

Lucky in Love & Unlucky in Life

Kumar's Biography

by R Kumar

KUMAR'S PARALLEL TIMELINES SERIES

Series Developed by Ravikiran

Copy right © R Kumar

email: ravi_kp_com@yahoo.com,
admin@ravikirantechnosoft.in

All rights reserved

No part of this book may be reproduced, transmitted or stored in a retrieval system, in any form by any means, electronic, mechanical, photocopying, recording or otherwise, without the prior permission of the author.

This book is a work of fiction. Names, characters, businesses, places, events, locales and incidents are either the product of the Author's imagination or used in a fictitious manner. Any resemblance to actual persons, living or dead or actual events is purely coincidental.

This book is sold subject to the condition that it shall not by way of trade or otherwise, be lent, resold, hired out or otherwise circulated, without the publisher's prior consent, in any form of binding or cover other than that in which it is published.

This book is dedicated to all my friends who have helped in writing this book and also to My Family who supported me and gave their invaluable opinions and Ideas for the story. And to Ravikiran for creating Kumar's Love Life Series with a touch of Science Fiction and Alternate Universe Theory.

Acknowledgements

Thanks to Ravikiran for creating this Kumar's Parallel Timelines Series based on Alternate Reality or Dimensions.

Preface

This book is part of an eight-book series written by R. Kumar and Ravikiran, exploring alternate universes and dimensions. In the final book, titled *The Final Chapter*, the overarching connection between all the stories is revealed, with recurring characters appearing throughout the series.

The first four books, each telling a standalone story, were authored by R. Kumar. The remaining four were written by Ravikiran and include entries from the *Three Idiots* and *Kumar Love Series*. *The Final Chapter* concludes the entire series, tying together the narratives from all previous books.

R Kumar

Date 24th March 2022

Prologue

My name is Kumar. In the year 1999, at the age of 35, I was at the helm of a thriving software company. Today, I sit in a courtroom, watching a high-stakes legal battle unfold before my eyes.

Two of my company's investors have filed an insolvency petition, demanding their money back. But this isn't just about finances. It's personal. They're determined to dismantle everything I've built—driven not by loss, but by vengeance.

What led us here? Why are they so intent on my downfall? To uncover the truth, you'll have to read my story.

Chapter 1

Kumar's First Days in Bombay – June 1980

I had just passed my SSC exams with 89%. Around the same time, my father was transferred to Bombay, so our family relocated there. My family included my father, mother, an elder brother who had completed his Intermediate, and a younger sister who had just finished 7th standard.

We moved into staff quarters in Vakola, Santacruz, near the old airport. Each block had six flats—three on the ground floor and three on the first. All three flats on each floor were interconnected through the balcony, and the ground-floor units had a small garden at the back. Our flat had two rooms, a kitchen, a bathroom, and a separate toilet.

I got admission to a college in Santacruz West. To get there, I had to take a bus to Santacruz Station, then walk for five minutes. The college was part of a combined school and college, and all students had to wear the same uniform: dark blue trousers and a light blue shirt.

Right outside our colony gate was a bus stop, but during college hours, the buses were usually packed. However, there was a special bus that started from the Old Airport and went directly to Santacruz Station. It was a two-minute walk from our building, but worth it since you could catch it while it was still empty.

Though my family had moved to Bombay about six weeks earlier, I arrived just a week ago. The delay was due to collecting my marksheet, SSC certificate, and Transfer Certificate. Thankfully, my father had already secured my admission, and once I arrived, I submitted the required documents and paid the fees.

First Day at College

On my first day, I waited at the bus stop. Most of the buses came from Kurla and were packed, but I managed to get into one that was relatively empty. I asked the person sitting next to me where the bus originated, and he said, “From the Old Airport.”

I got off at the station, crossed the bridge, and walked to college. I had taken admission in the Science stream—Maths, Physics, and Chemistry. My languages were English and an optional subject; I chose French.

It was a co-educational college. When I entered the class, benches were arranged in two rows. Unlike school, where boys sat separately from girls, here it was mixed. One row was filled with girls and the other with boys. I noticed a seat vacant on the first bench and took it. Some students turned and looked at me curiously—clearly, they all knew each other, having passed SSC from the same school.

The teacher walked in and took attendance. He then asked everyone to introduce themselves. When it was my turn, I said, "I'm Kumar, from Andhra Pradesh. This is my first year in Bombay." He nodded and moved to the next student.

During the break, a boy approached me and introduced himself: "I'm Shrikant Iyer, from Madras."

I replied, "We have relatives in Madras. My aunt just visited us before I came here. She has four daughters."

I asked him, "Which area in Madras?"

"Saidebad," he said.

"Okay."

He asked, "Can I sit with you?"

"Sure, I don't mind."

Shrikant brought his books and sat beside me.

"You don't know anyone here?" I asked.

"No."

"Where do you stay?"

"Near Juhu Beach. Do you know Asha Parekh's house? Ours is the second-last building on that lane."

"I don't know it, but you'll have to show me sometime."

As it was the first day, we had only a half-day. I said goodbye to Shrikant, crossed the bridge, caught a bus, and returned home.



Settling into the New Neighborhood

In the evening, I decided to explore the area. Our flat was on the first floor. As I came downstairs, I noticed a boy in school uniform walking towards our building. I casually followed him and saw that he went into the flat directly below ours.

I kept walking and reached the end of the colony wall where there was a pedestrian gate. On the other side of the road, there was a wide ground, a small hill with a military camp sign, and the compound wall of the airport.

When I returned, I saw two girls on the ground floor—one younger than me, the other older. They were talking in Marathi, which I didn't understand. I gave them a half-smile and walked upstairs.



The Second Day

The next morning, I went straight to the Old Airport bus stop. Within five minutes, a bus arrived. I boarded and found a seat. Three other passengers got on before the driver and conductor came, issued tickets, and started the journey.

At the next stop, more passengers boarded. A girl sat beside me—it was the same girl who was talking to the other one downstairs the previous evening. I smiled at her.

Soon after, the same boy from the previous day got on and stood beside her. He spoke something to her, and she took two tickets. I assumed he was her younger brother. On her lap was a notebook labeled: *Dharani, 10th Standard* with our school's name on it. So, her name was Dharani, and she studied in the same institution.

She didn't seem to notice that our thighs were lightly touching—she was focused on talking to her brother. At the station, we got off and walked together with other students toward the college.



Evening Conversations and New Friendships

After college, the bus stops were overcrowded. The evening was pleasant, so I decided to walk home. As I neared the colony gate, a boy approached me and asked in Hindi, “Are you the one who just moved to the top floor?”

I replied in English, “Yes, I just arrived last week.”

He said, “I’m Surender. Everyone calls me Suri.”

We walked back together, and he asked, “We’re playing badminton later—want to join?”

“I only have a ball badminton racket,” I said.

“That’s fine. Come down in half an hour.”

There was an old tiled house opposite ours, with a grocery store on one side. Between that building and ours, we tied the net and used lines already drawn for the court.

We played doubles. First, I partnered with Suri’s brother while he played with his sister. Then we switched teams. As the light dimmed, they switched on the court lights.

After the match, his brother introduced himself: “I’m Raju, and this is Dee.”

So, Dee was his sister.

“I’m Kumar, doing 11th in Science,” I said.

“Are you good at maths?” Raju asked.

“I am.”

“Great. Please help Suri—he’s in 8th and weak in maths. And if you get time, help Dee too. She’s in 10th.”

“Sure,” I said with a smile.

Chapter 2

Settling into Routine – New Bonds in Bombay

The next day, I walked to the Old Airport bus stop and boarded the nearly empty bus. At the next stop, I saw Dee waiting in line. I placed my book on the adjacent seat, and when someone asked about it, I said, “Someone’s coming.” When Dee boarded, I called her over, and she sat beside me. A moment later, her brother got on and stood next to her. He asked her to make space so he could sit. I shifted toward the window and leaned slightly forward. Dee moved closer, her shoulder lightly touching my back.

We all got down at the station and walked toward the school and college building. While they entered their school section, I went to my college.

Inside the classroom, I saw Shrikant chatting with a girl who looked Tamilian. I quietly took my seat. A few minutes later, he came over and said, “She’s from Madras—her name is Latha.”

“Okay,” I said.

Because of his interaction with Latha, we soon got to know more girls. Gradually, we formed a friendly group of South Indian students—boys and girls.

A Walk, A Game, and New Introductions

That evening, while walking back from college, I bumped into Dee. We crossed the bridge together, chatting along the way. Looking at the long queues at every bus stop, I suggested we walk home. She agreed. The breeze was pleasant, and we didn’t even realize how quickly we reached our colony.

“Walking is better than waiting,” I said.

Later, we changed and came outside with our badminton rackets. After about 15 minutes of playing, Suri arrived.

“Why so late?” I asked.

“Buses were delayed,” he replied.

“That’s why we walked,” I said as he went in to change.

Just then, an auto pulled up outside. An elderly couple and a girl stepped out.

“Momma,” Dee called out and rushed to them. It was her parents and elder sister, Lakshmi.

“How was the journey?” Dee asked.

“Horrible,” her mother replied as they went inside.

Half an hour later, Lakshmi stepped out, freshly bathed and changed into a gown. She looked a year older than Dee, which would make her a year younger than me.

She was fair, a little rugged in her features—not as pretty as Dee, who was plump and had soft features, just the way I liked. Lakshmi was slimmer and taller by an inch or two.

Dee introduced us: “Didi, this is Kumar from the first floor. He’s in the science stream at our college.” Then she turned to me and said, “This is my sister Lakshmi. She’s joined the commerce stream.”

“Hi,” I said. “You’ve missed a few classes. We all go together in the morning. Join us.”

“I haven’t brought my racket,” Lakshmi replied when I invited her to play.

“Take mine,” I offered.

“Not today. I’m tired. Tomorrow, maybe.”

“No problem,” I said. I tend to say that a lot.



Evening Conversations & Neighborhood Observations

After we finished playing, we sat on the steps chatting. Suri, ever the gossip collector, began telling me about our neighbors.

A family from Kerala returned from school—a boy in sixth grade, short for his age, and his sister in ninth, who was very slim. Their mother was plump and friendly. Another couple arrived, also from Kerala. The wife was slim and tall. Later, Raju came home, walking with another young woman—probably a working professional. She looked Maharashtrian, about 5’2”, slender, with an oval face. After a short chat, she went inside.

A little later, Dee called Suri inside. I said goodbye and went up to my flat.



Reflections and Wandering Thoughts

My brother was fiddling with electronics—he was learning TV repair. The radio was playing some Hindi songs. I tried to study, but nothing grabbed my attention. I picked up *Andhra Bhoomi*, flipped through a few short stories, and came across a pen pal section. I browsed the names and addresses but didn’t find anything interesting.

Eventually, I set it aside and picked up a textbook, though my thoughts drifted to Dee and Lakshmi. They were so different. Dee was more attractive to me—shorter, softer features, and plump. Lakshmi, taller and slimmer, seemed tougher, perhaps due to their recent stay in the village.

Suri didn't seem to mind my closeness to Dee, nor did Raju. They didn't appear to be a conservative family. Or maybe, after growing up among traditional Andhrites, I was seeing Bombay families as more liberal. Or perhaps it was just this family. I didn't realize how long I had been daydreaming until my mother called for dinner.



A Comfortable Routine Begins

The next morning, I again reserved the seat beside me on the bus. Dee and Lakshmi boarded together—Dee sat next to me, and Lakshmi sat behind us with Suri.

At the station, we split—Lakshmi and I entering the college gate. She turned and said, “My class is on this side,” before heading off. I went to mine.

During the lunch break, I found Lakshmi waiting outside.

“What did you bring?” she asked.

“Dal rice. You?”

“Roti bhaji.”

We shared our lunch, drank water, and returned to our classes.

In the evening, Lakshmi was again waiting near my classroom. Dee and Suri were nowhere in sight, so we walked to the station together. The queues were short, and we got a seat on the bus. I bought the tickets for both of us. We chatted about her subjects and what she'd missed so far. At our stop, we got down and walked home.



Days Blend into Routine

This slowly became our daily routine. Every morning, we walked to the Old Airport bus stop. Dee always sat beside me; Lakshmi and Suri sat behind. In the evenings, sometimes Lakshmi and I returned together, and other times Dee and Suri would accompany me.

One day, Dee mentioned she wanted to learn typing. There was an institute near the police station. We walked from the station to the highway and crossed over to reach the institute. After enquiring about the fees, we walked back home.

The next day, Dee paid the fees and joined the typing course. That changed our evening routine. Dee and I would walk to the institute after college—she would attend her class, and I'd walk home from there. Sometimes, Lakshmi and Suri joined us. Other times, they took the bus.

Chapter 3

A Festival-Filled Year and Growing Friendships in Bombay

When Krishna Janmashtami arrived, the residents of the 'P' Block set up a Dahi Handi suspended between two buildings. A team of young men formed a human pyramid and broke the pot in a spectacular display. It was the first time I had witnessed such a feat. Back in Andhra, the tradition was quite different—participants would pull the Handi up and down with a rope and try to break it using a stick.

Soon after, it was time for **Vinayaka Chavithi**—a major festival in Bombay. Our entire colony contributed funds to celebrate together. The energy was incredible, and the entire city seemed to come alive with devotion and festivity.

Then came **Dussehra**, marked by **Garba** and **Dandiya** dances. For nine nights, we participated in our colony's Dandiya celebrations. It was an unforgettable experience—lively music, colorful outfits, and an electric atmosphere.

Friendships and Emotions Take Shape

Day by day, our group grew closer. Dee and I shared a special bond, but Lakshmi wasn't far behind. In fact, she often made an effort to be near me, especially during college hours. We'd share our lunches and steal quiet moments together.

I was on **cloud nine**. Never in my dreams did I imagine I'd be this close to **two girls at once**. Back in my 10th standard, the mere thought of befriending a girl felt like a distant fantasy. Now, both Dee and Lakshmi were vying for my attention.

Dee often asked me to explain math problems. We would sit at a table in the corner and solve equations together. Our knees would brush under the table. Sometimes, I'd touch her leg under the pretext of adjusting or scratching mine. She never objected. Occasionally, we'd playfully nudge each other with our knees. These innocent, unspoken interactions became part of our growing bond.

Festive Vibes & Community Life

Diwali was next. My brother set up a lighting system on our terrace. We bought crackers and celebrated with full enthusiasm.

Then came the **Christmas holidays**. We had grown a bit tired of badminton, so we switched to cricket. Someone brought a bat, I bought a rubber ball, and we marked a pitch using stones—right on our badminton court. After accidentally breaking a few windowpanes, we approached the maintenance department and got them replaced.

However, when a **Keralite neighbor's** glass broke, he created a scene. That forced us to shift our venue to the main ground nearby, which had a proper pitch.

Our cricket team gradually expanded. Someone brought a better bat and stumps. Eventually, our group grew to **10 regular players**. When one of our teammates' parents were away, we rented a **VCR** and watched movies together. Initially, we were into horror films—one boy was obsessed with them and even sponsored the rentals. Over time, we branched into comedies and other genres.

Exams, Holidays & Madras Trip

Exams came and went, and then we had our **summer holidays**. I travelled to **Madras** and stayed with my relatives—two paternal aunts and one maternal aunt. I rotated my stay between their homes. One aunt had a son and a daughter; the other had **four daughters**, and I especially liked her elder daughter.

I spent nearly a month in Madras, enjoying family time and a slower pace of life, before returning to Bombay.

New Habits & A Gym Routine

Back in Bombay, life returned to its energetic rhythm. I continued chatting with the girls and playing cricket, but I noticed I had developed a slight **paunch**—a surprise, given I used to be slim. Determined to get fit, I decided to join a gym along with some friends.

The gym was located in **Kalina**, just a 10-minute walk from our colony. Though buses were available, I preferred taking the **back road** on foot. I bought a pair of shorts for workouts and a small towel for wiping off sweat.

During the college holidays, I'd go to the gym in the afternoons. On some mornings, I even ran on the large **ground near the Old Airport**. Occasionally, one or two group members would join me on these runs.

Chapter 4

A Year of Bonds, Boundaries & Breakthroughs

As the new academic year began, Lakshmi and I entered **12th standard**, while **Dee joined 11th in the Science stream**. With that, our routine resumed—travelling together to college in the mornings, and in the evenings, walking Dee to her typing institute and then returning home.

This time, **Lakshmi often accompanied us on the walks**, and we'd drop Dee off before strolling home together. I began to feel an **unspoken bond** growing between the three of us. I wasn't sure what it was—**friendship, affection, or something more**. We simply enjoyed being around each other. Surprisingly, there was never any sign of jealousy between the sisters, and **their family never objected** to our closeness. Even Suri, their younger brother, seemed comfortable with it.

In fact, **Suri seemed to be fond of a neighbouring Marathi girl**. They were often seen walking and chatting together. She had **two sisters and a younger brother**, and they all lived nearby.

One of their other neighbours moved out, leaving a flat empty. It was later occupied by a **Maharashtrian boy and his mother**. We heard that his father had passed away, and he had secured his father's job on compassionate grounds. He was a **draftsman by profession**, possibly working as a junior clerk. He often brought his drafting work home and spent hours at his desk.

Meanwhile, the **Keralite neighbor** across from us, whose wife had left, brought in another woman. She was **short and stout**, and according to Suri, she wore **short dresses at home**, attracting the attention of some boys in the colony, who'd sneak to nearby terraces just to catch a glimpse of her.

The Key Incident

One day, I had a small scratch on my hand and, feeling mischievous, **rolled a piece of paper and inserted it into the latch keyhole** of the Keralite's flat. When he returned in the evening, his key wouldn't turn. A small crowd gathered, and everyone tried their hand at unlocking the door.

Only I knew the reason behind the stuck lock. After everyone failed, I finally took the key, pressed hard, and managed to open it. He was grateful and thanked me, even apologizing for previously scolding us for playing near his door.

A Moment of Intimacy

One afternoon, I was tutoring Dee alone at her house. Her parents were out, and neither Lakshmi nor Suri were home. The silence and privacy of the moment made me nervous—and bold.

I leaned in and **kissed her on the cheek**. She looked surprised, slightly flustered, but said nothing. Encouraged by her reaction, I stood up, pulled her into a hug, and **kissed her again—this time longer, deeper**. We stayed in each other's arms for a few moments, caught between thrill and fear. Then, concerned that someone might walk in, we returned to our seats, pretending to study.

Barely five minutes later, Suri arrived, unlocking the door with his key. I silently breathed a sigh of relief—**saved by the bell**. Seeing us focused on studies, he simply changed his clothes and stepped out again.

From that day on, I never acted in the same way with **Lakshmi**. I told myself that **Dee was my true love**—and the way she responded that day, I felt she understood and reciprocated those feelings.

New Routines & Simple Joys

Our days continued with small, comforting routines. One of the boys in our group introduced us to a **vada pav stall** in the evenings. It became our regular hangout after college and institute sessions.

Results, Reflections & Moving Forward

Exams came and went. Then came **the results**:

- **I scored 79%** in 12th—satisfying, though I hoped for more.
- **Lakshmi got 57%**—not great, but she was relieved to have passed.
- **Dee scored 67%** in her 11th standard exams—a significant improvement.

Her parents were **genuinely happy**, especially since they hadn't expected her to score above 50%. They even acknowledged my role in her improvement. It felt good to be appreciated—not just as a tutor, but as someone trusted by their family.

Chapter 5

Emotional Crossroads, Changing Bonds, and New Beginnings

Lakshmi and I were now in our **first year of degree college**, having secured admission to a college in **Vile Parle**. Dee continued her studies at her junior college, now in 12th standard. Our routines shifted accordingly—**Suri** began accompanying Dee to her college, while **Lakshmi and I traveled together**.

We usually caught a direct bus to Vile Parle. The route wound around the airport, crossed the Western Express Highway, and passed by offices like **Lupin and Elbee Couriers** before reaching Vile Parle East. The buses were often packed, so we rarely got seats together, but we'd manage to stand side by side. If a seat became vacant, she'd take it, and if the adjacent seat freed up, I'd join her.

Our return journeys were slightly less crowded. The routine was manageable, and **Lakshmi and I grew steadily closer**. I began to feel that while **Dee had once been physically close to me**, it was **Lakshmi who was now emotionally drawing me in**.

Drifting from Dee, Growing with Lakshmi

My bond with Dee had started to fade. **Our time together was now limited to tuition sessions**, and even those were disrupted—Suri had developed a habit of popping in with random questions, unknowingly cutting short our moments together. I felt **sandwiched between two sisters and their younger brother**.

Their family never objected to my closeness with Dee and Lakshmi. Perhaps they believed Suri was keeping a watchful eye. But honestly, **Suri was too naive**—if I ever wanted to elope with Dee, **he might even help me**, clueless about the implications.

As my bond with Dee weakened, **Lakshmi quietly began filling that space**. Earlier, she kept her distance when Dee was around. But now, **with Dee not accompanying us daily**, Lakshmi stepped in—**walking with me, sharing lunch, spending more time with me**. Eventually, I stopped bringing lunch from home altogether; Lakshmi would bring extra food, and we'd eat together. Since I preferred chapatis anyway, sharing meals was easy.

My parents **never objected** to this arrangement. Maybe they approved of my growing closeness with Lakshmi, or perhaps they just didn't care. I recalled my mother once telling my brother, *"If you ever want to marry someone, tell us—we won't object to caste or religion."* I believed the same would apply to me. **My parents were broad-minded**, especially my father, who had friends from every corner of India and was involved in union matters. He never judged people by community or background.

Holidays, Beaches, and Shifting Affections

During holidays, we often went out as a group—to the beach or other spots. At the beach, Dee would lock her arm into mine as we walked along the shore.

Lakshmi never showed jealousy; she simply enjoyed the outing.

But I began to notice changes. When Dee wasn't around, **Lakshmi would become more expressive—showing concern, affection, even subtle signs of love**. She never acted as physically close as Dee, but I felt she was intentionally giving Dee priority—almost as if she accepted her sister should come first.

Still, I couldn't help but wonder: **Was Lakshmi acting? Or were her emotions real?** In college, people began referring to us as boyfriend and girlfriend. This hadn't happened in junior college, probably because everyone knew I was close to Dee. But now, no one knew our past, and Lakshmi didn't seem to mind the label. Maybe she felt **safe with me**, or maybe she liked the idea that **other boys wouldn't approach her** because of me.

College Life & A Changing Social Circle

Our old group had thinned—some members joined other colleges. **Shrikant was now officially dating Latha**, and their relationship grew stronger.

When our college arranged a **picnic to Lonavala**, Lakshmi's parents allowed her to go only after confirming I would be attending. That said a lot—they **trusted me**, not only with Dee but now with Lakshmi too.

Picnic to Lonavala: Defining Moments

The picnic was fun and full of memories. The college booked a bus and a dormitory-style accommodation with **separate areas for boys and girls**.

Throughout the trip, **Lakshmi remained by my side**. She sat next to me on the bus, resting her head on my shoulder during the ride, or entwining her hand with mine. Her gestures were quiet, but spoke volumes.

During the picnic, her friends teased her, saying, *"Take him behind the bushes!"* Lakshmi would laugh shyly and say, *"Stop it, yaar!"* I wondered—**had we not been watched, would she have acted on those suggestions?**

Still, nothing inappropriate happened. We returned home safe, with warm memories.

Lakshmi's Silent Takeover

After the picnic, **Lakshmi became more openly affectionate**. On bus rides, she'd lean on my shoulder. During lunch, she'd feed me. **These small gestures added up**, drawing us emotionally—and visibly—closer.

At times, I wondered if she was doing all this to **compete with Dee**. Whether or not that was true, it was working. **My time with Dee had shrunk**, especially since Lakshmi began attending Dee's tuition sessions—perhaps as a strategy to **limit our one-on-one time**.

Dee rarely got a moment alone with me anymore. With **Lakshmi always present**, acting like a silent chaperone, Dee and I drifted further apart. Eventually, I heard from Suri that **Dee had grown close to a boy from her college**. Perhaps this was inevitable.

By the end of the academic year:

- **Lakshmi and I completed our first-year degree exams.**
- **Dee appeared for her 12th standard board exams.**
- **Suri took his 10th standard exam.**

Dee and Suri were more anxious—their results were **make-or-break**. Lakshmi and I felt confident; we knew we had done well.



Madras Trip & A Cousin's Twist

That summer, our plans changed. **My grandmother**, who had been staying with us for three months, wanted to visit her younger daughter—my aunt in Madras. I booked train tickets and accompanied her.

In Madras, I stayed with two of my paternal aunts. One of them had **four daughters**—her eldest, who I had liked for years, had recently **married the boy next door**. I felt disappointed—she had always been my favorite cousin. Her second daughter wasn't fond of me, but the **younger two liked me a lot**.

Every evening, they attended Hindi classes at an institute. I'd drop them off and then visit another cousin who ran a **TV repair shop**, where I sat and learned basic electronics.

When it was time to return to Bombay, **my youngest cousin insisted on coming with me**. I booked her ticket, and we began our journey together.

During the train ride, she met a young man from Madras. To my surprise, **she spent most of the journey chatting with him**. I couldn't help feeling a twinge of jealousy, though I hid it behind a calm face.

We arrived in Bombay, took a **local train from Dadar to Santacruz**, and finally an auto back to our colony.

Chapter 6

Endings, Realizations & The Quiet Farewell

Our second year of degree college had begun.

My uncle came and took my cousin back to Madras. Around the same time, **Dee joined our college**, and for a brief while, it felt like old times—the **three of us traveling together**, sharing mornings and walks home. But it wasn't the same anymore.

Dee had changed. She kept her distance, no longer the affectionate, open girl she once was. **Lakshmi**, on the other hand, stayed just as close—if not closer. Dee would **avoid walking home with us**, often finding ways to return separately.

A month later, I went to give Dee tuition as usual, but her mother said, "*Dee doesn't need tuition anymore.*"

Even **Suri**, who had now joined the Commerce stream, didn't require my help. I was left confused and quietly walked back home.

A Sudden Shift

The next day, I learned the truth. **Dee had been enrolled in nursing training.** Lakshmi explained it to me: "*Dee told our parents she either wants to marry the boy she loves or be sent to nursing school. So they chose nursing school.*"

I was stunned.

Dee had been so close to me—yet she had never once shared this part of her life. The emotional distance now made sense. But it also **shattered the rhythm of our lives.**

There were no more tuition sessions. No more quiet moments. No more distractions from Lakshmi during our study time. **It was over.**

Filling the Silence

With the growing void, I immersed myself in other things. I began playing more cricket and started **exploring electronics.** I learned about **resistors, capacitors, diodes, transistors**, and more. I bought a DIY **amplifier kit** from Grant Road, assembled it, and gave it to a friend. When he connected it to his turntable, the sound was crisp and clear. That moment gave me a small sense of pride—a success of my own making.

A Tragic Turn

One evening, tragedy struck our colony.

The **elder daughter of the Maharashtrian family** was returning home from work. On her way back, she stopped at the Hanuman temple near the bus stop. As she walked home, **a military van hit her from behind** and sped off. A passerby rushed her to the hospital, but she didn't survive. That same man came to her house to inform them—his shirt soaked in blood.

Raju was devastated. He had been very close to her. Her sudden death left a silence in the colony none of us could ignore.

A Party, a Bar, and a Love Story Rekindled

Around this time, one of our friends, who had recently received a promotion, wanted to celebrate. He invited us to **Shetty's Bar and Restaurant on Pipeline Road.**

We ordered food and drinks, and after we were done, the manager at the billing counter came over and asked, *"How was the service?"* We replied, *"It's our first time here, and it was great."*

Something about the man felt familiar. I asked him, *"Did you come to our college once? I think you and another guy had come for Maria?"*

He smiled. *"Yes, my name is Shekar. I've known Maria for years. I like her."*

I said, *"But your friend—Raj, I think—he seemed to be the one talking to her."*

"Yes, Raj lives in my building, near the market," he explained.

"Nice to meet you. Next time, give us a discount!" I joked.

The next day, I asked **Maria**, *"Do you know Shekar Shetty?"*

"Yes! We went to school together," she replied.

"He told me he likes you," I said.

She looked surprised. *"I had no idea. I like him too, but he never said anything."*

"He's probably a Cancerian—those types don't express themselves easily. Just talk to him once," I suggested.

Two days later, she came back smiling and said, *"Thank you. I spoke to him—he said he likes me a lot. I wouldn't have known if you hadn't told me."*

A Year Without Dee

Our second year came and went. Exams passed. But that summer, **something was missing.** With Dee gone, the energy of our group felt dim. There were no beach outings or evening walks. Just silence, studies, and occasional gatherings.

We entered our **third year.**

After six months, **Dee came back home**. But she didn't stay long. Soon after, **her family arranged her marriage**, and she left to begin her new life. I never got a chance to speak to her—**not about the past, not about the future, not about us**.

The Final Twist

After our final year exams, **Lakshmi's family arranged her marriage too**. They took her to their village, and she was married off there.

Just like that, everything ended.

There was **no goodbye, no confession, no closure**.

I had once felt close to both sisters—but in the end, **I was left with nothing**.

Looking back, I began to wonder: **Did Lakshmi ever really love me?**
Or was it all just a game to pull me away from Dee?

Maybe she acted out of loyalty to her sister. Maybe she simply wanted to prevent Dee from choosing me. Or maybe, **she never had any feelings at all**.

Whatever the reason, **my love story with the two sisters had come to a quiet, painful end**.

Chapter 7

Narrative: A New Chapter Begins – After the Storm

After the B.Sc. results were declared, I was happy to see that I had secured **89%**. With college behind me, it was time to think seriously about my next step.

I began **searching for a job** aligned with my qualifications and also started **attending coaching classes** for government exams. Alongside, I noticed I was developing a **small paunch**, a reminder that I had let my fitness slip. Determined to get back in shape, I **resumed my gym routine** and also began **running in the mornings**, often with **Suri** joining me. My days now followed a disciplined rhythm: **morning runs, afternoon gym, and evening cricket practice**.

At that time, **underarm cricket** was gaining popularity, requiring only a small playing area. But our group stuck to **traditional cricket**, the way we had always played.

A Glance That Changed Everything

To get to **Kalina**, I often used the **back road**, and along the way, I noticed a girl sitting on her veranda, **studying diligently**. I also saw her a few times at a **typing institute**—not the one Dee had attended, but a newer one nearby.

One day, as I passed by her house, our eyes met. She smiled. I smiled back instinctively—as if I already knew her.

The next day, I deliberately slowed down near her house. She noticed me again. I smiled and gave a small wave. She acknowledged it. That silent exchange felt like the beginning of something new.

An Unexpected Encounter with Shekar and Raj

While shopping at the market, I ran into **Shekar** and the guy he had once introduced as **Raj**. Raj was smoking, and they both seemed to be in a heated discussion.

“Hi, Shekar,” I greeted. “How’s Maria? Haven’t seen her since the exams.”

Shekar turned to Raj and said, “*He’s the one who spoke to Maria about me.*”

I asked, “Is something wrong?”

Shekar looked troubled. “Come,” he said, leading me into the narrow lane behind the market—toward their **chawl compound**. It was my first time there. **Four buildings** stood around a common yard, with a **large gate** and a **narrow gully** as the only entrance. These were typical **Mumbai chawls**—low-rent flats, usually secured through **pagdi** (a partial ownership lease). Most units had **common toilets**, and tenants had to bring their own water.

On the ground floor of one building was a board for the **typing institute**. Shekar pointed to the **first floor** as his home, and Raj pointed to the **ground floor unit** as his.

Shekar said, "I haven't been able to contact Maria for a week."

I assured him, "She might be out of town. I'll try to find out more."

Raj added, "I went to her building. The house was locked."

Just then, a familiar figure approached. It was **the girl from the veranda**.



Sahithi Introduces Herself

She stopped in front of me and said with a smile, "**Hi, I'm Sahithi. I see you pass by our house every day.**"

I replied, "I go to the gym at that time."

"In the afternoons?" she asked.

"Yes, I just finished my degree. I'm job-hunting, so I'm free these days."

She asked for my name.

"Kumar," I said.

"I thought I'd seen you somewhere before, but couldn't place it," she said.

"You probably saw me around here. I've been in Vakola for five years."

"Only five?" she asked.

"I came here after my 10th. We live in the staff quarters."

"Oh! D Block?"

"Next to it—E Block," I answered.

"I'm visiting **Uday's house**. He's my cousin."

"Uday? He's in our cricket team! We often sit and chat in front of his house. His neighbors, **Sandip and Mangesh**, are also part of our group."

"I know Mangesh's family," she said. "I've seen Sandip too, but we haven't talked much."

We continued talking, and I could feel **Raj and Shekar watching us in disbelief**.

Sahithi looked at her watch and said, "**My typing class is about to begin. Wait for me—I want to talk more. It'll be about an hour.**"

I agreed and stayed back with Shekar and Raj.



Inside the Chawl

As we sat on a **cement slab**, another guy joined us—**Harry**. Raj introduced him as a friend dealing with girlfriend troubles. While they chatted, I kept glancing toward the institute.

An elderly man—thin and short—stepped out and headed toward the gate. Raj remarked, “*He’s going for Namaz.*” Then he went inside the institute and spoke to a **plump girl in slightly shabby clothes**, dressed in churidar pyjamas. I guessed she might be an assistant.

Raj came back.

“Who’s she?” I asked.

“That’s **Bharathi**—she manages the institute.”

“What about the girl you were talking to—typing there?”

“Oh, that’s **Triza**,” he said and offered no further detail.

They returned to discussing Harry’s issues, but my mind had wandered. All I could think about was **Sahithi**—her smile, her presence, the spark of a new connection.

An Hour Later...

Students slowly began exiting the institute. Eventually, **Sahithi emerged with Bharathi**, who locked up for the day. As they walked toward the gate, **Sahithi turned and called me**.

I said goodbye to the others and caught up with her.

We chatted casually.

“I’m preparing for the **Company Secretary (CS)** entrance exams,” she said.

“CS?” I asked, unfamiliar.

“Yes, Company Secretary,” she smiled.

As we walked, **Bharathi turned down another lane**, leaving us alone.

Sahithi and I walked together until we reached her house.

“See you tomorrow,” she said before disappearing inside.

Evening Reflections

I slowly walked back to my home.

A strange **emptiness** hit me.

Dee and Lakshmi were married and gone. Raju had married and brought home a smart, working wife. From his house, I could hear **old Hindi songs playing** on the radio.

I sat down on the veranda, letting the music fill the silence.

And for the first time in a long while, I **wasn't thinking about the past.**
I was thinking of **Sahithi.**

Chapter 8

From Typewriter Keys to First Paycheque

The next evening, I went over to **Raj's building**, hoping to catch up with someone, but neither **Raj** nor **Shekar** were around. I looked inside the **typing institute**, but **Sahithi** wasn't there either—perhaps she hadn't come that day.

As I walked toward her house, I saw her coming from the opposite direction. I stepped aside to wait for her.

"Hi, I was just coming to see you," I said as she reached me.

We smiled and walked back together to the institute. She went inside. Not wanting to leave immediately, I looked around but still couldn't find Raj or Shekar. On impulse, I walked into the institute and asked **Bharathi**, "I'd like to join typewriting classes. What's the fee?"

"Rupees 30 per month," she replied.

I paid the fee. She handed me a form, which I filled out and returned. She then gave me a typewriter—an old, clunky machine that looked like it came straight out of a 1930s English movie. When I pressed a key, it skipped two spaces, forcing me to backspace constantly.

Bharathi, noticing my struggle, said, **"This typewriter is for beginners. You'll get a better one after a week."**

So, I spent the session repeatedly typing **'ASDFG;LKJH'**, the basic home-row exercises. When time was up, I submitted my sheet. Bharathi placed it into a folder, wrote my name on it, and stacked it with the others.

As Sahithi finished her session, the three of us—Sahithi, Bharathi, and I—**closed up the institute**. I locked the front door and handed the keys to Bharathi. Then we walked toward Sahithi's house. Bharathi turned into her gully, and I walked with Sahithi the rest of the way. She went inside, and I began walking back home.

An Unexpected Interruption

As I neared the corner, **a man stopped me** on the road.

"Who are you, and why are you following Sahithi?" he asked in a harsh tone.

I calmly replied, **"We attend the same typing institute. She asked me to walk her home because it's dark."**

He glared at me and warned, **"Don't follow her again."**

I looked him over from head to toe, said nothing, and continued on my way. I wasn't intimidated—but I took note.

A New Routine Begins

Soon, going to the institute became part of my daily life. **Since Sahithi was also learning shorthand**, I decided to join that too—partly out of curiosity, partly to **keep her company**.

Shorthand turned out to be a strange and fascinating script—a language of **lines and dots**. I found it challenging at first, but within **six months**, I had **mastered both typewriting and shorthand**. I was proud of my progress.

Recognizing my dedication, the **institute owner asked me to assist in teaching shorthand** during evening batches. I began helping students with **dictation**, evaluating their notes, and correcting errors. We would often be the last to leave—**Sahithi, Bharathi, and I**—extending class time by 30 minutes as new students kept enrolling.

Sahithi often sat in the shorthand room during my sessions, practicing and waiting for me to finish. We had grown closer—comfortably, quietly, and without labels.

Unwanted Attention

One evening, **a girl in the shorthand room** kept calling Bharathi because her typewriter wasn't working. Bharathi, caught up in a conversation with another student, ignored her.

Unable to listen to her yelling anymore, I got up, went into the room, checked the machine, and quickly **re-adjusted the ribbon**, which had come off the guide. The girl thanked me.

A couple of days later, she had another issue. Once again, I helped fix it.

Then, one evening, as I arrived at the institute, **that same girl and another one were waiting outside**. She stopped me in the lane and, out of nowhere, said, **“My parents have fixed my marriage. A groom is coming to see me tomorrow.”**

At first, I was confused. She was speaking as if **I was her boyfriend**. Her friend tried to explain what she meant.

If it had been the **other girl** saying that—frankly, I might've considered it. She was attractive, with an **oval face, slim build**, and a warm smile. But the one speaking to me, though neat and soft-spoken, had a face slightly spoiled by her **very small mouth**—something I couldn't unsee.

I stared at them, confused by the entire encounter. At last, I spoke:

“What are you thinking? Why should I care about your marriage? I don't even know your name.”

She started to speak her name, but I cut her off and said, “**I already have a girlfriend. I’ve been with Sahithi for six months now. If you want to play games, pick someone else.**”

Then I walked into the institute.

I never saw her again.



My First Job Offer

In **December**, I spotted a **walk-in interview ad** in the newspaper for typists with shorthand skills.

Excited, I went to the **institute**, typed up my **bio-data**, and submitted it at the venue.

The **HR interviewer**, a heavysset woman, asked me a few questions and then said, “**We have an opening for a trainee typist. The salary is ₹800. Are you willing to join from January 1st?**”

“**Yes, absolutely.**”

“Wait outside,” she said.

After about 20 minutes, she handed me an **offer letter**. It was from one of their **sister companies**, appointing me as a **Trainee Typist at ₹800/month**.

I left the office feeling **genuinely proud**—I had **landed my first job**.

Chapter 9

A New Year, A New Job, and A Journey with Sahithi

January 1, 1986.

I reported to the **HR Manager** at my new office. She instructed me to go to the **second floor** and report to **Mr. Rodrigues**.

On the second floor, I found a row of cabins. Outside the MD's office stood a **butler**. I asked him, "Where is Mr. Rodrigues's cabin?"

He pointed to the cabin next to the MD's. I entered and introduced myself.

Rodrigues looked up and said, "Get a dictation book and a pencil. I'll give you dictation."

I stepped out and asked the butler where I could get those. He went into the PA's cabin and came back with a pencil and a dictation pad. I returned to Rodrigues's cabin and sat down, ready.

He pulled out a memo from his in-tray and began dictating. I took it down in shorthand and then asked, "Where's the typewriter?"

He pointed to a door across the hallway. "Inside that room, there's a typewriter."

I entered a small office space with a desk, cabinets, and files. The typewriter sat on a side table. I typed the memo on a memo pad with a 1+1 carbon copy and brought it back to Rodrigues. He made a few corrections, handed it back, and asked me to retype it. Once the final version was done, he signed it and told me to send it.

Afterward, I returned to the same room with the typewriter. Though it seemed like someone else's workspace, it became my temporary office.

Later, I asked the butler, "Where can I get a cup of tea?"

"Go down to the ground floor," he said. "There's a small gully behind the building where tea and coffee are available."

I went down, had tea, and came back up. The butler told me Mr. Rodrigues was looking for me, so I hurried to his cabin with my notepad and pencil. He gave me another memo to take down—this routine repeated for the rest of the day.

At lunchtime, I informed him I was heading home for lunch. I crossed the highway, took a bus, had lunch at home, and returned in 40 minutes. This became my **daily office routine**.

In the evening, I joined the cricket game as usual, and later, at the institute, I sat beside **Sahithi** and told her all about my **first day at work**.



An Unexpected Conversation

One day, the **MD's secretary** called me for assistance. She had a pile of letters and matching envelopes and asked me to help insert the correct letters into the corresponding envelopes.

While we worked, she started chatting—asking me about my background, education, and what brought me into this profession. She spoke sweetly, and I answered politely.

The butler brought two cups of tea—one for her, one for me. After finishing the task, I asked if she needed anything else. She said no, so I returned to my room.

To pass the time during idle hours, I had picked up a book—"**The Case of the Shapely Shadow**" by **Erle Stanley Gardner**, a Perry Mason novel. I finished it in two days and made a habit of keeping a book in my drawer to read during downtime.



An Opportunity in Delhi

One day, I came across an **ad in the newspaper** for **stenographers at a hotel**. I applied and encouraged Sahithi to apply too. Soon, **we both received interview call letters**.

The test included a **shorthand dictation**, followed by a typing exercise, and a **speed test at 40 words per minute**. We passed all tests and were invited for **final interviews at the company's corporate office in Delhi**—a **fully paid trip**.



The Delhi Interview & More

Initially, **Sahithi's parents** were reluctant to let her travel alone to Delhi. She managed to convince them by saying her friends were also going, and even brought one along to corroborate her story.

We received our **train tickets via mail**—**Rajdhani Express, 3-tier sleeper coach**. At the station, we found that our seats weren't adjacent, so we swapped with fellow passengers to sit together.

After arriving in Delhi, we took a **cab to the hotel**, where we were given **two single rooms**. We freshened up and went for our **interviews**, which were held on the premises.

The hotel offered **everything—breakfast, lunch, dinner, tea, coffee, and snacks**. After the interviews, we went sightseeing around Delhi, returned for dinner, and then headed to our rooms.

Later that night, I went to **Sahithi's room**.

It was the **first time we were alone together in a room**. We chatted late into the night. As I got up to leave, **she stopped me and kissed me on the cheek**.

Unable to resist, I kissed her back—on her cheeks, then her lips. What began as a gentle moment turned into **our first night together**.



The Outcome

The next morning, I returned to my room early. After getting ready, I packed my bag and went to check on Sahithi. She was also getting ready.

I kissed her and sat on her bed while we waited for the results.

We went to the office, where we both received **appointment letters** for the **hotel in Bombay** we had originally applied to. **We had both been selected**.

After lunch, we went back to Sahithi's room. **That afternoon became a continuation of the previous night**, marking another moment of intimacy between us.

She packed her suitcase, and I collected mine. At the reception, we informed them that we were checking out. A staff member came up to check the minibar and the room status. Once verified, they prepared the final bill, and we signed it.

We then took a **cab to the station**, boarded the train, and returned to Bombay—**with new jobs, new memories, and a new bond between us**.

Chapter 10

Disconnected – The Sudden Disappearance of Sahithi

We began our respective jobs, though not as we had hoped. While we both joined the **same hotel group**, we were posted at **different office branches**, which meant **we weren't working together**.

Our work timings were also misaligned—**Sahithi had a regular day shift**, while I was assigned **rotating shifts** that changed every week. As a result, our **time together shrank dramatically**. We could only meet on Sundays, and even that was possible **only if my shift allowed it**.

We kept in touch through phone calls during office hours. Most of the time, I would be the one calling her during the day—those brief conversations were our only link to each other amidst the growing distance.

A New House, A Greater Distance

Around this time, my father got a **promotion**, and our family was allotted a **three-bedroom flat in Wadala**. We moved in soon after.

The new location **further widened the gap** between me and Sahithi—emotionally and geographically. What used to be a short walk or a bus ride was now a complicated commute. Our relationship had suddenly become something we had to **make time for**, rather than **live within**.

Three Days of Silence

About **three months into our jobs**, I called her office as usual, hoping to hear her voice—but was told that **she hadn't come in that day**.

At first, I thought she might be unwell or simply on leave. But when the silence stretched for **three days**, and **repeated calls went unanswered**, I grew anxious.

I contacted the **HR department** at her office, but they too had **no explanation** for her absence. No one had informed them of her resignation or any planned leave.

Searching for Sahithi

Worried, I went to **Vakola** and met **Bharathi**, hoping she might have some news. She promised to check and get back to me.

Later, she called and said, *"Their house is locked. The neighbours say they moved out in the middle of the night. No one knows where they've gone."*

I was stunned. **Why would Sahithi and her family leave like that?** No goodbye. No message. No clue.

I reached out to **Raj**, asking him to make enquiries. He tried, but came back empty-handed.

I asked **Uday**, hoping he might have heard something—but even he had no idea.

I did everything I could to trace her, short of filing a **missing person's report**. There was nothing else I could do.



A Sudden End

And just like that, **my love story with Sahithi ended—without warning, without closure**. One day she was everything in my life, and the next, she was **gone without a trace**.

To this day, I never found out **what happened or why**. And perhaps, some answers are never meant to be known.

Chapter 11

A Goodbye with No Answers

Another **six months passed**, and still—**no sign of Sahithi**. Not a letter, not a phone call, not even a rumour.

In those months, I slowly began to **unravel**. I **barely slept**, my **appetite disappeared**, and I found myself drifting through each day like a **ghost**. I was, in every sense, **a shadow of who I used to be**.

People began to notice.

Concerned Colleagues

My colleagues, who had once known me as someone **cheerful, talkative, and lively**, began to ask questions.

“When you joined, you were full of energy—always joking around,” one of them said. “Now you barely say a word. You didn’t even show up at the office party last week.”

I didn’t dodge their concern.

I told them everything—**how I met Sahithi**, how I joined typing and shorthand classes just to be with her, how we had landed our jobs together, and then—**how she had vanished without a trace**, taking her entire family with her.

They were shocked.

“How does a whole family just disappear?” one of them asked.

“That’s what haunts me,” I replied. “It doesn’t make sense. And that’s why... I can’t stay here anymore.”

A Resignation with No Regrets

The next day, I submitted my **resignation letter**, giving the required **one month’s notice**.

When I met with HR, they asked, “May we know the reason for your resignation?”

“**Personal reasons**,” I said, keeping it brief.

The HR manager urged me to reconsider. “Are you sure you want to leave? You’ve been doing well.”

I looked down, shook my head slowly, and replied, “**There’s no way I can continue here**.”

Walking Away

A month later, I packed up my things and left the hotel—for good. I walked out not just of a job, but of a **chapter in my life** that had started with hope and **ended in silence**.

Chapter 12

A Return to Vakola, and a New Path in Data

After leaving the hotel job, I began doing **data entry work** with a lady who was compiling data for **credit card companies**. My role was to work in the **evenings and nights**, cleaning the data—**removing duplicate entries** and organizing it for database uploads.

One day, she mentioned a **data entry job opening** at a **software firm in Kalina**. I decided to check it out.

Interview with Kathuria

I met the owner, a **Punjabi businessman named Kathuria**, who ran a small company supplying **software to SMEs (small and medium-sized enterprises)**.

During the interview, he asked, “**What experience do you have?**”

I replied, “I worked for a year as a stenotypist and also did data entry work in the evenings.”

“**Why do you want this job?**” he asked.

“I had to leave my previous job due to personal reasons,” I said honestly. “Now I’m out of work and looking for something to keep me going.”

He looked at me and said, “This job won’t pay as much as you were earning earlier.”

“I understand,” I said. “That’s fine.”

“Alright,” he agreed. “I’ll pay you **₹1,000 per month** for the work.”

It wasn’t ideal, but I accepted. I knew **data entry had no long-term future**, but I thought I’d stay busy while looking for better opportunities—and perhaps **learn something new** along the way.

A Return to Vakola

I joined him and was soon sent to **client offices** where **data entry work was pending**. Most of them were using his company’s software but lacked trained staff to handle backlog tasks.

One of the first companies I was placed at was a **paint company in Vakola**. It felt strange—and familiar—to be **back in Vakola**, working again.

My job started with **purchase department entries**—entering backlogged data into the system. Once that was completed, they moved me to assist with **accounts-related work**.



Learning on the Job

Sometimes, **Kathuria** would call me to **deliver software modules** to clients. Other times, he'd personally visit client sites for **software maintenance**. I began observing him closely—**noticing commands**, watching how he navigated the system, how he debugged and configured. I made mental notes and started **practicing on my own**.

The company had an **EDP (Electronic Data Processing) department**—a clean, air-conditioned room equipped with a **UPS system and a Unix server**. Inside, a guy named **Jathin** handled **sales invoicing**.



My First Step into EDP

One day, **Jathin needed to take leave**, and he trained me briefly on **how to prepare and print invoices**. Then he handed the responsibility over to me.

The sales department would **drop invoices through a small window** between their office and the EDP room. I'd process the information, prepare the invoices, print them, and **leave them at the window**, calling the staff to collect them.

It was a small role—but it gave me **exposure to real systems and software**. I was slowly **transitioning from pure data entry into IT operations**.



Lingering Hope

And yet, even amidst this new routine, **a part of me hadn't let go**.

Every day, while walking to the **Kalina bus stop**, I found myself **looking for Sahithi**. Hoping—**foolishly, desperately**—that she would be there. That I'd see her across the road. That she'd turn and smile. But **she never has**.

Still, I looked. Because hope, even unreturned, was **all I had left of her**.

Chapter 13

From Data Entry to Department Head – A Quiet Ascent

January 1987.

Recognizing the consistency and quality of my work, the company offered me a **contract position as a Data Entry Operator**. I was now officially part of their internal team and was **assigned a seat in the EDP department**, alongside **Jathin**.

Whenever Jathin took leave, I was expected to **handle his duties**—processing **sales invoices**, managing file outputs, and ensuring system uptime. In addition to this, I continued my regular **data entry tasks** for the **Purchases, Accounts, and Sales** departments.

Self-Learning Behind the Scenes

In my **free time**, I began going through the **source code** of the software Kathuria had supplied to the company. Two different programs were being used:

- **COBOL for Sales and Accounting**
- **FoxPro for Payroll**

The COBOL-based system occasionally ran into issues with its data files. When this happened, **Kathuria** would come in to **reindex the files**—a process that often took an entire day, causing significant disruption.

One day, I noticed that the COBOL program had **several redundant index files**. I removed the **unnecessary indexes** and reindexed the system myself, reducing the indexing time from **an entire day to just 30 minutes**. That single improvement changed how the team viewed me.

Taking Ownership Through Code

My next effort was aimed at **improving the Account Info module**.

Previously, the system required users to input **dates and account codes**, after which pressing the **Print** or **View** button would create a text file. Pressing **Print** would send the file to a printer; **View** would launch the file in a text viewer. It was **slow and inefficient**.

I rewrote the logic so that pressing **View** would **display the data directly on screen**, removing the need for an intermediary file.

I kept experimenting and refining the system in my spare time—**evenings, weekends, and Sundays**—driven not by a deadline, but by pure curiosity and passion.

A System Reborn in FoxPro

Eventually, I decided to **recreate the entire software in FoxPro**, consolidating everything into a **single platform**. I carefully copied data from the **COBOL data files** into **FoxPro DBF files**, rewriting all modules and logic from scratch.

Once I had built a fully functional version of the software, I spent weeks testing every module. When I was confident that the new system was **bug-free and stable**, I approached the **management**.

Recognition Earned

I presented the new system and asked, **“If I implement this bug-free software across the company, what do I get in return?”**

They didn’t hesitate. **“We’ll promote you to EDP In-Charge,”** they said. **“And you’ll receive all the perks given to department heads.”**

I agreed.

Soon after, I began **gradually replacing the old system** with the new FoxPro-based solution. I also introduced new features like:

- **Encrypted formula modules**
- **Costing modules**
- **Optimized screen views and reports**

By the **end of the year**, I had officially become the **EDP In-Charge and Software Developer** for the company.

One of the biggest wins? We **significantly reduced software maintenance costs** by **eliminating dependency on Kathuria’s firm**, which had previously provided the original COBOL-based system.

Chapter 14

A New Chapter – From Loss to Love

January 1988

Even now, more than a year since Sahithi disappeared, I still found myself **getting off at Kalina** and walking toward the office—partly out of habit, and partly because a small part of me still **hoped to see her again**.

I used to ask **Bharathi** about her occasionally, but her answer was always the same: *“No news.”*

Over time, my search became **less frequent**. From looking for her **daily**, it turned into **once a week**, then **once a month**, and eventually... **never**.

Work Sends Me to Madras

Our company had decided to **upgrade software systems** at our **branch offices**—in **Noida, Madras**, and the **Delhi sales office**. I was assigned to **Madras** to verify hardware and **install the new application**.

As instructed by the **Branch Manager (BM)**, I checked into a hotel near the airport. The manager had arranged to **pick me up the next morning**.

At 9:30 AM, he arrived on a scooter. As I checked out at the reception for the day, I casually told the receptionist, “The TV in my room isn’t working. Could someone check on it?”

The receptionist looked at the register and asked, “Are you Kumar?”

“Yes.”

“Did you study at Vile Parle College?”

“Yes...”

“I’m **Latha**. Don’t you remember me? We were friends with **Shrikant** back then.”

I was stunned. “Did you marry Shrikant?”

“Yes, after our degree. We lost touch with everyone after that. Are you still with Lakshmi?”

“No. She got married and moved on.”

“Are you married?” she asked.

“Me? No.” I gave a polite nod and left—the **Branch Manager** was already honking from outside.

Work and Unexpected Encounters

At the factory, I **verified the existing hardware**, recommended a **new server and networking upgrade**, and documented everything in detail. The manager ordered lunch from a nearby mess—**familiar South Indian food** that didn't bother me in the least.

Later that evening, back at the hotel, the **TV had been fixed**. I went out for dinner, returned, watched TV for a bit, and fell asleep.

That night, I **dreamt of Sahithi**, but couldn't recall what she had said. It felt like she was speaking to me, but her words were **muffled**, unreachable.

Meeting Sunitha

The next morning, I had breakfast and waited in the lobby for the BM. **Latha** was at the reception again, speaking with a **young woman**.

When she noticed me, she said, "**Sunitha**, this is Kumar, Shrikant's best friend from college. We all studied in Bombay."

I turned toward **Sunitha**—she was about **5'3"**, **fair, graceful, and strikingly beautiful**. Everything else around me faded. I couldn't take my eyes off her.

Latha spoke, but I heard nothing. It wasn't until the **manager's horn blared again** that I broke out of my trance.

"I'll speak to you later," I told Latha, glancing at Sunitha one last time before hurrying out.

Successful Implementation

I installed the new software at the factory and conducted **test runs**. Since the new system was modeled on the old one, but with **additional validations and improved UI**, the transition was smooth. I trained the users and **let them practice** for a while before going back to the hotel.

That evening, I asked Latha about **Sunitha**.

"She's visiting from Bombay," Latha said. "Just completed her degree. She'll be here for at least a week."

"Can I meet her again—maybe this Sunday?" I asked.

"I'll ask her and let you know."

Sharing Stories

That evening, Latha and I caught up. I told her about **Lakshmi**, about **Sahithi's mysterious disappearance**, and about my journey since. She listened, and as her shift ended, invited me to visit their home.

"Shrikant would love to see you."

"I'll try," I said. "Please speak to Sunitha."



A Sunday to Remember

Latha informed me later that **Sunitha** agreed to meet on **Sunday at a theatre** to watch an **English movie**.

I was ecstatic.

I spent the next two days wondering **what I should say**, how to express what I felt, how to **not mess it up**.

Sunday arrived. I dressed carefully and reached the theatre. **Sunitha was waiting**, radiant as ever. When I saw her, **words failed me**.

She noticed my nervousness and took charge—**held my hand**, pulled me inside, and led me to our seats.

The lights dimmed.

She tapped my cheek. "What happened?"

"I... I've never seen such beauty before," I stammered.

She smiled. "Thank you."

We spoke quietly before the film began. I asked her opinion of me.

"Latha told me you're a natural leader—kind, intelligent, and selfless. I know you've had heartbreak. I think that's made you stronger."

I smiled, touched by her words.

Midway through the movie, I **interlaced my fingers with hers**. She didn't pull away.



Dinner with Old Friends

After the movie, she invited me to **Latha's home** for dinner. I met **Shrikant** after nearly two years. We shared a hearty meal—**mutton curry and rasam**.

I teased, "Shrikant, when did you start eating non-veg?"

He laughed. "After marriage—for Latha's sake."

Later, on the **terrace**, Sunitha and I sat alone.

I shared everything—**my heartbreak, career journey, and recovery**.

“You’ve been through a lot,” she said. “But it seems you’ve emerged stronger.”

When I offered to book her ticket back to Bombay, she agreed without hesitation.

Love at 30,000 Feet

We boarded the **flight together**. She took the **window seat**.

As the plane took off, she **gripped my hand tightly**.

“Don’t worry,” I whispered. “I’m with you.”

Once airborne, she smiled and thanked me.

“For what?”

“For bringing me along.”

She kissed my hand, and I whispered, “**I love you.**”

She looked into my eyes and said, “**I love you too.**”

That was it. The moment we **fell in love**.

Chapter 15

A Promise in December – The Love That Stayed

Sunday Afternoon

On Sunday morning, I went to the market and brought back ingredients for a **non-vegetarian meal**. My mother began cooking around **midday**, and by **12:30 p.m.**, lunch was ready.

I got dressed and waited. Around **1:40 p.m.**, I spotted **Sunitha** walking toward our colony from the balcony. I quickly took the **lift down** and met her at the gate. I welcomed her with a **side-hug**, held her hand, and walked her in.

My **parents were waiting at the door**. Sunitha greeted them by **touching their feet** and then warmly hugged my mother.

My mother cupped her face and said,
“I didn’t expect you to be so beautiful.”

My father smiled and added,
“Welcome to our home.”

My mother led her to the **sofa**, sitting beside her as my father settled opposite. I sat on the side, quietly taking in the scene.

First Family Conversation

Dad asked,
“Tell us something about yourself.”

Sunitha replied confidently,
“I just completed my degree and recently got selected as an **air hostess**. I’m leaving for training in **Delhi next week**. Honestly, I think Kumar is my lucky charm. I met him, and the next day, I received my job confirmation.”

“How long is the training?” Dad asked.

“**Six months**,” she said.

“So, you’ll be away for quite a while,” my mother added, with a hint of concern. I remained silent, feeling a tinge of sadness at the thought of her absence.

A Loving Meal

We soon sat for **lunch**. My mother served Sunitha with unusual warmth—placing food on her plate, urging her to try this and that.

I had never seen her serve **any guest** with such affection. It was clear—**she liked Sunitha instantly**.

After lunch, we returned to the sofa.

Mom asked,

“How was the food?”

Sunitha smiled,

“Delicious. It reminded me of my grandmother’s cooking.”

I asked when she’d be leaving for Delhi.

“Next Sunday,” she replied.

“I might be going to **Noida** in a couple of weeks,” I said. “Think I could see you there?”

“Maybe,” she said, thoughtfully. “It depends on my schedule.”

“I’ve just met you,” I added, “and now you’ll be away for six months...”

“Six months will fly by,” she reassured.

Dad asked,

“When can we meet your parents?”

Sunitha responded,

“Just give me a date. I’ll check with them and confirm.”



Reflections

As I dropped her to **Wadala Station**, I said,

“I’m going to miss you for six months. I already miss you if I don’t see you for a day.”

She smiled, and I reminded her to **call me when she reached Delhi**, letting me know where she’d be staying.

After she left, I walked home with a heavy heart.

“Absence makes the heart grow fonder,” I told myself. Or is it “Out of sight, out of mind”?

We had only known each other for **two weeks**. Could she truly love me? Would she forget me in Delhi?

But how could I stop her from going? I wasn’t that kind of man. I wanted her to **be free, to grow**, even if it meant being apart.

Still, a part of me wished we could stay close—without making her feel caged.

Should I take up a temporary assignment in Delhi? Request a transfer? I’d **sleep on it**.



Meeting Her Parents

On **Thursday**, we visited **Sunitha’s home**. Their house was **tastefully decorated**, and the influence of **two daughters** was evident.

Surprisingly, one of their relatives working in the department knew my father. That connection went a long way in building trust. My father was well-regarded in their circles—a **respected, compassionate man** who had helped many.

After the visit, Sunitha told me her parents had **enquired about our family** and received nothing but praise. They were happy and agreed to proceed.

We had a **small engagement ceremony** before her departure—just **close family and friends**.

Delhi – A Love Rekindled

About **20 days later**, I arranged a trip to Delhi for **software upgradation**. I planned it deliberately to last longer than needed, citing multiple branches and training requirements.

Instead of Noida, I booked a **double room in a Delhi hotel**, and informed Sunitha of my arrival.

I finished my work at the **Delhi office** and then went to meet her. I asked her to **pack an overnight bag** and come with me. She got permission from her trainers.

We had **dinner out**, returned to the hotel, and chatted late into the night.

“Shall I switch off the TV?” I asked, hinting subtly.

She nodded,

“Yes.”

I dimmed the lights, wrapped my arm around her shoulders, and kissed her cheek. She turned to me, embraced me, and **we shared our first night together**.

Making Memories

The next day, she brought her suitcase to the hotel. During the day, I worked between **Delhi and Noida**. In the evenings, she was with me.

We even visited the **Taj Mahal on a Sunday**, capturing beautiful moments with her camera.

We made **so many memories** in those few days.

Eventually, I had to return to Bombay.

“Stay,” she almost said. If she had, I wouldn’t have refused.

But she returned to her hostel, and I returned to my life in Bombay—with a heart **full of love and longing**.

Wedding Bells

I made two more short trips before her training ended.

Once Sunitha returned to Bombay, we **fixed our wedding date**:

December 26th.

Preparations were in **full swing**.

We booked the **marriage hall**, arranged **catering**, printed **invitations**, and began distributing them—**personally in Bombay**, and by **post for others**.

I visited my **old colony** and invited my childhood friends. My father delivered invitations to his circle.

Everything was in place.

Now, we were just **waiting for the big day**.

Chapter 16

1989 – When Everything Fell Apart

January 1989

I awoke in the hospital, confused and disoriented. My father sat in a chair beside my bed, his eyes filled with concern.

“What happened?” I asked.

He leaned forward. “You had a **mental breakdown**. The doctors kept you **sedated for the past week.**”

I looked around, still unsure. **“Did I have an accident?** I don’t feel any injuries.”

Dad hesitated. “Do you remember your **wedding day?**”

Bits and pieces returned.

“I remember getting ready... someone knocked on the door asking if I was ready... I said yes, and then... someone came running, handed me something—a **letter?** I can’t remember what it said.”

Dad looked me in the eyes.

“Sunitha sent a letter cancelling the marriage.”

“What?!” My voice cracked in disbelief.

“She wrote that she received an **anonymous letter**, claiming that you had a **son from a previous marriage**, a fact you had hidden from her.”

I sat up abruptly.

“A son? A previous marriage? **I never had a marriage! I never had a son!** Someone must have lied to sabotage my wedding.”

Dad nodded solemnly. “She also wrote that she was going to verify the information and would not go through with the marriage until it was clarified. After that, she disappeared—we haven’t heard from her since.”

I couldn’t process it. **“Did you try contacting her?”**

“They aren’t responding.”

“When will they discharge me?”

“Tomorrow morning, if the doctor approves.”

The Fragmented Memory

After a couple of hours, a doctor checked my vitals and gave the go-ahead for discharge the next day.

Dad left to let me rest.

I lay in bed, trying to piece together the events of that fateful day. I recalled being in the **dressing room**, ready to walk out. Raj had been there. Then **Sunitha's cousin** came running with a **letter**. It mentioned someone had written to Sunitha, alleging I had a child. The writer wanted to **meet her in person** to provide proof. In her note, she stated she was going to verify the claim and **called off the wedding until further notice**. The memory **faded there**. That must have been the moment I collapsed.



An Unexpected Familiar Face

Later, I rang the bell beside my bed. A nurse came in—her **square-shaped face** stirred something familiar.

“Could you please adjust the bed?” I asked.

She did. Then brought me **a glass of water**, and asked if I wanted anything to eat. I nodded.

She called the canteen and returned with **two slices of bread and a cup of milk**.

While eating, I asked, “**Did Sunitha come to see me?**”

“Sunitha, your fiancée? No. No one from her family has visited.”

“Do you know what happened?”

She looked hesitant.

“I don’t know the full story,” I said. “But I was falsely accused of having a child I didn’t know existed.”

“You had a child?” she asked softly.

“No,” I replied. “At least, I don’t think so. I would never hide something like that. And if I had a son, **I would never abandon him.**”

She looked at me with concern. “Call me if you need anything,” she said gently, and left.



Visitors and Questions

After finishing the paper my dad had left behind, **my mother and younger sister Revathi** arrived.

Mom asked, “**How are you feeling now?**”

“A little better. But I can’t understand how someone could make up such a cruel lie.”

“We trust you,” she said, firmly. “If anything like this had ever happened, you would have told us. We always encouraged openness.”

My mind went racing.

Could it be Sahithi?

We had spent a night together in Delhi. Then she disappeared. If she had been pregnant, **was that why she vanished?** Could the anonymous letter have been telling the truth—but not the whole truth?

If I did have a son, he would be about two years old.

But then, why didn't she come to me?

So many **questions**, and no **answers**.

"Mom, do we have my phone book?"

"It's at home," she replied.

"Could Dad try calling **Shrikant or Latha**? Maybe they know something."

She sent Revathi to a **payphone** to inform Dad.

A Familiar Nurse and an Unspoken Connection

Later, the same nurse came to administer medication. Suddenly, it clicked.

"Didn't I see you before? During a leg procedure I had years ago—you were a trainee nurse then."

She smiled shyly. "Yes. I remembered you when they brought you in. I didn't think you'd remember me."

"I remember you used to take my pulse—and hold my hand a bit too long," I teased.

She **blushed**.

"Would you like something to eat?" she asked, changing the subject.

"Do you have any **fruits**?"

She brought me an **apple**, cleaned it, and handed it over.

I took a bite. "That was about **four or five years ago**, right? Are you a staff nurse now?"

"Yes."

"You know, I don't forget faces... just names."

"You seemed like a different person back then," she said.

"I've been through a lot," I admitted. "Two heartbreaks. First, the girl I loved disappeared without explanation. Then, the woman I was about to marry left me at the altar."

"Is she really that beautiful?" she asked.

“**Stunning,**” I said. “But now... no one knows where she is. Her family left without a word.”



The Call That Didn't Help

That evening, my father returned.

“I spoke with **Latha,**” he said, quietly. “She and Shrikant **don’t know where Sunitha is.** As soon as the wedding was called off, her **entire family returned to Madras.**”

Chapter 17

Closure and a New Beginning

One week later, Sunitha returned—with a **two-year-old boy in her arms**.

She sat down across from me and began, her voice calm yet filled with emotion.

“I want to tell you everything about **Sahithi**.”

The Untold Story

“When her family discovered she was pregnant,” Sunitha continued, “they immediately vacated their house in Bombay and returned to their **native village**. They couldn’t face the shame or the questions from neighbours.”

“They told everyone that **Sahithi was a widow**, and that her husband had died in an accident—leaving her three months pregnant. That’s how they justified her sudden return. Sahithi, heartbroken and vulnerable, never left the village again.”

Sunitha paused, gathering herself.

“She gave birth to a baby boy. But she... she didn’t survive childbirth.”

My chest tightened.

“They were devastated,” she said. “At first, they tried to raise the child themselves. But the grief, the regret—it haunted them. Eventually, they decided he needed to be with his father.”

I whispered, “**They should have told me**.”

“They didn’t know how,” she replied gently. “Not until recently did they realize the damage their silence had done. They found out you were about to get married and decided it was time. So... they called **me**.”

I stared at her.

“They asked me to take the child. When I arrived, **Sahithi’s mother was very ill**, so I stayed until she recovered. And then... I brought him back.”

My Guilt, Her Grace

I looked at the boy—my son. His eyes were like mine. His presence was like a door reopening that I didn’t know had ever been closed.

“I’m sorry, Sunitha,” I said, my voice low. “I had **no idea** she could have been pregnant. It never occurred to me.”

She nodded slowly.

"It's okay. They explained everything. They were overwhelmed with shame and guilt. Every day, they wish they had stayed in Bombay. Maybe then... Sahithi might have survived."

I couldn't speak. Grief and disbelief coursed through me.



Her Answer

I finally asked the question I'd been afraid to voice.

"Sunitha... What's your take on all this?"

She looked down at the child in her lap, then at me.

"I will **raise him as my son**. I've promised his grandparents. I'll look after him as if he were my own. He is part of you—and I love you."

Her words stunned me with their grace.

"**So... are you ready to be married?**" I asked softly.

She smiled, without hesitation. "**Let's get married.**"

Chapter 18

Marriage, Distance, and the Weight of Absence

The following month, **Sunitha and I were married in a simple ceremony.**

There were **no elaborate decorations**, no grand reception—just close family, a few friends, and solemn vows. But despite the simplicity, the moment was sacred.

A New Life, A Child Already Loved

Sunitha received her **official posting in Bombay**, though her work required **frequent travel**. Her schedule had her **home one day, on the move the next**, constantly shifting. It was the life of an air hostess, and we had known this before—but living it was different from planning it.

The boy—**our boy**—had already been named **Atul** by his grandparents. His name was recorded in the birth registry. **Sahithi** was listed as the mother, and I, **Kumar**, as the father.

There was no need for any **legal formalities** to raise him. He was **already home—our home.**

Everyone in the family helped care for him. **My parents, my sister, even neighbors**—they all adored him. He had become part of all our routines, and he brought with him a soft joy that helped heal the scars of the past.

Irregular Lives, Irregular Love

The only challenge—**Sunitha's schedule.**

Her irregular shifts created a rhythm only **she seemed comfortable with**. Everyone in the house adjusted to her comings and goings. **Except me.**

I struggled. I couldn't sync my life with hers. Whenever I was sent on tour for work, I would often return to find her gone. And when she returned, I'd be the one missing.

Even when we were together, I felt as though **something was missing**—like an invisible curtain hung between us.

I often wondered whether the seed of that **disconnection** was planted the day she **left me at the marriage hall.**

Yes, I forgave her. Yes, we had moved forward. But perhaps, deep inside, a part of me **never fully recovered** from the silence, the public heartbreak, the sudden void.



The Cost of a Career

During her **six months of training**, every time I missed her, I had a way to cope—I would **plan a business trip to Delhi**, just to be near her.

But now, she was **here**, yet **absent**—and I had **no excuse to leave**. And no way to be near her when I needed to.

I missed her **more and more**, and I couldn't bring myself to tell her how **heavy her absence had become**. I couldn't ask her to leave her job. She loved it. It was part of her identity.

But sometimes... I wished the thought to change careers would come to **her**. Not because I asked, but because she **felt it too**.

And deep inside, I feared she didn't **miss me** as much as I missed her.

Chapter 19

1990 – The Weight of Distance and Doubt

January 1990

A new year began—but I didn't even know **which city Sunitha was in**.

There are moments, in the stillness of night or the silence of early mornings, when I ask myself:

Does she love me the way she once did?

Our lives seem to be **drifting apart**. Instead of converging into a shared rhythm, our routines feel increasingly **separate**, parallel but distant. Sometimes I dream she's being **pulled away from me**, her body floating weightlessly, further and further, as I stand watching—helpless.

Maybe that's my subconscious—my **fear of losing her**—trying to surface.

But where did it begin?

The answer always leads back to **that day**.

The Echo of Old Wounds

The day our wedding was cancelled. The moment she left, carrying only a letter and my heart. I remember what it did to me—how it **broke me, shut me down**. I lay **sedated in a hospital bed**, lost to the world, my mind shielding me from the pain.

And I can't help but wonder:

If something like that happened again...

Would I survive it a second time?

Would I be able to come back from it?

I don't know.

But one thing I do know—I **have to remain strong**, at least for **Atul**. He deserves a father who's present, grounded, and emotionally stable. He didn't ask for any of this, and I owe him my strength.

Mind Games or Gut Feeling?

Maybe it's all in my head.

Maybe this is just the toll of **distance, shifting priorities**, and a lifestyle I never asked for. Maybe I'm turning a **normal, manageable situation** into something larger, something dark and complicated.

But **who can reassure me** that it's all in my mind?

Who will allay these fears that whisper when I'm alone?

Chapter 20

Sunitha's schedule had changed. She now left in the morning and returned at night, with only one weekly day off. Whenever she came home, she was completely exhausted. The situation had become increasingly rigid, and I struggled to cope with her growing absence.

Meanwhile, there was a software issue at the Noida branch. I attempted to troubleshoot the problem remotely from Bombay but couldn't identify the root cause. I requested a flight, but due to a surge in travel and airline issues, I was unable to get a ticket. Even Sunitha couldn't help. Eventually, I booked a first-class ticket on the Rajdhani Express.

At Bombay Central, I boarded the train and found myself in a two-berth coupe. I had brought along some computer books and spent time reading about emerging technologies. The internet had just been introduced in the U.S., but in India, connectivity was challenging. It required a telephone line and a modem, and even then, the speeds were painfully slow.

A little while later, the cabin door opened, and a woman entered. She appeared to be around 25, about five-foot-three, slim, and attractive. She sat beside me. I glanced at her briefly, then returned to my book. After finishing the article, I set the book aside and looked at her again.

She smiled. I smiled back.

"I'm Kumar," I said.

"I'm Loveleen," she replied.

I guessed she might be Punjabi, though she didn't quite look like one.

"I'm headed to Delhi for work. I work in IT," I told her.

"I'm going to Noida for a wedding," she responded.

"Oh? Where in Noida?" I asked.

"Sector 22."

"I usually stay in a hotel in Sector 1. Our factory is in Sector 2, and we also have an office in Delhi. There was a system breakdown, so I had to travel on short notice."

She was easy to talk to. The conversation flowed effortlessly, and I realized I hadn't spoken to anyone like this in a long time. The train departed at 4 p.m., and by 8 p.m., the attendant brought us dinner. We ate, made our beds, and continued chatting. Neither of us felt sleepy. There was no awkwardness, no boredom—just an easy connection.

Near midnight, I said, "We should sleep."

I locked the cabin door, turned off the lights, and switched on the night lamp. As I was about to climb into the upper berth, she stood up and kissed me on the cheek. Her touch disarmed me. I held her shoulders and looked into her eyes. They were unlike any I'd seen before—deep, hypnotic, drawing me in.

She wrapped her arms around me and pulled me closer. I placed my hands on her back and kissed her. She kissed me back, and soon, we lost ourselves in each other, forgetting the world around us.

I was awakened by a knock on the door. I quickly dressed, covered Loveleen with a bedsheet, and opened the door. The attendant handed me two cups of coffee. I took them and locked the door again.

Gently shaking Loveleen, I asked, "Would you like some coffee?"

"Yes," she said.

She sat up, adjusted her dress, and took a cup. Seeing that we had another hour before reaching Delhi, I packed my bag and set it aside.

"Come with me to the hotel," I said.

She nodded. "Okay."

She dressed, packed her things, and we prepared to disembark. Once at the station, we hailed a cab to Noida. I checked into my regular hotel and booked a double room.

After freshening up together, I dropped her off at her relatives' place. We exchanged numbers, and I proceeded to the office to resolve the software issue. Once the problem was fixed, I called her.

"My work's done," I said.

She asked me to come by in an hour. I picked her up and returned to the hotel. We spent the rest of the day together, ordering in and enjoying each other's company. The intimacy deepened over the next two days.

One evening, she said she had to attend the wedding. We got dressed and went to the event, where she introduced me as her friend from Delhi. After the reception, we returned to the hotel. Our connection only grew stronger—we couldn't get enough of each other.

We spent one more day together before heading back to Bombay.

Chapter 21

I regularly met Loveleen at her flat.

I never mentioned that I was married, and she never asked. Sunitha also never questioned where I was going at odd hours. Either she didn't notice, or she simply didn't care. Her late working hours were becoming the norm, and each day we drifted further apart. We shared a house but no longer shared a life.

At times, I wondered if she was having an affair of her own. But then I'd tell myself—just because I was, it didn't mean she was. Still, her relentless focus on her career left me feeling neglected, which drew me closer to Loveleen.

In my mind, it was Sunitha's fault that I strayed. If she had been more attentive, if she had cared about my emotional needs, I wouldn't have felt compelled to look elsewhere. She never considered my perspective. Why did she insist on such a demanding schedule when she could have opted for alternate days? For what—more money? I never asked what she earned or what she did with it. But I know she chose her work over us.

She let me down. She let down my love, our son, and the family. Her only priority seemed to be her career. I doubt Atul even sees her anymore. She broke the promise she made to his grandparents. I couldn't stand watching him wake up and look for her, only to go to bed without seeing her all day.

Six months had passed since I first met Loveleen on the train. Occasionally, I spent the night at her place. Sunitha remained unaware—or indifferent. She never asked where I spent my nights. Perhaps she didn't care anymore. She seemed so absorbed in her own world that it was as if Kumar no longer existed in hers.

Our schedules had become so misaligned that we barely saw each other, even under the same roof.

Chapter 22

January 1991

It had been nine months since Loveleen and I had started seeing each other. I didn't know much about her, but being with her felt enough. I had grown so emotionally entangled with her that I began to neglect my wife and son. There were times when I wouldn't go home for days, and when I did, it was only to catch a glimpse of my son. I hadn't seen Sunitha in over a month.

No one seemed to notice—or so I believed—until my father brought it up.

He said, “Why are you working so much? You haven't been home for days. Think about your son—he misses you.”

I lied. “I'm working on starting a firm, and I've been sleeping in the office.”

This was the first time I lied to my father about my relationship. The lie wasn't about the firm; that part was true. But I wasn't sleeping in my office—I was living at Loveleen's flat. She never asked about my home or family, and I had quietly made her place my second home.

One day, out of the blue, Loveleen said, “Let's have kids.”

I was caught off guard. “You want kids?”

“Yes,” she said simply.

“Do you want us to get married?”

“No, I want children without marriage,” she replied.

“If that's what you want, I'll support you,” I said. “Are you on birth control?”

She didn't answer directly. Instead, she smiled and said, “Thanks for your support.”

I figured if she wanted children, that was her choice. I would stand by her. Whether she needed financial help, a name for the child, or anything else, I was willing to provide it. In fact, I would have loved to hold her child in my arms. With Atul, I hadn't been around for the first two years of his life. I didn't know what it felt like to cradle your newborn right after birth. And with Sunitha—given the state of our relationship—I doubted she was in any place to consider having another child.

Around that time, we received a software order from one of our current vendor partners. I spent close to a month customizing and installing the

software. With no staff or developers yet on board, I had to do everything myself.

My focus on work pushed my time with Loveleen into the background. After about a week, I finally visited her.

"Sorry, Love," I said. "I've been tied up finalizing the application. I hope you weren't too disappointed."

"It's okay," she replied. She walked over and kissed me—I understood what that meant.

Meanwhile, Sunitha's health took a turn. Overworked and exhausted, she fell ill and was advised bed rest by the doctor. I stayed home to care for her instead of going to Loveleen's flat.

When Loveleen asked where I'd been, I said, "My mother's been sick."

Another lie. And I knew it wouldn't be long before everything came to light. But I kept hoping it wouldn't. I wanted to delay the inevitable. I wanted to stretch this affair for as long as possible.

In September, Loveleen gave me the news—she was pregnant with my child.

I asked her again if she wanted to get married. I didn't want our child to enter the world without legitimacy.

She said, "Don't worry. I won't hold you responsible."

As the pregnancy progressed, she began to ask for more space, on her doctor's advice. Gradually, I stopped staying over at night. Instead, I'd visit, check in on her, and leave shortly after.

Chapter 23

January 1992

Loveleen was now seven months pregnant. I visited her every day, spending time with her and bonding with the child growing inside her.

One day, she said, “I’ll be going to my mother’s place. I need someone close by at all times.”

I nodded. “Okay.”

She added, “You won’t be able to visit me there, but I’ll call you every day and update you about my health.”

April

One afternoon, I received a call from a nurse—Loveleen had given birth to a baby boy. She said I could come see them at the hospital. I quickly took down the hospital details and rushed there.

Loveleen was sitting upright on the hospital bed, cradling her newborn. An older woman and a man were present in the room. She introduced me as her *best friend*. The woman was her mother, and the man—her husband.

She handed me the baby. I looked at him closely. He had Loveleen’s complexion and my features—there was no mistaking the connection. Holding him in my arms filled me with a quiet, overwhelming emotion I hadn’t experienced before.

A month later, Loveleen called and asked me to visit her flat. When I arrived, she greeted me with a kiss and said, “Thank you for giving me a son. You never asked me about my marital status, and I never brought it up. If you had asked, I might have told you I was married. My husband and I had been trying to have children for seven years without success. The doctors confirmed he had fertility issues—so I turned to you.”

I took a deep breath and replied, “I’m sorry I never told you about my own situation. I’m married too—and I have a son from that relationship.”

She smiled gently. “I already knew everything. Sunitha is my best friend. When I got the medical reports about my husband, I confided in her. I told her I was thinking of divorce because he couldn’t give me a child. But Sunitha had another idea. She suggested I try artificial insemination. She said that if I needed help, I could ask her husband—you.”

My head spun.

“She showed me your photo,” Loveleen continued, “and I was shocked. It felt like God had sent you to me for this very purpose. After that conversation, I approached you. Sunitha agreed to help, but she didn’t know we’d fall in love. I’m sorry I didn’t tell you the truth. My husband’s name is on the birth certificate, but in my heart—and always—you are his real father. I won’t take that away from you.”

That was how the love story with Loveleen ended—but not our relationship. Something deeper remained.

Chapter 24

After her illness, Sunitha changed her work schedule. She began spending more time at home, and our lives started to feel more balanced. Atul, now in Upper Kindergarten, was especially happy to have his mother around.

I, too, made a conscious effort to be more present. For the first time in a long while, we began to feel like a proper family again.

One day, I asked her, “Sunitha, do you want to have a baby of your own?”

She replied, “I do, but right now, I want to focus on Atul. I need to prepare him for the idea of having a sibling. He shouldn't feel jealous if a new baby arrives.”

I respected her decision and left it at that.

Around that time, we needed a space to meet with clients. Since Loveleen wasn't using her flat at the moment, I asked if we could use it for a few meetings. She still called me occasionally for a night out, but the flat remained mostly vacant.

“Of course,” she said. “You can use it whenever you like. I'll leave the keys with the watchman. Treat it as your own—I have no objections.”

We held our client meeting there, and from then on, the flat became our office.

At present, my partner Simon Wood and I are the only ones working full-time. Simon handles the business side of operations, while I manage the technical aspects.

Through one of our company managers—whose friend owned a manufacturing firm—we received a request for custom software. The client had seen our software in action and wanted a similar system for their own company. With the recent changes in the excise duty regulations introduced by the Manmohan Singh government, it had become increasingly difficult for manufacturers to manage their accounts and invoicing. They needed a system that could adapt to the new rules, and we already had one in place that could be customized for them.

To handle the customizations and prepare for future orders, we decided to hire a developer. We posted advertisements and reached out through friends and family.

During the interview process, Jocelyn Fernandes—recommended by Sunitha—applied for the position. She was five-foot-one, slightly plump, with a round, dusky face. People called her “Joy.”

Joy had completed her MS in the U.S. and was in India for a vacation. Sunitha, being close friends with her, had invited her to catch up. When Joy mentioned she was interested in working during her stay, Sunitha referred her to me.

I called her in for an interview and, after our discussion, assigned her a small module from our existing software to assess her skills. Not only did she complete the changes flawlessly, but she also identified bugs that had slipped past me. I was impressed.

In consultation with Simon, I offered her a developer position at our firm.

At first, I closely monitored her work, reviewing every modification. But as time went on, I realized she was a better coder than I was. I gave her full access and allowed her to work independently.

By the end of the year, Joy had transformed our software into a robust, customizable product. With just minimal adjustments, it could now serve a wide range of clients. She had turned a custom solution into a scalable product.

In appreciation of her efforts, I offered her a share in the proceeds from all future orders—a gesture she wholeheartedly deserved.

Chapter 25

January 1993

We received orders from three new firms to implement our software by the end of March, in time for the new financial year. Until then, we had been operating from Loveleen's flat, but expanding operations meant hiring more developers—and the flat was no longer suitable for commercial work. It had served us well for our small-scale beginnings, but now it was time to grow.

We rented a proper office space with future expansion in mind. One of the immediate needs was a receptionist. I asked Sunitha if she knew anyone suitable. She said she'd check. I also spoke to Raj, who suggested Harry's wife, Susan.

I interviewed Susan and found her to be a good fit. She offered to handle accounts in addition to her receptionist duties, which was a bonus.

We also bought a company car. Joy, who had become essential to our operations, needed to travel frequently for software installations and upgrades. I appointed a driver and assigned the vehicle primarily for her use, though it could also serve other company needs.

Business was booming. Joy had become an integral part of the team. Simon, my partner, found himself increasingly tied up in collections, leaving little time to pursue new business. The workload was growing faster than we could handle.

We hired another developer, Naveen, and placed him under Joy's supervision. She was promoted to Team Lead.

I called Loveleen and said, "We won't be needing your flat anymore."

She responded warmly, "Keep it for your use. No need to return the keys."

I asked about Dhruv. She said, "Come to his first birthday." I had met him two months earlier—he resembled Loveleen so strongly that no one would guess he was my son.

Dhruv's First Birthday

We all attended Dhruv's birthday party, held at a five-star hotel. I took him in my arms and gazed at his face. Even though he bore Loveleen's features, there was something unmistakably mine in him—something subtle, but present. I believed he would grow up to be a leader, someone intelligent and sharp. I blessed him and handed him back to Loveleen, along with my gift.

Our staff and Simon arrived one by one, congratulating Loveleen and giving her their presents. After the cake-cutting, I went to the bar, got a drink, and sat down.

Sunitha joined me. "How is your son?" she asked.

"He looks good," I replied. "He doesn't look like my son, though."

Joy joined us. She greeted Sunitha and said, "Thank you for giving me this opportunity."

"You're welcome," Sunitha replied. "How's the work?"

"It's a little hectic," Joy said, "but I enjoy it. Kumar has arranged transportation, which makes it much easier."

Sunitha asked, "Joy, did you ever have a boyfriend?"

Joy smiled. "Back in the U.S., a senior tried to get close to me. But I came back here and never returned. If I had gone back, maybe I would've had one."

"Whatever happens, happens for good," Sunitha said.

Just then, Susan came by and greeted Sunitha. They had met earlier—Harry's wedding.

Business Talk Turns Personal

We gathered and began discussing our business strategy. Simon said, "We need more capital," and suggested we apply for a bank loan.

Loveleen approached us. "What's this serious discussion about?"

"We're discussing capital requirements," I explained. "Simon suggested a bank loan, but I'm exploring alternatives."

Loveleen said, "I can invest up to ₹10 lakhs. What will I get in return?"

"We're planning to register as a private limited company," I said. "If you're interested, I can offer you shares and a directorship."

She nodded thoughtfully. "Let me think about it."

Sunitha, watching closely, asked, "Are you sure?"

"About what?" I replied.

"About Loveleen becoming a partner."

"I trust her," I said. "If she's willing to invest, I'm open to offering her shares. We'll hold promoter shares, and if she agrees, we'll work out the details."

Sunitha said quietly, "Think about it before you act."

Was that jealousy I saw in her eyes?

I asked her, "Why don't you leave your job and join the company full-time?"

She looked stunned, as if she hadn't expected it. After a moment, she responded, "I'll think about it."

I smiled to myself.

The birthday party had evolved into a business meeting. I finished my drink and got another. Soon, Loveleen announced that dinner was ready. I sat down with my drink and glanced at both Sunitha and Loveleen. I couldn't help but reflect on how far I'd come. Then I thought of Sahithi—what she had missed. My eyes welled up.

Sunitha noticed. "What's wrong? Are you crying?"

"No," I replied. "Just thinking about everything we've gone through. You've had as much of a hand in my success as I have. Without you, I wouldn't be here."

She waved it off. "Don't give me too much credit. It's your hard work and intelligence that brought you here."

"But you supported me—even through my mistakes," I said, subtly referring to Loveleen.

Sunitha looked at her and said, "She supported you at your weakest."

I looked at Loveleen. She smiled. I smiled back.

Then Loveleen brought Dhruv and placed him in my arms. I turned to Sunitha and said, "Would you give me a son or daughter like him?"

For the first time, Sunitha held Dhruv. Something changed in her eyes. She looked at me and said, "I'm ready to leave the airline job."

Now it was my turn to be surprised. I looked into her eyes—they were sincere.

She handed Dhruv back to Loveleen and returned to me. "I want kids," she said.

"Have you finally decided?" I asked.

"Yes," she nodded.

We went to dinner. Afterward, I stepped outside for a smoke. Naveen approached me.

"Sir," he said. "I suspect Joy is cheating the company."

"How?" I asked.

“She’s installing the software at places we don’t have contracts.”

“I’ll look into it,” I said.

He left, and I stood there thinking. I stubbed out the cigarette and went back inside.

A Doubt Emerges

I told Joy to meet me in the morning.

“Okay,” she said.

Then I called Sunitha and we left with Joy. In the car, I asked the driver to drop Joy first and then take us home.

After Joy got down, I turned to Sunitha and said, “Naveen’s accusing her of selling software outside our contracts.”

“What’s he saying exactly?” she asked.

“He thinks she’s installing the product without authorization. But I don’t believe it. I’ve been giving her a percentage from the beginning—why would she go behind my back?”

Sunitha nodded. “I’ve known her for a long time. That’s not like her. Her family’s well-off. If she wanted to invest, she would’ve done it—but only if you had asked.”

Her words stayed with me.

Chapter 26

When I entered the office, Joy was already waiting in my cabin. She must have anticipated our conversation—or perhaps she'd seen my exchange with Naveen.

As I walked in, she stood up. "Sir, you wanted to see me?"

"Yes," I said. "Sit down."

I took my seat and looked at her intently.

"How are you finding the work here?" I asked.

Joy smiled. "I'm very happy. I couldn't have asked for a better start to my career. You've given me complete autonomy to design and implement software based on client needs. You've never questioned my decisions—and that trust means a lot."

I nodded. "That's because not a single client has ever complained about your work. You've earned that trust."

Then I leaned forward. "How would you feel about becoming part of the management? I'm offering you the same opportunity I gave Loveleen. You're aware of my relationship with her."

Joy responded, "Yes. I know she offered her flat for our office."

"That's true," I said, "but it was more than that—she was close to my heart. I'd do anything for her, and she has always supported me. You are also close to my heart, Joy. I have full confidence in you. That's why I'm making this offer: if you're able to invest, I'm prepared to offer you equity in the company. The amount doesn't matter—your dividends will be proportionate to your investment."

Joy hesitated for a moment, then said, "Let me speak to my parents. If they agree, I'll consider it."

"Of course," I said. "In the meantime, please keep an eye on Naveen. He seems unreliable. Make sure he hasn't taken any backups of our software."

"Understood, sir. I'll look into it and get back to you with my decision," she said before leaving.

That afternoon, Loveleen sent me a message confirming that she was ready to invest ₹10 lakhs. I informed her that I had extended the same offer of directorship and shares to Joy.

Loveleen responded warmly, "I know she's a hard worker. She won't disappoint us."

The Next Morning

The next day, Joy was waiting for me in my cabin again.

“My parents have agreed,” she said. “They’re ready to invest over ₹10 lakhs. How much would you like me to contribute?”

“We’re offering preferential shares at par value,” I explained. “Simon and I will retain promoter shares. You and Loveleen will receive preferential shares based on your investment. It will be your company as much as it is ours. You’ll also have voting rights equal to ours in company meetings. Once you deposit the cheque with the accounts department, I’ll have your share certificates issued.”

I didn’t bring up Naveen again—I knew Joy would handle the matter discreetly.

With this new infusion of capital, we were finally in a position to expand our business significantly.

I called Susan into my office. “As a bonus for your work, I’d like to offer you shares in the company.”

Her face lit up with happiness. I wanted to reward loyalty and build long-term commitment among our staff. I made the same offer to our company driver as well.

Finally, we registered the company as a **Private Limited Company**.

Chapter 27

January 1994

With the additional capital, we began expanding our business aggressively. Our focus shifted from purely custom-made software to building scalable in-house products. If a client approached us with a custom requirement, we explored ways to generalize the solution into a product that could be marketed to others.

We received a major order from a pharmaceutical company. I personally visited their factory, studied their workflow and procedures, and created a comprehensive process document. I handed it over to Joy and asked her to prepare a development roadmap along with a cost analysis.

Once the roadmap was ready, I compiled a project report and submitted it to the client. They were impressed and also requested us to maintain their existing software, as their previous developers had left. We agreed to a monthly maintenance contract until the new system was ready for deployment.

Rather than assign someone from our limited resources, I took responsibility for maintenance myself, since I had already studied the existing system. This also helped free up time for others while ensuring the client received efficient service.

Transition to Full-Time Management

I resigned from my previous job and offered them a separate maintenance contract for both software and hardware needs. This allowed me to fully commit to our company while ensuring they received support at a lower cost.

Joy and I worked closely on the pharmaceutical project. When she had to vacate her flat due to personal issues, I offered her Loveleen's old apartment as temporary accommodation.

Every time I stepped into that flat, memories of Loveleen flooded my mind. I still loved her as deeply as I had the day I first met her. But I also loved Sunitha—and I had loved Sahithi. My heart, I realized, had room for all of them. Sahithi, as Atul's mother and my first true love, had inspired me to become who I am today. Her absence had, in a way, propelled me forward. She was the reason I learned typing and shorthand, which led me to a steno job—and ultimately into the world of software development.

Sunitha and Loveleen had also played key roles in my success. Sunitha, despite her early career focus, eventually supported and even joined our company as a director. Loveleen not only helped emotionally but also provided resources—her flat and financial investment—that aided our growth.

Current Structure and Roles

Now, Sunitha works full-time as a director, overseeing operations and finance. She has a strong sense for financial management, which I discovered only after she took over the department. Joy heads product management. Her responsibilities include identifying new product opportunities, creating project reports, and presenting them to the board. So far, none of her proposals have been rejected.

Our company is now organized efficiently:

- **Development Team:** Led by Joy, focusing solely on building and evolving products.
- **Implementation Team:** Under my supervision, responsible for client installations and customizations.
- **Maintenance Team:** Handles client support, identifies bugs, and communicates issues to the development team for fixes.

Though not as technically skilled as the development team, the implementation and maintenance teams are vital. Given my past experience in this area, I manage them effectively by monitoring progress and optimizing manpower. When needed, I even interchange staff between implementation and maintenance roles to maximize productivity.

Reviewing Progress

As Senior Director, I was reviewing the performance of Joy's team when I came across Naveen's name. I had previously asked Joy to handle him, and now I wanted to follow up.

I called Naveen to my cabin.

"How's the work going?" I asked.

"It's good, sir."

"What about the complaint you made against Joy?"

He looked down. “I’m sorry, sir. That was my mistake. She was only installing trial versions—valid for a month. If the client wanted to continue, they had to purchase a license. I misunderstood. She later spoke to me and gave me a second chance. I’m grateful for that.”

“Do you know why she’s a director?” I asked. “Because she treats this company as her own. Her dedication is why I promoted her. I may have developed the software, but she elevated it into a true product. When you came to me with that complaint, I intended for her to handle you however she deemed fit—including termination. Instead, she chose to educate and guide you. I hope you’re making the most of that second chance.”

“Yes, sir,” he said. “I’ve changed my approach. I understand now—being spoon-fed doesn’t work here.”

“Good,” I said. “You can go.”

Financial Review

I reviewed our development team’s profiles. Joy had selected her team carefully—each member brought a unique skill. Their collective strength was driving the team’s success.

Susan now managed the company’s accounts, while a newly appointed receptionist also handled filing. Sunitha oversaw operations, finance, and HR, delegating salary preparation to Susan. Her assistant, Rita, coordinated inter-departmental communication and reporting.

Our finances were solid. We had enough liquid assets to sustain operations for at least six months. Fixed assets included computers, servers, and furniture. Our goodwill was reflected as promoter contributions.

The capital structure was as follows:

- **Preferential Shares:** Held by me, Simon, Sunitha, Loveleen, and Joy.
- **Ordinary Shares:** Allotted to Susan, our driver, and select staff—locked in for five years to reduce attrition. If anyone left early, their shares would return to the pool. We added shares to the pool annually.

In short, the company was financially sound.

Outstanding Accounts & Internal Dialogue

I reviewed our outstanding invoices. Some older balances were clearly unrecoverable, so I advised the accounts team to write them off. The rest looked likely to be cleared by the year-end.

I called Joy to discuss Naveen.

"I knew he was questioning my methods," she said. "But I felt it was my responsibility to explain. You've given me the freedom to handle things my way. If he had escalated the issue again, I would've terminated him. But instead, he came around—and even helped implement a locking mechanism for our software. That move led to our current licensing model."

"Well done," I said. "I reviewed the company's overall performance—it's on track. Sales are healthy, outstanding payments are manageable. I'll present the report in our next board meeting. Let me know if you want to raise any points."

"I'll review the pending items and get back to you," she said.

A Change in Joy

"What's happening in your personal life?" I asked. "How's the new flat?"

"It's good," she smiled. "Nice to turn it from an office back into a home."

"And your future—what are your thoughts?"

"I've been having doubts," she admitted. "I feel like if I marry, it might not work out."

"Give it time," I said. "Everything works out eventually. Come with us on Sunday—we're planning an outing."

"Thanks. I'll think about it."

The Picnic

I called Loveleen and invited her for a children's outing. She agreed, and we planned a trip to Essel World. I told everyone that anyone interested was welcome to join.

The outing turned out beautifully. Sunitha brought Atul, and Loveleen brought Dhruv. Joy, surprisingly, opened up and mingled freely. She played with the children, laughed, and seemed more relaxed than I'd ever seen her.

Something changed after that day. Joy began to interact with me more on a personal level. Initially, our conversations remained professional, but soon she began discussing trivial, everyday matters with me. She'd bring lunch and offer to share. There was no sign of physical attraction—but something emotional was taking root. It felt as though she was drawing closer to me spiritually.

True to her name, Joy brought renewed warmth not just to me, but to the entire office.

Chapter 28

A Night of Rain, Reflection, and an Unexpected Shift

One day, Joy sprained her ankle and couldn't move around much. I took her to the doctor, had her leg bandaged, and brought her back to the flat. After settling her on the sofa, I asked, "Would you like to have anything?"

"Nothing," she replied softly.

"I'll make tea," I said, heading to the kitchen.

As I started boiling water, she suddenly called out, "I'll have a cup too!"

I smiled and prepared two cups of tea. I returned to the living room, placed them on the table, sat beside her, handed her one, and kept one for myself.

"Are you comfortable?" I asked.

"Yes," she said, but something felt off. She sat holding her cup, not drinking, her eyes distant.

"What happened?" I asked again.

Without a word, she set her cup down and burst into tears.

I gently placed my hand on her shoulder and asked, "What's wrong?"

"I don't have anyone," she said through tears. "I feel so alone, like someone has ripped my heart out. I can't stay here alone. It's too much."

"I'm here now. Don't worry," I said softly.

She rested her head on my shoulder and continued crying. I rubbed her back gently in an attempt to comfort her. Slowly, she composed herself, picked up her cup, and sipped her tea. I did the same.

We sat in silence for a few minutes, quietly sipping.

Once we were done, I took both cups to the kitchen, rinsed them, and returned. She was staring blankly at the wall. I sat beside her again, this time keeping a slight distance, not wanting to intrude on her thoughts.

Still, I could feel her pain. She seemed adrift—abandoned. I felt a need to console her in some way. I gently shifted closer, placed her head back on my shoulder, and wrapped my arm around her. We sat like that for a long time. Eventually, I noticed she had fallen asleep peacefully.

I reached for the remote and turned on the TV, keeping the volume low. I started watching a movie while she slept against me.

After a while, she stirred, sat up, and said, "Sorry."

"Why sorry?" I replied. "Everyone has those moments. When I do, I like to have someone close too. You don't need to apologize. I'm here."

She picked up the remote and turned the volume up slightly. The movie playing was a sentimental love story—the heroine was telling the hero to return to his pregnant wife, but he refused, saying he would never leave her. The scene hit home, echoing the complicated emotions in my own life. We continued watching, each lost in thought.

A little later, I asked, “Would you like something to eat?”

Joy began to get up, saying she’d make something, but I stopped her. “Give your leg a rest. I’ll handle it.”

In the kitchen, I set dal to cook and washed some rice. When the dal was done, I tempered it with tomatoes, and once the rice was ready, I served everything in bowls. I brought two plates to the table, served both of us, handed her a spoon, and we ate.

“I didn’t know you could cook,” Joy said.

“I’m not a chef,” I replied with a smile. “But I learned from my mother.”

After the movie ended, I changed the channel to the news. Heavy rains had disrupted transport across the city. Local trains were stopped, and waterlogging was reported in several areas—especially near King’s Circle, which meant I couldn’t get home.

I called home. Sunitha was sleeping, reportedly with a headache. I asked to be informed when she woke up.

I looked around the room. Memories of Loveleen overwhelmed me—this flat had once been our private sanctuary. Thoughts of her brought a strange warmth to my face. I sat down and focused on the television, trying to redirect my mind.

I switched channels. *The Bold and the Beautiful* was on. In the episode, the hero was in a coma but had gained consciousness and was pretending to remain comatose to listen in on others.

I laughed and said, “Can anyone really pretend to be in a coma for so long?”

Joy, intrigued, asked, “If I were in a coma, what would you do?”

I paused, surprised by the question. “Why would you be in a coma?”

“Just hypothetically,” she said. “What would you do?”

“Well... I’d probably sit beside you and talk to you, hoping to wake you up. Maybe whisper things you’d want to hear,” I replied, though I sensed the conversation veering into emotional territory. I quickly changed the subject to work.

The next show was *The Wonder Years*, followed by Hindi songs. I left the songs playing. It was now 11 p.m.

“Want to sleep?” I asked.

“I usually sleep after midnight,” she replied. She shifted closer and rested her head on my shoulder, quietly watching the screen.

A classic song played—**“Aaj Phir Jeene Ki Tamanna Hai.”** Watching it, I felt as if Joy was sending a silent message. I rested my head gently against hers. She turned and looked at me. Our eyes met—just for a moment—then she turned back to the TV. I admired her profile in the soft light. She looked beautiful.

Another song followed—**“Jis Gali Mein Tera Ghar Na Ho Balma.”** It stirred something within me. I turned off the TV and asked gently, “Shall I help you to bed?”

“Please,” she said.

I helped her to the bathroom, then guided her to the bed and tucked her in.

“I’ll sleep in the other bedroom,” I said. “There’s a single bed there.”

She hesitated. “If I need something, you won’t hear me.”

“Alright,” I said. “I’ll bring the mattress here.”

I fetched the mattress, laid it on the floor next to her bed, set a sheet and pillow, turned off the lights, left the bedside lamp on, and lay down.

Staring at the ceiling fan, I found my thoughts drifting back to the nights I had spent here with Loveleen. I felt a familiar, almost uncomfortable warmth course through me.

Just as I was about to drift off, I heard Joy.

“Water,” she whispered.

I got up, handed her a glass, and asked, “Still not sleepy?”

“Sleep’s not coming,” she said quietly.

I lay back down.

“Come sleep here,” she said suddenly.

I paused. Then I picked up my pillow and lay beside her, keeping a respectful distance.

She reached out, took my hand, and drifted off to sleep.

Sometime later, I woke up to find her sleeping with her head on my arm, her hand resting gently across my chest. She had turned toward me in her sleep. I slowly removed my arm and turned away to give her space, but she instinctively pulled closer, her chest softly resting against my back.

The Morning After the Rain

When I woke again, I found myself facing Joy. Her leg rested across mine. I gently put my arm around her and pulled her closer. For a moment, it felt like I was lying next to Loveleen. I drifted back to sleep, dreaming of her.

I woke again around 6 a.m., kissed Joy lightly on the cheek, and headed to the kitchen. I made myself a cup of coffee and sat on the sofa, lighting a cigarette and sipping slowly. The city outside was still drenched from the night's rain.

Soon, I heard Joy calling. I walked into the bedroom.

"Can you help me sit up?" she asked.

I propped two pillows behind her back. "Would you like some coffee?"

"Yes, please."

I returned to the kitchen, made two cups, brought them back, handed her one, and sat on the bed with mine.

"You should try to get some rest," I told her.

"I'd rather use the bathroom first," she replied.

I helped her swing her legs over the edge of the bed, held her hands, and guided her carefully to the bathroom. I waited outside. When she called, I returned and helped her out.

"Back to bed or the sofa?" I asked.

"Sofa," she said.

I brought her to the living room, eased her onto the sofa, and placed her leg gently on the coffee table.

"What would you like for breakfast?" I asked.

"Bread and omelette would do," she said.

I went into the kitchen, prepared the omelette, toasted the bread, and brought the plate to her.

"This okay?" I asked.

"It's more than okay," she smiled. "But why didn't you make one for yourself?"

"I'll eat after I take a bath."

"Good habit," she said approvingly.

I turned on the TV and tuned into the morning news. The flooding hadn't improved—local transport was still disrupted.

"We're stuck here for a bit longer," I said.

Joy glanced at her leg. "I'm not going anywhere anyway," she joked.

I called home and spoke with Sunitha, explaining Joy's condition and the rain situation. I told her I couldn't make it back until the roads were clear.

Joy looked reassured as I ended the call.

I rummaged through the cupboards and found a change of clothes from when I used to stay there. With a towel in hand, I went for a bath. When I returned, Joy looked up from the TV.

"Where did you find the clothes?"

"You forgot I used to stay here sometimes," I said. "I kept a few things."

"Need anything?" I asked.

"No, I'm good," she replied.

I made myself breakfast and returned to the kitchen again to prepare two cups of tea. I gave her one and stepped out onto the balcony with mine. I lit another cigarette and sipped my tea. After finishing, I returned and sat beside her.

"How many so far?" Joy asked.

"Two today."

"That's too many."

"At home I don't smoke," I said. "But in situations like this..."

To pass the time, I asked, "What are you working on these days?"

We discussed her ongoing projects for about two hours. Afterwards, I got up and offered to make more tea. She agreed.

We continued sipping as we talked. She said, "Don't stop smoking on my account."

"Nothing like that," I replied, continuing to sip my tea.

I called the office. The watchman picked up. "No one's turned up yet," he said.

"That's fine," I said, and hung up.

I went downstairs to the car, fetched my briefcase, and opened a folder containing our upcoming projects. Joy sat sideways on the sofa, her legs elevated. I sat across from her, facing her as we discussed the projects one by one. I took notes with a pencil, jotting down her insights.

This went on for two hours. When we finished, I asked, "Hungry?"

"Whatever you can make," she replied.

I checked the fridge—there were a few vegetables, not much else. I set rice on the stove, returned to the sofa, and reviewed more documents.

When the rice was done, I cooked a simple fried rice with eggs, onions, and green chilies. I made a side of onion raita with curd and served it with two plates and spoons.

Joy smiled as she took her plate. “I didn’t know you were such a cook. If I had known, I might’ve married you.”

I chuckled. “Why marry? You can still eat my cooking—just ask.”

She blushed slightly.

I asked, “Joy, are there any projects you’ve been considering that you haven’t yet reported?”

“Nothing off the top of my mind,” she said.

“I’ve had a few ideas myself. Want to go through them?”

“Let’s see what you’ve got,” she replied with interest.

I pulled out a notepad and began explaining my concepts—ideas drawn from my experience in different industries. Some she rejected outright, some she thought were worth exploring. I marked the rejected ones with her name, and we spent the next three hours discussing the rest. I took notes, including her feedback and my counterpoints.

To take a break, I made another round of tea. I gave her one cup and returned to the balcony with mine, lighting another cigarette. After finishing, I came back in and we continued our discussion.

By the end, we had narrowed the list to ten feasible ideas. We noted down rough manpower requirements and man-hours for each. Five ideas had been marked as rejected.

Next came the dilemma: should we market these projects first and develop them only after confirming demand? Or should we develop them upfront and then sell?

This needed a meeting with Simon and the marketing team. We’d have to estimate potential orders for each product. Given our reputation in the industry, we couldn’t afford to compromise on quality or delivery.

Winding Down

“You should sleep for a while,” I told her.

I fetched two pillows and helped her adjust on the sofa, placing one pillow behind her back.

“I’ll check your leg after you’ve rested.”

She smiled and nodded, leaning back comfortably.

I stepped out to the balcony once more, lit a cigarette, and reflected on the long, meaningful day we’d shared. The projects, the discussions, the quiet companionship—it all felt... grounding.

The Confession and the Connection

I decided to revisit the ideas Joy had previously rejected. Perhaps, if I presented them differently, she might reconsider. She needed to believe in them if they were ever to be developed—or I could reassign some from my team. But first, I had to verify who had surplus capacity. That meant checking call logs—though I was well aware those could be falsified. Another issue to monitor.

I was only 30. Barring unforeseen circumstances, I had at least another three decades of productive life ahead. I was healthy, took care of myself, and though I smoked, I kept it under control—never at home. In general, I had good habits and discipline. But I had to get a grip on one growing problem: sexual tension.

Despite Sunitha’s revised work schedule, something had shifted in our relationship—especially in intimacy. Was it because she knew Dhruv was mine? Or because of Atul? I wasn’t sure. Whatever the reason, I still found myself relying on Loveleen when I needed comfort. We used to meet in this very flat, but since giving it to Joy, those visits had stopped.

Earlier that morning, I had a dream of Loveleen again—just like the one from the night before. Her presence in this flat lingered in my mind and heart.

As I stubbed out my cigarette, I stared out at the rain. Still coming down. When would it stop? When would the roads clear and the trains run again?

Joy’s voice broke my thoughts. I checked the time—it was 5 p.m. She was awake and calling.

I went in and turned on the TV. “Would you like some tea?” I asked. She nodded.

I made two cups and returned. I handed her one and kept the other.

I knew I drank too much tea. It was one of my vices—tea, coffee, and smoking. The unholy trio that defined my days.

I removed the bandage on her leg and inspected it. The swelling had gone down, but when I moved it slightly, she flinched. I applied some pain-relief cream, re-banded the ankle, and gave her painkillers with a glass of water.

"Do you want to use the bathroom?" I asked.

"Yes," she replied.

I helped her down carefully, placing her hands on my shoulders as I guided her to the toilet. After she called me, I asked, "Would you like to have a bath?"

"How can I?" she said.

"I'll bring a stool—you can sit while bathing. I'll remove the bandage. Let's try."

She agreed.

I helped her to the stool, removed the bandage, and let her undress on her own. I filled a bucket of hot water, placed the soap within reach, and left her privacy. When she called, I returned with a towel, wrapped it around her, and helped her to the bed.

"What would you like to wear?" I asked.

She told me, and I fetched her clothes, placing them beside her before stepping out.

Later, I helped rewrap the bandage and arranged pillows behind her as she settled into a comfortable sitting position.

Looking at her, now relaxed in her nightgown, I wondered: would I have done all this for Sunitha or Loveleen? Yes, perhaps even more. But with Joy, I had kept a line. I had helped her without crossing it.

I returned to the hall, pulled out my notebook, and started making notes for the upcoming board meeting.

A Shift in the Air

Thirty minutes passed. I checked in on Joy. She was resting, her chin against her chest.

"Want to come to the hall?" I asked softly.

"Yes."

I helped her up, supported her gently, and led her to the sofa. I made sure she was comfortable and gave her my meeting notes for review. She read silently while I worked.

Eventually, she handed them back. "I'll suggest the edits later. Can I see the other reports?"

I handed her the completed documents. After finishing those, she said, "I'll edit them on my computer later."

It was 7 p.m.

"I'll get something from the nearby eatery. You must be tired of my cooking."

She smiled. "Not at all. But sure, go ahead."

I grabbed an umbrella and went out, returning with chapatis, bhaji, and dal. I also made some fresh rice. I served her dinner first, waited until she finished, then cleaned up and joined her for a movie on TV. She seemed more relaxed. I arranged her legs on the coffee table and sat down with the reports, organizing them into folders.

It was Saturday night. No pressure for the next day.

We watched the film until around 12:30 a.m. I helped her to the bedroom, made her comfortable on the bed, and sat beside her.

"Come and sleep," she said.

I turned off the lights in the hall, left the bedroom lamp on, and lay down beside her—facing the other way.

Sometime later, I was awakened by a kiss. I responded instinctively, half-asleep, believing I was with Loveleen. I kissed back and drifted off.

Morning, Confessions, and New Truths

I woke around 6 a.m., prepared coffee, and stepped onto the balcony for a cigarette. Afterwards, I checked on Joy. She was sleeping peacefully.

I returned to the hall, switched on the news at low volume, and thought about the dream I had. Loveleen again. Her memories still haunted this place.

Then I heard Joy calling. I rushed in.

"Sorry, didn't hear you over the TV."

"It's okay. I need to use the bathroom."

I helped her brush and guided her to the hall.

Afterwards, I brought us both coffee. We sipped in silence. There was tension—something unsaid. Joy kept looking down at her cup.

She looked... lovely. I had always thought so but never said it aloud. She was brilliant at her work—that I praised often in board meetings. Her programming skills exceeded mine; she had studied under the best. I knew others on the board thought I was partial to her, but only a developer understands the pain of turning an idea into a working product.

She finally looked up and saw me staring.

"You're looking beautiful," I said.

"In this helpless state?" she asked with a small laugh.

"You're the strongest person I know. If I weren't here, you'd have figured things out. You're not helpless."

Joy had no answer. She reached for my face, pulled me closer, and kissed me on the cheek.

"Thank you for being here," she whispered. "I don't know what I would've done without you. You're a godsend."

I kissed her forehead. "You're under my care. It's my duty."

"Duty?" she asked softly. "Am I just a duty to you?"

"No," I said. "I care for you deeply. You are as important to me as Sunitha or Loveleen."

That surprised her. "Loveleen?"

"She's the mother of my son."

"Dhruv is your son?"

"Yes. We were lovers. When she found her husband couldn't have children, she asked for my help. Dhruv is the result of our love."

Joy sat quietly, processing. I continued:

"I may be married, but when I first met you, I had feelings I couldn't express. I felt compelled to protect you. I wanted to be close to you always. Maybe it's something spiritual—like we had a past life connection. From the moment you walked into your interview, something inside me changed.

"If I weren't married, I would have brought you into my home. I gave you this flat thinking you'd be safer here."

Joy's eyes softened. "Whenever I'm with you, I feel safe. After the picnic, something changed in me too. Until then, you were just my boss. But I saw a different side of you—with the kids, with the others. I felt a connection I hadn't noticed before. I'm sorry—I thought Dhruv was someone else's child."

"Don't be sorry," I said.

"I started feeling comfortable around you. I'd come to your cabin just to sit near you."

I smiled. "We have the whole day ahead. Let me tell you my story..."

Kumar's Story

"I came to Bombay in 1980. Two girls were my neighbors—we were close for five years. When I graduated, both married and moved on.

"Then I met Sahithi. I learned typing and shorthand for her. We went to Delhi for interviews and got jobs. Then she disappeared. Two years later, I learned she had died giving birth to my son, Atul.

"Sunitha was Latha's sister. I met her in Madras and fell in love instantly. We were to be married, but she cancelled when she found out about Atul. A week later, she brought him to me, and we got married.

"She was a flight attendant. We didn't get much time together. Then I met Loveleen on a train to Delhi. We clicked instantly. Later, she asked me to father a child for her. I didn't know Sunitha had agreed to it.

"And now... you're here."

I stood up and went into the kitchen, made scrambled eggs, plated them, added slices of bread, and returned.

We ate in silence. Joy was lost in thought, trying to absorb it all.

I went and found another change of clothes, took a bath, and returned to the hall. Joy was sitting comfortably.

"Do you have any questions?" I asked.

She looked hesitant, clearly conflicted. "Fire away," I encouraged.

She paused, then asked, "Did you love those two neighbour girls?"

I smiled faintly. "I'm not sure. I helped them with studies, we went to college together, and I gave them tuition. But I never really understood what I felt."

"And Sahithi?" she asked. "Tell me everything."

I told her the full story. How I met Sahithi in Vakola, how we went to a typing institute together, and then to Delhi for interviews. Our first night together. How we came back, got job postings, but were separated by work and her family. How her parents took her away, and I didn't see her again. Then the devastating news—she died during childbirth. Later, I found out she'd given birth to my son. I told her about meeting Sunitha,

the broken wedding, and how Sunitha eventually came back with Atul and married me. How we've raised him together.

The story took about an hour. When I finished, I looked at the time. "It's lunchtime—I'll go get something."

Joy nodded. "Okay."

I returned to the same restaurant from the previous night and brought back mutton biryani and chicken fry. We ate in silence.

Afterwards, I said, "We really need a computer here. We could've finished our reports."

"I might have a laptop somewhere," she replied. "It won't be fast, but could work for basic word processing."

"I'll arrange a proper system here and another at my house," I said. "We're doing well financially. I reviewed the company finances—your department's performance is stellar. If we implement our ideas, we'll make waves in the software industry."

She listened quietly as I continued.

"I think making you and Loveleen shareholders was one of my best decisions. Not only has it strengthened the company, but we now have a solid management team. I believe we have a very bright future. It's not boasting—by the turn of the century, I see us being recognised as a pathbreaking software firm on par with any international name."

Afternoon Into Evening

I suggested she get some rest. I brought pillows, helped her settle in, and put my feet up on the table to rest.

I woke up two hours later. Joy was still resting peacefully. I went to the kitchen, made two cups of tea, woke her gently, and handed her one. I stepped out onto the balcony, smoked, and finished my tea.

Afterwards, I returned, collected the cups, rinsed them, and came back. Her leg looked better—less swollen. I applied Iodex, re-bandaged it, and we relaxed in front of the TV.

By 8 p.m., I went out and brought back rotis and bhaji for dinner. We ate, watching TV in companionable silence.

The news said the city was beginning to return to normal. I looked at her and asked, "Will you be okay here alone? Or would you prefer to come home with me for a while? Think about it tonight and let me know in the

morning. If you stay, I'll arrange help. Or, we can take you to the office and decide from there."

We stayed up watching a movie until midnight. I helped her to the bathroom, then tucked her into bed and lay down beside her, facing the ceiling.

She turned toward me, rested her head on my arm, and fell asleep.

Questions That Don't Let Me Sleep

I couldn't sleep. Thoughts kept racing through my mind. Why had Loveleen drifted so far from me? Why was Sunitha distant? What was my relationship with Joy, really? Why did she ask me to sleep beside her? What was she feeling for me?

Ever since the picnic, Joy had changed. She'd said that day changed her perspective. What exactly had shifted?

And why did I feel so protective of her—for a simple ankle sprain, I'd done far more than expected. Why did I feel the need to care for her, stay beside her, soothe her to sleep?

She was sleeping on my arm like a wife would. Her trust in me was unmistakable. I turned to her and kissed her gently on the forehead. She stirred slightly and drifted back to sleep.

My thoughts continued to spiral. I gently removed my arm from under her head, placed her head on the pillow, and stepped out to the balcony. I lit a cigarette—then another. Two in a row. That had never happened before. The second one made me feel nauseous. I put it out, went inside, and turned on the TV with the volume low.

Eventually, I thought I heard her call me. I turned off the TV and went in. She was still sleeping peacefully. I slid into bed, taking care not to wake her, and soon after, I dreamt of Loveleen again—making love to me.

Sunday Morning

I woke at 6 a.m., made myself coffee, and smoked while standing on the balcony. I then switched on the news and listened quietly.

Finding some clothes in the cupboard, I bathed and changed. I peeked in—Joy was still sleeping.

Not wanting to wake her, I made breakfast, returned to the bedroom, and kissed her on the forehead. "Wake up, sleeping beauty," I said softly.

She stirred. "Good morning," she said with a sleepy smile.

"Good morning to you. Come on, breakfast is ready."

I helped her to the bathroom and waited. Then I helped her brush and settled her on the sofa. I brought breakfast and coffee for both of us. We ate together.

Afterwards, I asked, "How would you like to bathe?"

"Like yesterday," she said.

I fetched her chosen clothes, sat her on a stool, removed the bandage, and gave her privacy. When she called, I helped wrap her in a towel and guided her to the dressing table.

Once she was ready, I brought her to the hall, sat her down, and checked her ankle. It was nearly back to normal. I applied balm, bandaged it again, and asked her to move around a bit. With my help, she could walk a little.

"Are you ready for the office?" I asked.

"I'm ready," she said confidently.

I put the prepared folder in my briefcase, helped her down to the car, then returned to lock up. With everything secure, I joined her in the car, and we headed to the office.

At the office, I left her at her cabin and went to mine.

Chapter 29

Afternoon at the Office and Planning Ahead

An hour later, Sunitha walked into my cabin.

I explained the situation with Joy and showed her the preliminary work we'd done. "We should schedule a meeting this week," I said. "This needs to get started immediately. I'll finalize the report and then sit with Joy for budgeting. We may also need to hire additional developers."

Sunitha nodded. "Okay."

"How's Atul? I haven't seen him in four days."

"He's fine," she replied.

But something in her tone felt off—subtle, yet perceptible. Still, she appeared composed, her usual self.

"Please check with the others and finalize a date for the board meeting," I added. "I'd like to hold it by the weekend."

"I'll check and let you know," she said and left.

Once I completed the report, I backed it up on a floppy and went to Joy's cabin. She had her leg propped on a stool and looked comfortable. I copied the report to her system and asked her to review it so we could finalize budgeting.

"Alright," she said, and I returned to my cabin.

I spent the next two hours reviewing the previous week's service reports. Everything seemed in order, though reports were missing for Friday and Saturday. After signing off on them, I placed them in the out-tray for filing.

Next, I turned to the marketing reports. A few inconsistencies stood out. I noted them and decided to speak with Simon the following day.

Later, I dropped by Joy's cabin again. She was reading a printed copy of my report. "Having trouble reading on screen?" I asked.

She smiled. "I prefer paper when it's this detailed."

I sat down. "What do you think of the report? I'll update it based on your notes. Also—how's the leg?"

"Much better than yesterday."

We chatted briefly before I asked, "Shall I order lunch?"

"Please," she said.

I called the office boy and asked for roti, bhaji, and some juice. When he returned, we ate together quietly.

"I'll check on the lab," I said once we finished.

Facility Assessment and Team Structuring

In the development lab, we had 20 workstations, arranged in four zones:

- **Product Development:** 5 developers under Joy.
- **Maintenance:** 3 developers under Joy, and 2 maintenance engineers under me.
- **Implementation:** 4 engineers under me; 1 station vacant.
- **Reserved for Expansion:** 5 unassigned workstations.

Beyond that was the server room, housing two Unix servers, a Novell NetWare server, and a UnixWare server. We still had room for more infrastructure. With Windows NT servers entering the market, we'd need new licenses and compatible hardware.

Joy would need to decide whether to reallocate developers or request new hires. Another option was to consolidate the teams under a manager who would report to her. I'd wait for her final staffing recommendations.

Then, I visited the accounts department. I asked Susan for an end-of-day report on our budget usage and upcoming expansion requirements.

"How's everything managing here?" I asked.

"I can handle the current workload," Susan replied. "If it increases, I'll let you know."

After that, I stopped by the marketing division and informed them of a meeting scheduled for the next morning. I updated Simon as well, letting him know we'd discuss how his department could support our expansion plans.

Brief Visit with Sunitha

I dropped into Sunitha's cabin. She was eating lunch.

"Why so late?" I asked.

"Just found time."

"You should really take lunch on time," I said, sitting opposite her. "Don't skip meals."

She gave me a small smile. She still looked as elegant as ever. Perhaps working in the airline industry helped her maintain that glow.

I briefed her on my expansion plans, how Joy and I would sit down for budgeting soon, and that we were on track for the weekend board meeting.

"Let me know the time," she said.

"Promise me you won't skip lunch again," I added.

"I promise."

Return to Routine and Reflecting on Joy

I checked on Joy. “Are you okay? Need help with anything?”

“I got some help from one of the girls in my team.”

“Alright. Call me when you’re ready to go home.”

Back in my cabin, I reviewed what I’d observed throughout the day. The organization had room for optimization. I needed a road map for resource maximization and enhanced customer satisfaction—achieved, primarily, through bug-free software. These decisions needed to be made with the company’s future in mind.

Joy rang and asked me to come over. Given her leg, she wasn’t moving around much.

She handed me the reports with corrections. “You can make the final changes,” she said.

“No problem. Have you completed your tasks?”

“Yes.”

“Do you want to head home?”

“Will you take me?”

“Of course.”

We walked slowly to the parking area. I instructed the driver to take us to Joy’s flat and then return for Sunitha. I informed her of the plan, and she mentioned she was visiting her parents.

Evening at the Flat

I took Joy up to her flat, settled her on the sofa, then went into the kitchen and made us tea. I brought her a cup and took mine to the balcony. Afterward, I did my laundry—both mine and Joy’s—and hung the clothes out to dry.

“Why do you take so much trouble doing laundry?” she asked.

“Selfish reason—I’ve run out of clothes here.”

She laughed. “Fair enough.”

Back in the hall, I reviewed the corrected reports. Joy wasn’t watching the TV—she was watching me. I raised my eyebrows.

“Nothing,” she said quietly.

“Here,” I said, handing her the report. “Check my notes. I’ll finalize the draft tomorrow. Also, how many of your current developers can be reallocated? We have capacity for six more. Can we avoid new hires? Add your input at the end of the report.”

She nodded.

I stepped out to the balcony for a smoke, and when I returned, she was still working.

Dinner, Dreams, and Morning Routine

“What do you want for dinner?” I asked. “Shall I cook or get something?”

“Cook, please. I prefer your food.”

I bought groceries and prepared a simple meal. We ate, watched a movie, and by 11:30, I checked her ankle. It had improved, though she still winced slightly.

I helped her to the bathroom and later into bed. I applied balm and rebandaged her ankle, then sat beside her reading a book. She soon dozed off. I turned off the reading light and lay beside her. That night, I dreamt of Joy—for the first time, not Loveleen.

Another Day Begins

I woke at 6 a.m., brushed my teeth, and made myself coffee. Sitting in the balcony with a smoke, I realized how this flat had once been my haven with Loveleen—and now it was slowly becoming the same with Joy.

I returned, woke Joy with a kiss on her forehead. “Wake up, sleeping beauty.”

“Good morning,” she said with a yawn.

“Coffee’s ready.”

I helped her with her morning routine. Once she was dressed, I prepared breakfast. We ate together, and soon the driver arrived. I gave him my briefcase and helped Joy to the car.

We stopped at the clinic. The doctor checked her ankle, declared good progress, and prescribed meds.

From there, we went to the office.

Finalizing Reports and Quiet Observations

Back at the office, I retrieved Susan’s budget report and updated mine with Joy’s suggestions. I printed it out and brought it to her.

After reviewing, she said, “If we want to proceed with expansion, we’ll need to increase the budget.”

“I agree,” I said. “Give me your requirements, and I’ll adjust the figures accordingly.”

"Give me a day to prepare them," she said.

"No rush. If the full budget isn't ready, we can seek board approval for just the projects for now."

I let her continue and dropped into Sunitha's cabin.

She was cross-verifying daily reports.

"Any inconsistencies?"

"Always a few. I match them against client tickets to weed out falsified reports."

"I'm sorry I didn't come home last night. Joy should be okay in another day or two. I've missed seeing Atul. I'll stop by home today."

"My parents are fine," she added.

Something in her voice made me pause. Was she lying? Possibly. But I said nothing. I hadn't been home in five days, and she hadn't complained.

"Just go see him," she said. "He's been asking for you."

"I'll take the car. Do you need it?"

"No. I've still got work to finish before the board meeting."

Visit Home

I told Joy, "I'm heading home for a bit."

"I'd like to come. I want to see Atul."

We drove to my house. Atul greeted me with his usual cheer. Joy sat on the sofa and spoke to him—he remembered her from the picnic.

I packed a few clothes in an overnight bag.

Mother asked, "Going somewhere?"

"To Loveleen's flat. We have some work," I replied.

"She knows?"

"Yes, I told her," I said, and she left it at that.

We said goodbye and returned to the office. After grabbing the reports and my briefcase, we left again for Joy's flat.

A Subtle Distraction

Once Joy was settled, I handed the reports to her and went to make tea. I returned with two cups. As I sipped mine in the balcony, I noticed a woman on the opposite building's balcony—mid-twenties, attractive. She waved at me. I nodded back, and she disappeared.

Back inside, Joy was focused on the reports.

There wasn't much left in the kitchen. "I'll head to the market and get something for dinner," I told her.

Evening Encounter & A New Character Enters

As I locked the flat and walked toward the gate, I noticed the woman I'd seen earlier from the opposite balcony approaching. She stopped in front of me and said, "Hi."

"Hi," I replied.

"I'm Pauleen," she introduced herself. "Are you Loveleen's husband?"

"No," I said. "I'm just a friend."

"Oh, sorry," she smiled apologetically. "Going somewhere?"

"Just to the market."

"I'll come with you," she said casually, and without waiting for a response, began walking beside me. "Loveleen's a good friend of mine. I've known her for over ten years. How's Dhruv?"

"He's doing well."

"What do you do?" she asked.

"We're into software development."

"Software development?" she repeated, surprised.

"Software is the future," I said with a smile.

"What exactly do you do in it?"

"I'm the Managing Director of the company."

"There was a lady with you the other day—who's she?"

"She's another director. She's staying at Loveleen's flat for now. We used it as our office before shifting. Now I've let her stay there."

Pauleen raised an eyebrow. "And you're staying there with her?"

"No," I said firmly. "She sprained her ankle. I'm just helping her out. We're working on a project together."

"What kind of project?" she asked.

"You ask a lot of questions," I said with a laugh. "What do you do?"

"I've completed my degree. I'm looking for a job as a stenographer."

“Tell you what—why don’t you come by the flat? You can see the kind of work we do. You might be able to help us with the reports. Let’s see how we can help each other.”

We reached the market, picked up chicken and a few other items, and headed back.

Introductions and Unexpected Conversations

At the flat, I introduced Pauleen to Joy. Joy acknowledged her but remained focused on the reports. I went into the kitchen, and Pauleen followed.

“Shall I cook for you?” she asked.

“How good are you at it?”

“Good enough to eat,” she said with a wink. “Just sit with me, I’ll handle it.”

I looked out at Joy, who was deeply immersed in the paperwork.

“Alright,” I said. “You cook, I’ll keep you company.”

As she chopped onions, she asked, “Are you married?”

“Yes. I have a five-year-old son named Atul.”

“So young, and already a father,” she said with a smile. “What’s the story?”

“It’s a long one. I’ll tell you when there’s more time.”

“We’ve got time now,” she said playfully. “Start talking.”

So I told her. I shared the story of Sahithi—how we met, moved to Delhi, our brief time together, and how she passed away during childbirth. I told her about Sunitha, our complex relationship, and how she brought Atul back from his grandparents to raise as her own.

“She looks after him like her own?”

“Like he was born to her.”

“She never had her own child?”

“No. She was flying often, and later, she didn’t seem interested.”

“And what’s your story with Loveleen?”

I hesitated for a moment. “When Sunitha was too busy, I met Loveleen. We hit it off. Dhruv is my son.”

Pauleen laughed. “You’ve got a cinematic life. So many twists.”

She continued, "What's Joy's take on all this?"

"I honestly don't know. I feel protective of her. It's like my instincts are telling me she's in some kind of danger. That's why I stay close. I can't shake the feeling that I'm supposed to protect her."

She nodded and finished cooking. We brought the food to the table together. I fetched three plates and served everyone.

"This tastes different," Joy commented. "Not your usual cooking."

"Pauleen made it," I replied.

Joy smiled at her. After dinner, we cleaned up the dishes. I stepped out to the balcony for a smoke. Pauleen joined me and asked for a cigarette. I handed her one and lit it.

We smoked in silence. When finished, we returned to the hall.

I handed her a copy of the reports. "Take a look and tell me what you think."

She read one and said, "So this is a project. You develop software for it?"

"Yes. Right now, we're finalizing reports."

"What's my role?"

"You'll help update the documents with the corrections we've made. We'll walk you through the process."

She nodded, flipping to another report. Meanwhile, Joy had finished going through her stack.

"If you're interested," I said, "there's a lot of work ahead. This is just the initial report. We'll still need to list requirements, prepare a cost analysis, compare it to the budget, and finalize everything for the board."

"Got it," Pauleen said. "I'll come tomorrow. What time?"

"We leave around 8. If you come early, we'll have breakfast together."

She smiled and let herself out.

An Ominous Visitor

As she opened the lift, Pauleen heard a man ask, "Does Joy live here?"

"Yes," she replied, and pointed out the flat number before walking away.

We watched TV until 11:30 p.m. I helped Joy to the bathroom, then settled her in bed. As I walked to the hall to switch off the lights, the doorbell rang.

I froze for a moment. Who would be here this late?

I engaged the safety latch and opened the door slightly. A man around 25, fair-skinned, 5'8", stood outside.

"Does Joy live here?" he asked.

"This is Loveleen's flat," I replied evenly. "No one by that name lives here."

"Sorry," he said, and turned to leave.

I shut the door and locked it, but a sense of unease settled in me. My left eye began twitching uncontrollably—a bad omen, according to old belief.

I turned to Joy. "Someone was at the door asking for you. Mid-twenties, fair, casual clothes. Ring any bells?"

She frowned. "I can't think of anyone around here. There was a senior in the U.S. who was stalking me. I left the country to get away from him. I never felt safe."

"We'll ask the watchman tomorrow," I said. "Just to be safe."

We both went to sleep. That night, I dreamt of Pauleen.

Chapter 30

Morning Routine & A New Hire

I woke up around 6 a.m., went to the bathroom, brushed my teeth, and made myself a cup of coffee. Stepping onto the balcony with my coffee and a cigarette, I took in the quiet morning. Halfway through my coffee, I noticed Pauleen stepping into her balcony. She waved, and I waved back.

A thought crossed my mind—I could use a Personal Assistant. Pauleen seemed suitable. For now, she could also help Joy with her tasks.

Finishing my smoke, I waved goodbye and returned to the hall. I watched the morning news briefly, then went to the kitchen to prepare breakfast. After brewing another cup of coffee, I walked into the bedroom.

Joy was just stirring. “Sleeping beauty, wake up,” I said playfully.

“Good morning,” she replied, rubbing her eyes.

“Good morning. Here, have some coffee.”

She sat up and began sipping.

“Do you have any idea who that guy was last night?” I asked.

She shook her head. “I really don’t think I know him.”

“If he was from the U.S., what could he want?”

Joy frowned. “During my MS, I tried to avoid a certain senior. He made me uncomfortable. I don’t know much else about him.”

“Well, let’s just be cautious.”

“Yes,” she agreed, “let’s.”

I took my clothes from the overnight bag and went to bathe. After getting dressed, I helped Joy to the bathroom and left her there. When she was done, I helped her to the dressing table and returned to the kitchen to finish preparing breakfast. Once ready, I brought her to the hall and we ate together quietly.

Pauleen Joins the Team

The doorbell rang. As expected, it was Pauleen.

“Come in,” I said. “Have you had breakfast?”

“Yes, I have.”

We packed the reports into my briefcase and waited for the driver. Once he arrived, I handed him the briefcase, and we helped Joy down to the parking lot.

Before getting into the car, I stopped by the watchman. "Why did you let someone come to our flat so late last night?"

"He specifically asked for Joy madam," the watchman said. "So I let him up."

"Don't let anyone come up like that again. If someone asks for her, say no one by that name lives here."

I returned to the car. Joy and Pauleen were already seated in the back, so I took the front seat. As we drove, I brought up the mysterious visitor with Pauleen.

"I actually met him," she said. "He asked me if Joy lived in the building. I gave him the flat number."

"He came really late, which means he waited for two hours after you saw him. That's not normal."

"I agree," she said, her tone turning serious.

Back at the Office

At the office, I asked Pauleen to help Joy to her cabin and went to see Sunitha.

"Can you prepare an offer letter for Pauleen as my PA?" I asked.

"What about the salary?" she asked.

"Use the standard for the position," I replied.

Back in my cabin, I updated the corrected reports and saved the files to a floppy disk. It took me about an hour. Then I brought the disk to Joy's cabin.

Pauleen was already helping Joy. Just then, the office boy arrived with the offer letter prepared by Sunitha. I handed it to Pauleen.

"Have a look. If everything looks fine, sign a copy and hand it back."

She read it, signed it, and gave the copy to the office boy, who took it back to Sunitha.

"Welcome aboard," I said. "You're now officially working as my PA. For the time being, continue helping Joy since we're collaborating on the project."

"Understood," Pauleen replied.

I handed her the floppy disk. "Please update the files with the final corrections. Then start preparing requirement documents for each project. Once we have that, we'll work on costing and budgeting."

"Will do," she said.

Work, Logistics, and Moving Joy

I returned to my cabin and called the office boy. “Arrange lunch for three in Joy’s cabin and let me know when it’s ready.”

Later, once lunch was served, I joined Joy and Pauleen for the meal.

After lunch, I turned to Pauleen. “Take the driver and go to Joy’s flat. Bring back a few sets of clothes for her.”

Then I said to Joy, “You’ll be staying at our home for a while.”

Pauleen offered, “She can stay at my place.”

I shook my head. “He already knows she’s staying there. It wouldn’t be safe.”

Pauleen took the keys, consulted with Joy about what to bring, and left.

Later in the evening, I asked Sunitha, “Are you coming home with me?”

“You go ahead,” she replied.

I dropped Pauleen near her gate, then took Joy to my home. I helped her into the guest room, changed my clothes, and then returned to help her with the requirements list she was working on. We continued until 8 p.m.

I brought two plates of food from the kitchen, and we ate in her room. Atul came in, played with us for a while, and went to his room to sleep.

I checked on him—he was fast asleep—then returned to my room. Sunitha still hadn’t returned. I stepped onto the balcony for a cigarette, then came back to Joy’s room.

We wrapped up our work. I helped her to the bathroom and settled her into bed.

“If you need anything, just call me on the intercom,” I said, and wrote down the extension number for her.

Returning to my room, I finally went to bed.

Chapter 31

Morning Reflections & Rising Tensions

I woke up around 6:40 a.m. and noticed that Sunitha hadn't returned home the previous night. I called the driver, who answered sleepily.

"She said she'd come home on her own after a party," he said.

"Okay," I replied and hung up.

I freshened up and went to the kitchen where my mother had already set the coffee filter. I prepared two cups of coffee and took them to Joy's room.

Kissing her forehead gently, I said, "Get up, my princess."

"Good morning," Joy smiled.

"Good morning. Here's your coffee."

We sipped in silence, and once finished, I rinsed the cups and returned to my room to bathe and dress. I helped Joy to the bathroom, waited while she bathed, and then led her to the bed.

Atul was already having breakfast. I kissed him on the head and asked if he was ready for school. He nodded. The maid came soon after and took him to the bus.

My mother had made idlis for breakfast. I took two plates to Joy's room, and we ate together. After packing our project papers, we went downstairs.

I called Pauleen to be ready. By the time we reached the gate, she was waiting. I scanned the area to see if the mysterious man had returned—but saw no one suspicious.

Suspicious, Distance, and a Tense Conversation

At the office, Pauleen helped Joy to her cabin while I went to mine to check emails. Then I headed to Sunitha's cabin.

"You didn't come home yesterday," I said.

"I stayed at a friend's place after a party. It got too late," she replied nonchalantly.

"I had hoped to spend time with you," I said.

"Sorry, I didn't know," she said without meeting my eyes.

"It's fine," I muttered and returned to my cabin, unsettled.

Something felt off. I sensed distance growing between us. Was it jealousy? Was it the knowledge of my involvement with Loveleen? I had a gut feeling, an intuition that something was wrong, especially regarding Joy. It wasn't just fear—it felt like a warning, like *déjà vu* that wouldn't fully reveal itself.

A few minutes later, the office boy informed me that Sunitha wanted to see me.

When I entered her cabin, she smiled and said, “You wanted to talk to me?”

I blinked. “How did you know?”

“You said so this morning,” she reminded me.

Right. I had.

“It’s about Joy,” I admitted. “I feel like she’s in danger. Something’s coming... I’ve dreamt of it, but I can’t remember clearly. When that man came asking for her at the door that night, something shifted in me. Since then, I’ve had this dread I can’t shake.”

“If you’re feeling all that for her, what do you feel for me?” she asked, eyes searching.

“Only love,” I replied, voice softening. “From the moment I first saw you, I was drawn to you. With you, it’s like... I want to hold you, kiss you, make love to you—it’s a complete feeling, something divine.”

She stared at me for a moment. “All this time, I thought you only wanted my body,” she said. “When I learned you were the father of Loveleen’s child, it felt like I lost you to her.”

“I was only with Loveleen because I felt I had lost *you*,” I said. “You were always busy, distant. Loveleen filled a void. But I’ll always blame myself. I was wrong.”

There was a pause before I added, “Sometimes I feel like there’s another part of me, a voice that never stops. It talks to me even in my sleep, like a split personality or a leftover soul from a past life. It’s not just about Joy. I sometimes fear for Atul’s future too.”

Sunitha finally moved, stood up, walked to me, hugged me, kissed me on the forehead and whispered, “I love you. Don’t worry. These things will sort themselves out. Just follow your instincts.”

Tears welled in my eyes. “Thank you for understanding. That’s all I ever wanted.”

Routine, Reflection & Responsibilities

I returned to my cabin and sat quietly, thinking about everything I had just said. These weren’t new thoughts—they’d been building since Sahithi’s disappearance. That inner voice, the persistent feelings, the compulsions... they had always been with me. Was it trauma? My conscience? Or something deeper?

I returned to Sunitha’s cabin. “Shall I order lunch?”

“Order for me too,” she said. “We’ll eat in Joy’s cabin.”

I called the office boy to arrange lunch for four.

While waiting, I observed Sunitha working. Her focus, her elegance—it grounded me. Her presence reminded me of why I started this company, why I pushed so hard. Maybe all this was just to prove something to her.

Once the food was ready, I accompanied her to Joy's cabin.

"Pauleen, meet Sunitha," I said.

"Glad to meet you. Kumar speaks highly of you," Pauleen said warmly.

Sunitha raised an eyebrow at me.

Joy chimed in, "You're lucky to have him. He's been so caring."

Sunitha just smiled, but I could tell she was processing everything.

We shared lunch. I couldn't remember the last time we all ate together.

An Order Secured & Joy's Ongoing Safety

Later, I left to meet a client. We discussed upgrading his software, negotiated pricing, and he agreed. One project secured—no need to pitch this one to the board. He even gifted me a pack of imported cigarettes.

Back at the office, I informed Joy and asked her to coordinate with marketing to send the proposal.

After reviewing sales and maintenance reports, I made notes for the next product update. Then I looked through our client list to assess if any might be interested in our upcoming projects. No immediate leads.

I sat in Sunitha's cabin, watching her work. "You know," I said softly, "I don't know what I'd be without you. You're my anchor."

She blushed. "Stop flattering me."

I kissed her on the cheek and returned to my cabin.

Dinner & Late-Night Work with Joy and Pauleen

Around 5 p.m., I asked Sunitha if she was coming home.

"I have a meeting at the club. Send the car later," she replied.

I visited Joy and Pauleen. They were drinking tea.

"Drinking without me?" I joked.

Joy poured me half a cup. "This is all that's left."

"Let me know when you're ready to leave," I said. "We'll go to your flat tonight. Pauleen, you're invited for dinner."

"I'm coming in half an hour," she said.

We dropped Joy and me off at her flat. I helped her in, and the driver brought up my briefcase. I warned him to be on alert for the man who had previously visited. I made tea while Joy and Pauleen worked on the reports. I switched on the TV, and after an hour, I went to the kitchen to prepare dinner.

At 11:30, they finished their work. I told Pauleen to sleep over—it wasn't safe to go back now. I checked she was settled and then helped Joy to bed. She fell asleep with her back to me.

I read for a while and then slept beside her, facing the opposite direction. At some point, she turned and pressed close. Feeling her warmth, I drifted into sleep.

Another Morning Begins

At 6:30 a.m., I woke up, brushed my teeth, and made coffee. Pauleen stirred, and I offered her a cup. I also woke Joy and gave her coffee.

Pauleen joined me in the balcony for a smoke.

Later, I helped Joy with her bath and dressing. I prepared breakfast and we ate together. Pauleen returned, saying she had already eaten.

When the driver arrived, I gave him the briefcase. Locking up, we went down to the car.

Chapter 32

Morning Incident and Security Concerns

On the way to the office, I remembered I had a package to collect from the courier office. We made a quick stop, and I went in to collect it. As I stepped out with the parcel, I saw a man leaning against the car window—*the same man who had come to the flat previously*. Seeing me, he quickly walked away.

I got into the car and asked, “Who was that?”

Joy replied, “He was my senior in the US. He’s the one I was trying to avoid. I came back to India because of him.”

“What was he saying?”

“He asked why I left him in the US and came here for ‘this black fellow.’ I told him I didn’t come for you—you’re my boss.”

“It’s okay,” I said calmly. “But now we know his intentions. He’s a threat, and I’m sure he’ll target both of us. Give me his details—I’ll file a police complaint.”

Later that day, I went to the police station and lodged a complaint stating that we feared for our safety. I gave them his details and explained that he had arrived from the US. The authorities assured us it would be easy to trace him.

After that day, we didn’t see him again. The police later confirmed that he had returned to the US. Relieved, we resumed our work with renewed focus.

Project Preparation and Board Approval

With Pauleen’s assistance, Joy completed the requirement documents for our upcoming software projects. Using those, I prepared a detailed cost analysis. We then matched these costs with our proposed budgets and prepared an enhancement report.

At the board meeting, I presented everything clearly. The board consists of five members: myself and Simon as senior directors, with Sunitha, Loveleen, and Joy as directors.

I explained that these projects stemmed from my brainstorming sessions, and Joy had vetted them for feasibility. I also presented a list of other concepts to be taken up at a later stage.

I provided the board with:

- A list of requirements for each project
- Estimated costs
- Budget requirements for the current and next fiscal year

Although I anticipated potential opposition from Simon, he didn't object—perhaps because he understood the value these projects would bring. All projects and budgets were unanimously approved.

Feeling accomplished, we left the meeting enthusiastic and energized.

Project Launch: Targeting the Healthcare Sector

The first step was procuring new hardware and software. We also initiated the process of hiring new developers.

Among all the projects, we prioritized the Hospital Management System (HMS) as the first to be developed. It had strong market potential and the opportunity for multiple installations and license sales.

I had a connection in Hyderabad who was finalizing the construction of a hospital. I knew they would soon require hospital software. I contacted my friend and asked him to schedule a meeting with the hospital management.

They agreed and gave us an appointment a week later.

Planning the Trip: Shirdi and Hyderabad

Initially, I considered flying to Hyderabad. But instead, I decided we would drive to Shirdi for Sai Baba's darshan before continuing to Hyderabad.

When I told Sunitha, she said she and Atul would join me as it was Atul's Christmas break. Joy also expressed interest in coming along to observe hospital operations firsthand.

So, we planned a road trip—me, Sunitha, Joy, Atul, and our driver. We left Mumbai at 4:30 a.m. and reached Shirdi by 2:40 p.m. After checking into a hotel and resting briefly, we visited the Sai Baba temple around 4:30 p.m. and completed our darshan within 30 minutes.

After returning and having dinner, I asked the driver if he could drive through the night.

"Yes," he said. "At night, we can follow the private buses leaving Shirdi, and once we reach the Mumbai-Hyderabad highway, the journey will be smooth."

We left after dinner and reached Hyderabad by 7 a.m. the next day. We checked into a suite at a hotel recommended by my friend, freshened up, and spent the day sightseeing—Charminar, Golconda Fort, Birla Mandir—and returned to the hotel by evening.

Hospital Visit and Software Proposal

The following day, we visited the hospital. The owner, Mr. Subba Rao, introduced us to his daughter, Nandini, the hospital's Operations Manager.

When I saw her, I had a strange feeling of familiarity.

"Have we met before?" I asked.

"I feel I've seen you somewhere," she replied.

Subba Rao explained that they were originally from Guntur and had settled in Hyderabad. Nandini had completed a Hospital Management course, and her cousin, a heart surgeon, helped establish the hospital.

We toured the hospital, noting:

- Various departments
- Room categories for patients
- Operation theatres
- Nursing stations

After the walkthrough, we sat down to discuss our proposal. We offered to provide comprehensive hospital management software, including all functional modules, along with one year of free maintenance. The client would be responsible for arranging the hardware.

They asked about access to the source code.

"We don't normally share source code," I explained. "It contains proprietary components that can't be disclosed. However, in special cases, we can offer a version without the proprietary modules for ₹2 lakhs."

They accepted the terms, signed the agreement, and paid the advance.

Back to Bombay: Celebration and Technical Decisions

After concluding our Hyderabad trip, we returned to Bombay.

We hosted a Saturday night party at our home, inviting employees, friends, and potential clients. It was both a celebration and a networking event—an informal launch of our new phase.

On Monday, we held a technical meeting to finalize tools for the new development.

Previously, we had used:

- COBOL
- FoxPro

- Flat file and .DBF data storage

We had recently explored:

- Visual Basic
- PowerBuilder (PB)
- Oracle (as the RDBMS)

After evaluating the pros and cons, I proposed using **PowerBuilder with Oracle**.

Reasons:

- PB offers a GUI interface.
- It supports object-oriented concepts like inheritance.
- It reduces development time significantly.
- Oracle provides a robust, scalable RDBMS solution, ideal for the HMS project.

The team agreed, and we locked in this tech stack for our flagship product: the Hospital Management Software.

Chapter 33

January 1995: Hyderabad Project Documentation Trip

In January 1995, we decided to travel to Hyderabad to collect the detailed requirements for our upcoming Hospital Management Software (HMS) project.

Joy expressed her interest in joining me for the requirements gathering. We booked a double room in a hotel close to the hospital and began our work the following day.

Information Collection and Hospital Visit

The hospital had just begun operations, and we were assigned Nandini as our point of contact for gathering departmental requirements. We systematically visited each department to collect relevant data.

From our visits, we finalized the following essential **modules** for development:

Outpatient (OP) Modules

- OP patient registration
- Patient visit records
- Doctor profiles
- OP prescriptions
- Patient health records

Inpatient (IP) Modules

- IP patient registration
- Case sheet management
- Nursing station updates
- IP visit tracking

Diagnostics

- Diagnostic reception module
- Sample collection
- Sample testing (pathology)
- Radiology tests
- Report generation (linked to both IP and OP data)

Pharmacy

- Integration with both OP and IP modules

- Handling of credit and cash patients
- Stock and billing systems



Reception & Billing

- OP receipts and billing
- IP admission and advance collections
- Final IP payments
- Diagnostics receipts (for both OP and IP patients)



Additional Modules

- Billing
- Sample collection
- Diagnostic and radiology reporting
- Nursing station logs and coordination
- Accounts Maintenance

Benchmarking and Broader Research

We also visited several multi-specialty hospitals in Hyderabad for reference and planned to do the same in Bombay upon our return. This comparative study helped ensure our modules were robust and industry-relevant.

Client Engagement and Final Approval

We built strong rapport with Nandini, which made the information-gathering process more efficient. I gave her my contact details, along with those of Joy and Sunitha, and told her:

“You can reach out to any of us in case of an emergency. We’ll respond immediately.”

After a week of thorough analysis and documentation, I submitted the final project report to Nandini for her approval, which she provided.

Reflections on Client Relations and Joy’s Perspective

Throughout this process, I worked closely with Nandini to ensure the completeness of the project requirements. I was aware that Joy observed my interactions, but she didn’t show any visible reactions or discomfort.

Later, Joy shared her perspective:

“I’ve learned a lot from you—especially how you handle client relationships and extract valuable information. At times, I wondered about your closeness with Nandini, but now I understand. When clients feel comfortable and trust you, they open up completely. It’s our responsibility to filter the data and focus on what’s relevant. I admire your professionalism.”

Her words reassured me that she fully grasped my **modus operandi**—a crucial component of our client success model.

Being personally connected with clients ensures they:

- Reach out to me first with concerns or suggestions
- Consult me before implementing any major changes
- Always keep me in the loop, strengthening trust and accountability

Return to Bombay

With the documentation phase successfully completed and client approval in hand, we returned to Bombay to begin the software development phase.

Chapter 34

Deployment and Completion of Hospital Management Software (HMS)

January 1995

We appointed three new developers and reassigned two experienced developers from the existing team to work on our Hospital Management Software (HMS) project. This gave us a total of four developers for the project, with Joy and me providing direct supervision. The developers were stationed in the newly prepared section of the lab, and Joy oversaw their day-to-day activities.

Training and Development Phase

I took responsibility for designing the database in Oracle. Additionally, I trained the team in using PowerBuilder (PB), focusing on how its object-oriented features—particularly *inheritance*—could be leveraged to reduce development time. I created master classes and template screens to serve as a foundation, enabling the developers to build user interfaces efficiently using PB's GUI tools.

Within a month, the team became proficient with the new tools. In the next three months, they successfully developed the core modules and back-end logic. The software was then handed over to our QA testers, who identified and reported bugs, which we resolved swiftly.

Within four months of starting development, the software was ready for deployment.

Deployment in Hyderabad

I decided to personally handle the installation, given the complexity of setting up the database and the potential need for on-the-fly modifications.

Joy stayed back to oversee another ongoing project. I took our latest laptop, preloaded with the HMS software and Oracle database, and traveled to Hyderabad.

During my week-long stay, I:

- Installed Oracle on their server
- Configured the LAN and checked networking across departments
- Ran pilot tests with users to ensure stability and compatibility

After rigorous testing and feedback, we officially **inaugurated the HMS software** at the hospital. I monitored all departments to confirm smooth usage and stayed on-site to resolve any post-deployment issues.

Dinner Invitation and Client Engagement

Nandini, the hospital's Operations Manager, invited me to dinner at her family home in Jubilee Hills. Their home was a large estate, spanning nearly two acres, complete with a swimming pool and a spacious bungalow. Her father, Mr. Subba Rao, was already familiar with me, and I was formally introduced to her mother. Also present was her cousin Rohan, a cardiac surgeon.

After dinner, the three of us sat in the lawn, where they inquired about my background. During our conversation, Nandini mentioned having met Sunitha and complimented her.

"Your wife is very beautiful," she said.

I explained how I met Sunitha through her sister Latha, how our marriage came about, and the personal challenges we faced, including Atul's adoption and our eventual marriage.

An Unexpected Proposal

As Rohan drove me back to the hotel, he brought up a surprising point:

"Nandini says she feels a strange connection to you. She's not sure what kind of connection it is, but she's certain she wants to work with you. She's even open to investing in your company."

I was taken aback but responded diplomatically:

"I'll need to speak with the other directors. If she's serious about working with us, I can arrange for her to stay with Joy. She currently lives alone, and my PA Pauleen often stays with her for safety. Joy and I also work closely together, so it would be practical."

Rohan assured me he'd discuss the matter with Nandini and her father.

Post-Deployment and Return to Bombay

Over the next few days, I continued monitoring the software performance at the hospital. We encountered no major issues—only minor modification requests, which I handled on the spot.

I arranged for one of our team members to be sent to Hyderabad to manage further support and rented a small furnished space near the hospital for our staff to use during future visits. It included a bedroom and a functional kitchen.

With everything settled, I and Nandini flew back to Bombay. I dropped her off at Joy's flat, where she would be staying for the time being, and returned to my home.

Chapter 35

Growing Circle: Professional & Personal Crossroads

With Nandini joining our team, the number of women closely associated with me—Sunitha, Joy, Loveleen, Pauleen, and now Nandini—had increased. I often find myself reflecting on the nature of these relationships. Whether they are platonic or something deeper, I honestly don't have an answer.

Nandini's Integration into the Team

Although Pauleen was officially my personal assistant, she had been working with Joy since her appointment. Naturally, Nandini stepped into the role of my assistant. I began assigning her responsibilities such as:

- Reviewing daily visit reports
- Coordinating with the sales team
- Accompanying the sales team on hospital visits
- Shadowing the maintenance team to understand field operations

After working across multiple departments, Nandini submitted comprehensive reports on the functioning of the company. I forwarded:

- The **sales team report** to Simon
- The **maintenance team report** to both Joy and Sunitha

Implementing Her Suggestions

One of her notable recommendations was to equip our developers and support teams with **laptops**, enabling real-time modifications during site visits.

However, I identified two key challenges:

1. **Cost of Investment** – Laptops would increase operational expenses
2. **Security Concerns** – Allowing proprietary software outside office premises posed a risk

To protect intellectual property, we had established strict policies:

- Only I hold access to proprietary code
- A backup exists with Simon, password-protected, and only to be accessed in my absence or demise
- That password is sealed with our legal counsel

Given the infrastructure limitations—such as unreliable internet connectivity in India—this approach was not feasible at the time.

Conversations with Nandini

One day, I asked her:

“Nandini, what are your future plans?”

She replied:

“I want to keep working with you. I find a kind of satisfaction when I’m around you. I can’t explain it, but something keeps me close to you.”

I said:

“That’s your conscience guiding you. I’ve experienced something similar with Joy. When she sprained her ankle, I stayed with her for two weeks. I had this overwhelming dread that something bad was going to happen. And it did—her stalker from the US showed up. Thankfully, we acted in time, and the police handled it. Now, with Pauleen and you around, that fear has subsided. The key is to follow your inner voice—it rarely misleads.”

Nandini then asked:

“My brother once offered to invest in your company. Have you given it any thought?”

I responded honestly:

“I haven’t yet discussed it with the board. But if you’re serious, I will. Except for Simon, the others are aligned with my vision. Sunitha is my wife, Loveleen is a long-time friend, and Joy trusts my judgment. Simon will look at it from a profit standpoint. I’ll consult Sunitha regarding our financials first. While more funds help expansion, it’s about giving up shares and voting rights—that’s the bigger issue.”

She affirmed:

“If I’m investing, I want to work with you long-term. You can consider my commitment guaranteed.”

Lunch at Joy’s Place

Since returning from Hyderabad, Joy and I hadn’t spent much time together. One day, she said:

“You’ve cooked for me so many times, but I never got to return the favour. Come over this Sunday for lunch.”

I agreed. On Sunday, all four of us—Joy, Pauleen, Nandini, and I—had lunch together.

I brought up Nandini’s interest in investing.

Joy asked:

“Nandini, are you serious about joining us?”

Nandini replied:

“Absolutely. Even though I studied hospital management, I never felt this level of excitement before. Working here feels like a calling. Like Kumar once said—follow your heart. That’s what I’m doing.”

Joy welcomed her warmly:

“You’re one of us now. Welcome to our world.”

Bonding and Reflection

After lunch, I went to the balcony. Pauleen followed for our usual cigarette break. As we were lighting up, Nandini joined us.

Seeing us, she smirked and said:

“So this is why you disappeared?”

I explained:

“This has become our little ritual. Pauleen and I actually met at the gate when I was out smoking. She came with me to the market, made dinner, and has been with us since then.”

Pauleen added:

“All of us feel a connection to Kumar. Sometimes I believe it’s something from a past life. Even he says he feels it.”

We finished our tea and sat together watching a movie. Afterward, I left for home.

Chapter 36

Discussion at Home: Expansion, Investment, and Closeness Rekindled

I returned home, and Atul came running toward me. I scooped him up and took him into our room. Sunitha was sitting on the bed, reviewing some reports.

“What’s the current status of our finances?” I asked.

She replied, “We’ve received the final payment from the Hyderabad hospital. Our financial position is quite strong.”

“Do we need additional capital?” I asked.

She responded, “It would be beneficial. More capital would allow us to move faster on pending projects.”

I nodded. “Nandini is interested in investing in the company and wants to continue working with us. If we bring in additional funds, how can we best utilize them? What expansion options do we have?”

Sunitha paused, then said, “You’ve already secured approval for multiple projects—don’t forget that. We can use the capital to fund those initiatives. Also, why not expand geographically? We’ve just completed a successful hospital implementation in Hyderabad. We already have a presence there through our rented place. If we assign a salesperson and install a dedicated phone line, that setup can become our sales office in the South.”

I smiled. “That’s a brilliant idea. I’ll propose this in the next board meeting.”

Atul, growing bored with our business talk, slipped away to his room to play. I got up, kissed Sunitha gently on the forehead, and said, “Let the ideas flow. What do you think about offering Nandini an official position? She’s shown genuine interest in staying on board.”

Sunitha asked, “Do we know how much she wants to invest?”

“She said she’d speak with her father. She’s waiting to hear back from us first.”

“We should revisit the share structure. Joy and Loveleen were given preferential shares, while we hold promoter shares. What would be the fair value for Nandini’s investment? We also have some shares allocated in the staff pool. We need to finalize our decision before we present this to the board.”

She continued, “And about Simon—how will he feel about this shift in influence? If he wanted more support, he should’ve brought in his own investors. The fact that outside investors are interested in our company is a result of our success. We shouldn’t be faulted for that.”

Then, almost teasingly, she asked, “Why are all the investors and directors so close to you? What are you doing to them?”

I chuckled. "What am I doing? If people are drawn to my working style, is that wrong? If I show concern for their well-being, is that something to hide? If I genuinely care for them and they reciprocate, how can that be questioned? Look at the results—we have loyal investors and more people who want to join us. That's a strength."

Sunitha looked at me, speechless. Maybe she was thinking about how she first felt when we met. I still remember being completely captivated by her. I even had to take her sister's help to arrange our first meeting.

"Don't overthink it," I said softly. "Let's just relax and watch something together. It's been a long time since we've done that."

I switched on the TV and flipped to a movie channel. Hearing the sound, Atul came running back and sat between us. I hugged him and kissed the top of his head. We sat together, enjoying the film as a family.

Eventually, Atul fell asleep during the movie.

"Did he have dinner?" I asked.

"I think so," Sunitha replied. "But I'm not sure."

I carried him to his room, tucked him into bed, and returned to the living room. I sat beside Sunitha, wrapped my arm around her, and pulled her close as we continued watching the movie.

When the break came, she went to the kitchen and brought dinner. We ate on the couch while the film played in the background.

After the movie ended, I stepped out onto the balcony for a cigarette. Then I went to the bathroom, brushed my teeth, and returned to the bedroom. I laid down and picked up a book to read. About fifteen minutes later, Sunitha joined me.

I put the book aside, turned toward her, and whispered, "Where were you all this time? I miss you so much."

I kissed her, and we drifted off to sleep together.

Chapter 37

US Project, Unwanted Encounters, and an Emotional Shift

We received an offer from a US-based firm for a software development project. The company provided loans to energy firms and needed software to manage loan disbursements, repayment schedules, and automated payment reminders. The opportunity came to us through Nandini's father, who was setting up an energy plant in partnership with a major corporation. Their recommendation led to the US company reaching out to us directly.

They invited us to visit and collect their requirements, following which we would submit a detailed proposal.

Initially, I wanted to take Joy with me. But Nandini strongly insisted she accompany me instead. I said, "If you cover your airfare, you can come." She agreed immediately. The client would take care of our accommodations.

I booked two tickets for our trip.

Joy was clearly a little disappointed, but her prior unpleasant experiences in the US kept her from protesting. In a way, I was relieved—her safety remained a concern, especially with the resurfacing of a past stalker.

We arrived in New York, where the company provided us a shared double room with two separate beds. Neither of us objected. Nandini appeared genuinely excited to be in the US and was entirely comfortable with the living arrangement. Her confidence was striking. Even though I felt slightly uneasy at first—especially while dressing—she handled things with natural composure, changing partially in the bathroom and then finishing in the room without fuss or awkwardness.

We had breakfast in the room and headed to the client's office in a car they had arranged.

They walked us through their current accounting system. It was outdated, and they had lost access to the source code. The original vendors were no longer providing maintenance. They needed an entirely new system based on the structure of the old one.

We examined how their data was being input and reviewed the formats of their reports. Their data was stored in flat files, and upon investigation, I confirmed that we could recover the data for migration.

Over five days, with Nandini's help, I compiled the necessary documentation. We submitted the system design to their management.

Two days later, the proposal was accepted. They asked for cost estimates, which I prepared after consulting Joy and Sunitha back in India.

Following a brief negotiation, both parties agreed on a budget, and we signed the project contract.

On our final night, their team invited us to a celebration at a local bar. A car picked us up around 7:30 p.m. When we arrived, we were shown to our seats. I ordered a peg of whisky; Nandini chose a soft drink.

The atmosphere was festive. Team members came over to congratulate us. As I sipped my drink, I felt someone's eyes on me. I turned slowly—and froze.

The man who had once stalked Joy in the US was sitting across the bar, drink in hand, staring in our direction.

My heart sank. A wave of dread swept over me. I immediately considered what might have happened if Joy had come instead of Nandini. I couldn't risk being seen with her—especially by him.

Discreetly, I requested a team member to arrange a car. I turned to Nandini and said, "Let's step out for a moment," and we exited as if heading to the restroom.

Back at the hotel, Nandini looked disturbed. She asked, "What happened back there?"

I replied, "That man—the one who harassed Joy in the US—was at the bar. I had to get us out."

Our work was done, and we had two days before our return flight. That night, shaken by the incident, I needed a drink. I took Nandini to the hotel bar. We sat in silence while I downed two pegs.

After that, we returned to our room. I didn't even change—I just collapsed onto the bed, lying sideways, physically and emotionally drained. Whether it was tension, fatigue, or some deep-rooted fear, I felt paralyzed.

Nandini ordered food from room service and, seeing I had no strength to eat, gently coaxed me into eating. I vaguely remember her feeding me.

When I woke up the next morning, all I could recall was walking into the room and falling onto the bed.

Morning Reflections and Conflicting Emotions

I looked at Nandini, still asleep beside me. I leaned over and gently kissed her forehead before quietly getting out of bed. I went to the bathroom, brushed my teeth, and then ordered coffee from room service. Settling into a chair with a cigarette, I tried to piece together the events of the previous night.

Why was Nandini sleeping next to me instead of in her own bed?

She was still in her nightwear, while I was only in my underwear. Had something happened?

I couldn't recall. There was a lingering uncertainty—perhaps exhaustion and stress had blurred the lines. The tension from last night, especially seeing Joy's stalker at the bar, had drained me completely. Could that have led to something I didn't consciously register?

The knock at the door broke my thoughts. I collected the coffee tray and brought it in.

I walked over to Nandini and gently woke her. "Good morning," I said softly.

She opened her eyes, smiled, and replied, "Good morning."

"Come on, have some coffee," I added.

She sat up, still sleepy, and reached for her cup. As she sipped, she glanced at me from above the rim with half-lidded eyes—a look that was unintentionally alluring.

I watched her for a moment. She looked stunning in that quiet, unguarded state. A voice inside me stirred—my inner self whispering things I wasn't sure I should be thinking. I knew she had been a huge support throughout the trip. If I'd brought Joy instead, and had run into *him*, things might have gone terribly wrong. The decision to bring Nandini had been the right one—personally and professionally.

Whatever may have happened between us would stay between us.

I got up and walked toward the bathroom. "I'll go take a shower," I said.

After bathing, I emerged with a towel wrapped around my waist. I walked over to the wardrobe and began to pick out clothes for the day.

Suddenly, I felt her arms wrap around me from behind.

She rested her chest against my back, holding me close. I froze. A silent moment passed. Then, I turned slowly and met her eyes.

There was an open invitation in her eyes. I kissed her hard and long. It was as if I was transported to another realm. We kissed for a long time, my towel fell down and she led me to the bed.

After some time, I got up from the bed, sat on the chair, and lit a cigarette. I reflected on what had just happened. It seemed consensual—Nandini had led me on—and I felt no remorse. As I looked at her lying on the bed, she appeared almost sculptural, her beauty striking in a way I hadn't fully

noticed before. I kept thinking about what we had done. In the end, I felt good—at peace, even—and began to dress.

I turned to her and said, “Freshen up and get ready—we’ll go sightseeing.”

We spent the day exploring the city and returned to the hotel by evening. After dinner, we went back to our room. I sat on the sofa, and Nandini joined me, pulling my hand around her as she nestled close. A romantic film was playing on the TV. We sat watching quietly. When the movie ended, I pulled her closer and kissed her. She responded, and we spent the night together—it was our final night in the US before returning.

The next morning, we got ready and waited for the car to take us to the airport. One of the company’s representatives came to see us off. After landing in India, I dropped Nandini at Joy’s flat and returned home.

We met again at the office the next day. A board meeting had been scheduled to induct Nandini as a director. Her father offered an immediate investment of ₹25 lakhs, with a promise of another ₹25 lakhs over the next two years. Since we didn’t require urgent capital, we welcomed the offer. Nandini was thrilled—her position now on par with Joy’s.

At the meeting, the board unanimously approved Nandini’s appointment, and the cheque was handed over. Sunitha received the cheque for banking.

Outside the boardroom, we ran into Loveleen, who had just collected Dhruv from the maid. She brought him over to me, and I lifted him into my arms, planting a kiss on his forehead. Nandini was watching from a distance. I noticed her whisper something to Joy, but I couldn’t hear what was said. After handing Dhruv back to Loveleen, I returned inside to speak with Simon, who had been waiting.

I briefed him on the US trip, and we discussed various business matters. I asked for his thoughts on Nandini joining the board. He replied that he was pleased with the capital infusion and optimistic about the expansion. “We’ll be among the top software firms very soon,” he added.

When I came out again, Loveleen was still there, but Joy and Nandini were gone. I asked Loveleen where they were, and she said they had gone back to the flat. I was a little surprised but didn’t comment.

The next day, I couldn’t find Nandini in my cabin. I went to Joy to inquire.

"She left for Hyderabad yesterday," Joy said casually. "Didn't she tell you?"

"No," I replied, taken aback. "What did she say to you?"

"She told me she's going back and will operate from there. Did something happen?"

"I haven't spoken to her," I said. "What did you talk about after the meeting?"

"When she saw Loveleen, she asked who she was and about the baby. I told her Dhruv is your son and Loveleen is your girlfriend."

I stood there dumbfounded. Could that have prompted her sudden departure? I'd never had the chance to explain things to Nandini properly. Did she feel betrayed? Jealous?

I tried calling her, but she didn't answer. The following day, I called our Hyderabad office, and she picked up. I asked, "Why didn't you tell me about leaving?"

Her voice was calm but firm. "Why didn't you tell me about Loveleen?"

"I didn't get the chance," I replied. "Whatever happened was in the past. You're my present. Do you still want to continue as a director, or do you plan to withdraw? If not, I'll inform the board to hold the cheque."

"No," she said. "I want to continue. I'll operate from Hyderabad for now. My father needs help with the hospital, and he'll be handling the power plant setup. I'll take care of both from here."

"Okay," I said, "It's your call. I'll visit when I can." Then I hung up.

Later, I updated Joy. "She's going to work from Hyderabad for now. Her father needs her help."

We returned to discussing the US project. I checked in with the development division about the technical specifications. I informed them that I'd provide the Oracle database in a couple of days so they could start creating the PB application's data windows.

Our reliance on PowerBuilder was growing. Its features had proven very efficient for rapid application development.

I went back to my cabin and began the data conversion process.

It had taken the whole day, and I had only managed to convert 25% of the data. At this rate, it would take at least five days to finish the task.

I shut down the system and went to Joy's cabin. With Nandini now working from Hyderabad, Joy was alone again. I sat across from her, and

she must have sensed my isolation after Nandini's departure. She finished her work, got up, and asked me to come with her.

We drove together, stopping briefly at a wine shop where she asked the driver to get a specific drink. Then we headed to her flat. She also invited Pauleen to join us.

At Joy's flat, the three of us settled on the sofa. Joy brought out three glasses and some snacks. She poured the drinks, and we sat, sipping. Joy asked about the US trip. I explained what we had accomplished and told her about the man I saw at the bar—the same one who had followed her in the US—and how we made a quick exit to avoid trouble.

She poured me another drink, then she and Pauleen went into the kitchen to prepare dinner. I stayed in the living room, sipping my drink and watching TV. Eventually, they returned with the meal, and we had dinner together.

Afterward, I went to the balcony for a smoke. Pauleen joined me. We shared a cigarette in silence and returned to the hall. Soon after, she left for her flat.

Joy and I watched TV for a while. Feeling tired, I told her I was going to sleep. She helped me into the bedroom and laid me down. Later, she turned off the lights and joined me in bed.

She moved close and rested her hand on me—something she had done before, and which I typically ignored. But this time was different. She began kissing and touching me with clear intent. Slowly, I responded. We made love, and I drifted off to sleep afterward.

The next morning, I reflected on what had happened. It seemed Joy had acted with purpose. Perhaps she suspected something between Nandini and me after Nandini left suddenly. Maybe she didn't want to be left behind and chose this moment deliberately. Was Pauleen aware of it? Had she planned it with Joy when she picked up the drink? Or was it Joy's plan all along?

Back when Joy had sprained her leg and I stayed with her, she never crossed a line. Perhaps she was waiting for the right moment. Last night, she got what she wanted.

I brushed my teeth, made two cups of coffee, and took one to Joy in bed. "Good morning," she mumbled sleepily.

"Good morning," I replied, placing the cup on the table and heading to the balcony with mine.

Pauleen was on her balcony brushing her teeth. I waved, held up my cigarette, and she nodded before stepping inside to rinse.

After finishing my coffee, I came back inside. Joy, having finished hers too, rinsed the cup and sat on the sofa. She looked like the same Joy I had always known.

The doorbell rang. It was Pauleen.

"Where's my fag?" she asked playfully.

"On the balcony," I said.

"Then come with me," she replied.

We shared a smoke and returned to the hall.

I told Joy that it would take another four or five days to complete the data transfer. Then we discussed what project she could begin in the meantime and selected one for immediate development.

Turning to Pauleen, I asked, "Are you getting enough work with Joy? If not, come help me."

Pauleen looked at Joy, who smiled and said, "He must be missing Nandini. Go help him. He'll be busy with DB work this week. His daily reports are already piling up."

"Okay," Pauleen agreed. "I'll start with you today."

"I'm going to take a bath," I said.

"I'll make breakfast," Joy replied.

"I'll bathe too," Pauleen added. "Make some for me as well."

"Alright," Joy said.

I showered and stepped out with a towel around my waist, searching for clothes. Joy entered the room, handed me my clothes, and I thanked her with a kiss before she returned to the kitchen.

We were behaving like a married couple. I dressed and went to the kitchen, where she was transferring the food into a serving bowl. I took it to the hall and set the table. Just then, the doorbell rang—it was Pauleen, ready for the day.

We had breakfast together. When the driver arrived, we left for the office.

At the office, I gave Pauleen the daily reports to review and returned to my database conversion task. She read them seriously.

"Any issues?" I asked. "I'll make a note and let you know," she replied.

The process was at 49% completion. I watched her for a moment.

“Pauleen,” I asked, “what does the staff think of me?”

She looked up, surprised. “You give everyone a fair chance. You work hard, lead by example. They know they can’t manipulate you—if their concern is genuine, you’re fair. They respect you for building this company from the ground up. Joy trusts you completely. She says you’d protect her no matter what.”

“What about how I treat all of you?”

“They gossip a bit about you and Loveleen. Some think Dhruv might be your son. But no one says anything malicious. About you and Joy, most see a platonic bond. People say it’s like a Rakhi relationship—deeply caring but not romantic.”

That reassured me. There didn’t seem to be any workplace chatter that would affect Sunitha. And she already knew about Loveleen.

“What about Nandini and me?” I asked.

“They didn’t really form an opinion. She wasn’t around long enough, and they thought she might be a friend or a classmate.”

I nodded. Pauleen herself was drawing a salary comparable to the developers, yet was accepted as one of them. That said something about how well she blended in.

Then my thoughts drifted to Sunitha. Had I been unfair to her? She had changed after the wedding. Was it her career as an air hostess? My past with Sahithi? Or did my having a son with another woman push her away? She had always been distant after marriage. Was she just staying for Atul? Had she bound herself to me because of the promise to his grandparents? Should I set her free if that’s the case? Or should I let things remain for Atul’s sake?

I returned to my work as another data process completed and the next one began.

“Pauleen,” I asked gently, “what do you think of Sunitha?”

She thought for a moment. “She’s excellent at her role. She has great business sense.”

“I meant as a person.”

“I haven’t interacted with her enough to know her personally.”

After hesitating, I told her, “I’m not sure if Sunitha still loves me. She’s been distant ever since our marriage. It wasn’t always like this. Before the

wedding, I used to travel to Delhi just to see her during training. But afterward, everything changed.”

She listened carefully, processing my words. I told her to take her time before answering.

It was lunchtime. I called the office boy and asked for three lunches to be brought to my cabin. I also called Joy to join us.

The boy arrived, and shortly after, Joy came in.

“So late?” I teased.

“I was finishing some work,” she replied.

“Work can wait. Lunch first,” I said.

We sat down and ate. Pauleen was unusually quiet, perhaps still thinking about what I had shared. Maybe she wanted to consult Joy. I didn’t press for an answer.

As I resumed the next data process, lunch continued. The processes were running faster than expected—completion was likely today or tomorrow. Joy finished eating and stood up. “Are you coming to my flat tonight?” she asked.

“I’ll see,” I replied.

She returned to her cabin.

Later, I went to Sunitha’s office. “Did you have lunch?” I asked. “Not yet.”

“You should eat on time. Why not join us for lunch from tomorrow?”

“Alright,” she agreed.

Back at my cabin, Pauleen was still working through the reports. “I still don’t have an answer to your question,” she said. “I think I’ll speak to Sunitha first. I haven’t had enough interaction with her.”

“That’s fine,” I said. “Take your time.”

By 7 p.m., I had completed the day’s work. Pauleen and I left for the parking area. I lit a cigarette and chatted with the driver about a personal issue he was facing, offering him a solution. He thanked me.

Soon, Joy and Pauleen arrived, and we all got into the car. I still hadn’t decided whether to go home or to Joy’s flat. Eventually, I chose to go with them.

At her flat, I made tea for the three of us. Afterward, Pauleen and I shared a cigarette on the balcony. That was our way of controlling how much we smoked—only one shared, no personal stash.

Back inside, Joy and Pauleen started dinner prep. Joy brought the nearly empty bottle to the table with a glass and poured me a final drink. She placed some snacks beside it. I drank slowly while watching TV.

Afterward, Joy served dinner. We ate while watching a movie. Then Pauleen went back to her flat.

Joy and I continued watching TV until 11:30 p.m. We both changed into nightwear. I sat on the bed and picked up my book. After fifteen minutes, Joy sat beside me.

I closed the book and looked at her.

There was naked lust in her eyes. Seeing her I felt something stir in me. Unlike yesterday I was aroused by looking at her.

I got up in the morning as usual.

Joy was still asleep beside me. I remembered the way she looked last night when she sat on the bed—something about her expression had stayed with me. Thinking of it now stirred something in me. I felt aroused but tried to control myself.

I got out of bed, went to the bathroom to brush my teeth, and then to the kitchen to prepare coffee. I brought a cup for Joy and handed it to her as she sat up in bed. Taking mine, I stepped out onto the balcony.

Pauleen wasn't on her balcony yet.

I lit a cigarette, took a long drag, exhaled, and sipped my coffee. After finishing both, I went back inside and washed the cups in the kitchen. When I returned to the bedroom, Joy had finished her coffee and was sitting quietly.

I smiled and said, "Get up, darling, we need to get ready."

She asked, "Why don't we stay in today?"

"You forgot we have a lot of work, didn't you?" I replied. "I need to hand over the database so the team can start development."

She made a face like a child refusing to go to school. The resemblance was oddly endearing.

I kissed her and said, "If you want to stay in bed, you can. But I need to get ready," and went to take my bath.

When I returned, she was already in the kitchen preparing breakfast. I smiled, pulled a dress shirt from the cupboard, got dressed, and called Pauleen to check if she was joining us.

Pauleen confirmed she'd come over, and I told Joy to make breakfast for her too. Joy muttered something under her breath and reluctantly cracked a few more eggs. I paused for a moment—was she feeling jealous?

I didn't say anything. I went to sit in the hall until Pauleen arrived. When she did, I opened the door, and she went straight to the kitchen to help Joy. Watching them, I thought, *We'll never truly understand women.*

After finishing breakfast, we left for the office when the driver arrived.

At work, I updated the server with the Oracle database I had prepared. Then I met with the development team and instructed them to start creating data windows.

I explained that once the data windows were integrated into the PowerBuilder application, saving the data would become seamless. Hitting the save button would automatically write the data to the database. While some column-wise data validation would require manual coding, much of it would also be handled automatically. That was the advantage of using PowerBuilder—it significantly cut down on manual coding time.

After assigning the tasks to the developers, I returned to my cabin. I asked Pauleen to assist Joy for the day and then sat down to continue with my work.

Chapter 38

I sat in my cabin thinking about Nandini—what she might be doing in Hyderabad. She had been so eager to work here, and now, after leaving angrily, her absence weighed on me. I couldn't stand knowing someone was upset with me; I felt compelled to resolve it.

I first tried calling her at the hospital but was told she wasn't in. Then I rang our Hyderabad office. This time, she answered.

"When are you coming back?" I asked.

"I'm currently looking for an operations manager for the hospital," she replied. "Once I find someone suitable, I'll return to Bombay."

I exhaled in relief. At least she planned to return. To help ease her transition, I began looking for a flat. One of my friends offered a fully furnished apartment for rent. I asked him to hold it for me and said I'd let him know when we'd need it.

Later, I called Nandini and told her about the flat. When I mentioned it was separate and fully ready, she agreed to return that Sunday.

I inspected the apartment—it had everything she'd need. I stocked it with groceries and essentials in advance.

On Sunday, I picked her up from the airport and took her straight to her new flat. She seemed genuinely pleased with it. I stayed the night with her and returned home the next morning to freshen up.

On the way to the office, I picked her up again. I informed Joy that Nandini now had her own place—though I didn't mention I had arranged it. Joy wasn't visibly pleased with her return, but she didn't say anything. Perhaps she saw Nandini as competition.

At the office, I reviewed the development progress on the US Energy project. Everything was moving as expected. After giving the developers a few pointers, I returned to my cabin. Nandini was already immersed in work, reviewing daily reports and checking on the sales team's performance.

She wasn't happy with what she saw.

"You need to arrange a meeting with Simon," she said. "We need to discuss the sales team's performance."

I reached out to Simon, who asked us to meet him for tea at 4 p.m.

At the meeting, Nandini presented her findings—clear gaps and inefficiencies in the sales team's work. After she finished, I added:

"Simon, we need your sales team to step up. We're launching new products soon, and if we don't promote them early, we risk delayed returns. Right now, most of

our revenue is coming from project-based deals like the hospital and the US Energy project. What is the sales team contributing? Are they securing any new hospital projects? Are they pre-selling our upcoming products?"

Simon didn't offer much in response.

I continued, "Start selling now. If we get advance orders, it'll motivate the development team and secure early returns. We're ready with developers and hardware. We're also planning to convert some office space into additional development zones. I've already identified and secured new office space for relocation. Once we shift, our current cabins can be converted for developers. All we need is support from your team."

Back at our cabin, I asked Nandini, "How did I do in that meeting?"

"Excellent," she said. "But if Simon can't deliver results, we need to think about appointing a sales manager under him—someone dedicated to leading the team. He can't do everything on his own."

"I agree," I said. "That's why we delegate—like I've done with Pauleen. She doesn't code, but she's an excellent support system."

Later, I went to Sunitha and suggested we appoint a sales manager under Simon. She agreed to look into it.

I updated Joy on the meeting and our decision to propose a new sales manager role in the upcoming board meeting. She thought it was a great idea.

Back in my cabin, I said to Nandini, "That was a great suggestion. I want you to continue brainstorming and sharing your ideas."

After the day's work, I dropped Joy and Pauleen off and told them I would drop Nandini next. But instead of leaving after, I got down with her at her flat and sent the driver away. We spent the night there together.

Chapter 39

I woke up early and took a cab back home. After bathing, I called the driver to pick me up. Sunitha and Atul were still asleep. I gently woke Atul to get ready for school. He groggily climbed into my arms. I kissed him, carried him to the bathroom to brush, and then took him to the kitchen for milk.

Mom asked, "Where were you last night?"

"My work ran late. I stayed back," I said.

I went to the bedroom and gently asked, "Sunitha, are you coming to the office today?"

She sleepily replied, "Yes."

"Then get up and get ready," I encouraged her.

She got up, placed her hands on my shoulders, kissed me, and hugged me. I couldn't help but think—what was going on? Was I suddenly giving off some kind of pheromone?

"Come on, darling," I said playfully. "Go have your bath."

I nudged her toward the bathroom. A few minutes later, she called out for a towel. Realizing I had pushed her in without one, I opened the cupboard, took a towel, knocked on the door, and said, "Here's your towel."

"Bring it in," she said.

I stepped inside. She was standing there, unclothed. "Come, darling... show me your prowess," she teased.

I stood there, stunned. She hadn't changed at all since the first time I saw her in Delhi—same figure, same radiant presence. I couldn't resist. I closed the bathroom door behind me.

Later, I exited the bathroom while she continued her shower. I headed to the kitchen for breakfast. Atul was there, now bathed, grumbling about having idlis again.

"Idlis are healthier than dosas," I told him. "Less oil."

He reluctantly began eating. Once he finished, Mom served him a dosa, and he looked triumphant. I just smiled and went back to my idli.

Sunitha came into the kitchen dressed in a stunning sari—one of those expensive, modern ones.

"What's the occasion?" I asked, surprised.

"I'm coming with you, that's all," she said.

I was taken aback. The transformation was so unexpected. Just a week ago, I was considering asking if she wanted a separation. Today, she was affectionate, open, and dressed like we were attending a celebration. Could Pauleen have had something to do with this? Had she spoken to Sunitha?

Mom noticed too. "Are you going to a party?" she asked.

"No, Mom. Just to the office," Sunitha replied.

"Is there a party at the office?" Mom turned to me.

"Not that I know of," I said.

Mom looked puzzled, but eventually dropped the matter.

The maid took Atul to the school bus. I got dressed, and Sunitha informed me the driver had arrived and she had given him my briefcase.

"Thanks," I said.

We went down, got into the car, and headed to the office. Everyone stared at Sunitha as we entered. She looked like a film star. I felt proud.

We went to our respective cabins. Nandini hadn't arrived yet—perhaps the driver went to pick up the others after dropping us.

I reviewed the developers' database enhancement requirements, made the updates, and informed the team. Then I walked over to Sunitha's cabin. Staff had gathered to congratulate her, assuming it was her birthday or a special occasion. She calmly told them there was no occasion.

I sat in the chair across from her. Seeing me, the others turned and left.

"Look at the riot you're causing," I joked.

She smiled—a smile that could start more riots.

"What are you thinking?" I asked.

"About what?" she replied, puzzled.

"About this transformation."

"Oh, that," she said. "Someone opened my eyes."

"Who?"

"A confidante."

I figured it was Pauleen.

She returned to her work, and I just sat there watching her. She didn't seem to mind.

Eventually, the driver brought in Nandini, Joy, and Pauleen. Nandini popped her head into Sunitha's office. "Congratulations—whatever the occasion is," she said.

Sunitha smiled. "It's nothing."

Nandini looked at me questioningly, then went to our cabin.

When I got back, she asked, "What's with Sunitha today?"

"She said she had a revelation. I don't know more than that."

I turned to work and thought of new opportunities. We had two potential projects for the Power Generation unit. I discussed them with Nandini, and she offered to talk to her father.

As I looked at her, I wondered what she'd think if she knew what happened that morning with Sunitha. Would she stay or go back to Hyderabad permanently?

Nandini knows Sunitha is my wife—that's non-negotiable. She knows Loveleen is my son's mother. She knows Joy is my friend. But she doesn't know everything—especially not about Joy and me or my continued relationship with Loveleen. To her, Pauleen is my PA, and she herself is my lover. That's likely her perception of my life. And I suppose that's enough for now.

"Nandini," I said. "Do you want to ask me anything?"

She looked up from her report. "No, nothing."

Fair enough. I'd given her the opportunity.

With her back, my workload had lightened. Pauleen, though competent, wasn't experienced enough with daily reports. She'd be better off continuing with Joy. I made a note to formalize roles and introduce proper salaries instead of drawings. This could help with tax optimization.

I brought it up with Nandini. "What do you think of fixing salaries for directors?"

"Don't we already get monthly payments?"

"Yes, but they're shown as drawings. If we draw salaries officially, the company gets tax benefits, and we file returns individually. Plus, I receive royalty for the proprietary code I created before the company existed. Without my software key, no one can sell a single license."

"Oh, I didn't know."

"Didn't you check the P&L before investing?"

"No. I trusted you. I knew you wouldn't cheat me."

At least not financially, I thought.

She examined the financials and was surprised by the expenses. "These depreciation and salary numbers are huge."

"Talent doesn't come cheap," I said. "I train them constantly—PowerBuilder, Oracle, whatever's needed."

Seeing it was lunchtime, I ordered five meals and called Sunitha and Joy to join us. Pauleen gave a knowing smile when Joy raised her eyebrow at Sunitha's attire. We all ate in my cabin. Afterward, Pauleen followed me out for a smoke.

I asked her, "Was this your doing?" referring to Sunitha's change.

"Don't mind me," she smiled.

Back in the cabin, Nandini worked at her desk.

"What do you think?" I asked her.

"About what?"

"Our future—yours and mine."

"What do you think it will be?" she returned.

"I don't know. That's why I'm asking."

Her face stiffened. "You mean we have no future?"

"No," I explained. "I meant, should we plan for a future together—like a flat or something?"

She went quiet. I left her to her thoughts and stepped out for another cigarette.

Later, I visited Sunitha's cabin. She poured me a cup of tea from a flask—she knows my weakness for tea.

As I sat across from her, watching her, I couldn't help but admire her again. The distance she had once kept had vanished. She seemed like a new person.

In the evening, I told the three women to go ahead to their flats. The driver would drop them one by one and return for us.

"I'll come home with you," Sunitha said. "We'll go together."

I suggested we have dinner out. She called Mom to inform her we wouldn't be home.

We dined at a high-end restaurant. I had two drinks, she had wine, and we talked like a couple rediscovering each other. When we returned, Atul was already asleep.

We changed and went to bed. I picked up my book, but Sunitha came and sat beside me. I set the book aside, pulled her close, and kissed her.

I woke twice during the night. Each time I looked at her, she seemed more beautiful than before. For a moment, I forgot about Nandini, Joy, and even Loveleen.

Chapter 40

January 1996

We successfully delivered the US project ahead of schedule. Although we had until the end of March, we completed it in just three months. Due to the holiday season, there was a slight delay in receiving payments. Still, our third-quarter results were strong, and I'm optimistic we'll recover our hardware investments by the end of the financial year.

Initially, I had planned to shift our offices, but I decided instead to establish a new development center. With support from VSNL, we're working on integrating new technologies that will allow us to expand our services to the US and other international markets. This initiative marks a significant leap in how we distribute software both domestically and globally. Fortunately, we have the necessary capital and liquidity to back these plans.

I hardly saw Joy or Nandini outside work. I assigned most of my responsibilities to Nandini, who now works late and is usually the last to leave the office. Meanwhile, Sunitha and I have been taking things a bit easier. We finally took some time off and went on what truly felt like our first real honeymoon.

Our relationship has come full circle. I find myself deeply attached to Sunitha, spending entire days in her cabin discussing business strategies, financial planning, and company expansion.

I also started planning for the long-term future. We decided to establish a new company in Atul's name, as a way to safeguard our family's interests. When Loveleen learned about this, she requested that Dhruv's future be considered too. Eventually, we agreed to create a joint venture under the names of both children.

We named the firm **Atul and Dhruv Associates**.

I transferred my software licenses and trademarks to this new company. Ownership of our proprietary software and products was legally reassigned from my name to the firm via our lawyers. This ensures that if anything happens to me, the licensing codes and intellectual property won't be tied up with our main company. Instead, they will be protected under Atul and Dhruv Associates. This move secures the financial future of both children, independent of the fate of our existing company.

In **March**, Sunitha brought us the wonderful news that she was pregnant. We celebrated the announcement by distributing sweets to the entire office.

In **September**, we welcomed our daughter into the world. We named her **Reena**.

Chapter 41

I stood—quite literally—in the middle of the road.

My romantic entanglements had exploded into the open, and now the consequences were unraveling rapidly.

Joy and Nandini were furious. Both were demanding that the company be dissolved and their respective shares liquidated. Nandini, in particular, led the charge with unwavering determination. Together, they filed a petition in court, seeking to declare the company insolvent.

Our major product users became increasingly anxious about the continuity of their software maintenance contracts. Some responded by hiring our former developers directly, hoping to maintain stability. Others offered consultancy positions to developers, hoping to secure future support independently.

Meanwhile, Joy and Nandini retained a lawyer to safeguard their interests. On the other side, Sunitha and Loveleen stood by me, doing everything they could to protect what remained of our collective work. Unfortunately, the company lacked sufficient liquid assets to meet the payout demands. Nandini, having one of the largest stakes, was particularly insistent.

The court ordered the sale of our assets to repay the shareholders. But the primary asset on our balance sheet—our goodwill—had no immediate market value. No one was willing to purchase it under the current circumstances.

In desperation, Nandini and Joy attempted to sell our software products in the open market. But without valid licensing keys, the products were virtually useless. They also sold off office computers and furniture, managing to recover only a fraction of their investments.

Simon, perhaps the greatest casualty in all of this, had failed to protect his interests. He neither secured his equity nor ensured any fallback plan.

Now, everything is gone.

And I'm left—figuratively and literally—standing in the middle of the road.

Epilogue

I recently came across the heartbreaking news that Joy was murdered by her stalker. Her throat was slit while the attacker, reportedly high on drugs, committed the act. Though the killer's identity wasn't disclosed in the article, it was mentioned that he had returned from abroad. (For more details, see *Unlucky in Love* by R. Kumar.)

After this tragic event, Nandini returned to Hyderabad to oversee hospital operations.

Simon, taking what little he could from the company's liquidation, left for his native place.

At the conclusion of the story I've shared, I stated that I was *literally standing in the middle of the road*. But in reality—I'm standing on top of the world.

While Simon suffered losses during the dissolution of the company, I emerged with the most valuable assets. Most of the company's hardware was purchased by a third party, with funding quietly provided by Loveleen. While certain systems were cleaned and sold externally, the core servers were preserved and placed in Loveleen's custody.

Fortunately, I had the foresight to apply for all product trademarks under my name—not the company's. My lawyers held backup copies of the software and registration documents in the names of my children, to whom I've officially transferred ownership. This strategic move protected my life's work.

Today, I hold the rights to all product licenses, trademarks, and proprietary software.

I'm currently seeking new partners. If you're interested in investing or collaborating with us, you are welcome. **Ladies are especially welcome.**

Thank you.

The End