

The Pangs

of Love



Brian D. Kharpran Daly

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Jason War was devastated. He was weeping, deep down in his heart – the acid wrenching tears that scoured his heart, wringing it into a shrivelled ball of intense pain of nothingness. He felt he had no more tears left to shed, yet his heart seared with the burning anguish of a lost soul. The pit of his belly ached with the terrifying sense and realization that life and all that is beautiful had been sucked out of his being. The sordid vacuum left twisted the innards of his rational world.

His world, propitious and beautiful, had collapsed.

He had been suffering from depression for the last three months, ever since Marian had gravely told him that she would not wait any longer for him. She had met someone – someone more adventurous, more daring and more down to earth and both of them had been drawn to each other. Jason's head had spun when she told him that. He was shocked to the core of his being, not knowing whether she said it in jest or in real earnest. When he realized she meant it, his heart sank expelling all the vibrant and joyful hopes and aspirations that he had caressed and was looking forward to. From a clear blue sky, the dark and stormy clouds suddenly appeared and hovered over him, clouding his mind and imagination and dulling his senses. He could not understand why she had dumped him so unceremoniously when they had loved each other so much and it was just a matter of time when they would get married. How could she have turned her back on him and embraced this man – or this young boy? His grief was so profound and overwhelming that it was a wonder he was still clinging to sanity.

But that morning his heart broke into a thousand pieces. It was as if a big black, twisted tornado had suddenly clutched him, wrenched and contorted his body in ferocious play in the murky sky and when satiated, dashed his numbed body with impunity on the cold hard pavement.

He was walking along the street, mindful of the heavy throng of commuters and hawkers, when suddenly he spied her riding pillion on a motorbike. The motorbike was loud and arrogant, drawing all eyes to it. She had her hands resting firmly on the guy's back and looking pleased and happy. He stood rooted on the pavement, his face death-pale as a sheet – immobile, as the dam broke apart and the tears flooded his eyes. The cold and cruel reality gripped him and his heart splintered – his whole being convoluted and he was overwhelmed with wretched bitterness.

What about the promises they had made to each other? Do they not count? Are they all to be broken and forgotten? He could never imagine that love could be so cruel, not when she was the embodiment of what love was all about for him. His heart was broken to the core as he realized that life would have no meaning for him anymore. He could never love anyone, not in the way he loved her; of that he was certain. He had no more stomach to go to the pool for his bi-weekly keep-fit exercise, as bitter bile rose in his throat. Faintly and sick at heart, he did an about-turn and hurried back home where he locked himself in his bedroom.

The world for him had ended; a catastrophe he could never have comprehended. The pain of bitterness, jealousy, emptiness and a deep sorrow of loss gnawed at his heart. He cried till he could cry no more – the wells of tears had dried up. He wanted to hide, hide where no one would find him, maybe far away where no one would know him. But he knew that would never do; he was never a coward and would never back away from anything. But he needed to do something – anything that would take his mind away from the conflicting turmoil that was raging in his head. To find solitude, yes that's what he needed – far away from all life; yet somewhere where he could immerse his body and mind into some physical activity. Wring out the bitter sweat from his being. Maybe the pain would go away and he could come to terms with himself. Maybe, he would

in time learn to forget her. But that very thought was repugnant to him. He knew that she would always flow through his sinews – she would always and forever be a part of his heart. Even if he were to live as a hermit, he would never banish her from his heart or mind for she had become the most intricate and comforting part of his being. For the moment he was utterly broken – poor is the heart when love has fled, wretched is the soul when thoughts are dead. That’s how he felt.

He looked absently at his cell phone wondering how he had it in his hand. He thought that little piece of communication marvel would not have much use for him now. She is gone from his life and the very thought of it brought back silent warm tears trickling down his face as two little parallel streams. On an impulse he scrolled the telephone numbers on his cell phone and when he found what he was looking for he pressed ‘Call’.

“Hi Jason,” he heard his friend’s voice.

“Hi Alex,” he replied, “you at work?”

“Yes, I’m at work. How else will I earn my upkeep?”

“How about taking time off? A week maybe? We could go trekking and camp in the wild, far away from any human habitation.”

Maybe disappear forever, that’s what he thought; who would miss him anyway? He suddenly felt ashamed at that selfish thought that had invaded his mind – what about his parents? They surely don’t deserve such ungratefulness from him. But the realisation that a vital part of himself is lost weighed heavily on him. The future is dark; no, not dark but non-existent. He let out a sigh – the sigh of a man caught in the unfeeling and merciless torrents of the angry sea.

“Jason, is there something wrong? You sound so disturbed. Why do you want to disappear so suddenly?”

“I have my own reasons, Alex. Therefore, I need this favour from you. I could go on my own but you know, roaming around the countryside alone is not advisable. The village folks are superstitious and wary of strangers and I could land myself in trouble. That’s why I would appreciate it if you would come along with me.”

“When do you want to go?” Alex inquired, unsure of himself.

Jason thought for a while looking absently at the calendar, "Today is Thursday so if we leave this Saturday which is the 18th, it will give me plenty of time tomorrow to collect provisions for the trip. We could return back on Sunday the 26th. Will it be okay for you?"

"Well I cannot refuse you, can I? I could use a much-needed holiday myself and take the opportunity to shed some of the flab off my belly. So, I shall have to put in my leave application today."

"Good. And Alex, thanks for your understanding. I really appreciate it."

"By the way where are we trekking?"

Jason had not really given it a serious thought. "Well, we could trek from Mawsynram, down all along the valley, camping and lazing around and climb up to Laitkynsew or we could go to Nongnah and camp up at Lum lawpaw which is a very isolated and beautiful place. On second thoughts we could go caving. There is this cave called Krem Lamon which we discovered a few months ago and have explored and surveyed about 1200 metres only. The cave appears to be heading deep into the mountain and I'm hopeful it could be a big system – one of those typical Meghalayan river caves. How we missed this cave all those years I shall never know, but I'm glad we did and that it is there for us today. Yes, somehow, I feel that this cave has some hope for me, hope for what, I don't really know; just a tiny insecure feeling that some part of my wretched torn heart will be mended. Now, the more I think about it the more serious I am that we should explore the cave and map as much as we can. We could even bivouac in the cave if possible, so that we can have more time to explore. What do you think, Alex?"

"Yes, I think I will enjoy that. I have not explored too many caves yet; maybe just a dozen or so? I would really like to do some survey work underground. By the way what do you mean when you said 'some part of your wretched torn heart will be mended?' Anything the matter Jason? Anything that I should know?"

Jason bit his lips and screwed his face before he replied. "You will Alex, in due time. For the moment nothing to worry about; let us concentrate on the caving ahead, okay?"

"Right Jason, but how many of us are on the trip?"

“There will just be the two of us so you will have a lot to do with the surveying,” Jason said holding out the bait.

“I can’t wait then,” Alex replied, as Jason visualized the broad smile lighting up his face. How he wished he too could smile but such feelings were alien to his heart now. Would he ever smile and laugh again he asked himself? No, not ever; not the way his heart was struggling in the empty desolation. He felt oppressed, as if he was confined in a small airless and sunless, dank underground dungeon – alone in the deprivation of a lost soul. He felt his throbbing lungs splutter and struggle for its fuel of oxygen through his laboured breath.

“But what about Marian? Isn’t she coming along?”

Jason shuddered back to reality and he felt his heart bleed again. “No, Marian will not be coming along. She has some engagements of her own,” he vaguely muttered incoherently.

Alex felt the tremor in his friend’s voice. Something is terribly wrong he thought, but felt it wiser not to pursue the matter. Jason will confide in him sooner or later. “Alright then, just the two of us; we will have fun.”

“Okay, that’s settled then. We go caving. In that case, I will have to get mostly dry rations as we may not be able to cook inside the cave; which means we will have to rough it out. You game with that?”

“As I said earlier, it will be my chance to reduce the flab on my belly. It will do me a world of good. I’m already excited at the prospect of the underground adventure which I’m sure it will be.”

“Good! I will get everything ready by tomorrow afternoon including caving equipment.”

“How do we go?” inquired Alex.

“We’ll hire a Tata Sumo to drop us as far as it could go; then we walk to the cave, which is still some distance away,” Jason replied.

“Alright then, I’ll see you tomorrow to help sort out the equipment,” Alex volunteered.

“Bye,” Jason ended.

The prospect of a week’s caving, far away from civilization, momentarily lifted up Jason’s heart, though the feeling of loneliness

and loss lingered in the recesses of his soul and the sickening ache of emptiness seared through the pit of his belly. How could such a calamity befall him? Rend his heart apart? Like a terrible ill-wind that suddenly appeared from nowhere leaving his life in shatters. So swift it was – out of the blue a bolt of lightning had struck him dead.

The deep despair in his heart was, he knew, no matter how hard he pushed his mind and body to strenuous physical exertion and distraction, an unwarranted and undeserved punishment that life had singled out for him, made more intense by the fact that he would never be able to get Marian out of his system; not that he would want to do so, for she had worked her magic into his very soul. It will be a futile exercise and to his soul a crime even, to try to sweat her out of his system. He will cling on to the faith and dictates of his demented soul.

Can someone's life be so utterly bleak? Empty, painful as the chill of dead winter; as the ravaged terrain relentlessly bore the silent stripping of its creed.

The sky suddenly darkened. A wind had risen, bringing dark angry clouds, thick and ominous. Streaks of lightning crisscrossed the horizon soon to be followed by thunderous claps of thunder. When the rains came, it lashed with such ferocity that Jason had to run for shelter. He squeezed himself among the swelling crowd in front of a shoe shop. The rain was so fierce that when it hit the pavement, drops splattered metres away, soon soaking the lower half of Jason's trousers. He tried to inch backwards to avoid the splatter but to no avail. This is no good he thought; he would soon be soaked. He was about to make a dash for the next shop, where he imagined he could find better shelter when he saw her. She was trying out a pair of shoes inside the shop. He rudely pushed his way through a group of boys to have a better glimpse.

He was enamoured by her beautiful pair of legs, at least the part that was visible. The shoes seemed to fit her perfectly as she stood up and took a few steps. Jason's heart tingled as excitement coursed through his body. Never before had he seen anyone as beautiful – slim and olive-skinned she was tall for a Khasi. But what struck a chord in his heart was her face; he just fell in love with her. It was a face he had dreamed of in his subconscious for as long as he remembered.

He knew she was what he had been yearning for all his life. His knees trembled as he had never trembled before, leaving him weak and flustered. How could the mere first sight of a strange maiden, create such a vigorous mad chemical reaction, boiling in the consciousness of his being?

Totally oblivious of his stare, the lady in question sat down and took off the shoes trying on another pair – this time black. Jason marvelled for it was a perfect fit again. He was mesmerised and knew he had to know her. Without even thinking, he entered the shop and went around the displays, not really registering what he was seeing.

“Come sir, I will show you some good shoes for you,” he heard someone say behind him.

He turned around and followed the salesman. He flushed as he walked by her and found a seat close to hers, feeling overpowered by her nearness.

“Here sir, try these,” the salesman said producing a pair of pointed shoes.

“Oh no! I don’t want pointed shoes. I want comfortable shoes with thick rubber soles,” he said with a modulated voice to attract her attention.

But she had gone to the counter to pay for her two pair of shoes. His heart thumped; she would leave and he would not get to know her.

“Black or brown, sir?”

He looked at the salesman.

“Any colour.”

He watched as she paid her bills, absorbing the fluidity and flexibility of her being. Her rear was no less inferior – if at all it complimented her personality. He was totally captured and decided that if she leaves the shop, he would follow her, rain or no rain. He could not afford to lose her for he may never see her again.

“These are very comfortable ones, sir,” the salesman intruded blocking his view of the lady.

He peered round and saw her walking to the door. He was about to get up and leave, ready to make an excuse that he would come back

the next day. But she stood at the door, peered out and deciding that the rain was too severe, she came back in and sat in the seat she had just vacated. Jason was elated.

“Sir? Please take off your shoes,” he heard the salesman prodding him.

Jason quickly took off his shoes and tried the new pair. They were just the kind of shoes he had been looking for – thick rubber soles, comfortable and durable. The shoes felt as if they were made for him.

“Okay, I’ll take them,” he told the salesman, not bothering to even ask the price.

Putting on his old pair of shoes, he casually looked at her and smiled. She smiled back. This is outstanding he thought, as his heart sang in delight. He got up, went to the cash counter and made his payment and came back to his seat. It was, he felt, as if he was treading on thin air.

“Have to wait out the rain,” he said turning to her, “I don’t even have an umbrella.”

“Yes,” she agreed, “the rain is very heavy and I cannot risk it even with my umbrella.”

“I see that you are already quite wet,” she continued.

“Yes, I am, but it’ll dry soon enough.”

He hesitated, then ventured, offering his hand, “Let me introduce myself. I’m Jason War, a Professor of Geology at the North Eastern Hill University.”

She took his hand, sending a thrill up his spine.

“And I’m Marian Wann,” she responded in a very pleasing and warm voice.

Jason felt the warmth of her hand in his and held it a fraction longer, at the same time feeling a surge of euphoria when he realized she had neither engagement nor wedding ring on her fingers.

“Where do you work?” he asked her.

She hesitated before she told him that she is the Director in the department of Statistics and Economics, Government of Meghalaya.

He was taken aback; she looked too young to be holding such a top post.

“Pardon me,” he inquired; “You look too young to be holding such a responsible position.”

“Not too young at all,” she said. “Just turned thirty-five, if you must know.”

“Sorry for my insensitivity, but I wouldn’t have believed you to be a top bureaucrat. You must be very intelligent and efficient to make the grade.”

“I think I’m just lucky,” she said, smiling at him.

“Whatever,” he said, “you must be excellent at your work.”

“No, I’m not! I’m just hard working and really very lucky.”

“Whatever you say, I believe you are worth every penny of what you earn and more besides.”

She blushed.

“What about you? How old are you? You look young to be a professor in a university.”

“Oh, how I wish I were much younger, but alas, age catches up without you really realizing it. I am forty-five, ten years older than you. But I feel young and spritely,” he said, warming up to her.

“Pardon me for intruding into your private affairs, but are you married,” he continued, giving her his most charming smile.

She flushed, but responded with such a dazzling smile that he was swept off his feet.

“No, I am not married. Never met the right guy yet.”

He was ecstatic. That was what he had really wanted to hear, as his heart beat wildly inside him. She would surely hear the thumping inside his ribcage, he thought.

“What about you?” She inquired, gazing gently on his face, “you must be married.”

“Yes, I am,” Jason admitted with a sigh, “but we are separated. We have been living separately for the last eight years.”

"I'm sorry," she breathed, a slight frown creasing her unblemished face.

"Well, I'm not" he said, his voice taking a sour edge to it, "we never really hit it off. Our marriage lasted less than two years; and am I glad that we don't have any children? It wouldn't do for we were never on the same wave-length; it would have been disastrous for the poor kids had we had them."

"But not yet divorced?" she brashly questioned him.

"Unfortunately, no! She wouldn't agree to it; probably to spite me or to make me suffer. And as I am now wary of love, I have never seriously pressed her for the divorce – not that we are ever going to come together again in future. It is finished between us – there was never really anything to bind us together."

"Maybe she still loves you," she suggested rather coyly.

"Then why does she rebuke me day in and day out? Why does she find fault with whatever I do? Why does she deny me my rights as a husband? I believe she hates my guts. Personally, I think I have tried to keep our marriage intact but it never worked out. It only got worse, till I could stand it no longer. I don't think she will ever want to marry again – she couldn't get along with anyone let alone her own parents."

"All the more she should agree to let you go," she said.

"That will be so with normal people, but probably something is wrong with her; she just won't even consider the thought, though there is not one iota of love between us. I had tried to persuade her that we should go for counselling but she wouldn't think of it. She just refuses any suggestions I make. We cannot discuss anything in a meaningful and mature way. I have long ago taken it as the end of the road for me. Pity that I rushed into the marriage and pity that it should end this way – a mistake I will rue for life; the only saving grace would be to end the marriage in a more civilised way, but there she is a brick wall. I think I should start pursuing the matter again with her – seriously fight for my right to freedom. How could a person live tethered to a wrong and impossible match? It is not normal or healthy even in the eyes of God."

"I don't know how we are discussing your private life when I hardly know you, having met you just moments ago," she said, looking shyly at him.

"It's all right. I think it's because we vibe," he said with a sincerity that she believed him.

"I'd better go" she said suddenly getting up, "the rain has slackened." His heart was in his throat. He couldn't let her go just yet when he didn't even know where she lives.

"How about a cup of coffee somewhere?" he ventured boldly.

She smiled. "Thanks, but I have to go. The rain may intensify again."

"I could drop you," he volunteered, "where do you live?"

"Lumdiengsoh. But I shouldn't trouble you," she refused, her hands extended forward.

"No trouble at all," Jason insisted getting up too, "it will be my pleasure."

He guided her out of the shop. It was already dark and the rain was still falling but with a gentler rhythm. She opened her umbrella and he took it from her. He led her toward the MUDA parking lot, feeling the thrill and excitement of brushing against her as they walked. Keeping the umbrella more over her, he was actually quite wet on his left side. But he didn't care – he had never been so happy for a long time.

They drove out of the parking lot into the busy *Khyndai Lad*. The road glistened under the street lights after the heavy downpour. The ficus trees within the circle gleamed a lustrous green with the dust and grime washed off giving them an appearance of health and vitality. The busy and tired commercial area took on an invigorating ambience of lustrous sheen and cleanliness. Even the atmosphere had an air of freshness about it. And inside the car it was warm and cosy, filled with an air of delighted excitement.

"So where do you live?" she casually asked him, looking sideways at him driving.

"Shyiap. I built the house five years ago and my parents, both retired, are now living with me. They have given away their house in Mawkhar to my younger brother who has a family of his own. I'm happy in my new surroundings; my house is the third last house in the locality and no more building is coming up that part. The greatest thing however is, a hundred metres away, stands Lum Mawpat with a beautiful forest

cover. There is where I spend a lot of my time, climbing the hill and roaming through the jungle, right to the top of the ridge and down the very steep slope overlooking the village of Mawtawar. In the solitude of nature, I find my peace and happiness," he murmured, his thoughts lost amongst the pines, oaks and rhododendrons.

"My, that sounds lovely," she said excitedly.

"It's a great locality. And I'm very fortunate to be so close to nature."

"Well, we too have the Reserve Forest just about half a kilometre away from our house and I sometimes visit it."

Jason turned and smiled at her.

"Yes, I know. You too are fortunate having that wonderful green cover which is practically the lungs of the city. I know every nook and corner of that jungle; as a kid that was where I spent all my time. You know, we used to live near the edge of that forest till I was about fifteen years of age, when my parents sold the house."

She looked pleased. "Really? We could have been neighbours."

"Yes, and I would have got to know you earlier."

"Does it matter?"

"Not really, as long as I know you now. But when did you come to Lumdiengsoh?"

"Eleven years ago. We sold our ramshackle house in Mawprem when we were offered this house by my father's friend who wanted to go back to settle in Guwahati. Funny isn't it how we move around?"

"Yes, isn't it?" He agreed as he avoided a speeding motorcyclist.

He slowed down the car to a crawl and finally stopped; they were caught in a traffic jam. Shillong had become notorious with small roads and ever-increasing traffic. It was only going to get worse in the coming years, he visualized. Even if most of the office establishments are shifted to the proposed new township in Mawdiangdiang will it ease the congestion? Not really, he thought. The alarming rate of overpopulation and ever-increasing flow of immigrants is gobbling up every little space; eating into every valuable pocket of green cover. What an ugly and filthy monster this once beautiful and sought-after hill station had now become. He shuddered.

“So how many brothers and sisters do you have?” he asked her, banishing his unsavoury thoughts.

“I’m the eldest. I have a brother and a sister following me. And both are married.”

“And I,” he informed her, “have no sister; just a younger brother who is a very successful businessman having a great life of his own with his family.”

The vehicle in front moved and Jason followed. Soon the vehicles flowed freely as the jam at the bottle-neck was miraculously cleared. For once, he would have been pleased with being caught in an intricate traffic snarl.

Crossing the Fire Brigade, he turned right and drove slowly up the slope, trying to prolong the time he had with her.

“Up this slope?” he asked her.

“Yes. I’ll tell you when we reach.”

At the top of the slope the road turned slightly to the right and continued.

“There, just ahead is a right turn, and the second house on the left is mine,” she told him.

“A splendid house you have,” he commented.

“Well, it was an old Assam-type house which I had reconstructed into a double storey building.”

“That your car?” he asked, seeing a Maruti 800 in the porch.

“Yes, but I don’t use it often enough to go to work. I like the walk down to the Fire Brigade and take a taxi from there.”

“Good for you, though you don’t really need any exercise. You are fit and slim as you are,” he told her.

She blushed but looked pleased at the compliment.

“Marian, can I see you again?” he asked her hopefully, his heart pounding feverishly.

She looked at him for what seemed to him an eternity.

Then she smiled and simply said, “Okay.”

“Do you have a card?” he asked her, giving her his.

She fumbled in her handbag, found one and handed it to him.

“Thank you,” he said gratefully, “I shall keep in touch with you.”

She turned to him.

“Thank you for the lift. I enjoyed your company and your openness.”

“And I thank you too for a wonderful evening. It is my greatest pleasure meeting and knowing you. Good night, Marian,” he said in all sincerity.

“Good night, Jason,” she responded, opening the gate and walking to her house.

Jason, who had also got out of the car, stood watching her stately figure disappear into the house. He stood still, transfixed as the lamppost nearby, a divine smile on his face, even after she had closed the door.

Then the sky burst open and the rains lashed with great intensity, but for a while he was totally oblivious that he was getting wet. When he finally drove off, he was singing in his heart.

2

Jason was in a swoon the next few days. His heart had never been so joyful and so light. Everything about him shone on his face – his mannerism, condescending attitude and his cheerfulness. This aura of happiness did not go unnoticed by his parents, who had hoped that their son would again find a wonderful life of his own. They had tried to find him a nice girl but he had no heart for any of them. But how could he ever marry again if his estranged wife would not grant him a divorce. Spiteful person, they thought – not wanting to live with him yet not releasing him either. Poor Jason, his mother ached for him; he deserves happiness as any other, more so perhaps. Yet, he has been so patient, kind and understanding, this beloved eldest son of hers. His happiness and wellbeing were always in her prayers. She was confident that God would answer her prayers soon enough; something good must unfold. Why should her son suffer because of his merciless wife? God will right things that have gone awry, of that she was convinced. He would get his divorce and find his true love – a love that will fill his life.

Every evening Jason longed to ring up his new found friend Marian. He would scroll down the directory on his mobile till he came to her name, but then stop short of calling her. He debated in his mind that he should not be too hasty; that he should not frighten her or appear to be too bold and daring. He must bide his time and win her trust. One night, getting ready for bed, he impulsively pressed the ‘call’ button, but immediately cancelled it before the call effected. No, let me wait for a few more days before I call her, he promised himself.

But the next evening, he could contain himself no longer and called her.

He listened to the start of the ring tones and in less than five seconds she had responded. His heart beat wildly.

“Hello Jason,” he heard the sweet voice of Marian at the other end.

“Hello Marian, I was dying to call you these last few days,” he managed to say.

“Why didn’t you? I was rather expecting your call. When you didn’t, I thought you must be very busy or have forgotten a poor waif like me,” she laughed, a little nervously.

“You? A poor waif? You are a Princess, if I may say so,” he said warmly.

“Come on, you are just flattering me. You don’t even know me yet; let me tell you that I have a vile temper. That’s what they tell me at home.”

“I doubt it, but in any case, it’s worth the risk. For that matter we all have tempers including myself. What is important is how we control it. In any case, it mellows down with the years,” he said philosophically.

“You think so?”

“Definitely! I myself used to be a hot-headed brat who would jump at the slightest affront. Once, for some reason or other I was very angry with my mother; I took it out on her by refusing to eat for five days and to prove that I was not slyly eating outside, I never left the house for the whole period. No one could persuade me to eat however tempting the aroma of the food emanating from the kitchen was to me. Finally, on the sixth day, hungry as hell, I relented and ate with no persuasion from anyone.”

“My, that is really taking it to the limit,” she said, “you don’t look the sort. I don’t think I could starve myself like that,” she said with disbelief.

“Yes, I really had a temper and was always ready for a fight. But the five-day self-imposed starvation taught me a lesson. When I grew older, I used to think about it and it has taught me to calm down. Today, sometimes when my temper boils and am about to blow my fuse, I simply close my eyes, concentrate to stay calm and gradually

overcome the storm. And with the years I have really mellowed down," he confided in her.

"So, as I said, you don't have to worry about your fiery temper, if you have one," he continued. "The years take care of our attitude."

"That is some comfort," she said with relief.

"Anyway, what are you doing at the moment?" he asked her.

"Talking to you," she replied impishly.

He laughed at that. "That was a good one; but seriously are you busy?"

"I have brought some office work home. So, I'll be busy for a couple of hours before I go to bed," she replied.

"Are you that much overworked?"

"Well sometimes I have a lot of visitors at work. Therefore, to catch up with my work, I normally stay late at the office and oftentimes have to take my work home. It's not healthy I know," she said before he could comment on it.

Management of Time is what she should learn, Jason thought, but did not voice his thoughts. Some things are best left unsaid, at least until the appropriate moment.

"I was wondering if I could see you," he murmured hopefully.

"You could come to my office," she suggested.

"And I would be the reason for your homework and late nights?" he said laughing.

"Point well taken," she replied laughing as well. "But no worry, I'll cope, if you come in the afternoon around five."

"Tomorrow?" he suggested, a smile beginning to light up his face.

"Yes, tomorrow will be good. I will look forward to it."

Jason was enjoying the conversation and was reluctant to sign off but realized that she had a lot of work still to attend to.

"Marian, I think I should let you do your work, otherwise you would be up the whole night, and I would be responsible for you not getting any sleep," he said reluctant to let go.

"It's been nice you ringing me up and I would like to see you again. I'll go and have a shower first before I start on my homework," she said, trying to stifle a yawn.

"There, you are already tired and you need to get more rest," he advised her.

"I know, but I'll be fine once I've had a wash. So, goodnight Jason, I'll see you tomorrow," she said, thinking of the morrow.

"Wouldn't you like a back scrub?" It was out before he could think. He consciously bit his lips, afraid that he had gone too far.

Moment elapsed, then a coyishly laugh.

"Of course, I would, you naughty devil. But then my homework will not be done. And that would be a crime, wouldn't it?"

"You could hang a 'No Visitor' sign on your office door tomorrow and catch up with all your pending work, couldn't you? An exciting suggestion don't you think?" Jason joked.

"I'll bet it is, much so for you," she rebuked teasingly. "A good try though. And once again, goodnight Jason."

"Good night Marian and have a good sleep. Talking to you has pepped me up and I'm feeling over the moon. You are a balm for a sore and needy heart. Now don't stay up too late," he said, as a warm protective feeling of loving care crept over him.

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