

Captive Minds



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Prakash wiped the condensed vapour from the window glass and set his eyes on the courtyard. Outside, everything was covered with a white carpet. After a long dry spell, there had been a heavy snowfall the day before. It was eleven in the night but there were no signs of sleep in his eyes. He looked at the trees outside, which, with snow on their branches, looked like white ghosts. As soon as he turned to retire to bed, someone knocked at his door. It was his friend's mother who informed him that there was a phone call for him. He came into the drawing room and received the call. One of his relatives informed him that his brother was critically wounded and had been hospitalised.

On reaching the hospital, Prakash came to know that Kishore had been found lying in a pool of blood in the corner of a public park. A passer-by had reported the matter to the police, who arrived immediately and carried him to a nearby hospital. Someone in the hospital recognized Kishore and informed his relatives.

Prakash's parents were already in the hospital. Kishore was in the ICU. A few police officials were present there noting down some information from Ram Lal, Kishore's father. Their attention got diverted when they saw Dr. Hafeez coming out of the ICU. They gheraoed him and asked him about the patient's condition. The doctor himself was not sure. According to him, Kishore was still in a critical condition and nothing could be said with certainty till his CT Scan was done. The doctor left the place in haste, keeping Ram Lal and his family guessing. Prakash was standing in a corner, not daring to ask anyone about his brother. Ram Lal did not look at his face, nor did Sumitra, Prakash's mother. Prakash's sister Jyoti compassionately glanced at her brother but could not move her lips due to the fear of her father.

Prakash was calmly biting his nails and looking through the glass window at his brother who was still lying motionless on the bed inside the ICU. He was being prepared for the CT Scan. Both his hands and his right foot were bandaged. There was still some oozing from his head, which was reportedly having a deep wound. Kishore seemed to be in pain, apparently not being able to move his limbs. Prakash was moved by the sight and his eyes were full of tears. Kishore was his younger brother and Prakash still had a soft corner for him. It was after a long time that he had seen his brother again.

Prakash had been thrown out of his home about two months back and his parents had severed their relations with him. His eyes were wet, partly for his brother and partly for the ill treatment he was receiving from his parents, especially his father. There was nobody to console him. The series of events that ultimately led to his expulsion from his home, flashed before his eyes and he was lost in the bitter memories.

It was a cold winter night. The big clock on the wall struck eleven. Prakash got restive. Kishore, had been out of his home since morning, presumably gone to some of his friend's place for studies. But a friend of Prakash had informed him that he had seen Kishore and his friends gambling in a club. Prakash thought if Kishore was not put on the right path now, it might be impossible to stop him from ruining his career. He cared a lot for his brother and wanted to get him out of the bad company.

Soon the big gate of the courtyard opened slowly and Kishore came in. As soon as he entered the hall, Prakash wanted to know where he was coming from. Taking Prakash's words to be very offending, Kishore shouted at him, telling him it was none of his business to ask him questions. This infuriated Prakash and, in a fit of anger, he slapped Kishore. There was a great commotion. And at that very moment, Ram Lal, who had been on a business trip to Delhi, entered the house unexpectedly. On seeing him, Kishore started crying loudly as if in acute pain and expectedly, drew his father's attention towards him. On enquiry, Kishore told his father that he was studying at his friend's place and Prakash was falsely implicating him. Sumitra was reluctant to accept his story as wholly true, but Ram Lal believed that it was. Prakash tried to tell his father the factual position, but he was ridiculed and asked to mend his own behaviour. Ram Lal had a feeling that Prakash was jealous of Kishore and was bent upon giving him a bad name. To confirm the truth of what he had said, Kishore phoned his friend and asked him to tell his father that they were studying together. His friend did the same. Now Ram Lal lost his temper. As soon as Prakash opened his mouth to say something, Ram Lal shouted at him and in a fit of anger, lifted his stick high, in an attempt to hit him, but the stick fell down from his hand and he collapsed on the carpet.

The situation had changed now. Everyone was shocked. They got up to attend to Ram Lal. Prakash lifted him with the help of his brother and laid him on the bed. Sumitra rubbed his soles while Jyoti, his daughter, the youngest in the family, slowly moved her hands on his forehead. There was no doctor living nearby and, at this hour of the night, it was impossible to summon one from elsewhere. Prakash called up his family physician Dr. Jalali on phone and told him about the incident. He prescribed some treatment, and the situation was controlled from getting worse.

The half burnt fire-wood was emitting a lot of smoke in the fire-place. No one had paid any attention to that. When the temperature in the room came down, Jyoti gathered her wits and blew hard at the firewood. The fire came to life with a steady flame and its warmth spread around in the room. Ram Lal was feeling better now. He looked at his wife apologetically as if asking for forgiveness. Sumitra was moved and tears ran down from her eyes. She held his hand firmly and

whispered into his ear, "We don't want any thing of that sort again. For God's sake, why can't you do everything patiently and peacefully?"

Next morning, Dr. Jalali examined Ram Lal. He had suffered a mild stroke and was now out of danger. Dr. Jalali prescribed some medicines and also issued necessary instructions to the family members. In a few days, Ram Lal was fit and fine but he continued not to talk to Prakash any more. Except for the love his sister had for him, Prakash was just like an outsider in his own home. Though his mother still had some love for him, yet she could not exhibit it openly for she was scared of her husband.

Kishore was doing his graduation. Though he was not good at studies, yet he was very dear to his father. Ram Lal was very fond of him right from his childhood. Prakash was Ram Lal's first child but he never had a soft corner for him. He was said to have been born at an inauspicious moment, which, his parents were told, would bring disaster to them. Bad omens reportedly connected with Prakash's birth got somewhat confirmed when within two months of his birth, Sumitra lost her brother in an accident and Ram Lal suffered a heavy loss in his business. Though Sumitra was sad at the turn of the events, yet she did not totally consider these things as a consequence of Prakash's birth. She was not ready to consider her son to be an ill omen.

Right from his childhood, Prakash was sober and undemanding. He would bow his head and not talk back when rebuked by elders. He would not ask for anything, not even food when hungry. Ram Lal believed this to be his ego. He would always find fault with him. Sumitra was sure that it was not his ego, but the inborn politeness that made Prakash a different child. She often entered into an argument with her husband pleading for Prakash, but would fall silent when subjected to harsh words. Prakash would not lose temper even in the gravest circumstances. Whenever there was an argument between the two brothers [as is normal with all children] Ram Lal would always side with the younger one. On every small and big occasion, Kishore was given gifts of his liking whereas Prakash was always treated casually. But his mother was after all a mother, so she always kept some gifts aside for Prakash and warned him not to make a show of them. This would hurt him more because the gesture confirmed to him the fact that even his mother was terribly afraid of his father.

Kishore was four years younger to Prakash. He was brought up with utmost care and love. Ram Lal got a boost in his business immediately after Kishore was born. He attributed it to the good-luck Kishore had brought with him. Thereafter, Ram Lal showered tremendous amount of affection on him. His likes and dislikes were given priority in every matter. Sumitra felt uneasy with this, but she could not utter a word. She kept calm and suffered internally. Prakash was least disturbed with this. He loved his brother as much as anybody else did. He also would look after Kishore's comforts. This affection continued till it dawned upon him that his brother was going the wrong way.

Kishore had fallen in bad company. He had taken to smoking and gambling. He used to get a good amount as his pocket money, which he spent on smoking and gambling with his classmates. When Prakash heard of it, he gave a piece of advice to his brother, but without any results. Finally

he intimated his father about it, who in turn warned him for reporting falsely on Kishore. Only Sumitra would believe him to some extent.

And one day, Prakash lost the affection of his mother as well. An incident shattered his world beyond repair.

That day, Kishore had not returned home till late in the evening. Everyone was panicky. Ram Lal was not at home. Prakash enquired from his friends about him. He was led to a house in the outskirts of the city, where he found him and others in a tense situation. This was in fact a gambling den. Kishore had gambled and lost all that he had in his pocket. In the hope of winning back, he had continued till he came under a heavy debt. Prakash saw that a middle-aged man had caught Kishore by his neck and would not leave him before he would clear his debt. The man was unknown to him.

Prakash intervened and, with the help of a known friend of Kishore, he was able to get him released from the clutches of the middle-aged man who came to be known as Manohar. Prakash promised to pay him the amount next day but requested all the people present not to reveal the incident to any body.

Prakash had a beautiful pocket watch, which was gifted to him by his maternal uncle Mohan Mama on his passing 10th class exams with merit. Mohan Mama had got the watch especially for him from Dubai where he usually went in connection with his business. It was a unique kind of a gift, and very dear to Prakash. He kept it wrapped up and hidden lest someone should touch and dirty it.

Next day, Prakash took out the watch. He took Kishore along and approached a watch dealer far away from his residence, for money in lieu of the watch. When questioned by the shopkeeper, as to from where he had got such a beautiful watch and why he wanted to sell it, Prakash cooked up a story. He told the shopkeeper that the watch belonged to his ailing mother and he was selling it to get medicines for her. The shopkeeper was moved and paid him the exact amount required to clear Kishore's debt, though he had valued the watch far less than that. Prakash paid the amount to Manohar but advised him and Kishore to keep the whole episode a secret.

Prakash mourned the loss of his beautiful watch very much but was satisfied that he had saved the honour and dignity of his brother by paying his debt. He was sure that the Almighty would forgive him for the sin of telling a lie to the shopkeeper.

But Prakash's excitement did not last long. In course of time, Kishore passed his 10th class examination. Mohan Mama wanted to gift him a watch like the one he had gifted to Prakash. So he asked Prakash to show him the watch. Prakash was disturbed. He had no watch and no answer. He did not reply and stood like a statue.

Prakash was mum, but on persistent enquiry, Kishore revealed the story in a totally different manner. He told his parents and Mohan Mama that Prakash was in debt and he had sold the watch to a shopkeeper on the pretext of his mother's illness. Ram Lal, Sumitra and Mohan Mama were

taken aback. Prakash wanted to clarify but the moment he looked at his father's angry face, his lips refused to move. Words died down in his mouth. He could not reveal the facts. He was shivering now and this was considered as an admission of his guilt. Ram Lal lost his temper and beat him black and blue, till he fell unconscious. Sumitra also lost all love she had for him.

After this episode, Prakash felt he was not fit for this world but there was little he could do. His parents and Mohan Mama had believed Kishore's version of the story as true. Prakash was terribly hurt, not with his father's beating, but because of his brother's sordid role, which only brought him miseries. Yet he preferred to keep mum lest it should bring disgrace to his brother, who was younger to him and liable for mercy. On his part Kishore never repented for his deeds.

Jyoti was also hurt by the treatment meted out to Prakash from time to time. She was sure Prakash was a God-fearing boy and she believed there must be another side to the story. She did not like her father's behavior, but she could not help. She also was scared of him. Prakash found his sister very affectionate and caring. Many times he thought of leaving his home for good but it was only the thought of Jyoti, that prevented him from doing so.

Prakash did not want such kind of situation to arise any more. He knew he had no recognition in the house but was still concerned about the welfare of his family and also about the health of his father. He called Kishore into his room and advised him to live like a responsible member of the family. He also wanted to talk to him about the bad company he was in, but Kishore, throwing all etiquette to wind, warned him not to interfere in his personal life. For the first time in his life, Prakash lost his temper. He shouted at Kishore and slapped him once on his face. This enraged Kishore and he started shouting back at him at the peak of his voice. In no time did Sumitra and Jyoti reach the spot and saw both the brothers red with anger. Sumitra separated the two and enquired from her younger son as to what had happened. In a bizarre way, Kishore told her that Prakash was angry with him for revealing the story of the watch to his parents. Sumitra embraced Kishore and thrashed Prakash. Ram Lal returned in the evening and after hearing the whole story from Kishore and Sumitra, asked Prakash to leave the house.

Deeply hurt, Prakash left the house. His eyes were wet but there was no one to look into them. Not even his younger brother whom he had always considered as part of himself and because of whom had he invited the wrath of his parents. The ethics of sensitive human relationship was lost in the din. Nobody caught him by his hand and no one asked him where he was going, till he passed through the massive gate of his courtyard and vanished into the darkness.

On leaving his home, Prakash went to live with one of his friends, whose parent's showered a lot of love and affection on him. Through their son they had come to know all about Prakash's miseries. Prakash gave up the idea of pursuing studies any further and instead joined his friend to teach in a school.

Medical reports showed Kishore had no internal injuries. He was moved from the ICU next morning. For the whole night his parents were awake, praying for his recovery. Prakash was quiet, for nobody cared for him. His presence mattered little to them.

Police recorded Kishore's statement. He said that he had been attacked by some unknown persons while he was returning home. He did not give the names of the attackers nor did he explain the motive behind the attack. The police officer, however, did not buy his story and after persistent queries, Kishore gave in and named the attackers. However, he remained firm about ignorance of the motive.

Kishore was discharged from hospital after a couple of days. He was all right now, except for the injuries and bruises on his body which were now healing. His parents were happy and thanked the Almighty for saving their child.

The Police succeeded in arresting two of the three persons who had attacked Kishore. Both of them were said to be closely known to Kishore. On interrogation, one of the arrested persons, whose name was Manohar, told the police that there was a dispute between them and Kishore on sharing of the money won in a gambling match. Kishore, being rich and the son of an influential businessman, considered himself a dada and wanted to take half the money and asked the other three to share the balance. This was not accepted by others who wanted the money to be shared equally. This resulted in a heated exchange of words among them. When Kishore was about to run away with the money, they caught him. Kishore kicked Manohar hard and they in turn used stones and sticks to thrash him. After injuring him, they ran away with the money.

Next day, Ram Lal visited the police station to meet the police officer. The officer told the whole story to Ram Lal. On hearing the truth, Ram Lal was taken aback. Kishore had told him an entirely different story. He had said that Manohar and others attacked him when he demanded the money he had loaned them a long time back.

Ram Lal was now sweating. The Police had registered a case against Manohar and his companions for assaulting and injuring Kishore. Ram Lal spoke to Manohar in the lock-up and what he came to know in detail was sufficient to put him and his family to shame. According to Manohar, Kishore had been spending his father's money on gambling and drinking and had been in the company of people like him since a long time.

Ram Lal wanted the case to be closed, because he feared that within days people would come to know the fact and his son's character would become talk of the town. He himself had a very high standing in the society and these revelations could bring him a bad name. He requested the police officer to drop the case. While Manohar and his companion were being released from the lock up, Ram Lal accidentally found Prakash's Dubai watch on Manohar's wrist. Ram Lal asked him as to how he had got the watch, and Manohar revealed yet another shocking story. This story struck the hardest blow to Ram Lal; and almost fainting, he fell on the ground. The Police officer comforted him and offered him a glass of water. A little after, he left for his home completely shattered.

On reaching home, the first thing Ram Lal did was to contact his elder son and call him to his home presumably for some urgent consultation. Sumitra pleaded with Ram Lal not to call Prakash, as she did not want to see anything untoward happen in her house again. But Ram Lal was calm this time. He was looking deep into the family photograph hanging on the wall, with his three small children in the foreground. All those in the photograph had smiling faces except Prakash, who wore his serious looks there as well. "This cannot be ego, my child," Ram Lal said with tears in his eyes, "Forgive me". Sumitra was aghast. She could not make out what was happening. Ram Lal looked straight into her eyes and said, "My mind has long been captive to my prejudice against my son. Please pardon me, all of you." Sumitra was still ignorant about the new developments, but she murmured, "And so has been my mind, captive to your terror."

Prakash arrived immediately. Sumitra was tense. She was not sure what was going to happen. The hatred in her heart for her son had faded long ago and she had craved so many times to see him and hug him. But she could not let Ram Lal get an inkling of her sentiments. Prakash came, wished his parents and retired to a corner with a questioning look in his eyes. He had re-entered his home after a long gap of time. He looked around like a lost person. He was ignorant about the purpose for which he was called here; but before anything serious would happen, he wanted to see and meet his sister Jyoti. Jyoti did not come. She had heard of his father calling Prakash but expected only something very serious happening. Bolting the door behind her, she hid herself inside her room and wept and prayed for the safety of her brother. It took her some time to gather courage to see with her eyes whatever was going to happen. She wiped her tears and came down.

Jyoti could not believe her eyes. The moment she entered the hall, she saw her father weeping bitterly and hugging Prakash. Prakash and Sumitra were both dumbfounded. They could not make out what was happening. Jyoti came and sat beside her brother. Before anybody could ask any questions, Ram Lal sat down and related the whole story to them. The events unfolded like a well-scripted drama. Kishore was frightened and pale. He hung his head in shame. Sumitra and Jyoti went up to Prakash and embraced him, tears of joy running down their cheeks. At the same time there was deep sorrow in their eyes at Kishore's behavior. It looked as if they could never forgive him. But the elder brother had a big heart. He forgave his younger brother with open arms and a loving smile. Kishore fell at his feet.

And as it always happens, all of them lived happily ever after.