

CAGED:

The Price of Pride

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“You can easily confuse friendship for love,
but you can never confuse love for friendship.”

Caged: The Price
of Pride

Publishing-in-support-of,

EDUCREATION PUBLISHING

RZ 94, Sector - 6, Dwarka, New Delhi - 110075
Shubham Vihar, Mangla, Bilaspur, Chhattisgarh - 495001

Website: *www.educreation.in*

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ISBN: 978-1-61813-445-5

Price: ₹ 364.00

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Printed in India

Caged: The Price of Pride

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EDUCREATION PUBLISHING

(Since 2011)

www.educreation.in

iii

Dedication

To, my dad;
for never believing in me.



Contents

S.No.	Contents	Page No.
1.	Broken and Burned	2
2.	Reasons and Rumors	15
3.	Mommy Issues	24
4.	The Best Gift Ever	34
5.	Instincts and Desires	44
6.	Moving On	50
7.	The Mind Games	59
8.	Good Business	70
9.	Good Night	78
10.	Good Morning	83
11.	Hot and Cold	92
12.	The Blind Date	104
13.	Taking a Chance	112
14.	New Beginnings	122
15.	A Date to Remember	133
16.	Lucky	137
17.	Red Rendezvous	155
18.	The Tryst	161
19.	Waking Up	166
20.	A Little too Much	173

21.	Dilemma	179
22.	The Promise	186
23.	Heart of Darkness	198
24.	Revealed	212
25.	Showdown	221
26.	Caged	248
27.	Love Like This	254
28.	No Regrets	276
29.	One Last Time	291

Caged

She dreams of free blue skies,
but sits and stares at one all alone.
As a fear of falling is hidden in her eyes,
since the last time she had flown.

Still the lonely bird sings a beautiful song,
and the whole world finds it really sweet.

But lost beneath her aching wings,
is a caged heart which always silently weeps.

~ *Seeker***Rohan**



Chapter 01

Broken and Burned

Nov 18, 2014.

08:55 am

Janak Puri, Delhi.

Not sad, or happy... just alone. He reminded himself again. He was at such a place in life, where things like smiles, sunshine, and sobriety— that bring joy to people, were only bringing him pain. Love, lust, loyalty had lost their meanings. Everything seemed fast, though nothing really happened; everything seemed loud, though he always found himself alone; everything seemed tiresome, though he'd been mostly in bed. And whenever he thought, this was it; this is *the* worst thing which can happen to him; life always proved him wrong.

Amid the funny noises coming from the neighboring room and the sun shining brightly through the half opened window; a twenty year old guy with long greasy hair over his curved forehead and an oval shaped face with stubbled cheeks, lay propped against the head-rest of his hostel bed.

People had always told him, that he overuses smileys while chatting to them. Yet, nobody had ever asked him *why?* Today's morning was no different, for he yet again had been disappointed by somebody, who hadn't responded to his messages; yet. Several pages of

handmade notes were spread all over the dusty bedspread, while he was struggling to keep his eyes open & focused on presentation running in his laptop placed on his stomach. His bleary eyes were hurting now, and when he closed them for few seconds to rest, a sudden burning sensation ran through his body and mind. But he knew, he could not give in to sleep yet. He must complete his work, before his best friend-cum-roommate, shows up in that undersized room of their hostel, and starts to shout at him again. Last night, sleep had only come to his rescue after 4 am, but that did not stop his best friend to wake him up at 7 am, and prepare for their presentation due at 1 pm today. So as his alarm started to ring 5 minutes later, he decided to take a short break from the continuous staring at his laptop. His eyes were still burning, and his aching mind & body were in great unrest since last night. He absent mindedly switched off the alarm, but just when he was about to put the phone down, a wave of sudden excitation surged through his body; an unread message was blinking in his phone. Filled with eagerness, he opened it up.

“Stay awake! I’ll come to the room around 12:30pm, and we’ll then go for presentation together.”

Contrary to his expectations, it was a message from his roommate only. Still, his anxiety pushed him to check somebody else’s status on Whatsapp too. Somebody, whom he had sent several messages last night, but fell asleep while waiting for a reply which hasn’t come till now. Unfortunately, the last-seen timestamp on this contact wasn’t accessible by him. Disappointed, he put the phone down on bed and stared blankly at the ceiling of his hostel room, while lying motionless in his bed. Thoughts raced through his mind, like rain pours from the dark clouds. Unpredictable at first, drenching within moments. Some people scream, when they get hurt, and bleed on bed. While some

others, stay silent, and bleed on paper. So in notes app of phone, he scribbled his words: *“When nobody listens to your reality, your reality becomes a memory. And when a memory starts to haunt you, you start to weave a story. The whole story may not be true, but its parts always have had happened. The people might never try, but the paper always listens.”*

His hand dropped on the bed after finishing the note, and gradually he closed his eyes, hoping to quench the burning sensation he was feeling within. And few seconds later, without him knowing, he was taken for a short ride into the time, when he had last felt loved.

“You know, it’s hard, to take my eyes off you now,” he said to her, as she playfully caressed his stubbled cheek. She giggled, poured some more red wine in a long glass, and handed it over to him. And as she drew nearer to him, filling him with a fire of seductive anticipation, she whispered, “Then... don’t.”

Slowly she turned towards his cold and numb body, he felt her smooth skin as if soft petals of white roses were pressing against him, and soon her lustrous lips delicately awakened his sleeping desires. He held her as close as he could, and saw himself in her deep black eyes. Immersed in the moment, they let their breath slowly burn each other’s skin and leave a piece of art behind. Then, they danced to their heartbeats; as if they were just one heart, one body, one soul. And in that moment, he came to know her, as he never had...

His world came crashing down & disappeared, as he was brought back to his sad little reality, by an incoming call on his mobile as his ringtone played out loud.

*“The loneliness is a friend of mine,
I’m giving my heart in your hands.
People think love is blind,
And I fell in first glance.”*

Caged: The Price of Pride

He got up in a harried manner, and realized that somehow his short & sweet trip to past had cost him 2 precious hours of present. He quickly tracked his mobile amid his scattered notes, as it continued to ring loudly.

*And how I found you is a mystery,
You're all in my head.
Doesn't matter what's been your history,
as long as you are with me."*

He found it under a blanket, and answered the call. "Hel— Hello?" he blurted, his mind still not completely out of the stupor. A girl's voice came from the other end, "Hey..." and magically filled his tired body with fresh energy. It didn't even take him a second to recognize who was calling. "How are you?"

"I— I'm fine!" he said, rubbing his red eyes as he sat up on his bed, "where have you been?"

"I'm in my college right now, but listen... " she said, with a little bit of hesitation, just for the required right effect, "I need some help."

"Help? Of course!" he said, trying to wake his sleepy mind, "yeah, tell me what you need?"

"Well... a my friends are going to protest for Kiss of Love campaign soon," she said frivolously, "So, I was just wondering if you would like to join us?" He heard it & his tired eyes froze, and his weary mind went into a shock. Not in the condition to think of what to say, words came out of his mouth involuntarily, "Yes, sure, I'll be there in few minutes!"

"Great then, see you soon!" she said, in her cheerful voice and added before disconnecting the call, "bring your friends as well, if any!"

Nov 18, 2014.

12:05 pm

Janak Puri, Delhi.

Aanchal and Garima— two girls in their late teens, were waiting in a queue at Bharati College’s crowded canteen to place an order. It was just another slightly chilly day of fall for them, or at least till now they’d thought it would be. They had just survived a long and boring lecture by one of their most notorious professors— Prof. Pablo D’Souza, who was better known as The Leecher for sucking their energy during his computer classes. Hence they were now eager to recharge their body with some high calorie food.

The restlessness in Garima was growing for past few minutes, as she stood in the queue which wasn’t moving fast enough. So she stared at random things around her to divert her mind, and she caught a hazy reflection of herself on the nearby window glass, as her tiny nose-pin shone in it. She tilted her round face, and then turned her plumpish body a little towards the left side to see her figure, but frowned almost immediately, when it hit her, that even after all the exercises she had been doing at home, she might be gaining some weight instead of losing it.

Today she was in a black plain tee, paired with dark blue denim— an attire she often repeated 2-3 times in a week. Her dark brown hair was open today; but being curly, they were falling around her face. Frustrated, she picked out a hair band from her backpack and tied them into a pony tail using her flabby arms.

She then noticed another image in the glass window beside herself and turned back to look at her best friend in college. An unusual storm she was; too beautiful to see from a distance, too chaotic from within. A petite framed girl named Aanchal, who was wearing a white short *Kurti* and light blue skinny jeans, was standing

beside Garima. And she wondered how they were complimenting Aanchal's slim body and long straight hair perfectly. But oblivious to Garima's envious thoughts, Aanchal just stood there effortlessly with her small shoulder bag, lost in her own mobile world.

Ever since Garima had met Aanchal six months ago in the library, she had instantly felt a connection with her when she had discovered a hardbound copy of *The Fault in Our Stars* in Aanchal's hands.

"Oh, I so want to read this novel. I've heard so much about it!" Garima had had said then, as it was hard for her to buy anything fancy from her meager pocket money, "have you read it?"

"I re-read it whenever I can," Aanchal had had said, "No story is worth reading, if by the time you're finished, it doesn't make you read it all over again."

Aanchal had had lent it to her to read; thus, Garima began to admire everything about Aanchal; from her hazel brown eyes to her slim physique, from her honey sweet voice to her top-branded clothes. Well, almost everything... except Aanchal's little dusky looks. Garima had never said it to Aanchal, but she secretly felt a bit proud for her own fair skin complexion and a bit jealous about Aanchal's destiny to be born in an affluent family.

After a few minutes of waiting; her turn finally came to place the order. Garima pushed her thick-rimmed eyeglasses up a little, and spoke in her blatant tone, "What would you have?"

"Umm... the usual chilly-potatoes for me," said Aanchal, her diamond shaped face still looking down at her mobile, as she remained busy in texting.

"*Chotu*, one egg-chowmine, one chilly-potatoes, and two cups of hot coffee!" said Garima to a thin adolescent boy wearing a muddy white vest, standing behind the order counter, who gave her a weird cold

stare before beginning to process the order. She turned towards Aanchal to avoid the boy's stare, just about then; Aanchal's phone began to sing her favorite song.

"What goes around, goes around; comes back around."

Aanchal stared uneasily at the name flashing on the screen of her phone for a few seconds, before she finally made up her mind and answered it.

"Yeah? I... I'm in the canteen with Garima...Where? Room no. 13 near the canteen is vacant? Ok, we will be there in a minute," said Aanchal over the phone and ended the call. She put the mobile in the front pocket of her skinny jeans and stood there silently; looking away from Garima, towards the exit door of the canteen.

"Awww.... He can't even live a minute without you na!" said Garima, mocking at Aanchal's impassive face.

"That'll be eighty bucks... *Behanji!*" the boy interrupted, putting the plates in front of Garima.

Garima turned up her nose at his remark, and stared furiously at the boy who now had a smirk on his face. Garima was about to rebuke back but Aanchal interrupted, "I got it!" slightly turning the sleeves of her *Kurti* up, and quickly paid the boy behind the counter.

"Thank you, Ma'am!" the boy behind the counter said to Aanchal, and earned a grimace from Garima. Seconds later, a disgruntled Garima and an absent minded Aanchal were now on their way out of the canteen while holding their plates.

Few steps away, a lean and tall, twenty-something guy in white shirt and blue jeans, was standing near the exit door of the canteen, with his back facing towards Garima & Aanchal. As they were approaching the exit, the girls heard somebody shouting very angrily.

“MIND YOUR TONGUE, WHILE YOU TALK
ABOUT HER!”

Both of the girls froze in their track. The lean guy in white shirt and blue jeans, to their surprise was shouting at a broad shouldered, rugged guy, who wore black aviator glasses with golden rim, over a faded orange colored *Kurta*; munching some roasted chickpea while standing at nose distance from him.

“Seems like you need to be reminded how to talk to your superiors, *school-boy!*” the rugged guy sneered in an uncouth voice. And the next second, a group of tall and bulky guys standing beside him, got hold of the guy in white shirt.

“This will inculcate some respect and manners in you!” the black aviator guy said, as he threw punches, several times in the ribs of white shirt guy. The white shirt guy, punched and kicked a couple of guys around him in return, but they soon overpowered him, and the black aviator guy threw him inside the canteen with a powerful finishing kick. Aanchal and Garima, who were standing frozen right behind him, barely had time to react, and just like that, the white shirt guy slammed them to the floor, along with himself.

“DAMN YOU!” Garima shouted, as she struggled to balance her plate of chowmine, and instantly thanked god for the first time that her plumpish body had enough strength to withstand such a blow. But the petite framed, Aanchal, she wasn’t so lucky. She was floored along with her plate of chilly-potatoes, and some of her hot coffee had found its way towards her bare hands. The rest of the coffee changed the color of that guy’s shirt from white to light brown. Everybody in the canteen paused for a moment in shock, and all three of them—Aanchal, Garima, and that tall guy with now-brown-and-white-shirt, became the subjects of their silent stares.

Aanchal stayed there floored like a doll, but couldn't scream, although she did feel a burning sensation, when her hazel brown eyes met the deep black eyes of that guy knocked down beside her. It all lasted for less than a second, but it was somehow enough for naturally observant Aanchal to notice something strange about him.

The puffiness around his eyes told her, he was sleep deprived, and the darkness beneath them told her, he was quite afraid of light. His black, greasy, unkempt hair covered his sweaty forehead, and his lips were almost hidden by week old stubble on his dull face— which seemed marooned of any expression, other than pain.

But beyond all his appearance, Aanchal felt something familiar in his eyes, as if she had seen those eyes before or somebody with same kind of eyes for sure. The only question was, *who?*

“ARE YOU BLIND OR WHAT?” Garima yelled at nobody in particular. Her shrill voice interrupted Aanchal's observation process, and shook an already panic-stricken guy. He looked away from Aanchal and tried to get up, but his swollen ribs made sure he stays on the floor.

“MIND *YOUR* TONGUE, the next time you dare to stand in front of *ME*, *school-boy!* Then perhaps, you won't have to taste my shoes!” the guy with the black aviator glasses spat, as he quickly tugged the edge of his *Kurta* upwards from his shoulders with a flick of his hands, and left laughing, along with his small gang of guys.

“I'm sorry,” the white shirt guy hastily said, and got slowly to his feet on his own, while Garima helped Aanchal to stand again. But before Aanchal could say something, he turned away and left. Still, somehow, his sullen voice stayed back in Aanchal's ears.

Caged: The Price of Pride

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In between her silence and her screams, resides a memory; too painful to use, too precious to lose. As Aanchal Roy, turns eighteen in the fall of 2014, her intuitive mind slowly begins to question the decision, her lonely heart had made six months ago.

Caged: The Price of Pride is a story of Aanchal's struggles with herself, in a world where her life's choices has been dominated by others so far. Having grown up without her mother, she realizes only now that she had been cheated in love, and decides to make her own choices in life. And help comes to her in form of a stranger, Rehan Khan, to whom she relates for having a similar damaged past.

As a secret bonding flourishes among them, they begin to unfold years old secrets. About how she lost her mother, how his father went missing; why her father is so concerned about pride, why his mother is afraid about his relationships; why she always chooses the wrong people to trust, why his love is never reciprocated, and what sweet lies she had been told, and what bitter truths she must not reveal.

*"If somebody seems perfect to you,
you just don't know them well enough."*

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FICTION

ISBN 978-1-61813-445-5



9 781618 134455 >



EDUCREATION

PUBLISHING (Delhi)

www.educreation.in