get huh? I figured we could talk while we are waiting there, maybe take a walk around the grounds?” he answers softly, not even once glancing over to her. For Ruti it means he is not comfortable driving and that she doesn't like this anymore, she has to make a firm decision. It's time to be tough.

“Is this legal?” she asks with a hint of anger in her voice.

“Sure!!” He reaches into his back pocket and flips open his wallet, “See, limo license and everything.”

Ruti reads it, and rubs her thumb around the whole thing, she scratches it with her nail until she feels what she knew she would feel. Training by her old man came in handy tonight. It's a fake, then she reads it again. Fuming, she says to him, “Pull over, I'm going to be sick. Hurry.” He pulls over and she gets out in a hurry, slams the door and runs, she runs over the median and around a few trees, across the next street and down the block to the third house. She runs like she has never run since she was eleven years old and running away with her father from some people chasing them. When she is safely inside her friend's house she slides down to the floor and sends him a text, *“Clearly, I'm not coming back. Don't EVER lie to me!!! 6'3"!!! Green eyes!!! How stupid do you think I am!! Goodbye Casper, lose my number quickly.”*

Ruti pulls herself up and goes to sit on the couch trying to catch her breath with her friend rubbing her back and not asking a single question, this is a real friend. She calls Keri to explain what happened. Her friend listens to the story, she has her arm around Ruti's shoulders now. The kids are asleep by Keri, as they should be at this hour, but she offers to wake them to come and get her; Ruti's friend says not to and offers to drive her home. Keri waits up for Ruti to get home. As she enters the door Keri says, “Does he know why you would react so harshly?” she says with mild concern for the boy who is probably out trying to impress her. Badly, but trying to impress nonetheless.

Ruti's friend asked the same thing, not that she didn't think running was a good thing to do, but she owed him an explanation as much as he owed her one. Her friend also told her that she believes that one day, Ruti will find people to trust that are guys. She reminds her that there are boys in their group of friends at school that would beat the crap out of anyone who would hurt her and that she should know that these are real friends, not fair weathered ones. Ruti hugged her friend before she got out of the car. Now she sits on the couch at home, wondering what to do with Keri at her side.



Her first response is to cry, Keri holds her. They sit there for a minute. “I’ll be ok. It hurts,” she pauses, “again.” Another pause and a deep breath, “Why does it always have to hurt so much? You’d think I’d learn by now,” she states. Keri offers no words, she pulls Ruti in for another hug and she kisses the top of her head. Keri goes upstairs, knowing that Ruti has to work this out, knowing that she will probably be upset for a couple of days too. She goes upstairs to call her husband and let him know what has happened to their Ruti...again.

Ruti paces the living room. She pulls out her laptop and begins to type up an email to Casper. It’s too much to say in a text. It’s going to take a while to put it all in words. Maybe it will be cathartic, but she has her doubts. Those memories never are.

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While waiting for Ruti to get back into the car his phone buzzes. He reads what she has to say. “Crap, crap and double crap!” Casper picks up his wallet and looks at the license he paid to get only to realize that whoever makes these fake ones, doesn’t look at the person in the picture he is making it for. He shelled out a hundred dollars for a fake license to pull off this gig to make more money, to impress a girl who has never had fine things in her life, and all he pulls off is a colossal embarrassment. Probably right now there are a couple of guys laughing their asses off at his expense too. Oh, and the poor driver, Casper gets a sudden pit in his stomach that he has to fix this night and fast.

There is a tap on the dividing window. He pulls down his hat a bit over his eyes and opens it, “Yes?” he asks the guests.

“Oh, you don’t look like the same driver, I guess that is why we’ve stopped, but then again I’ve had a few too many already and you might be the pope as far as I’m concerned. Ok. Um, do you think you can find us a quick gas station, a couple of the girls have to pee,” the passenger asks in very drunken slurred words.

“Sure,” he answers and closes the window again.

He pulls away, knowing that Ruti must have known exactly where to say she was sick, so she could run to a safe place. One thing he knows for sure about Ruti, she always has a backup plan for everything. He was so busy looking around making sure cops weren’t following him, she probably conjured up an image of what was going on without him recognizing what she was doing or even what he was doing himself for that matter.

He hits the steering wheel with both hands. How did he let his friends talk him into this? First thing tomorrow..... find new friends. How much trouble can he really get into for doing this? Casper starts to calculate all the infractions, driving without a limo license, then the cops will find the real driver in the trunk and assume it was he who caused the problem, even though he hadn’t, what would he be able to say? No? Of course not, all evidence falls on him. Jail time for sure is in his future. It stops here and now, he resolves to himself.

Casper finds the nearest gas station that he knows well, he pulls to the back near the bathrooms. He sends the girls inside for the key they need to use for the bathroom. This gives him a minute to plan his next move. As he stands in the darkness of the night, knowing full well the parking lot lights are out at this particular gas station, he contemplates how to get out of this. He



pulls the hat off his head, ripping it to shreds because this copy is simply made of paper, he tosses the paper in the sewer behind the car, takes off his driving gloves and puts one in his pocket, which he will dispose of later.

With one of the gloves still in his hand, he pops the trunk, making sure none of the passengers notice. The girls are so drunk, he is sure the men are as well, their eye witness to anything will be a farce at best. He sees the driver lying there, still half unconscious from whatever drug those guys, his so-called friends, gave this poor guy in the drink. He slips both the gloves back on and slowly pulls the driver out of the car and lays him down on the ground behind the car, puts the real hat on the driver from the trunk, and looks around for his best exit. He closes the trunk as quietly as he can then he slips the driver’s shoes on top of his feet and walks back and forth to the driver’s side door, double checking to see there aren’t two different defined footprints.

Slowly, he walks in the heavy darkness towards the gravel on the side of the building, dragging a stick behind him, so he doesn’t leave any more footprints on the pavement that seems to be wet over here, in the midst of the trees, he continues walking around the path to the far side of the gas station. When he comes around, it is as if he has walked from the back path into the sidewalk, on the other side of the building from the car, he now walks in the front door and asks for the key to the men’s room. He takes a walk back around slowly and sees the driver is trying to stand up, he runs back to the front door and yells at the cashier, “Hey man, the driver to that limo out back looks sick, I don’t think he should drive, he is on the floor barely able to get up,” he doesn’t have to fake a nervous voice, this much is real. He sees the guys from the limo had gotten out too but they didn’t walk to the bathroom, they’re on the driver’s side of the car, releasing themselves on the pavement. For him, it will wash away anything he may have missed.

As he finishes his sentence, the girls walk back in and hand in their key. They don’t recognize him because he isn’t the one who picked them up, he is only a guy wearing dark pants and a white shirt, his jacket slung over his shoulder. He watches as they walk back to the limo with the cashier now following, the girls are oblivious to the world around them barely holding each other up to walk. They go back inside the car laughing and screaming, noticing nothing. Casper can only imagine what is going on in the back of that limo. He also has realized that the driver would have woken up long before this party was over and Ruti would have really killed him then, she might have called the cops herself and reported him.

The cashier comes back quickly and calls the emergency number on his phone, Casper waits with him by the side of the building for a moment or two. The police show up as well as an ambulance. They find the driver barely able to stand still behind the vehicle. Even if the driver describes the guys who did this to him, Casper wasn’t there for that part, it will be of no use, everyone was wearing masks and the drug he was given can act as a hallucinating drug, or so he was told by the guys giving the drink to the driver. Once help arrives, and the cashier is distracted, Casper makes a run for it. First, he walks away casually so that no one is suspicious, he drops the key back on the cashier’s desk, as he walks around the side of the building he came from, he casually walks through the path on the other side of the parking lot. Once Casper is past the grounds of the gas station, he bolts as fast as his legs could carry him. He runs through the grocery lot, through the lot behind the apartment buildings which is also dark, because the local kids are

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constantly breaking the lights by the apartments, so that adults don't see what they are doing. He sits behind the next set of stores until he hears the sounds of the sirens pulling past him. The ambulance must be taking the driver to the hospital, this is the fastest way to go; he knew they had to pass him.

Casper's heart is pounding, he narrowly escapes from being arrested for sure. It's time to leave. Not only this lot but this town. His father is right, he should go spread his wings and find what he is looking for. He thought he found something in Ruti, he still thinks he has, but she does not need a criminal in her life, he is pretty sure of that. He was willing to wait until she became a legal adult, and leave with her, but now he has to leave alone. He hopes he hasn't lost her forever, but he is not sure. No one has ever touched him like she does, how can he ever replace her in his life? In his heart?

Casper spends the next couple of hours walking home. He stays hidden in dark alleys and side streets, some of which he doesn't even know well but he knows he is on the way home. He decides that if he is beaten up tonight or robbed, he probably deserves to be. Casper walks into his and his dad's apartment very late, runs his fake license and gloves through the paper shredder, and crashes on the couch face down. Tired and worn from his evening, both physically and emotionally drained, he does not hear his phone buzzing at all. Sleep comes over him and he leans into it.

His dad works the night shift most days and sees his son on the couch when he gets home at 4:00am. He doesn't ask questions. Dad knows that his son has been up to no good, he also knows that the only way he looks the way he does is because he regrets all that he has done. Slowly, he approaches his son, "Hey, get up and go to bed. We'll work it all out after I've slept some. Too long of a night to think clearly now," he says softly.

Casper opens his eyes to see his dad looking at him with worry. "Ok Pa, time to make a plan, I'm yours," he says barely audible. Casper stands up and grabs his phone off the floor, he sees the light blinking that he has an email. Seeing it's from Ruti, he walks quickly to his room to read in privacy:

*Dear Casper,*

*In case you're wondering, I ran to Eli's house and she drove me home. I'm home safe and sound, if it matters to you to know.*

*While no one thinks I overreacted, because they know me, they also think I owe you an explanation. So, I'm going to try. This may take a while and I'm not even sure it will be coherent but I'm only writing it once then clicking send, no rewrites and no read overs or edits.*

*For most of my life, I walked around on eggshells waiting for the other shoe to drop, as the saying goes. I saw things my dad did that would make me curious, so I investigated. Whenever I did, what I saw was not good. I found things I shouldn't have found, know things I shouldn't have known at my age. Still do, I'm grateful the authorities never asked me, I am sure I would have caved under their scrutiny.*

*From then on, I always looked for the small things people did or didn't do that they may not even know are obvious. I saw the way you were looking over your shoulder tonight as you were driving, you are not a trained limo driver, that was obvious, but when you had the fake ID, I lost*

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*my composure. If you had even looked at the ID once, you should have seen the blatant mistakes. I thought you were smarter than this, I was beginning to trust you and you blew that trust out of the water big time.*

*As much as you know about me, here is what you don’t know. As I said before my father was a real gem when it came to doing things the wrong way. Because of that, I can spot fake a mile away. I can smell dishonesty at this point.*

*Then, things got worse and one night my brother, who thought the world of my dad, went out with him on one of his schemes. With no regard for his son’s safety, only the big payoff at the end of the night, my father took his only son into the fire. My brother lost his life that night and my father was put away for life, doesn’t matter what for. I was only twelve at the time.*

*My mom and I lived not too far from where I live now. I became friends with Keri, my “mom” for all purposes now, we became very close actually. I went to her house after school each day and I helped her with her kids, still do.*

*One day after school I was with her when the police showed up at the door saying they needed to take me to child services. It seems, my mother was as involved as my father was, in whatever scheme it was and it took them a year to figure that out. Because I was a minor, I had to go. Keri put up a fight and said she would sign any papers necessary to keep me out of the system and in a good home.*

*I am eternally grateful to her every day for keeping me out of foster care. The mom you met is only my mom by choice not by birth. I suppose it’s an even better type of mom to have. I have a great respect for her and her family. They all took me in without any questions. Immediate family as well as extended.*

*Basically, for the past five years I’ve lived something of a normal life. Then I met you and somehow you became a friend. I trusted you Casper, or at least I was beginning to. That was huge for me, ask my therapist, ask anyone. Thank you for pushing me right back into not trusting people again. I thought I had gotten past being able to trust again. Guess not.*

*Thank you for creating the pain of distrust and the agony of being fooled all over again. Of being shown an open door only to have it slammed back into my face. Thank you for reminding me never to let anyone get too close. Thank you for taking my thread of friendship and fraying it beyond recognition. As much as Keri and Eli know me there are things I still have never shared and probably never will until the human race changes or I die, whichever comes first. You can probably guess which one that is.*

*I see that I will die alone and unloved and that is ok by me. I am my strongest ally and I intend to make the best and the most out of my life. I hope you will do the same.*

*You’re young still Casper even though you’re older than me, don’t make me regret even knowing you. Some of being together with you was fun, ok, a lot was fun especially beating your butt on all things video game related. I want to see you in the papers one day and be able to say ‘I knew him when’ proudly.*

*Ruti.*







Casper sits on his bed and, for the first time since he was a small boy, cries. He cries so much he falls asleep again. The sun wakes him as it shines warmth on his face. Casper, seeing himself still in last night’s clothing, slowly begins to get up so he can shower and make breakfast for his father, the man he doesn’t give enough respect to, but will from now on.

However, as he turns over completely, he halts his movements. His father is sitting on the floor, sleeping, next to his bed.

Casper slides down and sits next to his father, he leans his head onto his father’s shoulder and falls asleep again, at least for a little while.

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Keri finds Ruti still sitting on the couch with her laptop open on her lap, Ruti’s head is tilted to the side to rest on the couch’s high back; she managed to pull one of the throw pillows up to her head for comfort.

Keri’s tears begin to fall trying to understand what has been going through Ruti’s head all night. She slowly takes off the computer and places it on the table nearby. Before she closes the screen, she sees that it is still on, she glances down to see what Ruti was searching, she has two windows open; one is her email so Keri assumes she wrote to Casper and the other is a search for psychiatric centers out of town. Places where your troubled teens go to be in a warm, open environment that looks similar to a country club but helps them overcome their life’s past and begin a future for themselves.

Keri takes her phone out of her pocket and takes a picture of the site Ruti has open and quickly sends it to her husband with the caption, ‘oh my, what do we do?’ she pushes the send button and walks over to the kitchen to get a good breakfast ready for everyone.

She is going to let Ruti sleep in as long as she needs to, who knows how late she was up last night. Once she has breakfast started, she goes upstairs to tell the kids they have to come down quietly. They all understand and tip toe down the stairs and silently walk into the kitchen.

Before leaving for school, Keri’s second grader writes a quick note and leaves it for Ruti to see when she gets up. Keri walks them to the bus stop and hurries back to the house. She closes the front door softly again and walks into the kitchen to clean up the dishes. Her phone is blinking, she picks it up to see a message from her husband. *‘I’m on the 9:00am flight home, we will do this together; she needs us more than ever today. See you soon.’* Keri’s heart melts a little more for her husband, he changed his work schedule for Ruti; she hopes that the magnitude of that is not lost on the poor girl.

Keri finishes cleaning up and pulls out her own laptop, she begins her work day as she always does, with answering e-mails and then she will check on her website and see if any of her products sold over night. Normally, she showers and gets dressed first, but today she doesn’t want to leave Ruti alone any more than she has to.

Time goes by very slowly this morning, Keri is trying to work, watch Ruti and watch the clock for when her husband will land. Not much work is getting done today, instead, she decides to bake something, it always occupies her mind and refocuses her.



By the time she is up to rolling the dough she hears an, “Ahem” at the kitchen doorway, she looks up. “Morning Ruti, breakfast?” she asks trying to sound normal.

“Did you see what your daughter wrote me?” she asks with sleep still in her voice.

“No, I didn’t look she said it was private and asked if it was ok to tape it to your laptop. I hope you don’t mind, I was trying to keep them quiet,” Keri bites her tongue to keep from crying at the way Ruti looks, she is emotionally spent that much she can see to be true.

“I’ll read it to you, *‘Dear Ruti, Momma says you had a bad night, I have those too. Sometimes I sleep with my green bear, he chases away all my monsters. You can borrow him tonight,’*” Ruti says a bit choked in her voice.

Keri stands up and walks over to Ruti. “That kid is a pain in the ass,” Ruti falls into Keri’s arms crying. Keri envelops her and pulls her in as deep as she can. No words are necessary right now either. Over the years Keri has learned when to speak to Ruti and when to listen. She thinks this is why Ruti has stayed all these years with them.

They stay together for a good ten minutes, until Ruti finally feels herself relieved of her last tear. “In answer to your question, I’m starved. Can I help you finish these cinnamon buns?” Ruti asks, not trying to change the subject, but looking for an excuse to walk away for a moment. This is the game they have played for the past five years.

Keri gathers the ingredients for the filling and places them on the table. Ruti washes her hands and face and grabs some grapes in the meantime, “After we put them in the oven, we should both shower and get dressed, what do you think?” Keri asks cautiously.

“Sounds wonderful, a nice long shower, I can do that for sure, but right now, let’s get these in before I start eating raw dough dipped in butter,” Ruti responds with a grin.

Keri has never been able to keep a secret from Ruti, so why start now. “When I lifted up your computer the screen came on. I saw what you had been looking at last night. I’m sorry,” Keri says still rolling the dough in perfect circles while Ruti fills them and places them in the pan.

“It’s ok, I would have told you at some point today anyway. I don’t want to be around other messed up kids. I realized I’ve done well this year at my school, you chose a good place for me. Eli and the gang have been so good to me and for me. I lost my head last night. I lost a little of my heart too. I know Casper isn’t a bad person, but I can’t do the lying again, know what I mean? Want me to wash up while you finish these last few buns?” she asks. Ruti is very good at bouncing from one subject to the next, often times to completely unrelated topics.

“Sure, that would be nice,” Keri pauses, “yes, you have by the way, come a long way this year. Remember when you even tried to sing a duet with Eli in drama club?” she giggles, then Ruti starts to laugh too.

The two of them fall into each other’s arms with laughter, it was kind of funny to hear the two friends sing, they were so off key but had the best time that the drama club teacher helped them make the act into a comedy routine, everyone loved their performance.

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Casper and his father wake up leaning on each other with the sun on their faces. His father speaks first, “Is there any danger from last night? I mean, are the cops going to be knocking on my door? It’s all I want to know,” he asks with concern.

“No Dad, nothing like that, a stupid idea that went wrong. I killed the best thing I’ve ever had. I’ll never get her back, never, and I don’t want any other. No one will compare. Not a soul on earth do you hear me?” Casper found his voice rising with each word.

His father puts his hand on Casper’s shoulder, “Sit down. Let me tell you a story about that love of your life.” Casper sits up and looks at his father, his face not fully rested from his late shift last night but there is worry written all over his eyes.

“You know about her family?” Casper asks.

“I knew her brother, he sometimes helped out working down at the docks during the busy shipping seasons. He was a true sailor that boy, was going to see the world one of the days, I hope he can see it from where he is. His father conned him into going out one night with him. Down at the docks, the whole exchange was supposed to take place there. His father thought because his son was familiar with the docks that he could help him hide, if need be. He brought his own son as a decoy, they looked a lot alike from the back, same hair color, same build, same swagger in how they walked. People on the street would get them confused sometimes which is what gave the old man this idea.

In the morning, when the dust cleared and everyone heard about what happened the tears flowed like a river from everyone down at the docks. Men and women all in huddles, mourning the loss of a child with such promise, all over the greed of a father, made everyone sick to their stomachs.

I thought you knew, I see by your face, this is all new to you. I assumed you knew and that is why you were always so cautious with her. The people who took her in are saints. Good people, we all helped them out financially the first year or so, then Keri’s husband received a promotion and many slowed down with their support, but some of us still have contributed to her college fund. We want to make sure she lands on her feet. She definitely has the capacity to be anything she wants to be. You can’t undo this my boy. You are going to have to let her go. It’s for the best,” his father stands and walks out of the room, leaving the words hang there like a fog at midnight.

Casper sits back down on his bed a minute and contemplates all that has been thrown at him. Ruti didn’t say in her letter exactly what had happened, she even wished him well. The woman is amazing, she is so much more than he deserves. He will win her back, he has to. He will show her he can be trusted. That is the most important part, he needs to be trusted. And by her.

One day.

With determination guiding him, Casper comes out of the shower and sits with his father in the kitchen. “Ok, I’m ready to go to school Dad, do we have any money for that or do I have to work to support myself. I’m going to win her back, you’ll see. I’ll get back that trust if it’s the last thing I do on this man’s Earth.”

Casper’s father puts his hand on his son’s shoulder, “Your college fund has been waiting for three years for you to come to your senses. I’m glad it’s not too late. Where do you want to go?” he asks.

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The two of them spend the next couple of hours poring over all the schools in the area and many that aren't. Glancing through websites, going over assessment tests to see what Casper would be good at, hours turned into a whole day. Before they knew how much time passed, Dad had to go back to work. Casper continued on his search. Life is reaching out to him and he had to find a way to grab it.

~ ~ ~

Keri's husband comes home and finds all the women in his life; his wife, mother, sister, and adopted daughter, all laughing and eating cinnamon buns in the kitchen. "Did you save me any?" he asks suddenly disturbing the girl time.

Keri jumps up and then leaps into his arms, "She wants to go to school now, get a head start, no senior year," she whispers quickly in his ear.

Ruti stares at him, the only man in her life that hasn't ripped her apart emotionally or otherwise. She stands slowly, knowing full well that he came home from a business trip for her, probably left an important meeting too. Keri steps aside from her husband and for the first time since living there Ruti hugs him, and he gathers her up in his arms and holds on tight. He could not have asked for a better gift than this. He has been waiting five years to hold her and show her how much he cares. The other women in the room stand holding hands and trying to keep tears from rolling down their cheeks.

Luca finally sets her down and Ruti grabs some buns on a plate for him and they all resume their positions at the kitchen table. "OK, catch me up, what's been going on since I left yesterday?" he smiles. More laughter ensues.

His sister speaks first, "Well, as you know Ms. Ruti here is a wiz at a sewing machine. Give her two pieces of material, thread and an imagination and she will give you a whole wardrobe. We thought that tomorrow we can start by going down to the Office of Education and she is going to sign up to take her GED next semester, you know her exit exam from high school, but it still gives her a state diploma. During that time, she will study at my boutique with Marushka to learn the finer points about design and sewing. After that she only has the world and her imagination to deal with is all," she smirks and pats Ruti on the shoulder, "now you're all caught up."

"Are there college plans?" he asks seriously, looking over at Keri trying to get her to remember about the college fund the community started for her years ago.

Ruti speaks up, "I don't want to do fashion design by someone else's thoughts. I like Marushka, she said she will give me all I need to know. I know that sounds childish to you, but is college really in the cards for me? I'm not exactly the academic type, I'm worried about, well," Ruti bows her head, "it's all the socializing. I'm going to get hurt, again and again. With Marushka I can't. Besides she is the best in the county. Have you seen her work? And she knows people. I tell you she does, your sister doesn't believe me but she knows some big names, she sews on the side for some really big political names," Ruti covers her mouth. How could she let that slip?

She betrayed Marushka's trust, she slumps down in her chair wondering if she can even follow through with this plan now. "Ruti, listen to Auntie Zelda. I know all about her extra work. I have always encouraged her. We made an arrangement between us, long ago, as long as her private

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work never interferes with her work at the boutique she can design for the Queen as far as I’m concerned but I never wanted them coming into the store. I never wanted that crowd of self-important people crossing my threshold. You will learn everything from her. I’m sure of you will,” Her aunt smiles.

Ruti exhales, she is happy to know she did not break a trust with Marushka, it would have killed her if she did. Especially after she shunned Casper for doing the same thing.

“Ladies, I hate to break up the party and be the one to bring down your mood, but we need to remember one thing. The good people of this community put money together years ago when we took Ruti in. A college fund, and a nice one, has been established. I think some have been contributing all these years. Ruti, can you take some business classes maybe at the community college, in case you decide to become the type of woman who owns her own business like my sister, you would need to know a lot more than how to sew,” he looks around the room.

Ruti looks at him in shock. “People did that for me? They don’t know me? I don’t know them. Then or now,” Ruti says softly in shock.

Keri comes over to her, “Many people knew your brother; they loved him. It was not his fault what happened to him, you know that, right?” she asks.

Ruti looks around the room. Do they all know something she doesn’t? “Mom said Dad and he went out together willingly. That he was excited to help his old man in whatever he could. She told me he was careless and cocky and got himself in front of a bullet.”

Keri looks to her husband, she cannot say the truth. He walks over to Ruti and sits down next to her, he takes her hands into his and holds them there for a moment. He takes another moment to think of the right words, “Your brother knew the docks well and your father knew that about him. There is no nice way to say this, he used your brother as a human shield, a decoy as it were. Not even a scratch on him as you know. He left his son for the wolves to get, it was actually the bad guys who called the shooting into the cops. That’s what we were told, that they ratted your father out for what he did to your brother. Even thieves have their morals I suppose, and family always comes first. I’m sorry, we thought you knew the truth. You were always reading the papers, we assumed you had seen the write up back when everything first happened,” he squeezes her hands a moment to make sure she won’t jump away.

Instead, the biggest shock of all happened. Ruti looks up to the ceiling and says, “I knew you were not at fault, deep inside, I knew. Rest in peace my dear brother,” she thinks about what she said and looks round the room. “I used to swear and hope that he was tossing and turning up there for being so stupid. It’s my fault he is restless, well, restless no more. I feel better, really, I do. Business huh? You think I can do those classes?” she looks right into Keri’s husband’s eyes.

“Yes, you can do whatever you choose and go wherever the world takes you,” he says.

“Luca? Thank you for being honest with me. Maybe I could not have heard it before, but today is the perfect time to say the true story. Really. I’m ok knowing. Can we go see him today or are you still working?” she asks not wanting to disturb his day any more than she already has.

Ruti has not been to the cemetery in two years, she has always refused to go. It’s time to make peace with everyone. Including herself.



Luca is having a hard time believing his day, first a hug, then his name. She has lived here for five years and always addressed him as she saw his face, not by name. Whatever happened last night, knocked some good out of all the crazy and he is not going to say no.

“Good idea, ladies? Anyone joining or will someone have to stay home for the kids?” he asks.

“I’d like to go,” Keri raises her hand. Ruti takes her hand and they head for the door together. Luca kisses his mom and sister.

“Luca,” his mom whispers, “you did well. Very well indeed,” she smiles at her son and so does he.

~ ~ ~

The men finally have a plan that will work for everyone. With no one knowing why, Casper starts to volunteer at the children’s shelter, his father told him it is his own personal community service sentence until college starts. Casper agrees. For the next several months Casper will be busy studying for the college entrance exam, volunteering and working with his father whenever possible to save up the spending money he will need while away in school.

Weeks quickly pass into months and Casper receives his first rejection letter from a college. He is thankful it is his bottom choice. Within the next two weeks, he receives one more rejection. There is one last school pending.

One week turns into two and then the turning point night hits Casper. He is not going to get into college. He waited too long, didn’t do well enough on his entrance exam, or simply didn’t cut it as a potential college student because he is starting too late. He decides to wait up for his dad to come home tonight. Dad sees him at the table as he walks in and walks over to sit down. “What’s up?” he asks.

“Plan B,” Casper says.

“Am I to assume you’ve already come up with one?” his dad asks cautiously.

Casper spends a moment to look down at his own lap and tries to gather the inner strength to say what he has to say. He is fully aware of how his father lost his brother and yet he sits up strong and looks at his father, “The military, I don’t know which branch yet sir but I’m going to go down to the recruiting offices later today to talk to someone, they train and educate you. It is probably the best community service I could pull off; don’t you think? Where better can I learn to trust and be trusted? Mom would have liked this idea, I think.” Casper says shyly.

Casper’s dad puts his hand on his son’s shoulder. “I think you’re right, but let me sleep some, we’ll go together in the afternoon, together,” then the two men walk to their bedrooms at the same time to crash for a few hours.

~ ~ ~

Leaving the recruiting office, both men feel very good. The officer there has suggested that Casper would be great for the Navy and they filled out all the necessary paperwork. He sets sail in three days.



On the day he is about to set off to the new chapter in his life, right before he hands his father his civilian phone, he sends one last text. *“My dearest friend Ruti. In my heart I miss you very much, I hope you are doing well. I’m off to join the Navy, this will be my last text until I receive a military issued phone. I am not transferring any numbers except my father’s so you have no worries about future contact. I wanted to let you know I’m moving on and moving out. I have taken all your words to heart and have vowed to myself, and now to you, to learn how to become the best man I can. I want to be someone people can trust, someone you can trust, I want to make you proud. One day, later in our lives we will find each other again. I’m not going to look for you nor will you look for me I assume, but I know we will find each other. Thank you for your well wishes, I know that you too will be off and running soon as high school finishes, the world is out there for you to conquer and I have no doubt you will do just that. It will be my pleasure to say that I knew you when, too. All the best. ☺”* he slowly hits send.

Casper hands his father his phone and joins the rest of the recruits on the bus. He is older than most of the guys on the bus by at least four years and he notices rather quickly that his resolve is ten times stronger. He is going to make this work, if not for him, then for Ruti. He will learn to trust and be trusted. No, he will master this and become even more than he ever thought he could or would.

~ ~ ~

Luca, Keri and the whole extended family are as nervous as can be. Marushka and Ruti have put together a fashion show of all of their new styles. Ruti was right, Marushka has many contacts, this is no simple fashion show; it is complete with all the fanfare you would see on television. There are many representatives from designers and department stores who know and want Marushka’s work, they are curious about Ruti. Rumor has it that Marushka has been training a protégé and the buzz going around the audience is that her work is spectacular. Luca and Keri hear what people are saying and are having a hard time containing their excitement.

One reporter caught wind of the fact that they are the new designer’s parents and he has been hounding them for insight which they keep telling him they have none of. Clearly, he doesn’t believe them because he keeps coming back to them with more questions they can’t answer. Finally, Luca turns to him and says, “You will find out all your questions the same time everyone else will. Walk away, now,” he uses his most stern voice without yelling. The message is well received. Keri holds in her laughter knowing what a real softy Luca is. Ruti and Marushka have been working together for five years now, Ruti’s talents are natural and are only limited by her imagination like Luca’s sister had originally said, which, by the way, is limitless. She has a signature/logo on her designs that no one knows where it came from but everyone loves how it looks. Ruti doesn’t want to have an animal, or even her name on her work, but this emblem fits her fine, sort of a combination of both.

Casper’s dad is at the show, the whole community received an invitation via the local newspaper, anyone who cuts it out and brings the ad with them, is allowed in. He is there to take pictures to send to Casper. While Casper has moved on to make a life for himself, the spark for Ruti has never dwindled, he figures it’s the least he could do is give him a glimpse of who she has

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become. It’s been years since he has given Casper any such news. Sharing in a public display of success must be allowed his dad thinks to himself.

~ ~ ~

After five years of being in the Navy, Casper has discovered that there is a lot more to himself than he ever imagined. His first superior officer took him under his wing and pushed him to get into officer training almost immediately. He has been on the fast track ever since. He has thrown himself into everything the navy has to give. Casper is also finishing with his bio-medical engineering degree in the next couple of months. He spent as many hours working drills with his fellow navy men as he did in the classroom. He has spent his time designing new and more practical medical items for his fellow wounded veterans. One of the items he designed, is up for a US Patent. It won’t really be his alone, it will belong to the Navy, but his name is on it and that is pretty amazing to him.

Casper’s dad told him he was sending him pictures today of a fashion show, something Casper would never have pictured his father going to, but he can’t wait to receive them and see how silly the outfits are. It is something Casper remembers he and his mom used to make fun of all the time when they watched high fashion shows on television together. Casper’s commanding officer calls him in to his office. A nice distraction, he decides.

“Yes sir,” he salutes.

“At ease soldier,” he motions to the chair for Casper to sit down in. “We have a future to talk about.”

~ ~ ~ ~

Casper’s dad walks over to Luca and introduces himself to him. Luca grabs his hand with both of his own and shakes with mixed emotion. No one has mentioned Casper’s name in many years but everyone in the family knows that he is still in the back of Ruti’s mind, even if she won’t admit it to herself.

“I wanted to let you know how proud the community is of Ruti and all she has accomplished. You and your wife saw an opportunity to turn things around for the good, and by the looks of things today, you’ve done very well. Um,” he puts his head down a moment, takes a breath and looks back at Luca, “actually I came over to you to make a sort of confession to you as well; you see, there is something I feel you need to know. Casper doesn’t know this, but I knew Ruti’s brother well, worked with him down at the docks. I was there before the police arrived, it was right when I came on duty. The guys who shot him were standing around him, one of them was trying to revive him, the other trying to stop the bleeding. I was the one who called the cops not them, they were actually shell-shocked. I know what the papers said, I gave them the information. It lessened their sentence because it was as if they turned in the evidence themselves. By their shock in the situation, it seemed the right thing to do somehow. I don’t think they would ever have shot at him had they known beforehand. Honor among thieves I suppose.

I couldn’t take her in, although I wanted to, because at that same time, my wife was terminally ill. It was too much for me to do. Casper doesn’t know that part either, that I had applied for the position of guardian opposite you. I am glad it was you in the end. You’ve done far

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more than I could have given her, not being a woman and all. I was too pre-occupied but I needed to try to make sure she didn’t go home, she deserved more than her parents gave her,” before Luca can even say a word, Casper’s dad turns into the crowd and disappears. Luca and Keri look at each other with new tears in their eyes. They didn’t know there was another application, that does explain the delays though.

Keri finds herself shaking, Luca pulls her in as much to calm his own nerves as hers. “Why would he tell us now?” Keri asks.

Luca looks into Keri’s eyes. A note of recognition washed over his face. His head darts around again to find Casper’s dad. Keri watches her husband, “What is it?” she asks.

“I have to find him.” Luca pushes away and darts into the crowd. Where could he be sitting? He pushes through the crowd to get further and further back. This is of no use, he thinks to himself. If I were Casper’s dad, where would I want to sit? Of course! The front, he would want to be up front and center. Luca turns around and nearly bumps into his ‘friend’ the reporter.

“Looking for someone?” the reporter asks slyly.

Luca’s mind is racing right now so he forgets to filter himself. “Bart Wangler,” he blurts out.

“Hmmm, any relation to the famous seamen Casper Wangler?” he asks.

Luca stops in his tracks, “How do you know Casper? And what do you mean by famous?” Luca practically demands.

“Ooooo, so now you want information from me, do you?” the reporter responds.

“No actually, I don’t,” Luca says regaining his composure. “I’ll find Mr. Wangler myself, he is an old friend of the family; not that it’s any business of yours.”

Luca begins to walk away, his mind reeling with information now. He sends a quick text to his wife about what the reporter slipped about Casper. Had they missed something in the paper? Now he has to find Mr. Wangler even faster. The show will begin in half an hour.

“Luca?” Ruti calls to him.

Luca turns around. “Hi honey, how are you holding up?” he asks

“Why do you look so nervous? Kids ok? Did something happen to Grandma?” Ruti asks this because Luca’s mother has recently taken ill. Hearing the word grandma spins Luca’s emotions to a whole new level.

“She is fine, I spoke with her a little while ago, my sister is there and I showed her on the phone a video of all your pieces that are on display for the public, the ones that won’t be worn today. She is so proud of you. We all are,” he smiles.

“And yet you look like you lost your best friend right now. Luca?” she says his name really slowly to indicate he is hiding something from her.

“I’m looking for Casper’s father, Bart. I saw him before and I wanted to invite him to sit with us. Is that ok?” he tries to recover his strong voice.

“Nice try, I’ve seen him already. He loves the stuff. Gave me a huge hug and told me there are angles looking down on me today with bright smiles. It was very nice of him to come. I always liked him. He makes me feel comfortable believe it or not,” she pauses a moment, “is it weird that I enjoyed his hug?” she asks Luca.



“No, it’s not weird. He told me some interesting news today. Did you know that if we hadn’t adopted you, well become your guardians, he was going to do it himself?” he asks.

Ruti stares at Luca. All those years ago, Mr. Wangler used to always call her ‘my girl’, always used to treat her like she mattered. She looks at Luca’s face, “What else did he tell you? I’m ok, you can tell me,” she says with caution, but desperate to know.

“He knew your brother, he was there right after it happened, the bad guys tried to revive your brother when they saw who was hurt. He was the one to call the cops, he couldn’t take you in because his wife was sick then. Casper has been without his mother as long as you’ve been without your brother. She died shortly after that night and he wasn’t in position to take care of another girl just yet, but he felt he needed to apply for the position anyway. He wanted to make sure you weren’t in the system,” Luca takes a deep breath, he is not sure now is the time to have said this, but now that it’s out, it’s out.

Ruti pulls Luca in for a hug and he hugs her back fully. He kisses the top of her head like any good father would do. “He always took care of me, he is the one who started the fund isn’t he?” she asks.

“It would be a safe assumption, yes,” Luca answers

The two break apart and look at each other. “It feels good actually to know that my brother didn’t die alone. All this time I thought everyone left him there to die but that they called on their way out. He was a good boy Luca, I believe that now. It was hard not to get sucked into my father’s life. I suppose one day when he is up for parole, I’ll have to fight and make sure he stays in for life. I have the evidence and the knowledge to do that, you know,” she says to him squarely in the eye.

“I figured you did. Not sure why, but I always knew you did. I’m sorry you are carrying this around inside you, but I sure am happy I’m the first to know,” he smiles, “I *am* the first to know, right?” he asks jokingly.

Ruti laughs too. “I believe you are, yes. Come on, let’s look into the crowd from behind the curtain, if we both look, we’re sure to find him,” she says.

~ ~ ~

Bart Wangler takes a few pictures of the clothes on display, he takes a few more of the handmade pocketbooks, all the while making sure he zooms in on the emblem of choice she is using. He is trying to keep his composure about the whole thing, but it’s very hard to do so. His angel, his very own angel is right here in Ruti’s heart. Casper must have shown her his tattoo enough times that it stuck in her creative mind. Or, it’s one hell of a coincidence.

He clicks send on his phone and hopes he is not interrupting his son in something important. Casper’s phone buzzes as he is walking out of his superior officer’s office. He has a lot of thinking to do. He has been made an offer he may not be able to refuse.

Casper opens the message from his father and stops abruptly as he is walking. Right in front of him, the pocketbook marked ‘handmade’ is the emblem of his mother. The emblem drawn by him so many years ago, the one of his tattoo, and the one on his father’s signet ring. Did Ruti know? How could she have? He does not remember showing it to her, did he?



Casper sits down on the nearest bench and looks through the rest of the pictures his father sent. The items are beautiful, not crazy or couture as you see on a lot of fashion shows. These are real, made for real people. He takes a deep breath and responds to his father.

*I have no words Pa. Not sure how she came to this. I never even had the opportunity to hug her, let alone show her a tattoo on my lower back. She doesn't go swimming, so we never went together. Unless she was there without me knowing. What do you make of it?* He hits send

*I don't know. I'm having a hard time with this, I have to admit. Did you see the last pic?* She took a selfie with me. Bart responds.

Casper sifts through the pictures again until he finds that picture. Ruti looks beautiful, the close-up picture really makes him think that she reminds him of someone. The smile, the dimple on her cheek. Casper sits up quickly, why had he not recognized this before? Her brother! He used to come home with his dad sometimes. They ate breakfast together, his dad took him fishing, Ruti was the tag along annoying sister who stayed away from everyone all the time, who gave Casper dirty looks. But that was long before his mom died, he didn't have the tattoo then.

*You've known all this time, haven't you? You knew who I was going after and you never stopped me. You never told me to be careful but, somehow, I knew. It was best, you're right, had I known I would have screwed it up sooner 😊 Thank you Dad for being the best man a man would want to emulate. I continue to learn life's lessons from you. I hope it makes you proud to know I'm up for a promotion and not only that, they want me working with the medical staff now full-time to identify what is needed for the wounded; basically I've been offered a lifetime job. How about that for an old screw up?* He clicks send with pride.

Casper stands to walk back to his barracks. He didn't tell his father that he will be working on the base only fifteen miles from home. The best naval medical facility there is in the country, is right in their own backyard. This part he will leave as a surprise.

*You're not a screw up and you're certainly not old, besides, you've already made me very proud – keep up the good work. 😊* His father sends back beaming with pride.

~ ~ ~

Luca and Ruti continue to look through the curtains for Mr. Wangler. They see the reporter and decide to watch him for a moment to see where he is going. First, they see him near Keri, she brushes him off, “Good girl,” Luca says out loud and Ruti laughs.

Next, they see him annoying some of her family, and even some of the other guests. He must be there to dig something up, but what could it be? She has no dirt on her. Ruti watches and watches, the reporter turns around and begins to walk towards the stage, he can't see them and it's a darn good thing too. Ruti's knees buckle and she slips down to the floor shaking.

“What is it? Ruti? What did you see? Who did you see?” Luca looks again and only sees the reporter and a couple of other men in suits.

Her voice is quite shaky but she knows what she knows, “He is not a reporter. He used to work with my father. He wants to find me really, not Bart Wangler, anyone who will get him closer to me, anyone who will get him information without him having to see me. He doesn't want to see me any more than I want to see him. I can't believe I'm saying this, but Luca,” she pauses to look



him in the eye, "call the police I'm ready to talk and it has to be now. Come, we'll hide in the trailer for the models. I'll kick them out, they should all be dressed by now anyway."

Luca pulls Ruti up and the two of them look over their shoulder to make sure no one is coming. They see Marushka, without words, she knows something is up. "You stay in here child. You too Mr. Luca. I will handle all. I do it with Keri instead, yes?" she asks with her accent heavy with concern.

"Yes, Keri will help," Luca says.

~ ~ ~

"Officer Balans, how can I help you?" he says as he answers the phone.

The officer listens carefully to what is being said to him. He asks a couple of questions then he responds with, "Do not move, we have you covered, there are some plain clothed men there already, requested by Marushka. She is an old friend of the precinct. I will call the man you asked for, we will be there shortly."

Officer Balans has been given the tip of a lifetime. To be able to settle a cold crime, the kind that involves over six figures worth of money and at least three kingpins to organized crime. He treads lightly as he walks into his superior's office and closes the door.

Once the information is dispensed the two men make a plan. They can't rush into the show, but they also have to protect the little girl who once stole the heart of the whole community. It is for her brother's memory, and for her future, that they must get this right. They have one chance and they had better do this right.

~ ~ ~

Casper packs his bags and heads for home. The paperwork will follow, they needed a verbal yes from him and he gave that quickly. As soon as he saw Ruti's work, he knew it was time to go home. The idea of being closer to his dad is not something he could pass up. The idea of being given even more opportunities to work with the wounded soldiers and help them out is a dream come true, this is what he is meant to do. He is meant to heal, to help.

He has a three-hour plane ride that leaves in an hour. He is lucky that they gave him ten days leave, so he will go straight home and be there for when his father comes home from work, won't that be a nice surprise? He hasn't been on leave in eight months. With his last leave he traveled, figuring that he may not get that chance again for a long time, his father encouraged him to do so.

The thought of home and all it comes with that, puts Casper's mind at ease. He gets to have ten full days with his father before reporting for duty so close by, his world couldn't get any better.

~ ~ ~

"Do you want to give me a sneak peek so I don't go into full shock when the police come?" Luca asks Ruti kindly.



"My father wasn't into petty theft, no, he ran with the big guys. You know the journal I always carry around?" she asks.

"The brown, battered one?" he asks.

"That's the one, it has all the names of people my father screwed over, he wrote them down as conquests, he thought he was smarter than them. He thought he could fraud, steal, and blackmail them into giving up what didn't belong to him. This is what he had done the night my brother was killed. He was going out to fool them into thinking he had the full amount in his bag, he didn't, they knew it the minute they shot my brother, that's why they didn't run. They thought maybe it was on my brother, so what may have looked like help, may have looked like they were trying to revive him but was probably them searching my brother, the fact that Bart called the cops and explained to them that they were helping, that's what got them off some time. Bart saved his own life by saying that, and he probably doesn't even know he did. They would have assumed he ratted them out and someone else would have lost their father too, Casper," she says with a heavy heart.

"You've known all along?" he asks.

"I knew it was a big deal, I really did assume my brother went on his own fruition, but I think he thought he could stop the men from killing my dad. I now think he went to try and save my dad from himself. It would be like him to do that. I can't believe I didn't think of that right away," Ruti begins to tear.

"Your mom did a number on your head. How come they didn't come after her sooner? She probably knows what you know," he says.

"No, I have the journal, I understand the combinations he has on the locks, I was the one who invented the code for him. He used to tell me it was a secret language for the two of us to have. He used my creative mind to keep his secrets. I can't hide anymore Luca. I have a life to live. He can't keep me down. Not here, now when I could really be something, and actually earn what he could never earn.....respect," she bows her head down and leans onto Luca, who encloses her into his arms and holds on for dear life.

There is a knock at the door. She waits a moment and looks out of the peep hole. She walks around the trailer to make sure no one is watching, there are peep holes for the models to look out of; they are small one-way windows so no one can see in. It's for their protection. She sees all the right people and unlocks the door and opens to see who she wants to see.

Three men walk in. Only one she recognizes. The man she sent for, the one who arrested her father, she wanted to give him all that she knows. It's only fair that one man busts the whole thing isn't it? At least that is how she thinks.

The last one in locks the door and assures them that the four men in question have already been apprehended. He shows her pictures of them in the squad cars, he took them right before they left, he needs them to be identified by her.

"I can do you one better," Ruti walks over to her bag that she had grabbed before they went into the trailer. "This is my father's infamous journal you were trying to find ten years ago. And this," she picks up a large envelope and opens the clasp, "are the pictures I took as a child



when I snuck out to see what my father was doing. I need to move on in my life, you never received these from me, it came in as an anonymous tip,” she stares at the older officer.

“Ruti, I can assure you that no one here cares where the information comes from. Can you tell me anything about the men we apprehended today?” he asks.

“Only the one that posed as the reporter, he is from the Marconey family, the rest I have no idea, newbies probably. It’s been ten years, you know. But him I could not forget, he has a scar down the front of his face, see here?” she asks them and they look at the picture again.

“Yes, what of it?” the officer asks.

“It’s from me. I was hiding up high and knocked over a heavy plaster pitcher on his face doing what any child would do to save their father. His face was bloody, he assumed it was one of his own guys because he was moaning at them. My father had left the building and I slipped out the high window I crawled in from. My father found me running outside in the same direction and put two and two together. That’s when he thought we would be partners. When we came up with the whole new language or code as it really is. You will see in the journal that I wrote down how to break the code. In all honesty, I’m not sure of the other guys are really that bad. I think my father pulled them in because of his own greed and stupidity. I’m pretty sure you will find his money hiding in all the places indicated still. If you hand the Marconey family back their money, they will be happy as can be, might even stop looking,” she finishes with a sigh. “Unless, of course, you have a reason to keep the money, but at least you will have all that you have been looking for. Before you ask, no, I never went back to take any of what was hiding, I had no reason to. You will find all of the money still there. Unless it wasn’t found by accident by someone else over the years, but it is all pretty well hidden.”

Luca stands up, “Gentlemen, I believe you have all that you need, it’s been a pleasure meeting you all. We hope to see big news in the papers tomorrow,” he smiles and hands them his hand to shake. One by one the officers shake his hand. The older man stands in front of Ruti, “I always knew you had more information, but I figured you’d been through enough, I never wanted to bother the child who lost so much. Good luck with your new venture, from the sounds of the crowds today, I have a feeling you will do very well,” he reaches out to shake her hand and she pulls him in for a hug. Something very unusual for Ruti, Luca observes, “The cracking of the code is wrong, I only want you to know. Switch numbers three and four,” she whispers to him.

Ruti looks up and the man smiles at her. “Thank you for that gift,” he says and walks out of the trailer.

Luca and Ruti wait a moment and walk outside themselves. By now the actual show is over, they head towards the runway and hear a roaring of the crowd. Marushka catches them as they get closer. “And now my fellow fashion buffs, I introduce you to the woman of the hour. Ruti!” she swings her hand over towards Ruti and the whole crowd stands in applause. Luca finds Keri standing at the back of the stage she looks at him with worry and he smiles in pride so she returns the smile. She knows she will hear about what happened soon enough.

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If Ruti learned anything from the past few years working with Marushka, it’s that you have to learn to trust each person, one at a time. You should not discount the whole human race or even a part. She gave Ruti many examples of how back in her country people did not trust anyone in authority but the first week she was here she needed help and it was the ones in authority that helped her. She will always be grateful. If a person shows you their worth, good; if they make a mistake, give them a chance to win you back, the real friends will try.

Ruti decides today is the time to give those people who worked with and for her father a chance to redeem themselves. Maybe by turning them in, they will in turn give the truth of the parts she doesn’t know. “This is all for you my brother. You did a good thing, my turn. It may not be to save our father’s life, but I’m sure it will save someone’s,” she says out loud.

“Who are you speaking with my dear?” Marushka asks her.

“My brother,” she says happily.

“Oh, good. Did you tell him you were a hit? Did you tell him that Madam Piersky wants you as her exclusive designer right here in our area?” she asks with a smile.

“What?! When did that happen?” Ruti asks.

“About an hour before the show even started. She spoke with me and asked me if I thought you would be willing to work for her like I do for your aunt. In an exclusive way, but then you could give private clients what they want as long as your deadlines are met with her first. I took the liberty of saying that you would most likely consider it an honor but that she has to ask you tomorrow, not today,” Marushka explains.

“You need time to breathe and to take a moment to recover from all of this nonsense today. I saw the police, I know you spoke to them. You did good, Ruti. I’m proud of you on many levels,” she puts her arms out to hug her and Ruti runs to her with open arms. “Ah, my child. You will rule the world one day. But make sure you’re not alone ok?” she whispers in her ear.

Ruti understands what that means. She has been missing Casper a lot lately and told Marushka all about what happen so many years ago. She pulls away quickly, “Oh my! His father, he is here. I need to find him!”

“He is by the handbags, he has been there three times today. Mesmerized it seems. Go child,” she pushes Ruti out.

Ruti runs around to find where the handbags have been put. So many people are mulling around cleaning up. The models are still talking to each other, every once in a while, begging Keri to take home a dress they modeled. Keri keeps saying no, she does not agree with the policy that they worked for it. They worked, they modeled, they will be paid in cash not in merchandise, she remains firm on this and Ruti agrees with her.

Ruti bumps into Keri, literally. “Whoa there, what or whom are you looking for?” she asks.

“Mr. Wangler,” Ruti says out of breath.

“He is over in the back wing. Luca is with him, over there, see?” Keri says curiously.

Ruti pulls Keri in and hugs her. “He has to know,” she says.

“Know what?” Keri calls to her but she is halfway across the room already.

“Mr. Wangler?” Ruti says in between breaths.

“What’s the rush tiger?” he says.



Ruti stares at him a moment. Tiger? Did he call me tiger? No one has called her tiger since she was a young child. Ruti takes a step back, Mr. Wangler used the word on purpose, she can see it in his eyes. Luca is watching the two of them stare at each other, he remains quiet. There is something going on that he is not privy to but he is hoping he will learn. He has learned so much today already about their little girl, not so little anymore he reminds himself.

As Luca is staring at the two of them, he sees Keri coming towards them out of the corner of his eye. He looks back at them as Ruti jumps into Mr. Wangler’s arms. He holds onto her as if he won’t ever let go. That is love there, this is not simply appreciating her upbringing. Luca pulls Keri to his side as she gets closer. They watch the two people in front of them together. It looks as if a million words are being spoken within those entangled arms.

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Casper has spent nearly the whole day traveling. There was a delay at the naval base because of a surprise visit by the General. All hands on deck. Casper and his direct superior officer were interviewed by the General himself. His body is still shaking from the experience. Everyone in the room agreed about where Casper is being posted, they spoke about expectations, about how much work he will be doing. Casper remained quiet unless spoken to, the whole idea of being in the room with the General overwhelmed him. In fifteen years from now, he might get over his awe of the man.

His career is set in front of him. He will be able to live near his father and settle down finally. It is time to get on with all parts of his life, including a wife and family. Now that he will be in a stable position.

The taxi from the airport is another delay. They break down five miles away from home. He could call his father but that would ruin the surprise and boy won’t he be surprised! Casper decides to wear his dress uniform home. It was nice to be so well received at the airport. For the first time, he actually felt respected, now he needs to see if he can earn trust.

The second taxi comes and it’s a new car, that’s a relief. Casper picks up his bags and hauls them into the trunk. In the next few minutes, he will be home. Casper sits back to relax a moment, his nerves are becoming jittery as he is happy to get home which makes no sense, it’s his home.

Looking at the apartment building, Casper feels his mouth widen to a huge smile. He pays the driver and heads inside, trying not to make too much noise so his father won’t hear him coming in. He approaches the door to the apartment and something strange is going on, he hears voices. Lots of voices.

Oh, well. He will surprise them all instead. He quickly opens the door and yells, “Surprise!”

The whole room goes silent. Bart Wangler looks at his son, his soldier son, his chest fills with pride as he stands up. But he notices very quickly, his son is not seeing him at all, but is looking straight at Ruti.

Ruti stands quietly and takes the first step towards Casper. This is all he needs, he jumps to her in two giant steps and pulls her in for the kiss he has always wanted to give her. The one that





has waited in his heart and grown exponentially as each year passed. The entire room explodes in laughter.

When Casper pulls himself away, he finds he is about to say he is sorry, when Ruti whispers, “Better than I ever imagined it would be,” she smiles at him.

Bart jumps from the couch to pull his son into a hug. Casper is now caught up in seeing everyone around the room. Why are they here? How did they come together? So many questions in his mind.

Luca decides to speak for everyone. “We were at the fashion show and Ruti had this epiphany about who Bart is to her. Then the whole emblem idea came out and before we knew what was going on, we were all here and have been laughing ever since. We talked all night it seems. A lifetime is hard to sum up in a couple of hours. Since we know why we are here, what brings you home so unexpectedly? Everything ok with the US Navy?” he asks still smiling to see Ruti so relaxed and happy.

Casper doesn’t let go of Ruti’s hand but brings her over to the couch to sit next to her and explains to everyone what is going on. Ruti also decides to take a moment and explain to everyone what took place a long time ago with her dad and why things happened at the fashion show the way they did.

The words simply pour out of her and to her relief, everyone listens. The aura in the room lifts from worried to ecstatic. Ruti has never felt better, “Why have I never let loose of this before?” she asks as she looks between Bart and Luca.

Bart answers first, “You had to learn to trust again my dear. Then it all fell into place. I have a feeling working with Marushka has helped you too,” Ruti shakes her head.

“So, now that everyone is home and that we are all family I have no problem saying I’m hungry, let’s order some food, my boy is home!!! My tiger has beaten her foes and the love of my life lives on!!! Who is going to break open the bottle?” Bart says.

The room fills with laughter immediately. Keri finds the wine and the glasses and begins to pour, Marushka telephoned a friend to get a meal delivered and Ruti and Casper catch up on the couch.

The adults in the room look over at the couch, not a dry eye among them.  
Trust.....restored.