

**Nandini**

A Story of Love and Relations

By

Anne Reporter

## Prologue

**This** is the story of Nandini from Three Idiots and Brave Man. She thought her dream man would come on a horse and take her away from age 20 when she had a kind of experience. What was the experience, and how did her dream come true? To know this, read this story.

# Chapter 1

I was born into a business family and grew up in Guntur, near Vijayawada in Andhra Pradesh. As a child, I was shy but observant. My father was a contractor who handled government projects, building offices, bridges, and roads. I enjoyed the privileges of being a wealthy contractor's daughter, but I was also deeply curious about my surroundings.

My cousin Rahul always dreamed of becoming a doctor, and while I admired his ambition, I knew I wanted something different for myself. I didn't see myself as a doctor or a nurse. Instead, I aspired to be a leader—a manager who could guide and command people. Watching my father manage his employees in his office fascinated me. I wanted to have that kind of authority and influence. My parents never discouraged my tendency to take charge, whether it was with friends or in other situations.

Until my first year in college, life moved along uneventfully. Then, one day, something happened that changed everything.

One of my father's clients left behind a Telugu magazine called *Andhra Bhoomi* at our house. Out of curiosity, I flipped through its pages, skimming through stories and weekly serials, until I stumbled upon a section for pen pals. Among the names listed, one stood out to me: Kumar. He was from Bombay, pursuing his degree, and enjoyed reading, playing cricket, and listening to music. Intrigued, I decided to write to him.

I took an inland letter from my father's desk, noted down Kumar's address, and introduced myself in the letter, sharing my hobbies and interests. To my surprise, I received a response within a week. Kumar explained that it wasn't actually his name published in the magazine—it was his sister's—but he decided to give pen-friendship a try. His handwriting was messy but readable, and his tone was polite and engaging.

Over the next year, we exchanged letters regularly. One day, Kumar wrote to say he would be visiting Hyderabad and Vijayawada, where his grandparents lived. Excited, I invited him to Guntur and asked him to send a photo of himself so I could recognize him at the bus stand. While I was hesitant to send him my photo, he happily sent his.

On the day of his visit, I waited at the bus stand where the Vijayawada buses arrived. It took him half an hour to show up. Kumar was exactly as I had imagined: about five feet five inches tall, slightly dark-skinned, and radiating a warm, trustworthy vibe. When I introduced myself, his smile dazzled me.

I led him to a bus heading to the Krishna Riverfront. As the bus swayed on the bumpy roads, I instinctively grabbed his hand for balance. It was the first time I had sat so close to a man outside my family, and I couldn't help but feel a thrill.

We arrived at our stop and took a boat to an island in the river. Finding a quiet spot behind some shrubs, we sat down. I hoped for something romantic to happen, but Kumar behaved like a complete gentleman, talking about himself instead. His voice, his presence—it all made me feel as if I were floating in a dream.

Eventually, he put his arm around my shoulder and spoke softly near my ear. His words didn't register; I was lost in the sensation of his touch. When I realized another couple was approaching, he quickly removed his arm. Embarrassed, I looked away. But something compelled me to act. I leaned over and kissed him lightly on the lips, then pulled back, shy and uncertain about what he might think of me.

To my relief, Kumar reassured me. "Don't be shy," he said warmly. "This is my first kiss too. Thank you for sharing this moment with me." He gently turned my face toward him and kissed me back, softly at first, then more deeply. For the first time in my life, I felt a connection that was both thrilling and comforting.

Time slipped away until I realized it was getting late. My mother would start asking questions if I didn't return soon. Reluctantly, I told Kumar we needed to head back. He helped me up, and we brushed the sand off our clothes before walking to the boat.

After seeing Kumar off at the bus stand, I returned home. But from that moment, I couldn't stop thinking about him. Would I see him again? Would he come back to visit me? I didn't know—but I hoped with all my heart that he would.

## Chapter 2

By the following year, we had moved to Hyderabad. My dad secured a significant government contract there, expected to last four to five years, so it made sense for us to relocate. We initially rented a house in Chikadpalli, a middle-class neighbourhood. But for his work, Dad used to visit Jubilli Hill, a rapidly developing area. Seeing its potential, Dad purchased land there and started building a house. Within nine months, construction was complete, and we moved into our new home.

Meanwhile, I continued exchanging letters with Kumar. He mentioned in one letter that he had injured his leg while playing cricket and would be laid up for a while. Despite this, our correspondence remained consistent.

Not long after, Kumar wrote to tell me he was coming to Hyderabad. He planned to stay with his father's friends near the Kacheguda station. Since I had already shared my address for our letters, I also gave him our home phone number so he could reach me when he arrived.

Soon after he reached Hyderabad, Kumar called me. Coincidentally, my parents were planning to attend a wedding in Guntur for a few days. Seeing the perfect opportunity, I invited Kumar to visit our house. I told my mom I couldn't accompany them because I had exams to prepare for.

Kumar visited our home, looking for directions and information about it. The construction of a nearby school made it straightforward for him to find our address. He arrived and pressed the doorbell. I answered the door and welcomed him inside. Seeing him sparked a wave of joy within me. I seated him on the sofa and offered him something to eat or drink.

He responded nonchalantly, saying anything would do. So, I fetched some snacks and tea from the kitchen and placed them on the table. It seemed he was quite hungry because he finished them quickly.

I then joined him on the sofa, turned on the TV, and talked for hours. I mentioned that our parents were away in Guntur for a wedding, and not due for another two days, subtly implying I wanted to spend time with him. We had shared our first kiss on the riverfront earlier, and now I was eager for more.

He caught on to my hint, stood up, and motioned towards the bedroom.

I guided him there. That day, I truly discovered what love meant. He led me to an overwhelming sense of bliss and back.

He began by kissing me, trailing kisses from my mouth down to my legs and back up again. His lips brushed over my chin, then moved down to my throat, stirring a deeper desire within me. Gradually, as he kissed me, he undressed me, leaving me in just my bra and panties. He kissed the top of my breasts, then gently pushed up my bra to continue kissing my breasts, focusing his attention on my nipples with his lips.

He continued down, kissing my stomach, lingering at my navel. With each slow kiss, he eased my panties down, revealing the hair on my pubic area and my vagina. After fully removing my panties, he positioned himself between my legs. Using his tongue, he gently parted my vaginal lips and explored inside, marking perhaps my first real experience of intimacy.

After he was satisfied, he lay beside me, and we dozed off for a while. Later that evening, I treated him to dinner at an upscale restaurant. We returned to my place and spent some time watching TV.

Back in the bedroom, we resumed our act, this time he started by exploring my back. He undressed me, stood behind me, and cupping my breasts, entered me from behind in a doggy-style position. After he was spent, he lay back on the bed.

Two hours later, he woke me up. We went downstairs for coffee and a light snack before heading back to the bedroom. There, we engaged in our final intimate act together. He positioned himself with his penis near my mouth and his mouth at my vagina; we pleased each other this way for about five minutes. Then, I took the lead, sitting on him, guiding his penis inside me, and moving rhythmically. Once satisfied, I rolled off and lay beside him. We shared a kiss, wished each other good night, and fell asleep.

In the morning, I drove him back to his residence and dropped him nearby to his house. He didn't invite me in, and I didn't press to follow him inside.

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The next day, my parents returned. My mother noticed the glow on my face, and asked, "What's happened to you? You seem different."

"I've been studying very hard; that's probably why I look a bit tired," I replied quickly.

"You don't look tired at all," she said, narrowing her eyes. "In fact, you look like you've had a good night's sleep."

"Yes, after finishing my studies, I did sleep well," I said, trying to sound casual.

How could I possibly admit that Kumar had visited and how satisfying our time together had been? I couldn't imagine the kind of punishment I'd face if she ever found out.

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I felt a pang of fear when my period was delayed by two days. Until now, it had always been on time. When it finally came, I wondered if the papaya I'd eaten had played a role.

Life carried on as usual—going to college and returning home—but the days felt unbearably slow. I was anxiously waiting for a word from Kumar about when he might visit again. He used to write letters to me, but they were always friendly and devoid of any romantic tone. Perhaps it was for the best; I feared the consequences if one of those letters ever fell into my parents' hands.

After two long and painful years, I finally received a letter from him. He mentioned that he would be visiting Hyderabad, staying with his sister who had recently married and moved there. Along with the letter, he included her address so I could write to him while he was in the city.

For two days, I eagerly waited for a call from him, but it never came. He must be busy, I thought. Unable to contain my anticipation, I decided to visit him at his sister's house. Taking the address and the car, I drove through the city, stopping to ask for directions along the way.

When I finally arrived, disappointment greeted me instead of Kumar. He wasn't there. His sister's mother-in-law welcomed me, offered me water and tea, and engaged me in a long chat. When I mentioned that Kumar had been my pen pal for several years, she began narrating details about his family.

One thing she said struck me hard: Kumar had come to Hyderabad to write his college exams. This revelation hit me like a thunderbolt—he wasn't studying in Bombay, as he'd always claimed. Was everything he'd told me a lie? Was he a fraud? My mind spiralled into chaos. Had I fallen into the trap of a liar? Worse, had I lost my virginity to someone who wasn't honest? Was I just another victim of his deceit?

I left the house in a daze, her words echoing in my mind. As I walked to the car, questions haunted me. Could he have lied to other girls, too? What had I done?

I drove back toward Jubilee Hills, but by the time I reached the LB Nagar intersection, my thoughts were in turmoil. My mind was spinning as I tried to make sense of it all. I barely noticed the traffic light turning orange. Thinking I could cross before it changed, I accelerated, not seeing the speeding lorry from the side.

The last thing I remember was the lorry colliding with my car.

## Chapter 3

I woke up to the hum of machines and the sterile smell of disinfectant. The world around me was unfamiliar—white walls, harsh fluorescent lights, and the soft beeping of a heart monitor. Tubes ran from my arm to a nearby IV stand, and I felt a dull ache coursing through my body.

I found a button near my bed and pressed it hesitantly. Moments later, a nurse appeared at the door. Her face lit up with surprise and relief.

“You’re awake,” she said gently. “I’ll call the doctor.”

She left, and I was alone again, trying to make sense of my surroundings. Minutes later, she returned. “Your parents will be here soon,” she said softly.

I wanted to ask more, but my throat felt like sandpaper. I gestured weakly for water. The nurse brought a glass with a straw, holding it as I sipped slowly. The cool water soothed my parched throat, giving me the strength to speak.

“Where am I?” I asked, my voice barely above a whisper.

“You’re in New York Hospital,” she replied.

“How did I get here?”

“Your parents brought you here for treatment. You were in a coma for two weeks before they brought you, and you’ve been unconscious here for about a month.”

Her words hit me like a wave. “A month?”

She nodded. “Your father stayed nearby. He had some work in New York, so he stayed back to be close to you.”

I frowned, confusion bubbling up. “Why bring me all the way here? Why not get treatment in India?”

The nurse hesitated. “Your chart mentions an abortion following the accident.”

Her words left me stunned. “An abortion?” I croaked. “That’s impossible. I didn’t... I never...” My voice faltered as my mind raced. “How could that be?”

She shifted uncomfortably. “I’m not sure. I’m just sharing what’s in your records.”

The nurse’s words triggered a flood of fragmented memories. Kumar’s face surfaced in my mind. I remembered visiting his sister’s house, though it felt like a lifetime ago. And before that, there was a night—two years ago, or was it sooner?—when he visited my home in Jubilee Hills.

I recalled serving him tea, followed by dinner at a restaurant. Then we returned to my place, and things grew blurry: the stolen kisses, the whispered words, and then the sound of a door slamming open. A thief had burst in, startling us both.

The thief tossed a bag and fled. Kumar had locked the door and returned, calming me with his presence. But the details of that night blurred together. Did we share an intimacy deeper than I remembered? Could I have become pregnant and somehow forgotten? Or was it all a dream?

The more I tried to piece it together, the foggier it became.

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The door creaked open, pulling me from my thoughts. My parents entered the room, their faces etched with worry.

“How are you feeling?” Mom asked, brushing a strand of hair from my forehead. Her voice trembled, betraying the fear she tried to hide.

Dad stood beside her, silent and solemn. Finally, he spoke. "It was the lorry driver's fault," he said, his voice flat. As if those words could somehow ease the weight of everything.

Neither of them mentioned the pregnancy. Perhaps they thought it was best not to burden me further.

After a few minutes, Dad excused himself, saying he had work to attend to. Mom explained once he left, "Reddy Uncle gave your father some work—a loan for a power generation project near Rajahmundry. He's been busy with that while staying close to you here in New York."

Her explanation was meant to comfort me, but it only deepened the pit of questions growing inside me.

As the room fell quiet, I was left with my thoughts. What truly happened that night with Kumar? How did I end up pregnant, and why was the memory so elusive? And what else had I forgotten during the weeks and months that had blurred into this moment?

The answers felt just out of reach, buried in the fog of my fractured memory.

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It took another month before I was discharged from the hospital. Dad, perhaps thinking it would be best for me to stay away from India for a while, enrolled me in a college in New York to study Hospital Management.

Two years later, I completed my post-graduation and returned to India. During my time in New York, I avoided close relationships, especially with men. My only confidants were my two roommates, who had boyfriends, but I kept my distance from romantic entanglements. Still, Kumar lingered in my thoughts. His memory, once fragmented and faint, became sharper over time.

I remember that day vividly. I was alone in my room, studying when the door creaked open. A shadow loomed in the doorway, and fear gripped me. I shrieked. Then, as if by some miracle, Kumar appeared behind the figure. The intruder dropped a bag and fled.

Kumar inspected the bag and said, "Nothing valuable in here." He then checked the locks on the doors and windows before returning to me.

"There's nothing to worry about. Everything's secure now," he said gently.

I was still trembling, but his calm presence steadied me. When he held me close, I felt safe. Before I knew it, I kissed him. He kissed me back with passion, and that night, we shared our first intimate moments. For the next two days, we were inseparable, completely lost in each other. On the third day, I dropped him off at his sister's house.

Yet, no matter how much I tried, I couldn't remember how the accident had happened. My last memory was of driving through an intersection, the traffic light turning orange, and a lorry speeding toward my car. Then, everything went black.

After returning to Hyderabad, I found Dad deeply involved in a project to build a hospital in partnership with my uncle. It was meant to be for my cousin Rohan, a heart surgeon. To prepare me for my future role, Dad arranged for me to train as a hospital administrator in Mumbai.

In Mumbai, I joined a hospital as a trainee administrator. Six months into my training, a software company approached us to supply a hospital management system. One of their engineers, Rajesh, visited to gather details. I gave him a tour, explaining our requirements. He took notes and left. Later, I learned that the software contract had been facilitated through a connection with the Maharashtra Sena, and our hospital administrator had played a role in securing it.

Months passed with no progress on the software. One day, the administrator's assistant informed me that the boss wanted to see me.



When I entered his office, I saw a man seated opposite him.

The administrator introduced me. "This is Nandini, our trainee hospital administrator. She completed her degree in the USA and is here for training." Then he turned to me. "Nandini, this is Kumar, the person now in charge of the software project. You'll be coordinating with him."

My heart skipped a beat. Kumar.

He turned to me with a polite smile. "Hi, I'm Kumar."

It took every ounce of composure to steady myself. "Come with me," I said, leading him to my cabin.

Once we were seated, I wasted no time addressing the issue. "Your team has only visited twice so far. They've looked around but haven't made any progress."

Kumar nodded thoughtfully. "I expected as much. That's why I've decided to take over the project personally." He handed me his business card.

I glanced at it, noting his title. "You're the Managing Director? And you're taking over this project yourself?"

He smiled faintly. "Yes. I've reassigned Rajesh to another project in Delhi, and the rest of the team is handling other tasks. I want to ensure this project gets completed as soon as possible."

I frowned slightly, trying to mask my surprise. "Why are you handling this yourself?"

"Our company is relatively new, and we don't have a large team yet. Recruiting experienced developers has been challenging, especially since this industry is still in its infancy," Kumar explained.

Intrigued, I asked, "So, how did you end up in this field?"

"It was a series of coincidences," he replied with a faint smile. "Sometime back, a software firm owner approached me to debug some software, that their team couldn't fix. After resolving the issues, he entrusted me with software to manage operations at a factory where I worked. That experience sparked my interest in software development."

He leaned back slightly, reflecting. "I eventually bought a computer and started developing software for political trend analysis. One of my early programs helped a political party win elections, and that success gave me the financial backing to start my own company. Various sources funded us—one party provided office space, others paid advances for trend analysis projects, and a few partners invested capital. I hold the largest share in the company now."

He paused and then said, "Shall we start? Can you show me the departments that need computerisation?"

"Follow me," I said, and we began touring the hospital.

We started with the cash collection counters, where receipts were issued, and moved on to the billing department, where invoices were generated, and patient reports were prepared. Kumar meticulously took notes, observing each department's workflow and collecting sample receipts and reports.

As we concluded the inspection, he said, "If you'd like to visit our office, you're welcome anytime." With that, he took his leave and walked toward the parking lot.

After speaking with the administrator and getting permission to monitor the software development process, I headed to the parking lot as well. To my surprise, Kumar was still there, leaning against his car, smoking.

He stubbed out his cigarette with his shoe just as I approached.

"I thought you'd left," I said, a bit startled.

"I was just about to," he replied casually.

"I got permission from my boss to visit your office and oversee the development. Could you take me with you?"

He smiled slightly. "Sure. Get in."

The drive was short, and we soon arrived at a quaint side bungalow. Kumar parked and gestured toward it.

"This is our new house," he said.

"Wow, this is yours?" I asked, admiring the beautiful structure.

He nodded, his pride evident.

I wandered toward the seaside view and exclaimed, "What an incredible view! You're going to live here?"

He nodded again, then motioned for me to follow him to another house nearby. A servant answered the door and summoned a woman who appeared holding a baby.

"This is Loveleen," Kumar introduced her. "She's one of our major investors and owns an interior decorating firm. Nandini is here to support us with the hospital's software development."

I smiled warmly at Loveleen and, glancing at the baby, asked, "How old is he?"

"Not even a month," Kumar replied for her.

I made a playful face at the baby, who gurgled softly before I handed him back to Loveleen.

"Come with me," Kumar said, leading me to his office nearby.

At the office, he introduced me to Pauleen, the receptionist, and then took me to the developers' cabin.

"She's here to assist with the development," he announced to the team.

Rajesh, who had been part of the project earlier, walked in and looked surprised to see me. "What are you doing here?" he asked.

"She's here to help with the development," Kumar repeated firmly.

Kumar then guided me to another cabin, where he introduced me to a woman named Mahira. "She's part of the marketing team," he said.

Finally, Kumar led me to a private room and said, "This will be your cabin. You can monitor the project's progress from here."

I was astonished. "Wow! My own cabin?" I asked, a mix of excitement and disbelief in my voice.

He smiled. "Everything you need is here. You can use the computer and all the facilities. Come, I'll show you my room."

He guided me to another room nearby.

Looking around, I asked, "Do you live here?"

He shook his head. "No, why?"

"This room looks like someone could live here," I said, noticing the cozy setup. "It has everything you'd need." I glanced around, even opening the cupboard, which was full of clothes.

Closing the cupboard, I asked, "So, where do you actually stay?"

"At Vikhroli," he replied.

"With whom?" I probed further.

"With my wife and kids," he said matter-of-factly.

"You're married? And you also have kids?" I asked, surprised. "This room seems like a bachelor pad. If you don't go home, you could easily stay here for the night."

He chuckled. "That's exactly the idea behind setting it up. Would you like some tea?"

"Yes, please," I replied.

He prepared two cups of tea, handed me one, and sat down at the table with his.

"How much did you spend setting up this office?" I asked, curious.

"I'm not sure of the exact amount yet. I haven't received all the bills. By the end of the financial year, I'll have a clearer picture," he said.

"So, you haven't paid for everything yet?"

"I've covered the cost of the computers and equipment," he explained. "The interior design, including this room," he gestured around, "was done by Loveleen's firm. Whatever the cost, I'll add it to her capital share."

"You've spent so much on this building. Is it yours?"

"Yes, it's in my name, along with the building next door, which we plan to shift into soon," he said.

"Was it gifted to you by your family?"

"No, it's all from my own earnings."

"How long did it take you to earn all this?"

"Around a year," he replied casually.

I stared at him, incredulous. "If you can earn this much in a year, whatever you're doing must be really good. What were you doing before this?"

"I was a manager in a factory," he said.

"What did you earn then?"

"Let's just say it wasn't much," he admitted with a shrug. "We got lucky with our business. Most of the credit goes to Loveleen. What started as a favour for her turned into all of this."

I shook my head in disbelief. "You have to tell me the whole story. None of this makes sense."

He leaned back and began recounting his journey.

I was born in Vijayawada into a middle-class family. My paternal grandfather passed away when my father was still young. My maternal grandfather, a doctor by profession, was once wealthy but lost his fortune in the lottery ticket business. After abandoning that business, he started a clinic near our house.

I studied in Vijayawada until the 8th standard. Then, due to my father's transfer, we moved to Vizag, where I completed my 9th standard. My brother was repeating his 10th standard during that time. It was in Vizag that I began playing cricket for our school team. Later, my father was transferred to Bombay. Since he couldn't secure quarters immediately, he sent us back to our village while he moved to Bombay. I completed my 10th standard in the village.

Afterwards, we returned to Vijayawada, but my family moved to Bombay, leaving me with my grandfather's family. I enrolled in Intermediate studies there. During this time, I met Sneha, a classmate who lived near our clinic. We often saw each other from our terraces and grew closer when she visited the clinic for a fever. Our bond strengthened through combined studies, and she even arranged for us to commute to college together by rickshaw.

Our relationship deepened during my vacation trip to Bombay. Upon my return, we shared our first hug, though we remained focused on our studies. Sneha often had lunch at our house despite belonging to a vegetarian family, while we were non-vegetarians. This cultural difference ultimately separated us. After my Intermediate, I moved to Hyderabad for my degree while Sneha's family sent her to their village, barring her from returning to Vijayawada until she completed her degree.

A year later, I eloped with Sneha to Hyderabad and we got married. Over the next two years, she earned an RMP certification. After completing my degree, we moved to Bombay where Sneha worked at a clinic, and I partnered with Kirit in a can manufacturing business.

During a trip to Hyderabad for my sister's wedding, Sneha's cousin took her away under false pretenses. Unknown to us, she was pregnant at the time. Her sudden departure left me heartbroken, and I spiraled into depression. Sahithi, a close friend, helped me recover. We shared a flat in Vikhroli, living as friends. When I later discovered Sneha had given birth to twins, I mistakenly assumed she had remarried and decided to marry Sahithi.

Upon learning of my marriage, Sneha returned, and we all began living together in Sahithi's house. Later, Kirit, Mahira, and I started a hotel at Bombay Central, where I sent Sneha to assist Kirit and Mahira. Tragically, she was involved in a fire accident that left my children motherless. Sahithi stepped in to care for the children, with additional help from Chitti, arranged by my mother.

Sahithi worked as a typist at Godrej but distanced herself after being transferred to the typing pool. Around this time, Sunitha entered my life. One evening, while returning from a client visit, a woman named Loveleen scraped my scooter. I visited her interior decoration office the next day, and Sahithi later joined her company. Loveleen promoted Sahithi to manager before moving to Delhi.

During a meeting with her friends, Loveleen opened up about her husband's misdeeds. Investigating further, I discovered his illicit activities. To expose him, I took Sunitha, who had been in an accident and introduced her to Loveleen's husband as a call girl, offering my services as a pimp. I later saved a woman named Dimple from pimps and brought her to Delhi, using her as bait to trap Loveleen's husband and a minister in a bribery scandal.

With evidence in hand, I informed Loveleen, who instructed me to present it to her father. The revelations led to the downfall of the Haryana government. When elections were announced, I helped Loveleen's father secure victory, making him the Chief Minister.

As a token of gratitude, Loveleen gifted me a car, a bike, and a bungalow, which we converted into office space. I then started a software company with my friends as partners, marking a new chapter in my life.

I asked, "So, you got all this for helping with the elections?"

"You could say that. But the software played a significant role," he said, sidestepping details about the house.

I summarized, "You're from Vijayawada. Sneha was too. You studied in Hyderabad, moved to Bombay, worked in a factory, married a Maharashtrian, met a Punjabi woman, and now you have all this."

He laughed. "That's one way to sum it up."

"So, Loveleen was pivotal in all of this," I noted.

We eventually sat down to focus on the software. Together, we made detailed notes about the development process.

"I'll upload everything to the server so you can access it from your computer," he explained. "If you make any changes, save them back to the server. I'll start by preparing the data tables."

With that, he left me in my new room and headed out to the parking lot.

## Chapter 4

It was the day of the board meeting. All the partners had gathered in the boardroom when we heard a commotion outside, prompting us to leave our room. There were members of the press with cameras and videographers.

Kumar, maintaining his calm, addressed them, "What can I do for you?"

The press erupted with questions, to which Kumar responded, "Can one person speak at a time?"

A journalist stepped forward, asking, "Is it true that the minister invited you for a software order?"

"Yes, we went to Delhi for a software order," Kumar confirmed.

Upon being asked for proof of the order, Kumar replied, "As the minister stated, the details of the software order cannot be disclosed."

"How can we be sure you're telling the truth then?" the journalist challenged, thinking he had Kumar cornered.

But Kumar had a clever counter-strategy. "If you want to see the order, you'll need to sign a non-disclosure agreement (NDA). Then we can show you the order."

"Alright, I'll sign on behalf of everyone here," the journalist agreed.

Kumar then instructed, "Loveleen, call our lawyer. By the time he arrives, I'll warn you again: if you disclose the contents after signing, you'll be liable for a fine of one lakh rupees and potential jail time as decided by the court. Remember that before signing."

For the next forty-five minutes, until the lawyer arrived, Kumar kept the journalist on edge with these threats. When the lawyer finally appeared, Kumar briefed him on the need for an NDA to disclose the order.

The lawyer asked, "Can I get a typewriter?"

"You can use the computer on Pauleen's desk and print it in our server room," Kumar replied.

The lawyer prepared the agreement, printed it, and brought it back. Kumar warned once more, "Remember, if this gets out, you're responsible," handing over the documents.

The journalist read the conditions, then declared, "We believe you went only for the software order." When chided by his peers, he suggested they sign the NDA if they wanted to see the order, but he left the office instead.

The others, looking at each other, followed him out, returning to sit in their chairs. I also trailed behind, staying by the door.

Sahithi, puzzled, asked, "What is this drama?"

Kumar explained, "This is the reverse sting operation we pulled on the minister. They wanted to prove him wrong by catching us in a lie. By making them sign the NDA, I thwarted their attempt to get the order's information. Even if they sign it and see the order, they can't claim it's valueless, so we're safe either way."

"Is this what you were doing in Delhi for them? For this, they're giving you all this?" Sahithi gestured around the office.

"It's not just that. To protect their positions, they do what they can," Kumar responded. Noticing me, he said, "Nandini, come sit. Hey guys, this is Nandini; she works with the hospital we're doing a project for. She studied Hospital Administration in America and is now a trainee there."

I greeted everyone, "Hi to you all."

Kumar then redirected the meeting, "Now, where are we? Our second point on the agenda is whether to use the house between our office and Loveleen's as a residence or reserve it for future office use."

Nishitha remarked, "We're already working on the building for residential use."

Sahithi added, "I've decided to move here; I've even planned for the children's school."

Loveleen concluded, "This office space should suffice for at least another five years. So, we agree to use it for residential purposes."

Everyone agreed with an "Aye."

"The next point is marketing," Kumar said, turning to Mahira, "What's your take on this?"

Mahira explained, "Our target group isn't aware of the benefits of computerization, which might explain why we're not getting orders."

After a silence, I asked, "Can I speak?"

"You can certainly speak," Kumar encouraged.

I shared my view, "The issue Mahira mentioned might not be the only problem. I believe your sales team could be targeting the wrong clientele or presenting the wrong picture. You should engage with clients before the financial year starts so they can allocate a budget for such expenses. If you approach them three months into the year, they won't know where to fit the costs in their budget. We need to show them the future benefits and how they align with capital expenditure. That way, they can adjust their capital budget."

Kumar asked, "So, you think the main sales issue is how customers allocate their budget?"

I replied, "I believe that's one of the significant problems causing hesitation among customers."

He looked at Mahira for her response.

Mahira said, "I agree, it's one of the points, particularly for larger companies where board approval is needed. But for medium-sized or family-run businesses, it's different. Take your factory, for example; why did you consider computerization?"

He explained, "We had to because Mr. Kathuria offered his software for free, giving him time to debug it. So, are you suggesting we give our software away for free to hook customers?"

Mahira replied, "We could consider that approach."

He continued, "Then we need a product that can be offered on a trial basis. If customers are satisfied, they'll buy it; otherwise, they can't use it after the trial expires."

Mahira suggested, "We could trial the software you made for the factory."

He questioned, "It's up to you to sell it. Can you do that? How many trial versions can you convert into sales?"

She admitted, "I don't know; I need to discuss this with my team."

He agreed, "You do that." Then turning to me, he asked, "Nandini, what's your take on the trial software idea?"

I responded, "You could turn the hospital software into a product. My father and uncle are planning to build a hospital in Hyderabad. My cousin is a surgeon, and we're still in the planning and financing stages. I did my hospital management course to manage our future hospital. That's why I'm working as a trainee here. When our hospital is complete, I'd prefer to purchase the software rather than use a trial."

He then offered, "On another note, if you need financing for your hospital project, let me know; we have sources interested in such investments."

This was unexpected. Where did he get the money? He hadn't mentioned having surplus funds before. I needed to be cautious, so I said, "I'll speak with my father regarding the finances."

He then asked, "Does anyone have any other points to discuss?"

Sahithi inquired, "How can you get investors for such a project?"

He answered, "Through our contacts, we can gather investors. I know many who want to convert black money into white by investing in such projects."

Sahithi pressed, "Can you definitely secure such investors?"

He affirmed, "I'm sure we can from our contacts."

Nishitha then asked, "Are you prepared to settle the bills for interior decorating?"

He responded, "If you raise the bills, I can pay them off, or your firm can convert those bills into capital shares."

Loveleen nodded in agreement.

Sahithi questioned further, "Are you sure you can handle the bills and have enough running capital?"

He reassured, "Absolutely, we're liquid at the moment. I can inject more money into the business or take a bank loan. There are many options. I'm thinking about returning the money I borrowed for the children's future in the form of bonds."

He went to his office and returned with bonds worth five lakh rupees, handing them to Sahithi. "This is the amount I'm returning for the kids' future. Use the interest for their education."

It seemed like a spontaneous decision, yet he showed no regret.

Looking around, seeing no further comments, he suggested, "Shall we adjourn the meeting?" Everyone agreed with an "Aye."

He instructed Pauleen to prepare the minutes of the meeting and distribute them.

Then he proposed, "Shall we go see the house? Many of you haven't seen it yet."

I joined the others as we toured the new house, with those who hadn't been there before exploring it.

He mentioned, "We'll need servants to maintain the house. I'll employ the office cleaners for this as well." He waited at the back exit for everyone to gather. Once everyone was there, he opened the door to the beachside where he had organized a party for the partners. He said, "Someone call the others from the office."

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*I'm not sure why I've become so involved in their business. My initial intention was simply to learn how they were developing software, relevant for the hospital project my father and uncle were planning. That's why I opted for a trainee position here rather than directly assisting with the construction. Now, I understand that software will undoubtedly shape the future. There's this fear that technology might displace human workers, but I've always believed that while robotics or computerization won't replace humans, they might necessitate a shift. The less skilled labour force could be replaced by a more intelligent workforce adept at using these tools. It doesn't mean jobs will disappear; instead, workers might transition to different roles, requiring them to upgrade their skills, which is beneficial for their personal growth, income, and the education of their children. Governments can only do so much; self-improvement is key.*

*Now, Kumar mentioned providing financial support for our hospital. Do we really need that? Can he genuinely offer it? His company seems small, with a modest staff; they're just starting out. It appears this hospital project might be their first major endeavour, and his developers seem to lack experience, as evidenced by Kumar's need to personally kickstart the project. The marketing director seemed clueless about selling their software during the board meeting. How can someone who doesn't fully grasp his own company's operations provide financial backing? His confidence seems to stem from the financial sources he's connected with, and the tales about how he acquired these properties suggest he might have amassed wealth quickly. If his stories hold true, he could potentially offer financial support.*

*However, involving outsiders in our project could lead to interference in daily operations, complicating management. Long-term, running the hospital will be my responsibility as its administrator. I need to consider this carefully. First, I'll discuss with my father what our exact financial needs are. Then, I'll decide whether to talk further with Kumar based on that.*

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Kumar hosted a housewarming ceremony for his new bungalow, where he and his family planned to move in. He invited his parents, relatives, and friends for the occasion. The ceremony began with traditional rituals in the morning. On the following evening, he organized a party specifically for business guests.

The day of the housewarming started with a traditional puja to mark the entry into the new home. This was followed by the Satyanarayana Vratha Puja, a customary ritual in Andhra Pradesh for such occasions. After the ceremonies, lunch was served to the guests. Since the puja required a vegetarian menu, the family decided to schedule a non-vegetarian party for the next evening.

Many relatives attended the housewarming, including some who couldn't make it to Kumar's wedding. This event gave them an opportunity to visit Bombay for a family function and to see the new bungalow and adjoining office that Kumar had built. They were eager to witness the house in person, as its grandeur was beyond anything they had seen before—something reminiscent of scenes from movies.

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The next day, Kumar brought his cousins from Andhra to my room. He knocked, entered, and introduced them, mentioning that they had some questions for me. He encouraged them to ask freely. They inquired about various aspects of my life, such as where I was from, why I chose hospital management, what my plans were after finishing my training, and whether I intended to return to Hyderabad or stay and work here.

Interestingly, Kumar himself had never asked me about my personal details before. I shared with his cousins that I was originally from Guntur. In 1986, my family moved to Hyderabad, where my father, a businessman, settled. Later, I pursued my Hospital Management studies in New York. After completing my education, I returned to Hyderabad to help my dad and uncle build a hospital for my cousin, who is a heart surgeon. However, before undertaking the hospital project, I decided to gain practical experience by training at a hospital in Bombay.

As I recounted my story, Kumar didn't seem to recognize anything from it. Based on the narrative he had shared with me earlier, there seemed to be no prior connection between us.

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In the evening, Kumar hosted a grand party for his business guests. Among them was the Maharashtra Sena Pramukh, who had recommended Kumar's firm for a hospital software project. The Sena Pramukh approached me and asked about my background, followed by questions about our hospital administrator and how he was doing. I responded respectfully, aware that he had entrusted Kumar with a significant project to assist in the upcoming elections.

Kumar then escorted the Sena Pramukh to the bar, where he collected a drink before moving on to meet the President and Vice President of a courier company, who had been introduced by Mahira. Meanwhile, I spent time with Kumar's cousins, chatting and joking in Telugu so that others couldn't follow our conversation.

Later, Kumar introduced Mr. Lal, the President, to the Shakha Pramukh, Mr. Deshmukh. The Shakha Pramukh shared stories about how Kumar had supported their group during the riots and narrowly escaped the Air India building bombing. Kumar elaborated on those events, but their conversation shifted when Mr. Lal asked Kumar to show him Loveleen's house to view its interior decorations. Kumar obliged and left with him.

As they went off, Mr. Deshpande, another guest, approached me and initiated a discussion about building a hospital for the poor. I explained our plans for a similar project, sharing details about the land and other arrangements. He listened attentively before excusing himself to speak with Kumar and then leaving the party.



I noticed Kumar heading out to the front of the house and stepping outside, likely to buy cigarettes. He returned about half an hour later and saw Loveleen sitting with the courier company's Vice President. Approaching her, he mentioned that a servant was looking for her, prompting her to leave for her house. I wondered when he had visited her house himself.

Mahira then approached Kumar, and the two walked toward the seashore, possibly to smoke. From the gate, I watched him hand her a cigarette and light one for himself. After some time, they returned, and Kumar went to the bar to fetch a drink before settling at a table. Mahira joined him, dropping a packet onto his lap. Kumar took out a cigarette, lit it, and began smoking. Mahira took it from him, took a drag, and passed it back. They continued their conversation, seemingly about something serious.

I observed from a distance, unable to hear their discussion. Despite his wealth, two bungalows in Juhu, a successful software business, and numerous connections, Kumar appeared burdened. I wondered what could be troubling him.

Eventually, he went back into the house. I waited for a while, but when he didn't return, I decided against going back to my hostel. Instead, I returned to my room in the office and lay down, reflecting on the evening's events.

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Kumar was not in the office when I went looking for him, so I approached Pauleen to ask about his whereabouts. She told me he had gone to the hospital. I wondered what might have happened, as I had planned to discuss the hospital application with him. Pauleen assured me she would remind him once he returned.

Later, I heard Kumar come back, but he immediately took a call and left again, this time with Sunitha. Curious, I went back to Pauleen for an update, and she informed me they had gone to the courier company after Kumar received a call from their Vice President. When Kumar returned a couple of hours later, he seemed pleased—apparently, he had secured a new project. Kumar called Rajesh to discuss the details.

When Rajesh came out of Kumar's room, I asked him what the project was about. Rajesh explained that Kumar had landed a significant project involving data transfer for the courier company's branches. Realizing that Kumar might be too busy to discuss the hospital application, I joined the other developers to continue working on it.

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The next day, Kumar returned with Sunitha, this time with all her luggage. It seemed she was moving in, as she now had a room in his house. I found their relationship intriguing. It seemed very close, but they didn't appear to be relatives. Kumar is from Andhra, and Sunitha is from Tamil Nadu, though I had seen some of his relatives from Madras before. However, none of them interacted with her beyond a polite word from his aunt.

Later, Kumar brought Sunitha to the office and arranged for her to have her own room. Not long after, he took Sahithi to see a doctor. I couldn't help but wonder if Sahithi had some medical issue. When they returned, Sahithi appeared to be in poor condition and needed Kumar's help to get into the house. I speculated whether it might have been an abortion, but there was no confirmation.

Meanwhile, Rajesh informed Kumar that the courier company's application was complete. Kumar instructed Rajesh to take Mahira along to the courier company to deliver a demo. The two of them left on Kumar's bike.

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Later, I stood at Pauleen's desk, chatting with her since she usually knows what's happening around the office. Kumar came out of his room, looking like he had just woken up. He hurried to his house and then went over to Loveleen's place before leaving in his car. About an hour later, he returned, holding the hand of a young girl. Her dress was shabby, but her appearance suggested she was from a respectable family. I couldn't help but wonder who she was and why Kumar had brought her back with him.

Later he took the girl and Sahithi went out in his car.

Later I came to know the girl's name is Leena and when they landed in Bombay, her guardians died in an accident. She was brought to the Sena Shakha and Kumar went there and brought her here. Later he took her to his parent's house in Wadala and left her there.

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Kumar called me and two developers into his cabin. Once we were seated, he turned to the developers and asked their names. I found it surprising—did he not know their names? They introduced themselves as Upendra and Sawant.

He then asked them about the pending tasks based on the details I had provided earlier. We spent about an hour discussing the necessary modifications, and he instructed us to focus on implementing them.

Turning to me, Kumar asked, "Nandini, how is the work progressing on building the hospital?"

I replied, "They've acquired the land for the building and plan to start the construction after consulting their guru, who will fix an auspicious date for the foundation stone-laying ceremony."

He followed up, "Are they inviting anyone for the foundation stone-laying ceremony?"

I responded, "If you're interested in visiting Hyderabad, I can arrange a tour with my father."

Kumar nodded and said, "Please do that. I'd like to visit the site and review the hospital plans. Incidentally, the Shakha Pramukh mentioned they also want to build a hospital for the poor here in Bombay."

I remarked, "It's commendable that they want to build a hospital for the poor, but ours isn't for the poor."

He acknowledged, "I understand. If your father can assist with their project, they're willing to pay consultation fees, so there won't be any issues on that front. They're even open to providing financial support for your hospital."

I assured him, "I'll confirm the date and let you know."

He thanked me, and I returned to my room to resume work.

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Kumar must have been worried about the kids because he went out and brought home two small puppies. They're Great Danes, just days old, one male and one female. He asked Chitty to put them in a box for now, but we plan to build a dog house in the backyard. He's named them Sonu and Monu.

Kumar also built gates between the three properties, so now the puppies can roam freely among them.

Rajesh has returned after completing his project with the courier company. Meanwhile, our hospital software is progressing well and should be ready in a few days.

Dad called to let me know that the muhurta (auspicious time) for the hospital's stone-laying ceremony has been set for next Monday. I told Kumar the timing is confirmed, and he's welcome to attend. After checking with Sahithi and Sunitha, he agreed to join us.

Kumar has already booked the first flight on Sunday morning for our trip to Hyderabad.

## Chapter 5

We both caught the flight and landed in Hyderabad. After collecting our luggage, I started looking for the driver. "My father said he'd send a car," I mentioned while scanning the area. Instead, I saw my cousin, Rohan. I walked over, hugged him, and asked, "What are you doing here? I didn't expect you to pick me up."

Rohan smiled and said, "I came to see you. It's been a while." I introduced him to Kumar, and Rohan said, "Glad to meet you. I've heard a lot about you from Nandini." Kumar looked at me curiously, and Rohan added, "All good things, don't worry. Let's go."

We got into the car. I sat next to Rohan and started chatting with him as he drove us to our bungalow in Jubilee Hills. The area seemed quiet, with only a few houses scattered around. Kumar remarked, "This area feels pretty isolated."

Rohan reassured him, "Don't let that fool you. The surrounding land has been bought by VIPs. This is an up-and-coming area."

Kumar nodded, looking at the bungalow. "Nice building."

I chimed in, "It's nice, but it's nothing compared to what you have in Bombay." Rohan gave me a look, and I clarified, "Kumar has two bungalows in Juhu, both facing the sea."

Rohan asked, "What do you do with two bungalows?"

Kumar explained, "I use one for our office and the other for residential purposes."

I excitedly added, "He also has two Great Dane puppies. They're three months old, and he's thinking of sending them for training. They roam freely between three properties."

Curious, Rohan asked, "What's the third property?"

I explained, "That belongs to his business partner, Loveleen, who lives next door."

We arrived at the house, and Kumar was shown to the guest room. After settling in, he joined us in the living room, where my father, Subba Rao, greeted him warmly. Dad shared the plans for the new hospital and said, "Nandini contributed a lot to the design. Her studies have been helpful."

He asked Kumar how the kids were doing, to which Kumar replied, "They're doing fine." The two of them then talked about Kumar's background for over an hour. Eventually, Dad suggested we all head to lunch.

At the dining table, we ate quietly, as Dad believes in not talking during meals. Once we finished, Kumar excused himself to step outside for a cigarette. Rohan and I followed. Kumar lit a cigarette, and Rohan took one too. They smoked in silence before Kumar asked, "Where are you working now, Rohan?"

Rohan replied, "I'm working with a hospital. My dream is to have my own."

Kumar inquired, "How long until it's built?"

"At a conservative estimate, it'll take about nine months to a year," Rohan said.

"So, can we expect it to open by the end of next year?" Kumar asked.

Rohan nodded, "Hopefully. It might take a bit longer to get all the equipment, but by 1995, it should be operational."

After finishing their cigarettes, we went back inside. I suggested we watch a movie, and I asked Kumar, "Are you okay watching a Telugu film?"

Kumar smiled, "I'm fine with any language movie. I haven't watched a Telugu movie in a long time. I think the last one I saw in a theater was with Sneha when I was in college."

Sensing his emotions welling up, I quickly said, "Let's go now, or we'll miss the start."

We went to a theater showing *Mayalodu* starring Rajendra Prasad. Rohan got us tickets, and I sat between the two of them. Throughout the movie, I whispered bits of commentary to Kumar about the actors and plot. When it was over, I asked him how he liked it.

"Excellent," he said with a smile.

Afterward, Rohan took us to a restaurant. He asked Kumar what he wanted, and Kumar said, "Just tea." I ordered dosas for both of us, and while we are eating, Kumar sipped his tea. When we finished, I ordered ice cream, but Kumar excused himself, saying he'd wait outside.

Five minutes later, we joined him outside. Rohan asked, "Why did you step out?"

Kumar replied, "Just for a smoke." We then got in the car and headed back to the house. Rohan dropped us off, mentioning he had work to attend to, and I went to my room to change.

Meanwhile, my father sat down with Kumar and continued the conversation. He asked about politics and why the Telugu Desam Party had failed in the recent elections. Kumar, though not very involved in Andhra politics, shared his views on national trends, particularly how the Sena was likely to come into power in Maharashtra. They discussed political strategies and the importance of strong leadership, especially concerning foreign policy and nuclear threats from countries like Pakistan.

After a while, I sensed Kumar was growing tired of the heavy conversation and suggested we step outside. He thanked my father for the discussion, and we went to sit on a bench in the garden. Kumar lit another cigarette, and after a few moments, I said, "I thought you were getting bored."

"I wasn't bored, but I needed a smoke," he replied, taking a drag.

Later that evening, Rohan returned, and we made plans to go out for dinner. I suggested a new restaurant near Jubilee Hills, and we headed out around 8 PM. After a couple of drinks and dinner, I drove us back to the house. Kumar seemed unusually quiet, and when I showed him my room earlier, he had quickly left, his behavior puzzling me.

It seemed like something was on his mind, but I couldn't quite figure out what. When I knocked on his door later that night, he opened it, and I found him sitting on the bed. I joined him, asking, "What's going on?"

He handed me the book he was reading, and I noticed it was a mystery novel. "Earlier, when you were in my room, you said something strange. What did you mean?"

Kumar hesitated before answering, "When I walked into your room, I had this strange feeling like I'd been there before... and we had spent time on your bed."

I was surprised, but I smiled. "Then why don't we spend some time there now?"

He shook his head, "In the end it didn't end well for me. You left me heartbroken. It took me a long time to recover."

I looked at him, "Why are you so afraid of heartbreak? Just enjoy the moment."

He sighed, "When Sneha left, I was devastated. Sahithi helped me pick up the pieces. But now... I'm not sure she can do that again. She's in a bad place herself. I don't think I can handle another heartbreak."

I asked gently, "Then why did you start a relationship with Sunitha?"

Kumar explained, "Our relationship is different. There are no expectations beyond the physical. We understand each other. The only time we had a misunderstanding was about Mahira, but once that was cleared up, everything went back to normal. We can stay in the same house and keep our distance. The only thing that can come between us is jealousy."

I promised, "I won't leave you, ever."

Kumar smiled faintly. "Let's just keep things professional for now. We have a lot of work ahead of us, and I don't want to complicate things."

I nodded, "Okay, but I'll give you time to think it over. Good night," I said, leaving the room.

As I lay in bed, I thought about his fear of heartbreak. It wasn't me he feared losing—it was Sahithi's support that he was unsure of. I needed to show him that I would be there for him, no matter what.

If we shared such a connection, then who was it that visited our house that night? Or was it a day? My foggy mind couldn't connect the event Kumar mentioned. Was he referring to me leaving him? Was he talking about the time I had an accident and slipped into a coma? Did he think I abandoned him then? I couldn't tell what was real and what was a dream. Did we both share the same dream? How could that be possible?

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I knocked on the door, and Kumar got up to open it.

I said, "Get ready, we have to go."

He replied, "I'll be ready in 10 minutes." He quickly took a bath, changed, and came downstairs.

I handed him a cup of coffee. I was already dressed in traditional wear and ready to go. He took the cup from me and started sipping.

After finishing my coffee, I took his cup and went to the kitchen.

When I returned, I asked, "Do you want breakfast?"

He said, "There's no urgency for it, I just had coffee."

Rohan came and urged us to leave.

Kumar got up, and we went with Rohan to the car.

Kumar asked, "Is no one else coming with us?"

Rohan replied, "It's just the three of us. The others have already left."

We went to the hospital land, where arrangements for the puja had already been made. We stood a little behind as the purohit started performing the bhoomi puja rituals. After completing the puja, we returned to the house.

I said, "Let's have breakfast."

We went to the dining hall, had our breakfast and tea, and then returned to the hall.

Someone switched on the TV and changed the channel to the news. The newsreader started reading the main news after the highlights.

She read, "In a shocking turn of events in Delhi, Haryana CM's son-in-law, Gurvinder Singh, was murdered in broad daylight a few hours ago. While he was coming out of his house, someone stopped his car outside the gate and shot him twice in the head. He was declared dead at the scene and taken to the hospital for a post-mortem."

There were reports of many people expressing shock over his murder. Someone claimed it must be the act of business rivals.

Kumar got up and called Loveleen at her house.

He asked, "I just watched the news on TV. Is it true?"

He listened and then asked, "What are you going to do?"

He said, "I'm starting now," and hung up the phone.

I was standing beside him, listening. "Do you need to go anywhere?" I asked.

He said, "I have to go to Delhi."

"Why? What happened?" I asked.

He said, "Loveleen's husband was murdered in Delhi."

I exclaimed, "Loveleen's husband was murdered?"

"Yes," he replied.

"So, you are going to Delhi to be with her?" I asked.

He said, "It's not just that. She has to get her affairs in order. It wasn't business rivalry that killed him; it was political rivalry. She asked me to be there, so I have to go. Can you get a travel agent to book my tickets?"

I said, "I'm coming with you."

He asked, "What will you do there?"

"I want to be there with you," I replied.

He said, "Okay, see about the tickets. Take my card and get the tickets." I called the agent and asked him to book two tickets to Delhi.

He went to his room, packed his bag, and got ready for travel. I came over and said, "I got tickets for Delhi. I'm packing and will be ready in five minutes. We have to leave in 10 minutes."

He said, "I'm ready," showing his packed bag. He informed Loveleen about the time of our flight.

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We went to the airport, collected the tickets, checked in, and waited for the gate call.

I asked, "What is your real relationship with Loveleen?"

He said, "She is a partner in our firm."

I asked, "Is that the only relationship you have with her?"

He replied, "I treat her like a friend. She depends on me for support. Her family also supports us financially; otherwise, I couldn't have started the firm."

I said, "So, you are saying you do not have any physical relationship with her."

He said, "I have never imagined having a physical relationship with her. I have always kept her at arm's length. We never had an intimate relationship. I never imagined it like that with her."

He took a breather and added, "Except with Sunitha, I never had a relationship with anyone else."

I asked, "Can I believe you?"

He said, "If you want me to promise on anyone, I can promise it."

I said, "There is no need for promises. Your word is enough for me. The only thing I cannot understand is your devotion to her."

He said, "Some things can't be understood, like our relationship. What is our relationship, you tell me?"

I said, "I think we are friends."

In the meantime, the gates opened, and boarding was announced. We got up, showed our boarding passes, went inside the aircraft, and sat down in our seats. I linked my hand with his and sat. He did not object to that.

When the lunch cart came, I unlinked my hand, collected the lunch, and started eating. He ate his lunch and handed over the remains when the air hostess came to collect them.

We reached Delhi, collected our baggage, and came out. A person in a driver's uniform waved.

Kumar went over to him and asked, "How come you are here?"

He said, "Madam called me. She said you are also coming. If you reach first, she told me to tell you to wait for her."

He handed him the luggage and said, "Put them in the car. We will wait for her here."

We looked at the board for incoming flights. The next flight from Bombay was due to land in 30 minutes. We sat down on the seats and waited for the flight to arrive.

When Loveleen arrived, she looked at me, questioning why I had come with him. She handed her luggage to Vishal and said, "First drop me at my parent's place, then take them to the flat."

When she got down, she said, "I will give you a ring when I get time," and went inside the house. Vishal drove us to the flat.

We went inside the flat, which was neat and clean. Someone must be keeping it tidy. We took our bags and put them in the bedroom.

We had not even settled down when the phone rang. It was Loveleen. She said, "Be at Guru's house in half an hour, wait outside the gate."

Kumar said, "Okay," and informed Vishal about going to Guru's house.

We went over to Guru's bungalow and waited outside the gate. When the watchman inquired, Vishal told him that we were waiting for Loveleen Madam to arrive.

Hearing Loveleen's name, he went back to his seat. After about five minutes, Loveleen arrived with Dhruv. Kumar picked him up from her. She had a stern face, and we went inside with her. The hall was filled with Guru's relatives.

Guru's body was placed on a pedestal in the center of the room. People were coming and placing flower garlands on his body. We stood aside, and she went and stood beside his head. She had put on a veil and kept looking at the floor.

Someone asked for the baby, and Kumar handed him over. They touched his foot to pay respects and handed him back.

In the meantime, Vishal brought a garland, and I placed it on Guru's body on behalf of Loveleen.

Someone from the CM's office came with a garland and placed it on him. After finishing the formalities, they took the body in a van.

Kumar took Dhruv and went with the van to the crematorium. I waited with Loveleen in her room, giving her company.

Kumar returned and gave Dhruv to Loveleen. She went inside a room.

Kumar looked at me, signalling to be with her. I followed her into the room.

They were placing a photo of Guru and lighting a lamp in front of it. Someone was making arrangements for people to sit in front of the photo. I, along with Loveleen, came out and sat at the head of the group. I brought Dhruv and gave him to Kumar to hold.

He put Dhruv on his shoulder and rocked him to sleep. Someone arranged eatables on the side. Kumar went and asked for tea. He picked up the teacup, sat down on a chair, put the cup aside, placed Dhruv in his lap, picked up the cup, and sipped his tea. He must be used to having Dhruv with him.

I looked at the time; it was nearing 8 pm. People were still sitting in front of Guru's photo, paying their respects and leaving.

Kumar looked at Loveleen, who was playing the role of a grieving widow brilliantly. I knew she did not have any feelings for him, but in front of all these people, she had to act her part. I went and took Dhruv from Kumar and handed him to Loveleen. He got up and went out, possibly for a smoke.

I went with Loveleen to her room. She gave Dhruv milk, rocked him to sleep, and came out to sit down.

Kumar came inside. Dhruv woke up, and Loveleen gave him to me. She got up, took him, and went to the same room.

Kumar told me to take something for her to eat there.

I took a plate, placed some eatables on it, and took it to the room Loveleen had entered.

By the time I came out, Kumar had taken a plate with a small quantity of eatables and went to a side to eat.

I came over and said, "Loveleen told us to go back to the flat. Someone from her family has come to be with her. She told us to come tomorrow after 11."

He asked, "Does she need the car or driver?"

I said, "Take him with us. She won't need the car."

He said, "Then inform her we are going to the flat."

I went out in search of Vishal. After informing Loveleen, I came back, and he asked, "Did you have something to eat?"

I said, "I had something. Let's go."

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We went to the flat, and Kumar asked Vishal to help separate the single beds that were joined together. Kumar took a bath, came back, chose a bed, and sat down. I sat on another bed.

Vishal came over and asked, "Do you need anything?"

Kumar replied, "Give me a cup of tea."

I added, "One cup for me too."

Vishal said, "I will prepare the tea," and went to the kitchen.

Kumar went to the hall, sat down on the sofa, and lit a cigarette. Vishal brought three cups of tea and placed them on the table.

Kumar shouted, "Nandini, come and have your tea."

I shouted back, "I am coming."

Vishal took a cigarette from the pack and lit it. I came, picked up a cup, and seeing both of them smoking, went back to the bedroom.

After finishing his cigarette and tea, Kumar came back to the bedroom. He picked up a book and continued reading.

Kumar put the cups on the nightstand, woke me up to have coffee, picked up a cup, and went back to the hall. He lit a cigarette and started sipping his coffee. After that, he came to the bedroom. By that time, I had finished my coffee and went back to sleep. He woke me up, saying, "Vishal is getting breakfast. Get up and have a bath."

I got up reluctantly, saying, "Let me sleep for some time."

He said, "If you want to sleep, you have the whole day for that. Did you come with me to sleep or what?"

I took a towel and went to the bathroom.

It took me around fifteen minutes to bathe and change, and then I went and sat beside him.

He asked, "Are you feeling bored here?"

I said, "Not bored, just a little cold. We did not bring our warm clothes for this season."

He said, "While going to Guru's house, we will get something to wear. The cold has not picked up yet, but it will get colder."

When Vishal brought breakfast, we finished and got ready to go to Guru's house. Kumar said, "Vishal, take us to the cloth market."

He asked, "Nandini, what would you prefer, a sweater or a jacket?"

I said, "A jacket would be good."

Finally, he bought a sweater and a jacket for me.

We went to Guru's house, and Loveleen gave him Dhruv to take to the crematorium to collect the ashes.

He returned with Dhruv and handed him over to me to give to Loveleen. I handed Dhruv to Loveleen and came back.

He asked in a whisper, "What is happening?"

I said, "There was some talk about Guru's inheritance. After they publicly announced the pregnancy last year, no one had the guts to raise their voice. They are only whispering about Dhruv getting his father's share. I think Loveleen came here to ensure Dhruv gets his share of the property."

He said, "I also think the same. I don't really know his family details, if he had any siblings, or who else may be sharing his father's inheritance. After coming to Delhi, I did not get a chance to speak with Loveleen. Ask her to give me five minutes."

I said, "I will tell her," and went to Loveleen.

I went looking for Kumar, but he was not in the hall. He must have gone for a smoke. I found him sitting in the car, smoking with Vishal. "I was looking for you all over, and you were sitting here."

He asked, "What is the matter?"

"Loveleen told us to return to the flat. She will give us a ring when we are required."

He asked, "Can we leave now?"

I sat in the car and said, "Let's go."

Vishal started the car and drove us to the flat.

We got down and sat on the sofa. Vishal went out, saying he would bring us lunch.



Kumar must have remembered he had not made a call to Bombay. He first called Sahithi and asked how everything was going there.

She said, "Everything is fine. When are you coming back?"

He said, "It is not certain. I will let you know when I am returning."

Next, he called the office and spoke to Sunitha. He checked with her about her work and asked her to check what the developers were doing. As Nandini is also not there, check if they are working or not. I will let you know when I will be back, and he cut the call.

He asked me, "Shall we go on a tour of the city?"

I said, "Let's go."

Kumar asked Vishal to show us Delhi. We came back after 8 pm.

Kumar asked, "Nandini, how was the trip?"

I said, "It was good. When shall we go to see the Taj Mahal?"

He said, "Soon. When we find a suitable time, we will go and visit."

Vishal went away to bring dinner.

I had a bath, wore a nightdress, had dinner, and lay on the bed.

In the middle of the night, I awoke from sleep. As my sleep was disturbed, I went and lay beside Kumar.

I woke up early in the morning and went back to my bed. Let him think he had a dream.

Kumar came and woke me up, saying, "Get up, we will go visit the Taj Mahal today."

I said, "Yay, Taj Mahal!" and got up and went to the bathroom.

When I returned from the bathroom, he went for a bath, dressed, and sat in the hall.

Vishal had already brought breakfast. After completing breakfast, Kumar prepared tea, brought three cups to the hall, and placed them on the table. He picked up a cup and sat on the sofa. After completing my bath, I came out dressed. He told me to have breakfast and be ready.

We went to Agra, spent the whole day there, and returned after having dinner at a restaurant.

He had a bath, dressed, and lay on the bed with a book.

I went and slept beside him. He woke me up in the middle of the night and told me to go to my bed.

We spent the next week like this, daily visiting places near Delhi. We left in the morning and came back at night. With the help of Vishal, I got the beds attached.

Still, he kept his physical distance from me. I didn't expect anything from him, just some closeness to bring back his memories.

In the morning, he prepared three cups of coffee, gave one to Vishal, and took the other two to the bedroom. He woke me up to take the coffee.

He asked, "Where shall we go today?"

I said, "We will ask Vishal."

He went out to ask Vishal, and then the doorbell rang.

He went and opened the door. It was Loveleen's family driver.

The driver asked Kumar to come with him, meaning he should go alone.

Kumar told him to wait in the hall and went to take a bath. He dressed, had breakfast, and went with the driver.

Kumar came back to the flat after two hours. I asked, "What is the update?"

He said, "Our work here is complete. We will return to Bombay tomorrow."

I asked, "What is in your hand?"

He said, "It is the property papers for the building next to Loveleen's. What will we do with this building?"

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After returning to Bombay, I distanced myself from Kumar. It seemed he either didn't remember our relationship or preferred to avoid any connection with me. If he truly didn't recall, why did he act as if he felt we shared something intimate? Why did he believe I would break his heart? If I intended to hurt him, why would I wait for my prince, the one who would sweep me off my feet?

He didn't seem to grasp that my actions were not intentional; I had an accident and was in a coma for three months. After that, I stayed in New York to focus on my studies. I'm uncertain about what his sister's mother-in-law may have told him, but is he truly the same Kumar I once knew? From his perspective, it appears we no longer share a connection.

The hospital software is now complete, and we are implementing it in stages. So, I have been working from the hospital, staying in touch with the developers and making necessary changes. During this time, I lost touch with Kumar and did not see him for more than a month. I received an invitation from his office for his children's birthday, to be celebrated at his house.

After completing my work at the office, I went back to my room, changed, and reached Kumar's house.

Kumar asked me, "Are you angry with me?"

I replied, "Why would I be angry with you?"

He said, "I have not seen you for the last two months."

I explained, "You know I have been busy managing the hospital work, and the software development is a bit tiring. I didn't get time to call you."

He said, "It's okay. At least you have come to this party. How is the hospital building coming along in Hyderabad?"

I said, "The construction will be completed in another two months. They have ordered equipment to be delivered in three months."

He asked, "Why in three months?"

I explained, "It takes at least that long for deliveries. If we order them later, they might ask for premium prices. So, we ordered in advance."

He asked, "How are the finances managed?"

I replied, "At present, they don't have much of a problem. We will see when the hospital actually starts running."

He said, "Remember, you can always approach me for any kind of help."

I said, "My father is confident you will come in an emergency to help out, so he is not worried about the finances."

He said, "That's all I want. Come, I will introduce you to the other hospital management."

He took me to the office backyard, where the party was arranged for the clients. He introduced me as the architect of our hospital management software and mentioned that I had done hospital management in the USA. Hearing the mention of the USA, they all started showing interest in me and asking various questions about hospital management and software. It took me the whole evening to consult with the client's questions.

One of the hospital administrators wanted more details about the software, so I took him to Kumar. The administrator was asking how we would go about implementing the software. Kumar explained that we would study the hospital's working environment and make customizations accordingly. After some more questions, the administrator seemed satisfied.

Kumar said, "If you want to see how they are working on the software, you can check with Nandini. She will arrange a tour of the hospital."

The administrator said he would like a tour of the hospital, so Kumar asked me to coordinate with him.

I told him to give me a call so we could plan the visit.

Kumar called me at the hospital after a week. He asked about the client who wanted to visit their hospital.

I said, "He came and looked at the software. He is impressed with its workings and said he would give you a call after getting approval from their management."

Kumar said, "I will wait for him to call back. How are you doing? How is the work progressing in Hyderabad?"

I replied, "I am doing fine. The work in Hyderabad is progressing briskly. I will call you for the opening ceremony."

He said, "I think it would take another six months."

I replied, "Yes."

He said, "Come and meet me sometime. I think we are shifting next week. Come for the housewarming ceremony."

I said, "I will certainly come."

I said, "Okay, see you," and cut the call.

How many housewarming ceremonies will he have? They recently shifted to the bungalow they are staying in now. Now he is saying they will shift to the new bungalow and give these two bungalows for rent for shootings. When I met him, he just had this office building. He didn't even have proper developers then. Now he has three bungalows to his name, and Loveleen is also putting her bungalow in his care. How does he manage that? How does he get Loveleen to listen to him? I saw another side of Loveleen in Delhi. She was so stern and played the sad widow brilliantly. Now Kumar seems to have her wrapped around his little finger. Sunitha is another one who listens to him. How did he elevate her to the position of Director of Operations? From flight assistant to Director is a big leap. But the way he saved her and himself at the Air India Building must be his foresight.

Kumar called me on the phone while I was on rounds, and the reception made an announcement for me to come to the phone.

I went and picked up the phone and said, "Sorry, I was on rounds."

Kumar asked, "How is the software coming along?"

I replied, "It is almost complete. Some small tweaks are needed to finish the project on our side. I am planning to go to Hyderabad at the end of this month."

He asked, "Is the hospital ready?"

I replied, "The construction is complete, and I have to go there to supervise the installation of equipment. I hope to start the hospital in April. You should come for the inauguration. I will send you an invitation. About the software, I want the hardware to be set up by the end of March. Can you arrange that?"

"I will certainly arrange it once you send the advance payment."

"Can you arrange the payments for the hardware and software from your end? I don't know the financial position at this point."

"I will arrange it. Send me the details of your requirements, and I will personally look into their installation."

"Thanks."

"I have not seen you for ten days. Why don't you come over to our housewarming ceremony in two days? We are having it this Saturday. The party will be in the evening."

"I will certainly come over."

"See you then," he said, and cut the call.

Kumar called me and asked, "Where is the list of computer requirements? If you don't send it now, your order will be delayed, which will delay the installation."

I said, "I will send it to Mahira just now," and cut the call.

After half an hour, I went there personally to deliver the requirements.

Kumar got up, shook my hand, and took the list from me.

I looked him up and down and said, "You look a little different."

"It has been a stressful week as my father had a heart attack."

"You should have brought him to our hospital."

"They called the ambulance and took him to Sion Hospital, which is closer. Now he is okay and will be discharged in a day or two."

He reviewed the list and said, "I will arrange for the delivery."

I got up and went towards him. He must have thought I was coming for a handshake. He got up and extended his hand toward me. I came near him, caught his hand, came close, kissed him on the cheek, and went away.

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Kumar rang me up at Hyderabad and said they are having Sena meet in one of their bungalows and he will be delayed by at least one week to reach Hyderabad. I have already ordered the computers and other equipment to be sent to Hyderabad. As soon as they arrive I will send networking guys to do the networking." "Ok, I will make the things ready for them to work on. Bye seeing you soon."

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Kumar called me after 10 days and said, "Sorry for the delay as I was busy with the meetings. I will come there in a day or two. I am sending the networking people, get the networking done before I reach there. Tell me what else you need."

I said, "Nothing else for now, when you come here I will speak with you."

He said ok and cut the call.

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Kumar rang me up and told me about our booking flight tickets and asked me to book a suite or a double room at a nearby hotel. At first, I thought is he asking me to stay with him at the hotel. Then decided against it. He must be bringing someone, possibly Sunitha.

I took a car and went to the Airport.

When they came out of the airport, I had a surprise of my lifetime. Kumar landed with none other than Loveleen. Why is she here?

I let Kumar place the luggage in the dicky, and he closed it and came and sat beside me. By that time Loveleen with Dhruv sat in the backseat. I started to drive to the hotel, where I booked their rooms.

I said, "This hotel is not nearest to the hospital, but it is the best and nearest to the hospital. Don't worry about transport, I will pick you up daily from the hotel and take you to the hospital."

He said, "Thanks", they went inside the hotel and registered, by the time I parked the car and went over to the reception.

We all went to the room and Kumar put aside luggage and tipped the porter and he went away.

The room is as they asked for, it has two bedrooms and a hall and everything a room normally has.

I asked, "Is this room ok?"

Kumar said, "It will do" and looked at Loveleen.

Loveleen nodded her head.

I sat down on the sofa. Looked around and looked at sleeping Dhruv. I don't want to disturb his sleep.

Kumar asked, "Do you want something like a cool drink."

I said, "No thanks."

Kumar removed the laptop and put it on the table.

I asked, "Shall we go to the hospital and have a look."

Kumar said to Loveleen, "Take some rest, I will have a look at the hospital and will be back."

Loveleen said, "ok, come back as early as possible."

He said, "See you then."

He picked up the laptop and came with me to the parking. We got in the car and I took him to the hospital. I first took him to my father.

Dad was in a meeting with some people.

He said, "Come" and introduced them. They were discussing starting an electricity-generating unit. The other party has got approval for starting an electricity generating unit. They were asking Dad about building it for them. Dad said, "You have come at the correct time", and introduced Kumar, they developed software and had come from Bombay to install the software, and they have supplied the computers top."

Another team's head is Mr Reddy and they have come to build the plant.

Kumar asked how are you planning the finances.

Mr Reddy said we got a loan from a USA company. That was when I had an accident and dad took me to the USA.

We took leave and went to check the networking and placing of the switches.

Kumar checked the networking by connecting the laptop at some places and checked and found it to be satisfactory. Then went and checked where the server was placed.

He said, "I will be doing the server installation. And the other systems will be installed by the company person, who will be arriving the next day."

He checked the placement of the systems and noted what part of the software will be installed where. After completing the inspection, we returned to my cabin and sat down. I ordered tea.

He asked, "How are you?" Now he got the time to ask about me>

I replied, "I am fine, why did you bring Loveleen with you?"

He said, "We are looking to expand here. I was planning to have a small sales office here. For selling software and hardware."

I said if you want a single office room, I might find a room for you here on this premises."

He said, "I don't know if it is feasible. Clients might not find it easy to come here."

I said, "We will give you a room and phone connection and what else do you need."

He said, "I am thinking of having a room, where we can set up the office and a developer can stay over there in the room, like live there. something like that."

I said, "If you have to send your person, they would be by choice only. But if you have a salesman from here it is not necessary for you to provide them accommodation."

He said, "That is ok. What we are going to look at, is if it is feasible to have an interior decorating firm here, that is Loveleen's domain. I don't have any idea about it. I feel the Hyderabad computer industry is going to be changed in the near future. I would like to meet Mr Naidu."

I said, "I asked you mean Mr Naidu, we might know someone, who can get you a meeting. Rohan had done surgery for someone in their family. I think I can get you a meeting."

Tea was brought to us and having tea we came back to the hospital parking.

I asked, "Shall we go somewhere?"

He asked, "Where can we go?"

I said, "I can't call Loveleen, she has Dhruv to look after, let us go to Rohan House, it is close by. I will go and get the keys, you sit here for a minute."

I went and collected the keys from Rohan, and came back to the parking showing the keys in my hand to Kumar.

I said, "Let us go, we came out of the hospital, O said let us go on walking it is just 2 minute's distance. We walked to a new apartment block. We went by lift to the top floor. I opened the lock and we entered the apartment.

Seeing the apartment, Kumar said, "Wow, what a nice apartment. I think we should have this kind of apartment."

I said, "If you want one, I will book you one." This building is being developed by Dad only.

He asked, "Is there something on the lower floors."

I said people now prefer higher floors. If you want the lowest we have some on the 1<sup>st</sup> floor."

He asked, "Can we see it?"

I said, "I think there is some work going on, let's go and see."

I took the keys and we came out and closed the door, we came by the lift to the first floor. We looked into the flat, the flooring is being put. We had a look from the outside.

He must have thought he should have a look at it. He asked, "When can we have a proper look, I think Loveleen would want to have a look at the flat."

I said I will check and let you know, let us go back to the flat. We got in the lift and rode up to the flat.

I opened the door and told him to sit on the sofa and went inside. I came back with a bottle of whiskey and two glasses. I put them on the table, went inside the kitchen and came out with some snacks. I poured a peg each and we started to sip and munch. I am talking about something.

He was absentmindedly listening to me and saying aha, or something like that, but he kept looking at my face, so I kept thinking that he was listening to me.

The doorbell rang, it is Rohan, who returned from the Hospital.

He came in and said, "Sorry, I could not meet you at the hospital, I was busy with surgery."

I said, "No problem, I know how it is with work. So, how is the hospital running?"

He said, "You should ask her, she is the one running the hospital."

I said, "If I ask her that she would say everything else except about the hospital."

He said, "We have not opened the hospital fully. We only started the emergency ward, and Operation Theater is operational. If you start the software we can start making the other departments operational."

I said, "Sorry for the delay, at the last minute there was a Maharashtra Sena meeting and it was in our bungalows only, and I was asked to be present to understand their problems."

He asked, "how it went?"

I said, "This election they would certainly win. I am not sure about next. I have told Nandini about meeting Mr Naidu, I have some advice for them. But first I need some more information for my software, which predicts results based on the data."

He said, "I will see what I can do."

We went on to discuss the Andhra politics as he wanted to have a sense of the politics there, he had listened to us attentively. Rohan has a good grasp of the politics here and I too participated in discussions.

Rohan said, "Let us go for dinner and then I will drop you at the hotel."

Kumar rang up his hotel and informed Loveleen to order room service.

We went to a nearby restaurant and had our dinner and we dropped Kumar at his hotel and went away.

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I went to the hotel by 8 am. By that time, Kumar, Loveleen and Dhruv were ready, and they came with me to the hospital. I left Kumar at the hospital and took Loveleen to show some properties.

With Loveleen, I showed them some properties where they can have office space. And some vacant lands, one of them was near our house.

When we returned Kumar asked, "what is the outcome of your visits?"

Loveleen said, "we had visited some new buildings. I think with this trend we can set up our offices here. I am sure we will get lots of Interior decoration orders. Nandini also showed me the land near her house, I think we can buy it for building later. It is a very fast developing area. There is another flat in the building we were interested in other than the ground floor for our office. It is also nice, we should buy it now."

Kumar said, "we will speak with the builder about them."

He looked at me and said, "Nandini, I have completed the server shall we go and check if the systems were ready."

I said to Loveleen "are you comfortable here?"

Loveleen said, "yes."

I told him "let us go."

We went and checked the systems that had been installed and checked the software running. I told them to try out the application and we will clean it once the testing is completed.

We came back to the server room. Dhruv is sleeping. She put him on a sofa and sat with him. I asked Kumar "Can you leave her at Rohan's flat?"

He said, "That is a good idea, she will be comfortable there."

I handed Kumar the keys, he took the keys and put them in the pocket lifted Dhruv and told Loveleen to come with him.

Kumar came back, and we went and updated the systems which were ready and gave them for testing to the users. It took us up to 6:30 pm to complete the updating and allotment of systems to the users.

We came back to my cabin and sat down. I ordered tea and when it came we drank it and decided to go to Rohan's flat. Kumar rang up the flat and informed Loveleen that we are coming there.

While walking I asked, "What is your relationship with Loveleen?"

He said, "I would say I am her bodyguard."

I said, "I thought you would say she is your good friend."

he said, "What is the fun in it if I say what you are expecting?"

I asked, "then what is your story with her?"

"if I had to say it short, she hit my scooter with her car and called me to her office. I went and met her. She offered a job to Sahithi later. We went to Delhi for finding a branch office there and instead she told me her story. To help her out I had done a sting operation on her husband and it helped her father to win elections. Then I got all this wealth through her. And I started the software business with all these people as partners. Rest you know."

"When we are free I will let you tell the full story."

We entered the lift and I asked, "you did not reply to my question what is your relation to Loveleen?"

"Like you and others, I think I have a life connection with her too."

"Like me you have rejected her too?"

He took a minute and said, "that kind of situation has not come between us", then our floor has come and the lift doors opened and we went to the door and rang the bell.

Loveleen came and opened the door. Dhruv came behind her. I caught Dhruv and we went and sat on the sofa. Nandini looked at me and a smile spread on her face. I asked what happened.

She shook her head and said, "I want to hear your story?"

I got up and went inside to bring last night's bottle. Only half of the bottle was empty. She put it on the table and went to bring some snacks. She sat down and poured the drink and said, "You tell me your story from the beginning. We have a whole night in front of us."

I said, "I don't know if Loveleen wants to hear it."

Loveleen said, "I had heard it before but I don't mind listening to it once more."

I said, "Wait a sec, I will check if Rohan is coming."

I rang up the hospital and was told he had already left the hospital.

I said, "He will be here any minute" and the doorbell rang.

I said, "It must be him" and went and opened the door.

Rohan handed her a bag and said, "I brought something to eat."

She opened the bag, and there was chicken 65 and other items for munching with the drinks."

I said, "How do you know we want this."

Rohan said, "I have a sixth sense. Get me a glass."

I said, "Your glass is here."

Rohan sat down and poured himself a peg.

I said, "Kumar is going to tell his story. Start from the beginning."

He recounted his journey: "I was born in Vijayawada, where I completed my education up to the 8th grade. I then moved to Vizag for my 9th grade, where I truly enjoyed my school experience. Unfortunately, we had to relocate to a village for my 10th grade. During that time, I studied and played with friends, often spending hours on a friend's terrace preparing for our exams over three months. Despite my efforts, I developed a headache and was unable to achieve the top rank as I had hoped. Afterwards, my family returned to Vijayawada, leaving me behind as they moved to Bombay. I enrolled in college in Vijayawada, where I shared memorable moments with Sneha. I later travelled to Bombay but returned for my second year of college. While in Bombay, I learned that Sneha had been sent away, and eventually, I moved to Hyderabad to pursue my degree."

I asked, "You studied for your degree in Hyderabad?" *He studied In Hyderabad, but that was before we moved to Hyderabad.*

He said, "Yes, I waited until she turned 18 and with the help of my friends brought her to Hyderabad and married her. After completing my degree, we went over to Bombay and got a job with Kirit."

I asked, "So, what happened?"

"I met Sahithi during a visit to Paints Company, and we quickly became friends. When my sister's marriage was arranged, we all traveled to Hyderabad for the wedding. Unfortunately, her cousin deceived her and took her away. For a while, I was preoccupied with factory work and helping Kirit prepare for his exams. Upon returning home, I felt depressed until Sahithi began visiting me regularly. Eventually, she vacated her flat, and we moved in together.

One day, I received a message from a friend saying that she had come to the temple with twins. I mistakenly assumed she had remarried, and soon after, I married Sahithi. When Sneha learned about this from her cousin, she insisted he tell her the entire story of how he had misled her. Sneha then returned to Bombay, and she and Sahithi, along with the twins, adjusted to living together.

However, one day, a misunderstanding arose between Sahithi and Sneha, leading to a fight. Sneha asked me to take her away from her home. At that time, we were operating a hotel and dormitory in Bombay Central, so I brought her there to assist with the hotel. Sahithi was in charge of the kitchen and generally helped Kirit and Mahira, who were managing the hotel. Tragically, one night, a fire broke out, and she passed away the following day, leaving the children motherless. Despite this, Sahithi stepped in to fulfill the maternal role. Since she was employed at Godrej, my mother arranged for Chitti to care for the kids, and she assisted Sahithi in the kitchen and with household maintenance."

I asked, "but how did you meet Loveleen?"

I am coming to that. One day, I was returning from Panvel to the factory when it started drizzling. Loveleen was also on her way back from a client meeting and had to attend a party in Dadar to secure a substantial contract. Unfortunately, her car grazed mine, causing me to fall. Thankfully, I was not seriously injured, so I got up, lifted my scooter, and put it on the stand. By then, Loveleen approached me, handed me her card, and said, "Come and meet me; I will pay your medical bills." Although I had not incurred any expenses, I felt it was important to inform Loveleen that I was fine.

I knocked on her door and asked, "May I come in, madam?" Without looking up, she assumed I was one of her workers and asked if I had finished my work. When I replied, "What work, madam?" she lifted her head, apologized, and said, "I thought you were one of our workers. Who are you, by the way?" I introduced myself as Kumar and reminded her that she had grazed me the previous night. She expressed her regret, explaining that she couldn't recognize me in the dark. I reassured her that I was okay and showed her my hand, where I had placed a band-aid. She sighed in relief and said, "Thank God. Sit down; what would you like to have?" I declined, saying, "Nothing, ma'am. I just wanted to inform you that I am fine."

She then asked me personal questions and took my address to visit my kids. The following Sunday, she came with presents for them. Over time, she grew attached to Atul and frequently visited us. During one of her visits, I mentioned Sahithi's struggles at work, which were causing her to feel depressed. Loveleen offered to help by



inviting Sahithi to join her firm as she planned to relocate to Delhi. Sahithi left her job and became a trainee at Loveleen's company, quickly rising to the position of manager within three months.

When Loveleen wanted to explore office space in Delhi, she took me along. During her meetings with friends, she became emotional and shared stories about her husband, Guru. I tried to support her and took on the role of a girls' supplier, eventually meeting Guru. We managed to trap him with one of the girls we had saved. When he attempted to bribe a minister in the Haryana government, we recorded the incident. As a result of the recording, the minister had to resign, leading to a government collapse and paving the way for elections. With the help of software that predicted the results, we won, and Loveleen became the daughter of the Chief Minister.

As a token of gratitude for my efforts, she gifted me a car, a bike, and a bungalow, which we repurposed as our office space to start our software company. I was on my way back from Panvel to the factory when it began to drizzle. Loveleen, returning from a client meeting, was also en route to a party in Dadar to secure a significant contract. Unfortunately, her car brushed against mine, causing me to fall. Thankfully, I wasn't seriously injured, so I got up, lifted my scooter, and placed it on the stand. At that moment, Loveleen approached, handed me her card, and said, "Come and meet me; I will cover your medical expenses." Although I hadn't incurred any costs, I felt it was essential to reassure her that I was fine.

I knocked on her door and asked, "May I come in, madam?" Without looking up, she mistook me for one of her workers and inquired if I had completed my tasks. When I responded, "What work, madam?" she lifted her head, apologized, and asked, "Who are you, by the way?" I introduced myself as Kumar and reminded her of the incident from the previous night. She expressed her regret, explaining that she couldn't recognize me in the dark. I reassured her that I was okay and showed her my hand, where I had a band-aid. She sighed in relief and said, "Thank God. Please sit down; what would you like to have?" I declined, saying, "Nothing, ma'am. I just wanted to let you know that I am fine."

She then asked me personal questions and took my address to visit my children. The following Sunday, she arrived with gifts for them. Over time, she grew fond of Atul and frequently visited us. During one of her visits, I mentioned Sahithi's struggles at work, which were affecting her mental health. Loveleen offered to help by inviting Sahithi to join her firm, as she planned to relocate to Delhi. Sahithi left her job and became a trainee at Loveleen's company, quickly advancing to the position of manager within three months.

When Loveleen sought to explore office space in Delhi, she took me along. During her meetings with friends, she became emotional and shared stories about her husband, Guru. I tried to support her and took on the role of a liaison, eventually meeting Guru. We managed to entrap him with one of the girls we had saved. When he attempted to bribe a minister in the Haryana government, we recorded the incident. This recording led to the minister's resignation, resulting in a government collapse and paving the way for elections. With the help of software that predicted the outcomes, we emerged victorious, and Loveleen became the daughter of the Chief Minister.

As a token of gratitude for my efforts, she gifted me a car, a bike, and a bungalow, which we transformed into our office space to launch our software company.

We completed the bottle and she brought another bottle from inside. I skipped the details of Loveleen's drugging me and instead said while she was in Delhi, her father announced her pregnancy on national television."

Then Rohan asked, "are you Haryana CM's daughter?"

She nodded her head.

Seeing the time, Rohan said, "I will get some dinner for us."

He called the hospital and ordered dinner to be brought to his flat.

He continued with his story of how they got the hospital order and under what circumstances he met me and how we started to work together.

Then the doorbell rang and an attender from the hospital gave the food and left. Rohan put the items on the table and I went and brought plates.

By this time Dhruv went to sleep and Loveleen put him in the guest bedroom. By the time we finished with this, It is after 12 midnight. So, they started a questions and answers session.

He patiently answered our questions. When the time came for sleeping arrangements, I said she will sleep with Loveleen. Rohan told Kumar to sleep in his room and he would sleep on the sofa. Kumar said I am more habituated to sleeping on the sofa, he would like to sleep on the sofa. Finally, Kumar slept on the sofa and Rohan slept in his room.

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Kumar knocked on the bedroom door and Loveleen said, "Come in."

Kumar opened the door and asked, "Did you wake up?"

Loveleen said, "just now."

"Come then, we need to go to the hotel to change."

I said, "Wait I will come and drop you."

He said, "you need to go to the hospital, we will catch an auto, it will be easier."

He lifted Dhruv and they both went away.

I called Kumar said, "I am coming to pick you up, don't go to the hospital on your own."

He said, "ok, baba, I won't go on my own."

We had breakfast and had tea and waited for Nandini to arrive.

Kumar came to the lobby with his laptop. I caught his hand guided him to the car.

After hearing his story something clicked.

We went to the hospital and went through all the departments and reached cardiology.

I said, "I will show you Rohan's room, he is free now, as his surgery is cancelled."

We went and Rohan said to me, "The electrician is looking for you, Reception called for you."

I said, "You sit here, I will come back and went to check the problem."

I came back after 15 minutes.

I asked, "What is our next in line."

Rahul said, "he is saying he did not go to visit his sister, take him to her."

I said, "Let us go.

He said one second and called Loveleen asked her, "Do you want to visit my sister?"

He placed the cradle on the slot and said, "she says for us go ahead."

He said, "let us go, but first, we have to do some shopping."

He knocked on his sister's door, she opened the door and she called her son and said see who has come to visit us, it's your mama. He is months younger than his twins. He came and took the bags from his hand.

His mother scolded him and said to him, "Come in, who is this girl with you? You always have some girl around with you."

Kumar said, "She is my girlfriend, are you satisfied?"

We went and sat down and she asked tea?

He said, "Why not."

She put the tea on the stove and came and asked, "what are you doing here, when did you come?"

He said, "Two days back, came to install the software at their hospital", indicating me. Meet Nandini, she is Operations Manager at the hospital. The hospital belongs to her father. However, she did her Hospital Management from the USA", speaking two contradictory words with her. One is me is in that position because I am the daughter of the owner and the other is I am qualified for the job. "and she is Revathi my sister."

I said, "I have come to your house earlier."

Revathi asked, "When?"

Before I could answer, Kumar asked, "where is your mother-in-law?"

Revathi said, "Her daughter came and took her to their place."

I got up and looked at a group photo and pointed to her mother-in-law and said, "she is your mother-in-law, am I correct?"

Revathi went near to the photo and looked at the person I was pointing to and said, "yes, she is, how did you know?"

I said, "I told you so, I have met her."

Kumar said, "thank god you have not met her now, else you would have left me and run away, and laughed aloud."

Revathi asked, "what is the joke?"

He said, "The joke is between us."

I looked at him as to why he is talking rubbish.

Kumar said, "Sorry to both of you. "

Revathi said, "I will bring tea" and went inside.

I asked in a hushed tone "What are you talking, joking on me?"

He said, "What are you talking, I have not seen her since my sister's marriage and she would not go out without a chaperone. Where could you have seen her?"

I sat there sulking.

He said, "Sorry baba, you must have met her and she filled your ears about me, correct? Otherwise, why would you run away from me?"

I asked, "When did I run away from you?"

He said, "When did you meet her, then."

Revathi brought tea placed it on the table in front of us and asked, "What are you both fighting about like a couple?"

Revathi said to Kumar "Where is your wife?" As if to remind him he is married.

He said, "She is in Bombay, she has to look after the interior decorating business. You did not come to our home after we shifted to Juhu. The Last time you came to Bombay was to bring your son back, then Sneha was alive."

Revathi asked, "What really happened to her?"

I said, "It is a big story, to help in the hotel I sent her to the hotel run by Kirit. Now her grandfather sent some money through a known person, who frequents Bombay for business. He left her to die took the money and ran away. He was saying it is an accident, I feel it could have been deliberate, I left it to her grandfather to take necessary action."

She said, "I still feel Sneha is the good one, I don't feel that about Sahithi. I feel she tries to get everyone into her grip."

He got up and said, "ok I will take leave, we have lots of work at the hospital."

Revathi said, "At least have lunch and go."

He looked at me, I said, "Sorry sister, I left work at the hospital to bring him here, he was not ready to come to your house."

He said, "Now you are blaming me, it was me who suggested to your brother I had to go and visit my sister."

I said, "It was he who said you have not visited your sister even after two days."

Looking at us his sister said, "If I don't know otherwise I would have thought you two were husband and wife, you are fighting like one."

I blushed at her remark.

He said, "I will come some other time, this time I will bring kids also."

She asked, "What is this about a girl you found?"

He asked, "Are you talking about Leena?"

She said, "Yes, Leena, mom told me about her. She was calling mom Naanamma and Sahithi Aayi, and you daddy."

He said, "I still don't understand that fully, I feel she is from another universe or a time traveller, I think your husband is more interested in those things."

Revathi said, "When she told me I too did not understand."

He got up and said, "ok, will see you." We came out and got in the car.

After going some distance, I asked, "What is that in there?"

He said, "It is nothing just a joke. She was joking so I continued the joke. What is it about you meeting her mother-in-law?"

I replied, "I felt I met her before and I could recognize her from the photo."

He said, "I felt she was filling your ears against me and you got angry and went far away from me."

I asked, "Are you bluffing?"

He said if you are telling lies I am telling lies, if you are talking truthfully, I am also talking truthfully."

It seems she kept thinking about that throughout our journey. She did not speak anything else.

I was thinking is it true, listening to her lies, did I go away from Kumar? My foggy mind could not decipher the details. I felt like I met her, but what did she tell me? Is it to do with Kumar's past? But he told me about his past yesterday. His past story is not matching with, what my brain says. Why don't I remember anything? Is it because of the accident? Why did I have that accident? My mind is a little bit foggy about what happened that day.

When we reached the hospital, I left him in the parking and stormed off to my cabin.

When came back after five minutes, he sat there smoking. He and his smoking, I said, "Sorry" as if I was doing him a favour and when he exited the car locked the car and we both went inside.

I went and sat on my chair and opened the system.

He sat in front of me and asked, "What happened Nandu?"

I lifted my head and asked, "What did you just say?"

He asked, "What happened?"

I asked, "After that", he said, "Nandu."

I said, "I know it was you who called me Nandu, no one else ever called me Nandu."

He asked, "Ok, what happened Nandu?"

I said, "When you did not believe me, who else will believe me? No one believed me then, no one believes me now."

He said, "I am not saying I did not believe you, all I am saying is, if I believe what you said then you will leave me heartbroken, and that will also happen. So, why should I believe you, to have a breakup?"

I said, "No, no, I don't want to break up with you."

He said, "If you had met her before, you must have remembered what she said."

I said, "That is what, I can't recollect what she said."

He said, "Then where did you meet her, in your dreams?"

I said, "Yeah, it might be in my dream."

He asked, "You told me that I called you Nandu before when was it?"

I said, "Long back, when the thief came and you came to rescue me and you spent the whole night with me."

He asked, "What did we do the whole night?"

I said, "We watched TV, we played cards, then we dozed off on the sofa. Then in the morning, I left you in my car at your sister's house. That's how I know where she lives. Then when you wrote to me you were coming to Hyderabad, I went there to meet you. You were not there and your sister was also not there, that's when I met your sister's mother-in-law."

"Then you don't remember what she said."

I shook her head and said, "No I don't remember anything she said."

He said, "Thank god, you don't remember anything."

I asked, "Why are you saying it like that?"

He said, "If you promise me that you will never believe what she says, then I can be your friend."

I said, "ok, I will not believe what she said or will say, now are you satisfied?"

I looked up from the keyboard and asked, "What are you thinking?"

He said, "How to marry you."

I was a little surprised by his words.

I exclaimed, "You are already married twice."

He said, "That is the only problem. Shall we kill my wife?"

I said, "Don't talk like that."

He said, "I am just joking, why would I kill the wife, I loved and married."

I said, "I forgot yours is a love marriage. How could you have a love marriage with two girls?"

He said, "I am thinking of having a third love marriage."

I thought he was pulling my leg, laughed and said, "Oh, what a joke."

He said, "You know we have started a Pan India Matrimonial Service."

I asked, "What is this Pan India?"

He said, "If you register here your profile, it will be available throughout India."

"How is it possible?" I asked.

He said, "It is our software technology. We are having a joint venture with a courier company for having branches all over India."

I said, "Is it so, you did not tell me."

he said, "Recently we have collaborated on this, we have registered a company for that it is called Pan India Matrimonial Services P Ltd. If you register here your data will be transferred to all the branches. Give me your profile, I will get it registered free on our server."

I asked, "You are also charging for this service."

He said, "Who wants to do it for free, of course, we are charging, as a special case, I would get you registered free on our server."

I asked, "Then, what will happen."

He said, "Then someone will see your profile and think who is this beautiful, intelligent working woman? I should meet her."

I said, "then."

"He will come to your house to meet you."

"Then."

"then you will reject him saying who is this fool who came to my house and he is not my type."

"Why would I do that? I might marry him."

"If you marry him, you will regret your whole life."

"Why would I regret it? I might love him."

“Let us see, whose word is correct, give me your details.”

“Why I would give you my details, I will ask my father to look for a match.”

“I will call him and say to him, look for a match for Nandini.”

I said mockingly “Why I will let you do that, I will call him myself.”

“Let us see who will call him first.”

He reached for the phone. I beat him to it and snatched the phone and made a call. He kept looking at me as he dared me to tell Dad.

Seeing him daring her, I said, “Dad I want to get married you were telling me about the match from Vizag. I am ready to get married.”

He said, I will check with them and I cut the call and looked at him triumphantly.

He made a sad face and said, “You have won.”

But why do I feel he is the one who won?

He got up and “I will have a fag and come”, and went out of the room.

Kumar returned with Rohan as if to mock me. I asked, “What did you do?”

He asked, “What did I do? Nothing.”

I said angrily “You made a fool of me.”

Rohan asked, “What did he do?”

I did not want to come out in the open in front of Rohan. But could not contain my anger and complained to Rohan, “he made me tell Dad to look for a groom for me.”

Rohan said, “What is wrong with that? I am happy you agreed to marry someone.”

I said with irritation in her voice “It is not that, he forced me to tell Dad that.”

He asked innocently “Did I force you to tell your dad? Did I ring your dad and put a gun to your head and tell you to tell your father that you are ready to marry and look for a groom?”

I said, “You don’t have to put a gun to my head, you put a gun to my heart.”

He exclaimed “Now you are telling him that I put a gun to your heart. Where is the gun?”

I was confused by his logic, and I said, “ Now you are confusing me.”

He said, “Then calmly tell him what happened.”

I said, “Kumar is saying he wants to marry a third time.”

He stopped me and said, “I did not say I want to marry you. I told you I want to have a third love marriage.”

I said, “Before that did you not say I want to marry you.”

He said, “I did not say that, when you asked what are you thinking, I said how to marry you. Then what you said aren’t you married twice.”

“Then you wanted to kill your wife”, I accused him.

“Then what did I say why would I kill the one loved and married.”

This went on for some time you said I said. At last, I was annoyed with all this and stormed out of the room.

## Chapter 6

1<sup>st</sup> April 1994. Kumar cleared the data and gave them fresh data with the application. They have started to run the system and the results were satisfactory. He went and checked with the departments and everything running smoothly.

He and Loveleen went and looked at the plot of land near Nandini's house and decided to purchase it and gave them an advance. Also, the flat in Rohan's building. They took the total ground floor and decided to have their offices there. They also took one flat on the same floor as Rohan, now they are neighbours to Rohan. They called the supervisor from Loveleen's Bombay office and they engaged local people to work on the office and flat. It is expected to be ready in three months.

For the time being, I provided a room in our hospital for running their branch. They transferred one of the developers here to look after the hospital programs and modifications if needed. Setting up everything in Hyderabad they decided to return to Bombay, and booked return tickets.

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Rohan said he would have a party at his flat. Kumar said it is better we had the party at our hotel so as not to disturb Dhruv's routine. We went there with two bottles of whiskey and we started our party.

This time we targeted Loveleen about her story. First, she refused to say anything saying what story would I have. After some persuasion, Loveleen began to share her narrative. She revealed that she was born and raised in Delhi, coming from a family with a political background. She completed her degree at Delhi University and subsequently commenced her training at an interior decoration firm. Her family arranged her marriage to Guru, aiming to enhance their business prospects and establish political connections. Guru later expanded his business and relocated to Bombay, where Loveleen accompanied him. Leveraging her experience in interior design and with financial support from Guru, she established her own interior decoration firm in Bombay. With her aesthetic appeal and his financial resources, her business flourished, prompting her to move her firm to Andheri.

Three years into their marriage, when she had not conceived, her mother took her to a gynaecologist due to pressure from Guru's family. After comprehensive tests, the doctor confirmed that she had no fertility issues and recommended that her husband be evaluated. Initially hesitant, he eventually succumbed to familial pressure, only to discover that he had fertility issues characterized by low sperm motility and count, ultimately leading to a diagnosis of infertility and impotence.

Following this revelation, his demeanour changed significantly. In an attempt to facilitate her pregnancy, he resorted to various questionable methods, which a medical professional like Rohan could comprehend. He even went so far as to involve his friends, pressuring her to engage with them. Overwhelmed by the persistent harassment, Loveleen sought assistance from her family, who subsequently addressed the matter with Guru's family. His family summoned him back to Delhi, but as her business continued to thrive, she declined to relocate to Delhi to be with him. The remainder of her story was conveyed through Kumar, bringing her account to a close.

Rohan had a question for her. He asked, "What about Dhruv, it seems as if your husband is impotent, he can't be his father."

Loveleen said shyly "I gave drugs to Kumar and obtained his sperm without his knowledge."

Kumar expressed surprise and said, "Dhruv is my son", and got up and held him.

He looked at me and I looked at him accusingly. He shook his head as if he really did not know.

We completed the party and called for a cab and went to our flat.

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I called Kumar, and he asked, "How are you doing, Nandu?"

I replied, "I'm doing fine. I called because we have an appointment with Mr. Naidu tomorrow. Can you come over today?"

He responded, "I will try to catch a flight tonight." Kumar later called back to inform me that he was catching a 9 PM flight.

When he arrived at the airport, I was waiting for him. He said, "Why did you come? I would have gone to the hotel." I explained, "I came to take you to Rohan's flat." He placed his handbag in the back seat and sat beside me.

He asked, "What's the news?"

I assured him, "Everything is running smoothly."

Upon reaching the flat, I unlocked the door.

He inquired, "Where is Rohan?"

I informed him, "He had emergency surgery and would be back in an hour or two."

He set the bag down and took a seat on the sofa.

I then brought out a bottle of whiskey and a glass. He asked, "Aren't you drinking?"

I replied, "When Rohan arrives, I have to head back home." I poured him a drink and handed him the glass.

He took a sip and set the glass down, then lit a cigarette and smoked. After finishing the cigarette, he picked up the glass again and took another sip. Eventually, he finished the drink, felt drowsy, and slumped back on the sofa.

Looking at him slumped on the sofa, I could not do what I intended. So, I let him sleep on the sofa and went into the bedroom.

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I woke up at 6 am, made a cup of coffee, and waited for Kumar to rise. He got up around 7 am. I went to get him another cup of coffee and handed it to him. He asked, "Aren't you having any?" I replied, "I just had some." He then inquired, "Weren't you supposed to go back home? Why didn't you?" I explained, "Rohan's surgery took longer than expected, so I stayed back."

Kumar asked, "Why am I sleeping on the sofa?" I responded, "You fell asleep sitting on the sofa, so I let you rest there." I began preparing breakfast, and by the time Kumar returned from his shower, I had it ready on the table. After we finished breakfast, he asked, "What time are we expecting to see Mr. Naidu?" I said, "We need to confirm the time; I'll let you know once it's set."

He took out his laptop and started typing. Curious, I asked, "What are you working on?" He replied, "I'm writing my autobiography." "Can I read it?" I asked. "You'll have to wait until it's published," he said. "Why can't I read it beforehand?" I pressed. "You can read it once I finish and publish the book," he assured me.

"When you go to the bathroom, I'll sneak a peek at what you're writing," I joked. "I know that, which is why the data in this book is encrypted," he replied. "What do you mean?" I asked. "You can't access it without the password," he explained. "Who has the password?" I inquired. "I'll leave the floppy disk and the password with my lawyer," he said. "Oh, so you don't want anyone to read it just yet," I noted.

I made a call and returned to inform him, "Mr. Naidu hasn't come back from Delhi. They'll let us know as soon as he returns." He leaned back and looked at me, asking, "What will we do now?" I suggested, "You can keep writing, and I'll sit with you to see what you're working on." He motioned for me to come closer and tapped the sofa beside him. I sat down next to him.

He asked, "Tell me, what do you want?" I shook my head, indicating nothing. He said, "I know you're expecting something from me, which is why you called me to come early. I assume the meeting is for tomorrow, right?" I nodded and confirmed, "Yes." He pressed, "What do you mean by 'yes'?" I clarified, "The meeting isn't today; it's scheduled for tomorrow."



“So, what do you really want? By the way, where’s Rohan?” he asked. “Rohan went to a conference in Calcutta, and I want what you gave me back then,” I replied. “What did I give you, and when?” he questioned. I explained, “When you came to me, you gave me something valuable. I want it again.”

“Are you referring to what I gave you in 1987? How could I possibly remember? How old were you then?” he asked. “20,” I answered. “So, when I came to you at 20, I gave you something valuable. What was it? Did I kiss you?” he teased. “It was more valuable than that,” I replied. “Then a hug?” he guessed. “No, it was even more valuable than that.”

“What is more valuable than that? Don’t tell me we had sex that day.”

I said shyly, “Yes, we had sex.”

He had that look, and I sensed he was deep in thought. I waited for five minutes, sitting beside him. I turned his head towards me, wrapped my hands around his neck, and asked, “What are you thinking about for so long?” My chest pressed against his hand, and he seemed frustrated. Suddenly, he shouted, “Don’t you understand? That was not me.”

I trembled with fear at his outburst; he looked like the devil himself. Regaining his composure, he said, “I’m sorry, I’m sorry,” and hugged me, kissing my cheeks. I held him tightly, unwilling to let go. He loosened his grip from behind, but I still clung to him.

“Did you get scared?” he asked. I replied, “When you shouted like that, you looked just like the devil.” He apologized again, saying, “I don’t know what came over me. I’ve never shouted like that before.” He held my face in his hands and kissed me on the mouth, perhaps trying to calm me down.

I began to kiss him back on his mouth and cheeks, which sent him into a frenzy. He struggled to control himself and attempted to push me away, but memories of that night flooded my mind, and I refused to let him go. He couldn’t hold back for long.

It felt as if I had traveled back in time, witnessing events from the past. I was back in my bedroom, aroused, recalling the things I had accused him of. After he had satisfied himself, he let me go and sat down. I looked at him, seeing him as he was in 1987. Had I really gone back in time to be with him then? I felt entranced and sank into the sofa.

He seemed lost in another world until I shook him, saying, “Kumar, where did you go? Come back.” He looked at me, dazed, before returning to reality. “What happened?” he asked. I replied, “You became wild with your sex drive. Did you always behave like this in bed?”

“I don’t remember what happened,” he said. “I was back in 1987 with you that day. Now I recall what we did.” I responded, “See, you remembered what you did; nobody would believe me.” He replied, “I wouldn’t believe myself either.”

“Let’s go to my sister’s house,” he suggested. “Now? Why?” I asked. “I need to confirm something with her,” he said. We got into the car, and I drove to her house. Upon arrival, we rang the doorbell, and Revathi opened the door, her son standing behind her.

Kumar handed him a ten-rupee note and said, "Go get some chocolates." The boy dashed off. Revathi remarked, "Twice in a month." Kumar asked, "When did I last visit your house?" Revathi replied, "Last month." He pressed, "Before that." She said, "Never."

"If I've never visited, how do I know your house?" he questioned. Revathi thought for a moment and said, "I assumed you must have gotten the address from Dad." He insisted, "I've never been to your house, don't know your address, yet I guided her here. It never crossed my mind that I didn't know your address, but I told her we needed to visit my sister. Nandini said she knew your address and came here to meet your mother-in-law, but she doesn't remember what was said."

I interjected, "Now I recall what she said. She mentioned you came here to write your final year degree exams. You weren't studying in Bombay as you claimed, and that's when I got angry." He clarified, "I studied for my degree in Hyderabad. I never claimed to study in Bombay. I didn't stay here during exams; I wrote my finals in 1984 while living with my grandfather and Sneha, managing my other grandfather's business."

He told Revathi, "Last time we were in Hyderabad, we were purchasing properties—a plot of land near her house, a flat for office use, and a flat for residential purposes. When we open our offices here, I'll invite you for the inauguration."

"Sure, I'll come," Revathi replied. As we left her house and got back into the car, he asked, "What were you saying in there?" I said, "I remembered what her mother-in-law told me during my visit."

"When did you visit?" he inquired. "It was in 1988 during the summer. I remember the AC in the car wasn't working properly, and it was sweltering."

(Note: Readers are advised to read *Unlucky in Love: My Autobiography* by R Kumar to know exactly what happened between Kumar and Nandini in 1987 and 1988).

We returned to the hospital, where he checked in with the developer stationed there about the progress of the work. The developer reported that there were no bugs from the users, so he had no tasks at hand. He suggested, "If you don't have any work, why not visit other hospitals and observe their operations? If possible, meet their operations manager or someone similar. We could potentially secure some orders. If you can make contact, I can send someone, or I could go myself to meet them. You could also show them some demos. There's so much that can be done."

He assured me, "I will follow your instructions."

We headed to my cabin, where he asked, "Do you remember what happened after you visited my sister's house and spoke to her mother-in-law?"

I replied, "No, that might come back to me later."

He stayed and chatted with me until I finished my work, then said, "Let's go home."

He inquired, "Are we going to your house?"

I responded, "We have Rohan's flat to ourselves; why go home?"

He remarked, "I thought your parents might have called you to come home."

I clarified, "Nothing like that. They know I stay at Rohan's when I don't come home. It's Rohan who calls home if he doesn't find me there."

Kumar commented, "Oh, you two must be close."

"Yes, that's why I chose the same profession. He wanted to be a surgeon, but I know I don't want to be a doctor. I aspire to be a manager; I want to lead people and be a boss, so I chose this path."

"I didn't know what I wanted to be, so I went with the flow."

"But you're a successful businessman and must have a lot of money, given how you invest."

"It's not all my money; some belongs to my company, and some is Loveleen's."

I asked, "Did she do that?"

"What did she do?"

"As she told us, she gave you drugs, made you lose consciousness, extracted semen from you, and got pregnant."

"How would I know what she did while I was unconscious? I never imagined she would do something like that. If she had asked, I might have willingly given myself. In fact, I had a strange dream about it—she was looking at me with disgust, and that image has lingered with me until it actually happened."

"Did she look at you with disgust?"

"It has nothing to do with our relationship. When she learned that the house was ransacked, she did have that look. I took a breath of relief, thinking she didn't hate me."

"What if she does hate you?"

"I don't know; I dislike it when people hate me, and I prefer to keep my distance from them. That might explain why I have very few friends."

"Do you think your friends hate you?"

"I'm not sure. I don't maintain long-distance friendships. I only meet them when I'm in their city, and I might call them only when I need something."

"You called me to check on me, which means I'm special to you, right?"

“You’ve always been special to me.”

Upon reaching the flat, I opened the door, and we entered. He set his bag down on the table and said, “I’ll freshen up; my mind isn’t where it should be.”

“I’ll prepare a snack or something to eat.”

After he took a shower and changed, he sat down on the sofa. I brought some pakodas and a bottle of whiskey, placing them on the table. As he inspected the bottle, I reassured him, “Don’t worry; it’s not the same bottle as yesterday. I wanted to do what Loveleen did to you, but I didn’t have the courage, and honestly, what’s the fun in that?”

He poured himself a drink, and I poured one for myself as well. After having two pegs, he began working on his writing.

After a while, I suggested, “Let’s go for dinner. There’s a nearby restaurant; we can take a walk and come back.”

He glanced at the clock; it was past 9 PM. Closing the laptop, he said, “Let’s go.” We strolled to the restaurant, and he looked around, asking if we had been there before. I replied, “No, we haven’t.” He mused, “I feel like I’ve been here. Did we visit this restaurant in 1987?” I recalled our past visit, saying, “Yes, we drove here.”

“Is this a repeat of 1987? What did we do after returning from the restaurant?” I answered, “We had a night out.” He inquired, “Where did we go?” I clarified, “Nowhere; we spent the evening indoors.”

He asked, “Are you saying we spent the entire night without sleep?” I shyly replied, “You could say that.” After dinner, we returned to the flat. He sat down at the laptop and began to write. I sat beside him, resting my hand on his shoulder, peering over to see what he was typing.

He turned to meet my gaze, and I found myself captivated by his words. He wrote about how I had inspired him to create software code on a piece of paper, which then flew away into Mr. Kathuria’s hands. It was a moment that marked his entry into software coding.

After reading, I asked, “Is this how you began your journey in software development?” He replied, “That was just the start. I discovered I had a knack for finding bugs.”

Curious, I asked, “Were you a biologist?” He looked puzzled, “What do you mean?” I explained, “Biologists find bugs.” He chuckled, “Not that kind of bugs—software bugs, issues within the software. I thoroughly checked the software before installing it here, which is why we don’t encounter errors.”

“So, you identify errors in the code?” I clarified. “Yes, finding errors in software is known as finding bugs.”

“Then what happened next?” I asked. “I’m writing. If you’d like, I can let you read while I work.” I declined, saying, “No, I prefer to watch you. Your face captivates me as you type; it reflects the emotions you experienced during those moments. When you write a sad scene, your expression turns somber.”

“Enough of writing,” I declared, closing the application and shutting down the laptop. “I know how to distract you from working.”

“Is this your method of stopping me?” he teased, a smile spreading across my face. He leaned in, kissing me softly.

Surprised by his sudden gesture, I pulled back momentarily, then grasped his head in my hands, drawing him closer and kissing him passionately. This ignited a whirlwind of activity between us, leading us to the bedroom. I lost track of time there; when he finally woke me with a kiss on my cheek at 7 AM, he headed to the bathroom.

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It was after 11 AM when we arrived at the party office, and an attendant directed us to wait for Mr. Naidu. We stood at the door, peering inside. The room featured sofas arranged in an L-shape, and on one of them sat a lady whose profile we could see. Kumar hesitated at the door, taking a step back.

I whispered, “What happened?”

He pulled me aside and pointed to the woman on the sofa, saying, “That’s Dolly, a gangster from Bombay. She’s been involved in cheating banks and high-profile individuals.”

Curious, I asked, “How do you know her?”

Kumar replied, “I mentioned her when I had to save Kirit from some gangsters; it was her.”

“What should we do?” I inquired.

“Engage her in conversation. I’ll find some security or police,” he said, rushing out.

When Kumar returned with the police, Dolly attempted to evade them but was apprehended and taken to the police station. As we left, the Sub-Inspector called us to follow him. Mr. Naidu’s PA looked at us, puzzled.

We approached him, and he asked, “What happened?”

Kumar explained, “She’s a notorious gangster in Maharashtra, wanted by the police in Bombay and Nashik.”

“How do you know?” the PA asked.

Kumar responded, “We’ve been searching for her for six years. Last time, she slipped through the police’s grasp. Can you help us reschedule our meeting with Mr. Naidu?”

“I’ll see what I can do. You go find out what they need,” he replied.

We accompanied the police to the station, where they filed a case against her and confirmed her wanted status with Nashik police. I provided them with a written report, my card, and the hospital address in Hyderabad for any follow-up.

An hour later, we returned to the party office and met with Mr. Naidu's PA.

"Come in; Mr. Naidu is waiting for you. He postponed his other meetings," the PA said.

We entered and met Mr. Naidu, who listened as Kumar detailed his contributions to the elections. Kumar suggested, "If you provide us with data from the last elections, we can offer predictions based on various scenarios."

Mr. Naidu replied, "We're considering a seat-sharing arrangement with the BJP."

"If you share some data, I can provide insights on what can be done," Kumar said.

"What kind of data do you need?"

"The past election results, detailing how many votes each candidate received."

"I believe we can provide that. How will you use it?"

"We assisted Haryana's current government in winning elections. The Chief Minister's daughter is our partner in the software business. We analyze the data to explore different scenarios and develop strategies. Currently, we're collaborating with Maharashtra Sena."

"What's your role with them?"

"We're strengthening the party from the grassroots level. Recently, they held a meeting at our bungalows to finalize their agenda for the upcoming elections."

"How?"

"We gathered ideas from members to serve the public. The key to winning elections is ensuring people believe they won't be let down afterwards. We encouraged them to engage in welfare activities before the elections to build trust in the party."

"Do we need to do that here?"

"The public already has faith in the party; a small push from the party will suffice to secure victory. I believe seat-sharing will be effective. If you win, don't forget to support the software industry."

"Why?"

“I see a bright future for the software industry here in Hyderabad. We plan to invest in this area.”

“I’ll get the data for you. Where should I send it?”

I handed him my card, saying, “Send it to me, and I’ll pass it on.”

Mr. Naidu glanced at the card and remarked, “So, you’re the hospital administrator.”

Kumar added, “I’m here to install the software in their hospital.”

“If you assist us in the elections, we have hospitals where we’d like to implement the software.”

After taking our leave, I remarked, “Catching Dolly helped us secure this meeting.”

Kumar looked at me, asking, “Don’t we have an appointment with Mr. Naidu?”

“Rahul said to meet his PA; he would arrange a meeting,” I replied.

“Are we gate-crashing a meeting? Oh, great!”

“It all worked out in the end. We hit two targets with one shot.”

“I think it’s one shot,” he corrected.

“Regardless, you caught your criminal mastermind and got to meet Mr. Naidu.”

“Thanks for your help.”

“Are you being sarcastic?”

“No, I genuinely appreciate your assistance.”

We returned to Rohan’s flat, changed, and settled on the sofa to watch TV. I snuggled up to Kumar, my chest against his back, as a romantic scene unfolded on screen.

Kumar turned to me and kissed my cheek. I turned my head, and our lips met. We moved to the bedroom, continuing our intimate moments. This time felt different for me; I was fully present, unlike the previous two times when I felt transported back to 1987. I couldn’t quite understand why.

I turned towards him, resting my hand on his body, my breasts brushing against his side.

I playfully touched his groin, asking, "What are you thinking?"

He responded, clearly aroused, "Only about you."

"What's on your mind?"

He said, "How marvellous our lovemaking is."

"Do you really think so?"

"Let's try again and see."

Now it was 7 PM, and he asked, "Shall we go out or cook something here?"

"I'm not sure if we have anything to cook," I replied.

"Then let's go out," he suggested.

"I'll get ready," I said.

He inquired, "What are the happening places around here?"

I replied, "I heard from a friend that a jazz bar opened recently. Should I check?"

"Please do," he encouraged.

I called my friend, confirming the bar was nearby, and he urged, "What are you waiting for?"

I dressed in a modern outfit, my skirt above my knees, and announced, "Let's go." We headed to the parking lot, took Rohan's car, and drove to the bar.

Once there, we found a table and enjoyed the live jazz music. It was a new experience for us, and we savoured our drinks and ordered snacks.

After the concert, we went to a nearby restaurant for dinner before returning to Rohan's flat.

Kumar sat on the sofa, beckoning me to come closer. I stood before him, and he pulled me onto his lap, kissing me and saying, "You look sexy."

"Really?" I asked, surprised.

"You're incredibly sexy," he affirmed, kissing me again.



The kiss quickly escalated into a passionate frenzy, leading to our final intimate moment together. Afterwards, I moved away while he changed and lay on the bed.

I slipped into my nightwear and joined him. Kumar gazed at the ceiling, lost in thought.

I turned to him, resting my hand on his chest and kissing his cheek. He continued to stare at the ceiling.

Curious, I asked, "What are you looking at?"

He replied, "That dot on the ceiling."

"There's no dot," I pointed out.

"That's what I'm saying; I'm not looking at anything," he clarified.

"Sometimes you say the funniest things," I remarked.

"Then why aren't you laughing?" he asked.

"What do you mean?"

"If I'm funny, why aren't you laughing?"

"Not that kind of funny," I explained.

"Now I see there are many kinds of fun," he said.

Frustrated, I replied, "There's no point in arguing with you."

"Then don't argue with me," he suggested.

I looked at him sharply and sat on the bed, asking, "What's gotten into you?"

"I want you to marry the match your parents have arranged," he stated.

"Why should I marry based on your suggestion?"

"It's not a suggestion; it's a request."

Angrily, I retorted, "Who are you to make requests?"

“Ask your heart who I am.”

I placed my hand on my chest, pondering, “Who is Kumar? It’s not answering.”

“I know the answer has reached your brain, but you’re reluctant to voice it. Now tell me what it’s saying.”

“You’re my well-wisher.”

“See, now you understand why I’m saying this.”

“I want to wait before accepting my parents’ match.”

“What will you do in the meantime?”

“Until I’m married, I want to be with you.”

“Okay, you want to be with me, but you’re here, and I’m there.”

“I’ll come with you to Bombay.”

“If you follow me there, Sahithi will kill me and bury me in the sand behind our house,” he joked.

“She won’t know,” I insisted.

“Why wouldn’t she?”

“Do you think I’m unaware of what you do with Sunitha in her office?”

Feigning innocence, he asked, “What do I do in her office?”

I hesitated to use explicit language but finally said, “You make love to her in her office, and Joy told me.”

“What did she know about us? Sometimes we discuss software development matters. I had Sunitha spy on them to see why they weren’t completing the development. Joy must have overheard and filled your ears with rumours.”

“Do I seem like someone who spreads rumours?”

“That’s what I’m saying; she expected you to spread her rumours, but you didn’t fall for her deceit.”

“Do you think she wants me to spread rumours?”

“Otherwise, why would she lie? If ten people tell a lie, it becomes the truth.”

“Yes, you’re right.” I lay beside him, tracing circles on his chest, and asked, “Can you give me a child?”

Surprised, he asked, “What?”

“I want a kid.”

“If you marry, your husband will give you children, however many you want.”

“I want one from you.”

“How is that possible? What will your parents say? What will society think? What will the child be called, a fatherless child?”

“You can give Loveleen a son; why can’t you give me one?”

“Did I sleep with her to give her a son? She did it secretly; I didn’t even know until she told you that day.”

“Really? You didn’t know? Tell me more.”

“I suspected something when her father announced it on national television. When she supposedly got pregnant, she was in Bombay.”

“But why can’t you give me a child?”

“At the time of her pregnancy announcement, her husband was beside her.”

“Then you get yourself a husband, and I’ll think about it.”

“Promise?”

“Promise.”

With that promise exchanged, I turned to the other side and fell asleep.

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Kumar awakened me with a cup of coffee. I responded, “Let me sleep, please.” He attempted to pull the bedsheet but then dropped it and returned to the hall, taking a seat on the sofa. After a couple of minutes, I followed him with the coffee cup and inquired about his earlier comment. He apologized, explaining, “I was about to pull the bedsheet from you, but when I saw you, I decided against it, which is why I said sorry.” I remarked, “I thought you would crawl under the bedsheet instead of apologizing.” He replied, “Now I genuinely regret not crawling under the bedsheet with you.” I accepted his apology, and he expressed gratitude with a kiss.

After I mentioned I would take a bath, I retrieved a towel and headed to the bathroom. Kumar suggested we shower together, and I joined him, removing my clothes. We shared a passionate kiss under the running water, which escalated into an intimate encounter. Afterwards, I completed my bath and found Kumar reading the newspaper on the sofa. An article caught my attention about a notorious gangster apprehended during a police raid, with information provided by an accomplice named Dolly. The gangster, referred to as RK, is actually Rakesh Khanna, who had been operating behind the scenes while Dolly managed the gang's front. The police are currently interrogating both individuals to gather intelligence on their operations and associates.

Kumar contacted Kirit to discuss the news article, noting that it had not received significant attention since it was reported by the Andhra Police, although it was featured in the national news. He read the article to Kirit, reassuring him that with Dolly and her boss apprehended, he need not fear her as he did when they had previously taken him to their hideout. Kumar expressed his frustration that the Bombay police had not acted on the leads he provided earlier, which could have led to their capture sooner.

Kumar recounted how he had called security when he spotted Dolly at a party office, leading to her arrest. He requested verification of her cases from the Nashik police, which was sufficient to keep her in custody. During her interrogation, she revealed information about her boss, resulting in his capture overnight. I suggested informing Mahira about the developments, as I needed to head to the hospital.

After a brief conversation, we decided to have breakfast at the hospital, and I offered to order from the cafeteria. Kumar showed me the news article, and I expressed optimism about gaining traction with Mr. Naidu due to the situation. He hoped that the police inquiry would not inconvenience them. I argued that they should be grateful for exposing the gangster who had infiltrated their party office.

Kumar speculated that their main objective was to defraud individuals and banks, and we had likely intercepted their plans before they could execute them. He kissed me, and we proceeded to the hospital, where he went to his designated room. I inquired about the developer's name, and after confirming with Mohan, he joined me with his laptop. As he typed, I asked why he was looking at me instead of the screen. He complimented my beauty and expressed regret for not having spent more time with me.

I recounted how I did not know of him until he visited my room, noting that he was twice married with children at the time. I had only seen him as a friend helping me. When he revealed his feelings, I realized he was the person I had been waiting to meet again. I expressed my disappointment when he said he wanted nothing to do with me, but I seized the opportunity to accompany him to Delhi after Guru's death, hoping to impress him. However, Loveleen overshadowed our time together, and I felt disconnected until our encounter at Rohan's flat.

He shared his realization about our connection during a story I told him about my guardian angel from 1987. He had no idea of his involvement until I mentioned it. I asked how he knew what happened that night, and he explained that our intimate moments had triggered his memories. He felt as if he had been transported back to that time, a sentiment I echoed, noting that I had felt the same way during our initial encounters.

We discussed the possibility of Leena travelling between timelines, and he shared his feelings of calmness when she went missing this time, unlike the previous disturbance he felt. I inquired about our future, and he suggested that only time would reveal the answer.

Mohan informed Kumar that he had uploaded the data, and Kumar instructed him to place it on the server for retrieval. After processing the data, Kumar decided to take a break for a cigarette and asked me to return by 4 PM. I assured him I would be back.

After breakfast, I returned to my room, where Kumar was waiting. I apologized for the delay in ordering food, explaining that the canteen had forgotten my order. We enjoyed our meal, and I arranged for tea. Kumar reminded me of our 4 PM meeting, and I acknowledged it.

Kumar reassured me that he would return to Hyderabad regularly to see me. Mohan rushed in with a call from Pauleen, indicating that we should expect a call from the Paints company. Kumar decided to join me in my room, and we discussed the urgency of the situation.

The call from the Paints company came shortly after, and Kumar learned they were experiencing software issues in Madras. He expressed the importance of addressing this opportunity, as it could lead to a foothold in the region. I offered to accompany him, suggesting we could explore Madras together.

After booking our tickets for the morning flight, we had lunch and proceeded to meet Mr. Naidu. Upon arrival at his office, we were greeted and seated. Mr. Naidu inquired about our connection to Dolly, and Kumar recounted a friend's encounter with her, detailing how she had led him into a precarious situation involving a factory and a bank loan.

Mr. Naidu expressed surprise at the revelation of Dolly's boss, and Kumar lamented the missed opportunity to gather intelligence on her operations. We discussed the implications of her arrest and the potential for further investigations.

Kumar presented reports to Mr. Naidu, outlining the potential outcomes of his electoral strategy. Mr. Naidu was impressed with the analysis and inquired about the methodology behind it. Kumar explained the software he developed to process the data and generate reports, emphasizing the importance of strategic seat-sharing.

Mr. Naidu agreed to consider Kumar's recommendations and expressed interest in collaborating on software projects. Kumar clarified that he was not seeking political favours but rather business opportunities that would benefit both parties.

After concluding our meeting, we returned to the hospital, where Kumar checked in with Mohan before settling down to work. I joined him, and he requested a ticket back to Bombay. I suggested we stay another night, but he insisted on returning to his flat.

We spent the evening discussing potential grooms from my family's perspective, and Kumar assisted me in searching for suitable matches. After identifying a promising candidate, we arranged a meeting to discuss the possibility of an alliance.

The next day, we met with Prathap, who expressed interest in my profile. After a productive discussion, we agreed to facilitate introductions between our families.

Kumar later contacted my parents to inform them of the developments, and they expressed their happiness regarding the potential alliance. As our time together drew to a close, we enjoyed a final evening together, cherishing the moments before his departure.

The following morning, we travelled to the airport, where I bid him farewell, feeling a mix of emotions as he boarded his flight back to Bombay.

## Chapter 7

Next few years I had little contact with Kumar. He was busy with setting up branches and developing business, and politics too. My parents fixed the wedding with Prathap but the engagement got postponed for one thing or the other.

Kumar asked me to check with my dad about helping Sena build a hospital in Bombay. Dad provided the logistics to build it. So, I could not get any extra time at the hospital.

In the year 1997, when we went to Bombay for the hospital opening by the Sena, Kumar had arranged for my wedding date to be fixed on 21st March.

At last, I became Mrs Prathap. I thought if Kumar is no longer in my life, I have to accept what comes my way. This marriage is also fixed by Kumar only. He got the wedding ritual performed in Bombay.

At first, Prathap was loving and caring. As the time passed he was becoming paranoid. He questions why Kumar did this and Kumar did that. Why did Kumar performed the wedding in Bombay was his question. I told him it was a return of help by Kumar for helping in building the Sena Hospital. Prathap's logic was it was not his own hospital, he helped the Sena build that. What is his interest in that?

I tried to explain to him that to help Sena win the elections, it was one of his ideas to impress people.

Prathap seeing the wealth and clout he had with the political parties, decided that he had an eye on me. I can tell him that it was not Kumar, but it was me who had an eye on Kumar. He was my benefactor, he was my dream man and I had to settle for Prathap, who does not love me as much as Kumar.

Then when one of the buildings near our house belonged to a doctor from another hospital, I told Kumar. He came and visited the building, decided to buy it and gave advance too. Now we have become neighbours.

In the month of July 1999, when I got the news of Kumar arriving in Hyderabad, I checked with him if he is available in his flat. I already found that he arrived with Loveleen, but he sent her to Madras to check out an interior design project.

I called him from the hospital to check if Kumar is available in the flat or not.

He said, "I am here, but the servant went away, if you want something to eat, better get from outside."

I said, "Nothing like that I am coming to speak with you on an urgent matter."

He said then come over I am free.

I went over to him after half an hour with a bottle in hand.

He brought two glasses and I removed some snacks from the bag and placed them on the plate.

He asked me what is the problem.

I said, "I am having some doubts about my husband."

He asked me why.

I said he had not given me a kid yet.

He said you work in a hospital, you better get yourself checked.

I said I got myself checked and Prathap is refusing to get checked.

If he refuses you might find a way to get him checked.

From the time I asked him to get checked, he is behaving differently.

He asked how.

He might have thought, I will get his semen checked, so he is not letting me collect it secretly, so I am having a doubt on him, he must have got it checked.

Kumar asked then what do you want to do?

I said I want you to fulfil your promise.

He seemed to have forgotten the promise he gave me. He asked what promise?

I replied did you forget you promised to give me a child.

He said yes, I remember.

I said that promise.

He said how can I fulfil the promise now, you are married to Prathap, if he had already got his potency checked, wouldn't he doubt that you cheated on him?

I said he already had that doubt from the time we went to his office to check on him.

He asked do you have any problems in marital life, because of that?

I said nothing like that. But I feel he has some doubts about that.

He said there is a saying in Telugu that when asked who is the pumpkin thief, the thief checks his shoulders if it is still there. You were talking like that. Because we had a relationship, you are thinking like that. I don't know if it would be appropriate to fulfil the promise I gave you.

I said you have to fulfil that promise, so I came to you with that thought only.

He said what are you waiting for, come to the bedroom.

He stayed in Hyderabad for a week and I would come daily to his flat.

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It is the new year and Sunitha rang me up and told me that Kumar is no more. My heart cried, but I have his baby growing in me, that is some consolation. I catch the next flight to attend his funeral. He was cremated as per our rituals and I came back to Hyderabad. The only way to forget about his death is to immerse myself in work.

They called me to the puja in Bombay, but I don't want to attend because it will remind me that Kumar is no more. I can't bear that thought. I have a question running in my mind: Will he be born to me? If I give birth to a son, it will certainly be Kumar, that I am sure.

But the next day a miracle happened.

I was sitting in my cabin, checking through my computer. An attender came running and told me that Kumar sir was on the stretcher outside.

I asked him who placed him there.

I don't know, he was unconscious and I took him to the emergency. Doctors are checking him out.

I went by running as fast as the pregnancy permitted.

By that time Kumar was conscious. The nurse shouted madam, sir woke up.

He turned towards me. I went to him and asked, "Kumar are you ok?"

He asked, "Where am I?"

"You are in our hospital."

"Where is this hospital?"

He did not seem to recognise me. Over that his question, raised a doubt, did he have amnesia? He did not seem to be hurt. I called, "Doctor, he seemed to have forgotten everything."

The attending doctor came and checked and said he seemed ok, there are no external injuries. This hospital is in Hyderabad.

Kumar said ok Hyderabad, how did I get here?

Doctor said someone placed you on the stretcher outside the hospital. The ward boy recognized you and they brought you inside.

Kumar asked who is the lady who is pregnant.

The doctor said did you forget her, she is the hospital administrator, she is Nandini.

I went to my office and made a call to Bombay, came back and said I called Bombay and informed Sahithi.

I said Sahithi, Sunitha, and Loveleen are coming here on the first available flight.

I said you look younger, what is your age?

He said I just turned 22 this April.

I exclaimed oh, so young.

He asked what year is this?

I said the year 2000 month of February.

He said Nandini do I know you?

I exclaimed know you, we have been friends for the last six years and you fixed my marriage, did you forget?



He said did I fix your marriage.

Then who are these other persons you are mentioning? Sunitha, Sahithi, and the other lady you mentioned.

You don't remember them also. Sahithi is your wife and Sunitha is your Operations Director and also your girlfriend. Then Loveleen is also your partner in these businesses you run.

He asked do I have any children?

I said you have two children Atul and Reena.

He asked then where is Leena.

I replied you forgot, you said she went back to her mother.

He thought something and asked asked do I wear dhoti?

I asked why would you wear dhoti? You wear suits.

He asked Doctor can I stand up?

He said try if you can stand up.

He sat on the table and slowly got down from bed. He must have felt a little dizzy at first but by catching the bed he could get a grip over himself and could walk properly.

He said I felt ok.

The doctor said to me he must be having some kind of amnesia. He must have forgotten everything. But how can he be so young?

Then Rahul rushed in and asked Nandini, someone said Kumar had returned.

I said apparently, but he looks so young and he says he is 22 years of age. Must be 15 years younger than us.

He looked at him and said did he look like this when he came to you in 1987.

I looked closely and exclaimed yes exactly like that.

Rahul said it seemed like some kind of magic. Ok, you take him to his flat. He will have some rest. When they come from Bombay I will send them to the flat.

I said come can you walk or shall we go in the car?

He asked how much distance is the flat.

I said better go by car.

When we came out there was an ambulance standing there. I asked him to take us to our building. We sat and rode for a minute and the ambulance stopped we got down and took the lift up to the top floor. We came out and knocked on the door.

A servant opened the door and Nandini took me in and sat me on the sofa. She told the servant to get him a cup of tea, it may revive him.

He asked who did the interior for this flat.

I said did you forget, Loveleen got it decorated personally, you take some rest when they come I will wake you.

He looked at me where should I take a rest.

"I forgot", and led him to the bedroom. He lay on the bed and I kissed him and said take a rest I will come back.

He closed his eyes.

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After a few days, Kumar accompanied by Sunitha came to my cabin.

I got up from the chair and looked him over and gave him a hug. I said I still could not understand how you could come back.

He must have thought it won't be a problem if he tells me the truth. He said, "I was sent by someone from my timeline to set things right in the businesses here. Or was it to find the reason for my death? For some purpose they sent me here, what they told me is that I had to set the businesses right, which I have done by appointing Loveleen as the business head. She will head all the businesses and she should interfere if there are any issues

between the businesses. One thing I could not understand is my meeting you in 1987. Because Kumar can't remember coming to meet you. Is it someone else coming to meet you or do you have some kind of memories from other timelines? Because I had not reached that year, I could not understand anything. Maybe I will meet you in the future."

I asked did you really came from our past.

He said I would say I was brought to your present from my present of 1986. It is all confusing but I am getting some kind of understanding of how they are working. From my understanding now, I have come across 4 Kumars including me. I have only met Sneha, Sahithi and Sunitha. Whereas Sneha does not seem to be in others' life except Pujari Kumar. In this timeline she is dead. In my timeline, she must be at her grandparent's place or married off. And I don't know anything about the Kumar's Sneha whose Leena has lived here. Leena did not recognize her from the photos. But one thing I feel Sneha was somehow present in our life in the intermediate college. From that, I deduced our timelines are separated to make each one's life a little different. Other than that, I could not find much about the other Kumars. There were some manipulations with people, like Leena and my Sahithi.

I said come let us go to lunch. We went to a nearby restaurant for lunch.

We came back to the hospital after lunch.

Kumar touched my stomach and asked how many months.

I said 36 weeks. In another month the baby would come.

There was a movement from the baby, must have felt a feeling of belonging.

Kumar looked at me and asked, is it?

I nodded my head.

He asked how.

I said he had given me word that he would give me a baby. I made him fulfil his promise.

He asked me boy or girl.

I said it is a boy.

he told me we will go to our offices and see how the work is going on.

I said I will come and see you in the evening. Maybe we can have sit-in.

He said you can't drink.

I said I can sit with you and spend some time. Prathap is out of the city and Rohan also wants to sit and speak about your experiences.

he said ok, if not in the office, we will be at the flat.

He said bye to me and walked out.

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In the evening I went over to their flat. Kumar told me he had appointed Sunitha as an Operations Head.

I asked what is the sudden change of mind.

He said these people were without proper management. No one is interested in work, they need someone to put pressure on the managers and then they will put pressure on their subordinates. I thought this is the only solution to the company's problems. She asked what about Loveleen? I said Loveleen is head of the Business. She will look after the all the company heads and try to resolve inter business problems. Sunitha will look after the business managers and will follow up with them to see how the businesses are running.

Sunitha asked but it was not the way Kumar had organized the companies? I replied that is the reason I had to come to set the things right with these companies. It seems his setup has failed a little, I would not say failed totally. I am trying to remove bottlenecks in the management. Next, I will promote Sahithi to Loveleen's firm MD. Now Loveleen is looking after the total business, someone need to be head of her companies. Some kind of reorganization should help the companies. I called Pauleen and asked to put another proposition to the board, that to promote Sahithi to MD of Loveleen's Interior decorations firm. She deserves the promotion.

Sunitha asked aren't you going a little too fast? I said I am moving very slow as per my estimates. Until I complete my work here I can't go back to my time.

She asked what so urgent to go back? I said I had to look after my future, I wanted to start some business, and with this experience, I can start my own business.

Sunitha said don't you think you lack the experience of this Kumar. He had to learn a lot by hit and miss, now you are only hitting you not missing because this business is vast and it can take some hitting, if you go on like this you will start to get back some resistance.

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I came back from running an errand and found Kumar and Sunitha sitting in my cabin.

I went and asked how long were you waiting?

He said around 15 minutes. Your husband came ten minutes back, did he call you.

I asked Prathap came here, no he did not call me.

He looked at Sunitha. Sunitha got up and asked me do you know where he could be?

I said some relative of his is at the hospital, he must be there with them.

Sunitha asked which ward?

I said paying ward P02. Sunitha went away.

I asked what it is this.

Kumar said let us wait for Sunitha to come back to understand the situation.

He changed the subject and asked me how the hospital is running and what my father is working on. We chatted and waited for Sunitha to return.

I ordered tea for us and we had and I got a call from the maintenance and I said I will be back and went away.

Kumar waited in the cabin and I returned and started to work on the system, he kept looking at me.

After almost an hour, Sunitha returned and told him come with her. Kumar and Sunitha went away.

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After 6 pm I went and asked what happened you went away like that.

Kumar looked at Sunitha if she would reply to her.

Sunitha did not move and Kumar said, "Sunitha suspects that Prathap thinks that your kid is mine and got him killed."

Sunitha said, "how he could think like that? He does not have trust in his own wife."

We sat there like that for some time.

Kumar asked me would you like to have something, perhaps tea.

I asked are you having one?

He said yes.

I said then get me one, please.

Kumar got up and went to make tea. He put the tea on the stove and came back and sat down for it to boil. He went and filtered it and brought three cups and placed them on the table.

I picked one and he took one and put it in Sunitha's hand and picked one and started to sip.

Then I started telling what happened. "Prathap told me he would be away for a week and I asked Kumar to fulfil his promise to give me a baby. At first, he was not forthcoming. I had to make him fulfil his promise to me. He reluctantly cooperated with me to have the baby. I had suspected Prathap was impotent when I could not get pregnant after two years, he must be knowing that. Instead of one week, he had been away for more than a month. Then when I become pregnant he must have suspected the baby was not his and must have checked around whose baby it could be. He must have zeroed on Kumar and he must have gotten in touch with Kumar's enemies and got him killed."

Sunitha said, "now who has helped him, I could not find, someone must be in the house only."

Kumar said Chitti said there was a cook who had come with Loveleen's servants, who was using some special salt.

After Kumar's death she went away.

I said I will see what I can do and went home.

After 8 pm I called and said Prathap had confessed to having a hand in Kumar's death. When I had announced my pregnancy, he had checked my ultrasound reports and calculated the date of getting pregnant. He was aware of my relationship with Kumar previous to our marriage and he put 2 and 2 together and convinced himself that Kumar had not left me alone after our marriage. Now from what he told me that he was under impression Kumar

is using some kind of blackmail to have sex with me and he had impregnated me under coercion. So, he wanted to take revenge on Kumar and he had taken help from a person in your house.

Sunitha asked who is in our house helped him?

I said if you hear the name you would be surprised.

Kumar said I won't be surprised, you can tell the name.

I said Sahithi had helped Prathap.

Sunitha asked why did she help him, what did he tell her.

I said he must have told her what he was telling me. Getting me impregnated under coercion. He might have also told her about his other relationships, with Sunitha and Loveleen.

Sunitha asked but how did Sahithi help him?

I said your expectation is correct, he had supplied her with a blood-thickening agent. Both of them were aware of his smoking habit, they would have anticipated he would have some kind of heart problem and they have used that to target him. He is not told when or where she used the medicine on him.

I said she could have used the medicine when he was in the hospital bed, she went to see him after the doctors attended to him. Later he was declared dead from a heart attack.

Sunitha asked what is her idea, if she didn't have Kumar, no one else could have him. Or she might have thought he had gone away from her or lost him forever.

Kumar said that could be the reason she was acting so close to me, to see if I was the same Kumar who she killed or not. It seems she must have spoken to him before killing him, must have made him aware of why she is killing him. If I had been the same Kumar, I would have known her of intentions. So boldened by my lack of knowledge about her, I acted as if she is my wife, otherwise she would catch me in a lie.

He said to me we would speak later and cut the call.

So this way Kumar's death story came out.

I went home and told Dad that I couldn't live with Prathap, he got Kumar killed.

Dad asked do you have any proof?

I said he had himself confessed.

But that is not enough, now Kumar also returned to what kind of action can we take.

I said, I can't stay with him, get me a divorce.

I will see what I can do.

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After three months I gave birth to a boy. I named him Vivek Rao Kumar.

## EPILOGUE

It was Jan 2020, when I was asked to join with Kumar. One Mr Bob took us to Moon base.

**To be continued**