

Unlucky In Love

by R Kumar

Kumar's Parallel Timeline Series

Series Developed by R. Kumar with Ravikiran

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This book is dedicated to all my friends who have helped in writing this book and also to My Family who supported me and gave their invaluable opinions and Ideas for the story. And to R Kumar for creating Kumar's Love Life Series.

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Preface

My name is Kumar, and as of January 1st, 2021, I am 56 years old. I have built a successful career as a businessman and earned a solid reputation within my community. The ongoing coronavirus pandemic has impacted us all, and we are currently experiencing a decline in the second wave of infections. In light of this situation, we spend more time at home.

While sitting on my bed, I reflected on my life's achievements and felt compelled to document my journey. Inspired, I opened my laptop and began typing my autobiography, eager to share my story.

PART 1

My entry into Bombay

Chapter 1

I was born in Vijayawada, Andhra Pradesh, in 1964, where I spent most of my childhood. Coming from a middle-class background, we had only the bare necessities; we didn't even own a fan, let alone other items like a TV, fridge, or washing machine, which are now considered essential for the middle class. By today's standards, we would be classified as poor. Lacking toys, we often scavenged at the dump yard for discarded items to create our own playthings.

One memorable find was a broken children's tricycle missing a front wheel, which we repurposed as a plaything. We collected glass pieces to craft a kaleidoscope and fashioned small wheels with a handstick made of wire and a hook, playing games that challenged our creativity.

Most of my education took place in aided schools where the medium of instruction was Telugu. My proficiency in English was limited, and I struggled with Hindi, barely passing with a score of 20 out of 100. Despite this, I consider myself quite intelligent; had I been tested for my IQ, I believe it would have been around 200. I had a knack for studying, often reading textbooks or notes just once before exams, which consistently earned me good grades. My strong memory, analytical skills, and logical thinking contributed to my academic success.

Reading was my passion. I devoured numerous books, starting with children's literature, and when I gained access to my father's office library, I read nearly every book available. My interests spanned from science and technology to the works of Perry Mason and James Hadley Chase, with Guy de Maupassant being my favorite. His short stories, particularly "The Necklace" and "The Thread," had a profound impact on my life.

My father provided me with valuable tips in mathematics and English, which significantly shaped my academic journey. In 10th grade, I developed a crush on a girl who was not only beautiful but also

exceptionally smart, consistently achieving top grades in class. I found myself competing with her academically. During tuition classes, boys and girls were separated, with the teacher sitting between us. I would complete the assignments given by the teacher and steal glances at her. She ultimately topped the school in the SSC exams, earning her name on the honor board.

I completed my studies up to the first year of intermediate in Vijayawada. When my father was transferred to Bombay, I took the Konark Express and arrived in Bombay in the summer of 1981.

Chapter 2

Due to the changing states, I was unable to secure admission to the 12th standard in Bombay. Consequently, my father enrolled me in a diploma course in accountancy. It was there that I met a Gujarati student named Kirit. His father was an accountant who also dealt in stocks and securities. Kirit's father would occasionally assign me some accounting tasks, allowing me to earn a bit of pocket money.

Kirit took a liking to me and quickly became my friend when I joined the course. He had a wide circle of friends. On one occasion, in an act of revenge against another student, he locked him in the toilet, leading to that boy breaking the glass on the door. The management fined both students, but Kirit simply paid the fine and emerged unscathed. Despite this incident, he never displayed any anger, and we soon became close friends. In the evenings, he would take me out for snacks, even though I had no money aside from my railway pass and bus fare. Kirit was well-off and always had cash on hand.

During exam periods, he would invite me to his house for combined study sessions, which often turned into me coaching him on the more challenging subjects. Since I was not fluent in Hindi, I taught him in English, as all the subjects were taught in that language. Kirit, having transferred from Baroda, was not very proficient in English. This arrangement continued until he completed his degree.

One memorable outing was when he took me to see the movie 'Aliens.' On the way, we smoked cigarettes. Another time, we watched Amitabh Bachchan's film 'Yaarana.' When his parents were away, he invited me over, and we enjoyed some liquor and cigarettes, making the most of the night.

On one occasion, I visited his house when he was not home. I sat on his bed, and his cousins had come over from Ahmedabad. His older cousin sat across from me on the sofa, lifting her legs and folding them beneath

her. She was wearing a frock, and I caught glimpses of her underwear. This continued as she would get up to go to the kitchen and return to the sofa, repeating the same position.

Kirit once took me to Baroda for his exams, where he needed to write some tests to obtain a certificate for completing his studies in Bombay. He had two brothers there, one older and one younger. After arriving, we dropped off our bags and freshened up before heading out to meet some friends. We rode bicycles for about 20 minutes to reach a gathering. At lunchtime, they prepared kichadi, adding ghee, and served it to us along with buttermilk. After lunch, Kirit took us to the fields, where his friends offered us some toddy to drink. Kirit excused himself for a while and returned an hour later with a smirk, suggesting he had met someone special.

Kirit had a girlfriend, and we would visit her home after completing our course at the institute. However, after he graduated and I started my job, we began to drift apart. I would visit him occasionally, and he would come to our home for family functions.

Chapter 3

We had a neighbor family from the Himachal region who lived on the ground floor, while we occupied the first floor above them. The father worked in the Telecom Department, and the mother was a housewife. They had two sons—one older and one younger—and two daughters. Rashmi, the eldest daughter, was of medium height, fair-skinned, and petite. Dharani, the younger daughter, was slightly plump, fairer than her sister, and more beautiful; everyone affectionately called her Dee. From the moment I arrived in Bombay, I found myself drawn to Dee.

The youngest son, Surrender (Suri), was in the 8th standard at the time. His mother asked me to tutor him in math, as he struggled with the subject. I agreed and would visit their home for lessons. In the evenings, Dee attended typing practice, and I would wait on the steps for her to leave. I often tried to coordinate my outfit with hers—if she wore green, I wore green; if she wore blue, I wore blue. I seemed to have an instinct for predicting her attire. After finishing Suri's tuition, I would go for a walk, and we would pass each other, exchanging silent glances that spoke volumes. This routine continued for over a year.

One day, while waiting for Dee, someone from the terrace of another building noticed me and began taunting me, claiming Dee was his girlfriend. Infuriated, I set down the kerosene I had just bought and confronted him, throwing punches until he released me. I returned home, still shaken, and told my mother about the incident. She immediately went outside to confront the man, and with the support of our neighbors, he was never seen again.

As exam time approached, Rashmi asked me to accompany her to the exam hall to confirm the venue. It was quite far, but I had a railway pass for the route since my institute was in the same area. We traveled by bus and then took the local train, sitting side by side throughout the journey. We asked people and shopkeepers for directions, only to discover that she had mistakenly thought it was her exam center. We returned by auto,

then train, and walked to her college, where she noted the correct venue for the next day. Afterward, we took a bus back home.

The following year, Rashmi requested my help with her studies. We would sit in the hall, just as I had with Suri. As Suri progressed to the 10th standard, he shared stories about our neighborhood, and we often played badminton with his sisters and another neighbor. We even set up lights to play at night. With Suri's friends, we formed a cricket group and played in front of our house.

During Rashmi's tuition sessions, we would sit across from each other with a teapot between us. After Rashmi completed her 12th grade, Dee joined the 11th standard in college. Eventually, she asked me to teach her accounts. While I taught Suri in the hall, Dee and I were given a separate room with a table in the corner. We sat in an L shape, our knees often touching. I felt tempted to reach out, but I never had the courage to act on it, perhaps because she never gave any signals. Dee typically wore knee-length gowns or skirts and tops, and her modern family never objected to our interactions during lessons. I taught her in a lighthearted manner, making jokes and playfully flirting with her. This continued for two years.

One day, Dee's mother informed me that there was no longer a need for my tutoring. Rashmi suggested I should find a nice girl to marry, but I brushed it off and left their house. The next day, Dee was sent away for nursing training, and I later learned that her family had sent her away because she was interested in a boy. The following year, she got married to someone she had previously liked, and the reception was held outside their home. My brother was in charge of the lighting and asked for my help, which I gladly provided. After the reception, I was so exhausted that I needed painkillers to sleep.

I saw Dee once more while walking home from the station; she had gained weight and was struggling with a two-year-old girl. She didn't acknowledge me, and I didn't approach her. Thus, our story came to an

end. It seemed her family believed I was in love with her and would be heartbroken, but for me, it was merely a crush, and being with her was enough. At least for a few years, I enjoyed a delightful time in her company. Eventually, her family moved to Mira Road, and we relocated to a better part of the colony.

Chapter 4

Once I was in Vijayawada when I received news of my cousin sister's wedding. We traveled to the village on my uncle's scooter, with my mother and sister accompanying the bride, while my father went to Bombay. After the wedding, we returned to Vijayawada, where I met my friend Sreenu, with whom I had shared many memories from our intermediate college days.

Sreenu mentioned that Sneha had been asking about me and wanted to meet. I requested him to find out the details regarding when and where we could meet. Sneha lived just one street away, and if we both went to our terraces, we could see each other, as we attended the same college. Our grandfather had a clinic on her street, where I often visited, and she would come over so we could sit and chat. I would share my insights on astrology and read her palm, revealing various things about her future.

After my first year of college, I had to move to Bombay, coinciding with her summer holidays, which prevented me from informing her about my departure. When I returned, I discovered that her family had moved, and I lost the chance to see her again.

Two days after meeting Sreenu, he provided me with an address and a time to meet Sneha. When I arrived, she was waiting for me in her friend's room, having asked her friends to come later. During our conversation, she revealed that she had liked me since our college days but had never found the courage to express her feelings. She scolded me for leaving without informing her and shared that her parents were arranging a marriage for her, which she wished to postpone. She wanted to confide in me before her wedding.

I explained to her, "I am not in a position to marry you; I have not yet settled down and lack a stable income. I cannot commit to marriage at this time." I was uncertain if I was truly in love with her.

She acknowledged my situation and expressed her desire for a final parting gift, which was the reason for our meeting. Understanding her request, I agreed to fulfill it, hoping to bring her some happiness. Afterward, I took my leave, and since then, I have not heard from her again.

Chapter 5

After completing my diploma course, I took a three-year break during which I worked and pursued my CA. Subsequently, I enrolled in a degree program. I successfully passed my entrance exams and visited my paternal aunt's home. In our family, it was customary to treat my paternal uncle's daughters and maternal aunt's daughters as sisters, while my paternal aunt's daughters and my maternal uncle's older daughters were regarded as sisters-in-law, and the younger ones were seen as potential future wives, often leading to flirtation. Not flirting could be taken as an offense, and flirting was considered a birthright.

My aunt had one son and one daughter, both younger than me, and we all shared a single room. I slept on a cot, while my aunt's son was beside me, and my aunt rested in an easy chair at my feet. Her daughter lay parallel to my bed on the floor. One night, I was awakened by a touch on my hand and instinctively dropped my left hand, which accidentally brushed against her chest. She was wearing a half-sari with an unbuttoned blouse. I lingered in that moment for a while. The following day, she lay on the floor with her legs towards me. At one point, her foot rested near my shoulder, and as I turned, my hand brushed against her feet, slightly waking me. She appeared to be sound asleep, her breathing steady and rhythmic, seemingly unaware of my touch. I reached out and placed my hand on her thigh, and she did not react. After a brief moment, I withdrew my hand and returned to sleep.

I have always respected boundaries; if someone expressed disinterest, I would not impose myself. I maintained distance from those who exhibited a repulsive attitude, preferring to engage only with those who were responsive. I avoided individuals with inflated egos who looked down on others, keeping them at arm's length.

I was known for being cordial with girls and earned a reputation as the best-behaved boy among my relatives. At a cousin's wedding, a girl approached me, seeking permission to sit with me since she didn't know anyone else. As I was related to her, she received her parents' consent.

Throughout the event, she remained by my side, sharing meals and enjoying the day together.

I am a likable person, and people often confide in me, sharing their problems and seeking my advice. Most of the time, they follow my suggestions and find relief from their troubles. I have developed a keen intuition, particularly when it comes to understanding girls.

Chapter 6

In 1985, I found myself in Hyderabad, preparing to join Degree College. One of my pen pals, Sheela, invited me to meet her at the theatre. I arrived and waited for a while, but Sheela did not show up. As I looked around, I noticed that no one seemed to pay me any attention. Although Sheela had my photo, I had never seen her before.

Deciding to pass the time, I went to a nearby restaurant for my daily cup of tea. After finishing, I stepped outside, and to my surprise, Sheela and her friend approached me. Sheela explained that she had been worried I might leave, as she had been watching me from a distance. I reassured her that I was simply enjoying my tea. The two girls introduced themselves, and I learned that Sheela was fair, around five feet tall, and had a pleasant face, while her friend was a bit darker.

They took me to another theatre in an auto-rickshaw, where I sat in the middle, flanked by the two girls. Sheela purchased the tickets, and we settled into our seats. However, I found myself in a dilemma, unsure which girl was my actual pen pal. I touched each of them in turn, but their reactions were identical. It seemed both girls were there for a fun time, and I decided it didn't matter who was who.

After the movie, they suggested having Dosa, so we headed to Koti, where they enjoyed Dosas while I opted for ice cream. They asked what we should do next, and I mentioned that I had a room nearby. They agreed to come with me, and we took an auto to my place, which had a separate entrance to avoid disturbing the other tenants in the bachelor-filled building.

Once inside, I experienced my first threesome with the girls. I found myself slightly more drawn to the fair girl, who was my pen pal, but I made sure the darker girl was not left wanting. I gave them what they came for, and afterward, I dropped them off at the bus stop.

Chapter 7

I used to have pen pals, both girls and boys. Whenever the girls asked, I would send them my photos, while the boys never requested any. They were more interested in other information, such as how the girls in Bombay were, how to approach them, and what steps to take to get closer. I was photogenic and appeared better in photos than in reality. At that time, I was 22 years old.

Nandini from Guntur was one of my pen pals, and we corresponded regularly. It was 1986, and I had just completed my first-year degree exams in Hyderabad, planning a trip to Vijayawada. Nandini invited me to meet her when I was in Vijayawada, and I asked her for a place and time. She instructed me to meet her at the Guntur bus stand at 11 am.

I traveled to Guntur by bus from Vijayawada. Upon arriving at the bus stand, I found Nandini waiting for me. She recognized me from the photo I had sent her. Dressed in a white churidar pajama of good quality, she was slender, reasonably fair, and quite attractive. With clear skin and no makeup, she was almost beautiful and instantly likable. She seemed to come from a well-off family, as she mentioned her father was in business.

Nandini took me on a bus to the Krishna Riverfront. The bus journey was uncomfortable, with pothole-ridden roads causing the bus to sway and bounce. However, I enjoyed the ride, holding her hand and touching each other's shoulders and thighs for about 20 minutes.

After disembarking, we took a boat to an island where we found a secluded spot. Nandini hinted that lovers frequented this place, suggesting she wanted to spend time there in a romantic context. We chatted for a while, and she brought chocolates and Poppins. With no one around, I placed my hand on hers, and she responded positively. She mentioned her preference for chocolates over other foods, which I initially thought was a joke. I shifted to sit beside her, turned, and kissed her on the cheek. She turned her face towards me, and I kissed her on

the mouth, gently touching her over her dress. She flinched slightly, but we continued to enjoy each other's company.

Eventually, we returned to the riverfront, took the boat back, and caught a bus to the stand, where we said our goodbyes before I returned to Vijayawada.

Another girl from Vijayawada, Rajeswari, also invited me to meet her at 6 pm on a different day at the railway reservation counter. I asked a friend to accompany me, but he had other commitments. My uncle also declined, so I went alone to the railway station. After waiting for half an hour without seeing her, I wandered around the reservation counter. I noticed some girls on the first floor, dressed in half sarees, but they showed no interest in me. After a while, they left, and I decided to walk home, concluding that Rajeswari was not interested, as she never wrote back.

Later, I went to Hyderabad for my second-year exams, and Nandini had moved there. She gave me her number and asked me to call her when I arrived. After my exams, I called her, and she invited me to her place the next day, providing an address in Jubilee Hills.

When I reached the area, I struggled to find her house and had to call her from a payphone for directions. She lived in a bungalow with a garden, surrounded by a compound wall and a large gate. At that time, there were very few houses in the vicinity, and a new model car was parked in the compound.

Nandini welcomed me inside, offered me snacks and tea, and we watched TV while chatting. She mentioned that her parents were away at a wedding in Guntur and wouldn't return for another two days, as she had chosen to stay back due to her exams.

Eventually, she led me to her bedroom, where we shared a wonderful time together. I had prepared for this visit, knowing I had issues with premature ejaculation. Before arriving, I had taken care of myself, allowing me to focus on foreplay and ensuring her satisfaction was my priority.

The thing about men is they ejaculate and spend easily. Most women are not satisfied with that. Men had to be considerate of women's needs. Even after spending, let them do their things. That is the way to a happy sex life.

I started with kissing. Kissing her from mouth to legs and up to her mouth again. I kissed her on the chin and came down to her throat. Slowly kissing her I removed her outerwear. She was in her bra. I kissed her on the valley of her breast. I moved her bra up and kissed her on her breasts, using my lips I kissed her nipple. They were small. I came down to her stomach and kissed her on her navel. Slowly kissing her I moved her panties down, exposing her bushy hair, and then her vagina. Completely removing her panties, I sat between her legs. With the tongue, I parted her vagina lips and put my tongue inside her vagina. It smelled wonderful there. After finding it wet there, I sat on her and entered her. After I found her satisfied, I rolled aside.

We dozed off for some time. Later in the evening, she took me for dinner at a fancy restaurant. We came back to her house and watched some tv.

Later we retired to her bedroom. There we started where we left off. This I started from her back. I disrobed her and went behind her. Cupping her breasts, I penetrated her from behind. I fucked her doggy style. Having spent, I dozed off for some time.

She awoke me after 2 hours. We went down and had a coffee and a light snack and went back to her room. We had our final act together. I laid her on the bed and I sat on her with my penis near her mouth and my mouth on her cunt. We used our mouths on each other this way for 5 minutes. Then she sat on me and she inserted my disk in her vagina and she was moved up and down. When she was satisfied, she rolled onto the bed and slept beside me. We kissed and said good night to each other and slept.

In the morning she dropped me off near where I was staying. I had not invited her in and she had not insisted to come in.

Next year I returned to Hyderabad for my final year exams. We used to exchange letters and once in a while talked on the phone. Then I had to go to the STD booth to call her. Our phone did not have an STD facility as it was department-provided. Sometimes she used to call me. We kept in touch for a year like this.

Before the exams, I called her saying I will be busy with exams for some time, I will be at my sister's place during the exams. At the time my sister was visiting Bombay with her son. Her mother-in-law was present in the house.

One day I went to write the exam and Nandini came to my sister's place unexpectedly. I don't know what my sister's mother-in-law told her.

When I learned that she came there, I called her. She talked distantly and said she will call later. When next time I called her, she had someone tell me that she was not available.

I had my heart broken by this and returned to Bombay. She did not reply to my letters and had not taken my calls. As time passed, I decided, she dumped me on someone filling her ears and tried to forget her getting me busy by continuing my work and typing and shorthand lessons and practice. We also had our evening cricket practice for time pass. She went to the back of the brain but was never forgotten. The following year, I returned to Hyderabad to take my final exams. We would exchange letters occasionally and talk on the phone, although I had to visit an STD booth to reach her since our home phone lacked this feature as it was provided by my department. Sometimes, she would call me instead. This is how we maintained our connection for a whole year.

Before my exams, I informed her that I would be busy for a while and would be staying at my sister's house during that time. My sister was in Bombay visiting her son, and her mother-in-law was at the house. One day, while I was out for an exam, Nandini showed up at my sister's place unexpectedly. I'm unsure what my sister's mother-in-law said to her, but when I found out Nandini was there, I called her. She seemed distant and mentioned she would call me back later. The next time I tried to reach her, I was told she was unavailable. This broke my heart, and when I

returned to Bombay, she had stopped responding to my letters and hadn't taken any of my calls.

As time went on, I came to the conclusion that she had moved on, influenced by someone else. I tried to distract myself from the pain by burying myself in work, typing, shorthand lessons, and practice sessions. We also engaged in evening cricket practices to pass the time. Though she faded to the back of my mind, she was never truly forgotten.

Chapter 8

Our cricket team was called the Horror Team, a name inspired by Ramesh, a Bengali born and raised in Bombay who had a fascination with horror movies. Stout and around 5'8", Ramesh was passionate about films, especially horror. Whenever someone's house was available, we would rent a VCR player along with some tapes and gather to watch movies, mainly horror and sometimes adult comedies. Thus, Ramesh dubbed our team the Horror Team, though there was nothing horrific about our cricket skills. We were just a group of ordinary players enjoying the game.

Our team consisted mostly of students from our colony except for three working members: Ramesh, employed as a telecom linesman, Kambli, a draftsman living in our building, and Uday, who worked in the Fort area and stayed in the opposite building. Ramesh's job fixing telephone lines sometimes provided him with extra income, and he often treated us to Vada Pav or Bajji Pav. I particularly liked Bajji Pav. Occasionally, we would pool money to visit places like Churchgate or Charni Road for drinks parties.

At one point, our teammate Sandip shifted to his own flat in the Lokhandwala complex. When he visited us one day after match practice, we were sitting on a cement bench chatting. Sandip recounted how he had seduced his maid when alone at home. We lost touch with him afterward.

Ramesh had a crush on a girl he frequently saw at the railway station. We would walk there together, and while I took a different train, he stayed back, hoping to catch a glimpse of her. Once, Ramesh mentioned he might be going to Bengal, which the girl must have overheard. Later, she was heard telling her friend she didn't want to leave Bombay. Ironically, Ramesh wasn't planning to go, but his words ruined his chances.

I had a hobby of assembling amplifiers and speakers. Once, I built a set with a woofer, tweeter, and mid-level speaker from parts bought at Grant Road. Ramesh admired it and borrowed it for his cassette player. Inspired, another friend wanted a similar setup. I was assembling the next one in a vacant flat we had recently vacated when a neighbour angrily knocked, complaining about the loud sound disturbing his daughter's

studies. He didn't ask politely but went straight to the estate officer. As a result, my father scolded me, and we had to surrender the flat.

Our team once planned a two-day picnic at Mud Island. The group included Ramesh (Bengali), Sandip (Kannada), Vipul (Gujarati), Uday and Mangesh (both Marathi), and myself. We packed hard bedsheets, a battery-operated radio with extra batteries, towels, and clothes. After buying beers, cigarettes, and snacks at Borivali, we boarded a launch. Upon arriving, we strolled along the beach, drinking beer, playing music, and enjoying ourselves. We rented a shack on the shore, changed into swimwear, and swam before returning to enjoy drinks and music.

As the night deepened, Vipul, feeling playful, flung his shorts and started dancing naked, which had us all laughing. The commotion attracted four girls who walked over. We offered them drinks and snacks, which they accepted willingly, and they began pairing off with us. Sandip, tall and well-built, was chosen by the first girl. A short girl picked Vipul, matching his height. The Marathi guys refrained from getting involved, while Ramesh paired with a tall, slightly overweight girl. I was left with a short, slim girl with a round face and spectacles.

One by one, couples retreated to the shack. When it was my turn, I made sure she was comfortable, asking if she was acting out of peer pressure or personal choice. She assured me she wanted to experience it herself. I treated her gently, ensuring she had a memorable experience.

We continued playing cricket together for five years. During that time, I once had a shin injury requiring surgery, and another teammate was sidelined for six months with a leg injury. Despite the setbacks, our passion for cricket never waned. We often pooled money for drinks parties. Eventually, after completing my degree, I began working for a courier company, which left me with little time for cricket.

PART 2

My work experiences

Chapter 1

After completing my degree, I joined a courier company as a trainee stenotypist, where my work involved taking dictation and typing letters for the Regional Manager. I had to use someone else's typewriter, but due to the conversion of a side room into a conference space, the typewriter became inaccessible. This forced me to rely on the generosity of other stenographers, particularly Persis, a Parsi girl working for the VP of Marketing, Mr. Krishnamurthy. Persis, slightly older and plump but very fair, spoke sweetly and often let me use her typewriter when I needed it.

The company had a significant Catholic presence in both management and staff. The Catholic employees, known for their polished English, professional attire, and courteous behaviour, were often favoured by the management. I stayed friendly with most of the stenographers, telephone operators, and customer service girls, often chatting with them to stay informed about company gossip and happenings.

During this time, I was also attending the Roshan Type Institute to learn shorthand. Bharathi, a Marathi girl, managed the institute while its owner, Mr. Kazi, a Dubai returnee who had brought back several typewriters, mainly taught shorthand. Occasionally, when he was away, I would assist by administering shorthand tests and supervising students until closing time.

One of the students, Padmini, once struggled with her typewriter, and I helped her, making a light-hearted joke in the process. This joking continued a few times, and she seemed to misinterpret my humour as flirting. One day, she cornered me outside with her friend, a fair and attractive girl, and began discussing how her family was trying to arrange her marriage. At first, I was taken aback, as I had never thought about dating her. Yet, feeling pressured by both girls and lacking previous romantic experience, I hesitantly agreed to her advances.

Padmini took the lead in our relationship, often deciding our outings, which included movies, beach visits, and secluded spots—always at my expense. On Saturday afternoons, when we had half days at work, she would wait outside my office for me to finish. Once, a staff member named Diedre noticed me searching for Padmini and teased me about my "girlfriend." When she finally saw Padmini, she pursed her lips disapprovingly and walked away.

Initially hesitant, I gradually became comfortable with Padmini guiding our physical interactions. However, our relationship took a turn when, during a secluded outing near the university campus, a police jeep approached us. Though I confidently provided my details, knowing my parents wouldn't be alarmed, the officers warned us against visiting such spots for safety reasons, leading us to avoid them afterward.

During this time, I grew closer to two fellow students from the institute, Raj and Krishna. We bonded further during a picnic at Mud Island, where a girl named Vaishali, who had a soft spot for Raj, joined us. We all enjoyed the beach together until a street performer brought a trained monkey that jumped onto Raj's shoulder, scaring Vaishali and giving us all a laugh.

Later, Raj and Krishna shared a revelation about Padmini's past relationship with a Muslim chicken shop owner who had ended things after his family disapproved. This made me question her intentions further. One Sunday, I deliberately skipped a meeting she had set up at the bus stop. When I returned late, she confronted me angrily the next day, shouting and accusing me of disrespecting her. After that argument, she stopped attending the typing institute and ceased all contact with me. Strangely, I felt relieved. I had begun associating her presence with bad omens, and her appearance, particularly in a yellow t-shirt, had started to irritate me.

Later, Sahithi, a Marathi girl I used to drop home from the institute, returned after a break. She had transformed—her hair cut shorter, dressing more fashionably, and working with a big company due to her sister's recommendation. Though I resumed dropping her home after practice, I never found the courage to confess my feelings, still haunted by my earlier experience with Padmini and my own insecurities as a mere trainee steno typist while she was a personal assistant in a reputed company.

Chapter 2

After some time, the newly appointed Assistant Vice President (AVP) contacted me, having heard about my skills from my manager. That morning, I attended an interview for a Steno Typist position at the Leela Kempinski Hotel, where typing and shorthand tests were conducted. I performed reasonably well and had obtained permission to arrive late at the office, where I was working with the branch at the time.

During my absence, the AVP inquired about daily reports. My manager, Stephen, informed him that I had taken permission to come late. Being a dedicated employee who often stayed late to complete work, Stephen had allowed it. The AVP, impressed by my work ethic, offered me the position of his Personal Assistant (PA). He wanted someone who was reliable and willing to work beyond fixed hours, as many of the female staff preferred standard working hours. I explained that after my probation period, I hadn't been confirmed nor received my increment. He assured me that if I accepted the PA role, he would recommend my confirmation and salary increase.

Throughout the day, the AVP frequently dictated letters, leaving me with limited time for typing. I had to take quick lunch breaks to catch up. Whenever I brought documents for his signature, he often extended the process by giving more dictations. His phone calls, which lasted at least half an hour each, provided me valuable insights into business operations. To aid efficiency, he planned to get a Dictaphone and provided me with earphones for transcription.

However, my time with the AVP was brief. He was transferred to Delhi due to some internal issues, which he willingly accepted as he was originally from there. Our professional association lasted merely 2-3 weeks, but before leaving, he ensured my confirmation and salary increment. After his departure, I had several pending letters that took a week to clear, which I got signed by the Vice President (VP).

Following the AVP's transfer, I started working under the VP of Marketing, who also assigned me additional responsibilities for auditing collections and outstanding payments. The VP already had another stenographer named Joyce working for him. Joyce was about five feet tall, round, and dark-skinned. She often wore a costly Rolex watch, which I heard her father had gifted her after working abroad.

Since our tasks overlapped, I often reviewed Joyce's work, read what she was typing, and stayed informed about her assignments when I was free. On one occasion, I noticed a letter from a Regional Manager questioning why she was receiving letters from the audit team despite previously clarifying the matter with the VP. The VP sternly instructed her to let the audit team do their job and supported my work.

Once, Joyce invited me to join her and her friends for a movie. I had Ramesh, a colleague from the area, arrange the tickets, as online booking wasn't available back then. However, when I later asked her to join me for a movie, she refused and scolded me. It turned out she had only invited me previously to accompany her when her friend and her friend's boyfriend from our office wanted to go out.

Later, I was transferred to the Kandivali branch. During a visit back to the main office, I approached Joyce at her desk, but she seemed scared and asked me not to visit her. Apparently, the VP had reprimanded her about me, giving me an undeserved reputation as a ladies' man despite my professionalism and efforts to help colleagues. I was a good listener with an approachable demeanour, and even the President's PA often enjoyed conversing with me during work-related interactions. I maintained friendly conversations with everyone, which may have caused envy among some colleagues who reported to management.

Eventually, Joyce was relocated with her boss to another branch, and I lost contact with her. Once, I coincidentally met her at Kandivali station while heading to work. She greeted me warmly, asked how I was doing, and I responded politely before continuing on my way. It left me feeling a bit melancholic, as I never saw her again during my time with the company.

Chapter 3

Our courier company was near the airport, serving as the Airport Hub for operations, the head office, and the Airport branch. I was working at the Airport branch in general operations, preparing daily statements before the AVP offered me the PA job.

During that time, I developed a liking for a girl named Sandhya, whom we called Sandy. Most of the staff were Catholics. Sandy had a round face, was around five feet tall, and lived in a hostel as her parents were away. I often helped her with work, sharing my customer care information, credit client contracts, and service area details whenever she needed them. I would also cover the counter when she was away, delayed, or out for lunch.

After the AVP left, I continued working at the branch for some time before being put in charge of the Kandivali branch, which became my backup role.

One day, Sandy insulted me over a trivial matter, so I decided to work from my room on the second floor. Unknown to me then, she was seeing a guy from International Operations who was tall and good-looking. Apparently, they had argued that day.

On Monday morning, they both arrived at the office together, with Sandy wearing a mini skirt and a flaring top. She immediately went to the restroom to change into something more appropriate. Unfortunately, he later broke up with her, and she left the company heartbroken. I felt no lingering emotions for her.

Chapter 4

A new set of Marketing Executives were appointed, and a new customer service department was established after the company they were collaborating with was acquired by UPS. All the new Marketing Executives were sent to our branch for interviews and orientation.

One of the new recruits was a slim, dark-skinned girl with a fresh face, staying in our locality. She once showed me her house near the church, an area where my friends and I often hung out for smoking. We used to commute together, and I frequently bought her bus ticket.

Once, she invited me to a staff member's wedding, mentioning that other colleagues would also be attending. It was a Catholic wedding in a church, and she instructed me to meet her at the bus stop around 7:30 pm. Unaware of the typical dress code for such occasions, I wore a Kurta Pyjama and Kolhapuri chappals, the attire I had for my sister's wedding.

Arriving early at the bus stop, I waited for a while before heading to her house, where I stood outside without knocking before returning to the stop. She arrived more than half an hour late. At the church, none of the bride or groom's family had arrived initially, so we wandered around until the ceremony began. There was a toast with wine and later a dance floor was set up, but no liquor was served as the church prohibited it. I did not enjoy the event much due to my outfit, and from then on, she kept a bit of distance from me, possibly thinking I was not her type. Though she was a Kannada Hindu, she seemed influenced by her Catholic friends and attended Mahim Church Wednesday Novena.

I maintained professionalism and only assisted her with clients and collections when required. Another woman in the office was fair, a little plump, but not fat, with a good height. Another dark-skinned girl seemed to take a liking to me after a brief accidental physical contact.

These colleagues often took me along for client meetings and cheque collections. We frequently travelled to L&T Powai in auto-rickshaws, where I would sit between her and another girl, making the trips enjoyable for me.

When new customer care staff joined, I provided orientation, explaining procedures and relevant information. One of the girls continued to acknowledge me even after I left the company, sometimes meeting me

at the Parle station bus stop where we took the same bus. I remained respectful and courteous.

Among the marketing executives, two key figures were Balachander and Rajesh. Rajesh started as a courier boy delivering packages with his car and was promoted to Marketing Executive due to his dedication. Balachander used to sit with me while preparing his daily reports, and we developed a good rapport.

When the Kandivali branch was planned, Balachander was designated as the In-charge, and I was assigned as an Operations Assistant. However, he left during my 15-day leave for ICWA exams, leaving the branch under the supervision of a courier boy named Tony.

Chapter 5

I had two close friends from the typing institute: Raj, a Punjabi, and Krishna, a Maharashtrian from Goa. They were friends with Shekar and Harry from Raj's colony, and they all lived in the same building. One time, when Krishna was returning from Goa, he booked a bus ticket and bought a beer bottle before boarding. He found his seat occupied by a lady with a girl beside her. After a brief argument, he made the lady move to another seat. The lady wasn't related to the girl; she had simply tried to avoid sitting at the back of the bus. Krishna settled into his seat and started drinking from the bottle. He struck up a conversation with the girl next to him, learning that she worked as a nurse in Bombay. After the lights went out, he started fingering her and she co-operating with him until both of them are satisfied. She gave him her number.

Later he went to meet her. They went someplace to have a good time.

He learned AC repairing and was working with an ac servicing company for servicing ACs.

One day he went to a house for servicing. There he found a lady with a cleft lip. She is coming on him, as everyone rejects her. He told him about her Raj and gave him her phone no. After calling her Raj took her to our recently vacated house. Later when we handed over our house, he took her to Mud Island. When Shekar asked him to let her have her, Raj refused. To take revenge on him, Shekar took her to Mud Island to enjoy her. This ended there.

Shekar had feelings for a girl, and Raj promised to help him win her over. Raj began giving the girl gifts, claiming they were from a secret admirer, and would bring us along for support. This continued for a while until the girl's marriage was arranged with her boyfriend. Shekar, devastated, went to her and expressed his love, asking her to cancel the wedding. She told him it was too late, and he should have come to her earlier. In the end, Raj inadvertently sabotaged Shekar's chances with the girl.

Raj was enrolled in a college in Dadar but rarely attended classes. Instead, he spent his time hanging around the Mithibai College canteen. There, he became infatuated with a girl. The first time he saw her, she was wearing white churidar pyjamas, and he decided to call her "Chandini" after the character from a movie. He would frequently call us to the canteen so he could catch a glimpse of her, and we would be there for moral support.

We spent a lot of time in the canteen, where students would approach us for advice, and some would ask about their futures. I would use their birthdates, sun signs, and palmistry to give them insights. Our benches were always crowded—where three people could sit, five would squeeze in.

Raj became obsessed with Chandini. She was a Punjabi girl, and he even started visiting the Gurdwara to pray for her affection. He took us along for support, and during this time, he gave me a steel bangle, called a "Kadi," which made me feel more confident.

Raj's obsession grew so intense that he even gate-crashed the college's Annual Function just to see her. After waiting for over an hour and a half, he managed to get us into the function. He would always call us to the canteen, not just for support but because he was fixated on her. Eventually, through some mutual friends, Raj made an effort to befriend her, even visiting her house and bonding with her mother over their shared Punjabi background.

Raj once went to a housing complex for the Dussehra Navaratri Garba dance performances. Midway through the Garba, he decided he wanted drinks, so we went to a nearby bar. Unbeknownst to us, it turned out to be a dance bar. Once we realized, we quickly had a drink and left. When the girl's mother found out about this, she scolded Raj. Eventually, when the mother became more friendly with him, she revealed that she liked another guy, but they had some differences, and he wasn't speaking to her anymore. Raj, feeling compelled to help, took it upon himself to bring them back together. Through mutual friends, he befriended the boy and convinced him to take her back. After some persuasion, the boy agreed. However, once they were back together, the girl influenced her boyfriend against Raj, and he was shut out. This ended Raj's involvement with the situation.

Raj was also treating Vaishali as his girlfriend. She had feelings for him, but he didn't give her much attention. One day, I went to the reception at our office and found Vaishali there, speaking to one of my colleagues (who was the nephew of the owner of the typing institute) with tears in her eyes. She was crying, saying she wanted to end her life because Raj wasn't responding to her love. Knowing both of them, I offered her some

advice and counselling and sent her on her way. Two days later, she returned, and I took her to our friends. Since Raj wasn't around, we consoled her and encouraged her to move on, telling her Raj wasn't worth the trouble.

Krishna had a crush on a girl named Triza, who collected milk daily from a dairy farm in their lane. Raj would take both Krishna and me to smoke near the dairy farm. The owner of the typing institute, along with Vaishali and Triza, lived in the same lane, and their houses were nearby. We'd pretend to meet Triza by accident and would often walk with her to her house. She eventually joined the typing institute. However, Krishna never had the courage to tell her how he felt. He would sit beside her and practice typing, even though he wasn't interested in it.

Once, the institute owner, Kazi, gave me a VCR that was malfunctioning. I took it home, rented a few tapes, and watched them for three days. I cleaned the VCR and returned it, warning Kazi to ensure proper ventilation. A couple of days later, he brought it back, saying it had stopped working. I checked the circuits and found that a resistor had blown. I replaced it, and it worked again. We rented more tapes, watched them for two days, and then I asked Raj and Krishna to return the VCR. I stayed at a distance while they returned it and asked for some money, which Kazi gave us. We recovered the cost of the tapes this way.

A posh girl started coming to the institute. She was very fashionable, always wearing skirts, shirts, and coats, and she was quite beautiful. Raj became interested in her and managed to find out where she lived. One day, he suggested she would be a good match for me. I told him to forget it, as I felt I couldn't match her standards. She lived near the police station, so I assumed her father might be a policeman.

We spent a lot of time in the Mithibai canteen, where many boys and girls came to us for advice. People would ask me to read their palms or tell them about their future based on astrology. There was one girl I liked. She was dusky, round-faced, and a little plump, and I would often sing the song "Thumjo mil Gaye Ho" (When I found you, I found the whole world). However, she didn't seem to notice us.

I asked Raj to help me get an introduction, but he told me to forget her and that he would find me someone else. He couldn't get an introduction because the girl's friends weren't part of his circle. Raj usually didn't care much about others unless it served his own interests.

One day, Krishna took a group of girls around the campus, telling them they were going to London. After leading them around, he made them wait outside the toilets. When he came out, they asked where they were going, and he pointed to the toilets and said, "London." Krishna had a way of playing pranks and doing comedy like that to entertain people.

After we moved to the Kandivali branch, there was no supervision, and someone was always present in the office while others could come and go freely. I used to visit the Airport Hub to check if the courier items had been collected. If they hadn't, I would arrange for them to be sent to our branch. Afterwards, I would head over to Mithibai College. Once my evening ICWA classes started, I switched to attending them in the evenings instead of the mornings.

Chapter 6

When the new branch was opened, I was given independent charge of a branch and sent to Kandivali., my designation was changed to operations assistant.

When Balachander left, one Marketing Executive was given to our branch, her name was Saloni Dawood, she had previous experience. She used to come with me to the branch and I used to take her to the clients around the area of our branch. We went to many existing and potential clients. We used to go around in Kandivali Industrial Area. She used to talk sweetly to me. She has the habit of saying so sweet, in appreciation of our actions.

She was not much pretty but average looking. She became close to me professionally. We were not dating or anything. We used to smoke together. Due to this, I started smoking more. I used to have controlled smoking, just three per day. There was a restaurant near Andheri station, where we used to meet and smoke and discuss things.

Once we were sitting in our office a call came. My assistant Tony took the call, his sister used to work in our company in another branch and she put him there. He was catholic and used to talk in English sweetly with a low tone. It was a wrong number but he spoke to her sweetly and for a prolonged time. She used to call him and he used to speak to her for a long time. He was already married, but he used to say he was separated from his wife to us.

Once when he was away I took the call. She also spoke to me for a long time. I asked her what she was doing. She said she is in 2nd year of her Degree at Mithibai College. I said, "I regularly visit the college, in fact, I was doing my ICWA course at NM College (these two colleges were on the same campus)". She agreed to meet me at Parle station.

We had our whole gang waiting for her. Our friends consisted of both boys and girls. We waited for more than an hour. We thought we saw some girls. Seeing our friends, she must have been scared and did not approach us and she never called again.

Once Mangesh Heddao, he was a cricket mate asked me to take his typing test for him and get him a certificate, so he could get a promotion and increment. I said okay. He asked me how much money I want. I said the

cost of practice and exams and the party for our group. He agreed to it and gave me an amount for 3 months of practice. I joined an institute in Kandivali near our office and joined using Mangesh Heddao's name and started to practice in the afternoons before lunchtime.

One day Tony came to the institute to call me for lunch with Saloni and was asking for Kumar, the instructor told him there are no Kumar there. I looked up waved at him and shouted coming.

She was looking strangely at me, I explained to her Kumar was my middle name and he is the only person who calls me that. After 6 months I took the test and got 40 out of 50 marks for the 40 wpm test and gave him the certificate. He gave us the party at Charny Road.

When Tony decided to celebrate his marriage anniversary, he called us to his house. He said that he and his wife were not together and wanted to celebrate their anniversary, so they can come together. I went with two other courier boys from our branch, and Saloni went to his house. He had invited some neighbours and his friends and his wife's friends.

At the party, he had drunk heavily, and instead of patching up with his wife, he was proposing to Saloni. She was just laughing at him. When it was around midnight, I and another courier boy took an auto and reached home.

I liked his wife's younger sister Maria at the party and gave her my number. Our office was near the Kandivali station on the main road. If she had to go to the station, she had to pass our office. Maria visited our office after two weeks. I sent other boys for collections and locked the glass door and took her to the inside room. If anyone comes, it looks as if the office was closed. Inside we had a sofa. There we started having a go. I was angry at Tony for proposing to Saloni.

I wanted to take revenge and did not tell him about this. Then one day Tony went away to Saudi, he already arranged it at the time of his anniversary but he did not tell me. He got a job there and went away on a fine day.

When the accounts department was auditing, they found some payments were not submitted. Tony, when I was on leave for 15 days for my exams and he got charge of the branch when he was taking the payments to HO used to withhold some vouchers and not submit cash for them. When the

accounts checked the proof of delivery with the submitted vouchers the discrepancy was found.

Due to this I was shifted back to HO and was given a second shift in branch Operations. There used to be another guy who used to work in HO Operations, Vichare, we used to have clashes about work and procedures. He is the type who fills the ears of the bosses.

I used to go in the evening van to client visits when courier boys were unavailable.

One day Saloni came to me with a complaint from a client that we have not picked up their courier the previous evening. As I visited the client the previous day, I took Saloni to meet the client. We went there and sorted the things. As their security was responsible, they accepted the mistake and took back the complaint.

Vichare went and said something to the operations manager. But the management has taken a bad view of this visit and asked her to resign immediately. Until today I don't understand the reason behind asking her to resign.

I went to meet clients with all the executives. I went for collections. I know all the contracts with the clients. They always take me to meet with the clients. I know where the services are available and where it is not.

After Saloni left, finding the second shift was giving me problems with my studies, I was doing my ICWA and classes just started for the second group in the evening. After missing two classes, I went and asked the operations manager for a change in the shift, but he refused to accept my request, citing Tony's fiasco. Also, he threatened to cut my salary for Tony's mischief.

I resigned by giving a month's notice.

When they opened the new branch, I got the nod to run things on my own, and off I went to Kandivali. They bumped up my title to operations assistant, which was a bit of a step up, I suppose. Not long after, Balachander left, and in came Saloni Dawood, a Marketing Executive with a bit of experience under her belt. She'd tag along with me to visit clients around the branch, and we made the rounds in the Kandivali Industrial Area.

Saloni had this knack for sweet-talking. She had a way with words, always praising our efforts with that sugary charm. Now, she wasn't a showstopper in the looks department—just average, really—but she grew close to me in a professional sort of way. We weren't dating or anything romantic; we just shared the occasional smoke break, and I found myself picking up the habit more often. I used to stick to a strictly controlled three smokes a day, but that went out the window with her around. There was this restaurant near Andheri station where we'd meet for a quick smoke and a chat about work.

One day, while we were at the office, my mate Tony answered a call. His sister worked at another branch, so that's how he got the gig with us. He was a Catholic lad with a soothing voice, and interestingly, it turned out to be a wrong number. But he didn't seem to mind; he chatted away for ages. Next thing you know, this mystery lady kept calling him, and they'd banter on for long stretches. He was married but liked to spin tales about being separated to us. One afternoon, when Tony was out, I picked up the phone, and wouldn't you know it, she chatted away like old friends.

Curious, I asked what she was up to. She said she was in her second year at Mithibai College. I mentioned that I often visited the campus since I was doing my ICWA course at NM College, right next door. She agreed to meet up at Parle station, so I rallied our gang—there were guys and girls waiting for her. We hung around for over an hour hoping to spot her. I think she got cold feet when she saw us and never reached out again.

Then there was Mangesh Heddao, a cricket buddy of mine. He roped me into helping him out with a typing test so he could snag a promotion. He asked how much I wanted, and I said enough to cover practice costs and a treat for our crew. He was on board and dosed me with cash for three months of practice. So, off I went to a typing institute in Kandivali, using Mangesh's name to sign up, squeezing in practice sessions every afternoon.

One day, while I was at the institute, Tony showed up looking for me. He wanted to grab lunch with Saloni. The instructor told him there was no Kumar there, which was my middle name—only he calls me that! I waved at him from across the room, and Saloni shot me a peculiar look. I explained the whole name thing.

After six months of dodging and weaving through the typing course, I passed the test with a respectable 40 out of 50. I handed over the shiny certificate to Mangesh, who then treated us all to a bash at Charny Road.

Around this time, Tony decided to celebrate his wedding anniversary, inviting us all over, claiming he and his wife weren't seeing eye to eye but still wanted to celebrate. I showed up with two other delivery guys from work, and lo and behold, Saloni was there too. Tony had invited friends of his wife and their neighbours. By the end of the night, he was totally hammered and instead of mending things with his wife, he proposed to Saloni right there. She just laughed it off!

When midnight rolled around, I hopped into an auto with one of the other guys and headed home. Funny enough, I had taken a liking to Maria, Tony's wife's younger sister, during the party, and slipped her my number. Our office was dead easy to find, right by Kandivali station. If she ever needed to head to the station, she'd have to pass by us.

Two weeks later, Maria dropped by the office. I shoosed some other guys away, locked the glass doors, and led her to the back room where we had a sofa. Looked like a good setup for a little rendezvous, right? I was a bit miffed at Tony for his antics with Saloni and wanted to take my revenge on the whole situation without letting him catch wind of it.

But then, out of the blue, Tony headed off to Saudi Arabia, a plan he'd cooked up way before his anniversary but kept hush-hush from me. He landed a job there and was off one fine day. Trouble started brewing while I was away on a 15-day leave for my exams. Tony took over the branch responsibilities for a while and, as fate would have it, during an

audit, the accounts team spotted some sketchy payments. Turns out, while he was in charge, he was holding back some vouchers and not submitting cash.

Once they connected the dots, the management decided it was time for me to take a step back to Head Office and switch to a second shift in branch operations. A bloke from Head Office Operations, Vichare, always had it in for me, filling the bosses' ears with his tales. It was a constant battle over work processes, and I found myself filled with the frustrations of those shifts.

Then one day, Saloni came to me with a client complaint about a missed courier pick-up from the night before. I'd made that visit the day prior, so I whisked Saloni along to sort it out. We chatted with the client, and after a bit of back and forth, it turned out the security team had dropped the ball, not us. We managed to squash the complaint, but Vichare had other plans. He went to the operations manager and twisted the narrative, painting our visit as negative. Before I knew it, the management demanded Saloni resign.

I never understood the reason behind that decision. I was fully on top of things at work, meeting clients and managing contracts, so it seemed bonkers to me. But after Saloni left and with the struggles of fitting my ICWA classes into a second shift, I finally gave in. I approached the operations manager, hoping to change shifts, but he shot me down, making it clear I was paying for Tony's mess-up. That was it for me—I handed in my resignation with a month's notice and walked away.

Chapter 7

After completing my notice period, I left the company without informing anyone. Just the staff there.

I and Saloni used to meet at the restaurant near Andheri station.

Saloni proposed we start a courier company. She had some friends in Nashik and Pune and she was proposing to bring courier services between these cities. Her friend in Nashik was working with a courier company. He will get some clients.

She also told me we will provide other services with our company. Her friends had a fire extinguisher manufacturing facility. They were making small-sized extinguishers that will fit in cars and can be used in offices. We used to go together to meet clients.

We went to Nashik and set up a small office. Another two courier boys from our Kandivali office agreed to join us, they were fed up with the company. We had a function at my house for starting the company.

She has invited all the managers from our previous company. Unfortunately, I could not meet them, as I had to go to a meeting with a client. I was delayed to reach the party.

I reached home after everyone left. Saloni told me the previous manager was asking about me.

Later she told me that, she called Tony in Saudi and told him about starting the company. She said to me that he was jealous and was congratulating us as if it is not a company we set up and as if we were engaged. I did not know what to make of the conversation. Either she was telling me about him becoming jealous of our relationship or she wants me to propose to her?

I was just attracted to her and waiting to see her reaction. I was scared of proposing to her. Small incidents did not allow me to express myself.

After starting the company, we also tried to offer other products through our company. We used to go together to meet clients. She engaged one of her friends as a receptionist.

The receptionist used to sit at the telephone and used to call full day. We used to go meet with clients. She took me to meet her friends asking for help with the company. Then we made several trips to Nashik.

We had taken an Office with a room on monthly rent for our office. So, we had an office with a phone and a room to sleep in the night, whenever we visited. I was stationed there for two months and she used to come once in a while to visit me.

We used to go meet clients during the day and used to sleep in the room attached to our office at night. I had a single cot with a mattress there. I also had an extra cotton mattress. Sometimes courier boys come and stay the night and go in the morning.

Whenever she visited, I used to let her sleep on the cot and I used to sleep on the mattress on the floor. On the first day, we went to visit the client list provided by our friend from another courier company. Then we went for dinner and returned to our room.

The first day, as we were going from client to client full day, we were fully tired and went to bed early and had a sound sleep.

On the second day, we went and visited Taparia Steel. That day she borrowed my blue and black striped T-Shirt. Normally, I use it for the winter cold. Taparia Steel manufactures wrenches and tools. Their factory was nice. They have piped music throughout the factory. First time I have seen a place where piped music ran, creating a pleasant environment.

We came back to the office in the evening, went for dinner and came back and slept.

As it was winter the nights were very cold. Cold wind used to blow from small crevices of the windows. Blankets were not sufficient. After some time, she came down and slept beside me, saying it was very cold. We combined both blankets and shared them.

At first, we slept with our backs to each other. In the middle of the night, I turned around and put my hand on her and she pulled my hand and me closer, maybe because of the cold. Her chest was touching my hand. I felt a little twinge in my loins and I pressed myself closer to her.

My pelvic region was touching her ass. My penis was burrowed into the middle of her ass. A small sound escaped from her mouth. She pressed my hand to her chest. I pressed her boob a little. She moaned a little. I pressed her another boob. Now She turned towards me and kissed me on the mouth. My hand now was on her ass pressing her closer.

We played with our tongues a little. I brought my hands to the front of her and started removing the buttons of her shirt. Her bra-clad boobs were visible in the dim light. She made me turn on my back and sat on me and removed her shirt. Now her bra-filled breast was visible.

I touched her on the top of the breasts and slightly pressed them. She released a slight moan. I moved the straps of the bra to the sides and brought the bra down. Now her breasts were fully visible. I pressed them with the tips of my fingers and pressed the nipples, and in reaction, she arched backwards. I loosened the thread of her pajamas. I slid the hand inside the pajamas to her underwear. I touched the area above her cunt. She got up and removed her pajamas and sat down on me again. I had on my lungi, which could easily be pushed aside.

I again touched her breast and started pressing them. She came down on me and reached my lips. I turned her aside and laid her face up and sat on my knees beside her. I started kissing her breasts. With my lips, I was milking her nipples. Then I reached down and started kissing her stomach, her navel and her pelvic region. Finally, I went and sat between her legs and started fingering her cunt with my tongue. I parted the lips of her vagina and put my tongue inside.

She left a moan with pleasure. It was very sweet smelling there. After some time, I slept on her and she helped me to put my dick inside her. I started to move rhythmically while milking her boobs with my mouth.

I was spent and rolled over. I reached for a cigarette and lit it. I took a drag and she took it from me and took a drag and gave it back to me. We finished the cigarette in silence.

We dozed off in each other's arms. The cold was forgotten. We went into a sound sleep with the help of double blankets.

The next day was a Sunday. We wanted to spend the day relaxing. We got up, I took a bath and we went for breakfast. After breakfast, we returned to the room, looked at some papers she bought for signing and decided to go for an afternoon movie.

We went to the theatre took tickets and went to a nearby restaurant and had lunch, then went and watched the movie. We came out of the movie, had our evening tea and went back to the room.

She wanted to take bath. We did have a water heater but no shower. She filled the bucket with hot water and called me to give her some shampoo. I took the shampoo to her and asked can I come in.

I went inside, she was removing her outer clothes. She removed them and put them on a clothesline. Now she was in her inner-wear. I stood there for a minute and I looked at her. Seeing her in the night lamp dull light and seeing her in the evening light was different. I felt something move inside my heart. I moved forward and kissed her on the lips. She responded by kissing back.

We kissed each other for some time using our lips, and tongues. I put my hand behind her and pressed her ass and pulled her towards me. My penis was touching her just below her navel. She removed her inner garments and put them on the clothesline.

I was just staring at her. It was the first time for me to see her fully naked under the light. I put my mouth on her nipple and bit slightly with my teeth. Then I sat down on my knees and put my mouth on her cunt and fingered her with my tongue. She caught my hair and pressed my head closer to her. After two minutes, I got up and turned her around. I took my penis and inserted it under her ass into her vagina. I caught her boobs and started to move slowly. She started moving rhythmically to my movement.

After we were spent, we had a bath together rubbing each other's backs. Came out and dressed, discussing where to go for dinner.

After half an hour she received a call from her home to come to Bombay on an urgent matter. I took her to the bus stand and she left for Bombay.

After a few days, one of our courier boys from Bombay brought some documents and parcels to be delivered to Nashik. As we arranged with her friend in Nashik (he was working in a courier company as in-charge), I arranged for parcels to be delivered by their boys.

The boy went back to Bombay by train. We arranged for him to have a monthly pass to travel between Bombay and Nashik. I also had a quarterly pass purchased when We decided to start the branch.

Next time Saloni came with some documents to be delivered. This time, she said she could not stay for more than a day, as she had some work to

be carried out in Bombay. We went and had a chat with her friend from the courier company and took him to lunch.

After handing over the documents to him, we returned to our office cum room. We went through our plans and she had documents for me to sign for setting up the company. Which she had to submit to the registrar the next day. We went out and had tea and snacks and came back. She packed her bag and was ready to leave.

We had a quickie, and then I took her to the Railway station and sat her on a train.

That was the last I saw her for some time. We were talking about the business on the phone. Boys were coming and going.

One day the courier boy gave me shocking news, she was going steady with a guy. He was her ex and she left him then when he become addicted to drugs. Now he came back to her saying he will leave the drugs and will be a good boy and she accepted his proposal and they were going steady.

After hearing this I put a local boy in charge of the office and went back to Bombay. By this time, I have used up all the savings. I went and met Saloni at our regular restaurant. She was sitting with her new boyfriend placing her hands around his neck, her chest was touching his hand and his back.

She behaved as if nothing happened between us. I told her, I will be here for some time, as I have to attend my ICWA classes which I missed for some time.

With no money in hand, I used to do some odd work to earn spending money.

One day she called me and gave me some money to go and close our office in Nashik. I went and closed our office, gave some money to the boy and came back to Bombay.

Slowly, I started moving away from her. By now we also shifted from that area and shifted to another posh colony, where higher management officials were living. It was in the center of the city far from her place. Our phone number also changed.

I used to do some odd jobs. During this time, I joined a software company for data entry work. The owner used to send me to clients with updated software on floppy disks. I learned some commands for DOS and Unix to

copy files to the systems. Then, I learned by looking at him and making changes to how the programming is done. He used to use two programs. One is on Cobol and one is on FoxPro. I got some computer books from Raj and studied FoxPro.

One time at around 7 pm, Raj's mother called me and asked me to accompany her to Nashik, someone in their family died and I had a railway pass to Nashik. We took a train to Nashik, there were no seats and we had to sit on the floor and travel. We reached Nashik around 1 am and reached their house in 15 mins. They gave me a bed to sleep in, and the next day someone dropped me at the station to return to Bombay.

One day type institute owner Kazi got two second-hand computers. He wanted to teach computers in his institute and arranged for a computer teacher. He was not getting many students.

He sent me to get some data entry work from his friend's company. His friend was HR Manager there. I went to the concerned department (it was purchasing dept) and said so and so sent me for the data entry work they were having. The manager said they could not give the work to be taken outside and It has to be completed in-house.

I took up the work of data entry. When the work was completed, they gave me accounting data entry. I started slowly showing what can be improved and got entry into the EDP Dept.

There another guy was working as a data entry operator, preparing Invoices. He used to take my help if he wants a leave. I showed the management some improvements in the programming and maintenance of the equipment, I was appointed and after some time, when I prepared the entire software in FoxPro and installed it, they promoted me to EDP Manager.

So, after I wrapped up my notice period, I just up and left the company without a word to anyone, apart from the staff, of course. It was a bit of a quiet exit, really. My friend Saloni and I often met up at this little restaurant near Andheri station. One day, while munching on our lunch, she tossed out this idea – why not start a courier company? Saloni had some mates in both Nashik and Pune who could help out, and her friend in Nashik worked for a courier company, so he could snag us a few clients.

And it didn't stop there! She had even more plans up her sleeve. Her friends owned a fire extinguisher manufacturing facility, creating these cute little extinguishers designed to fit in cars and serve offices. It was an intriguing pitch, to say the least! Before we knew it, we started going around meeting potential clients. We even trekked to Nashik to set up a small office, dragging along a couple of courier blokes from our old Kandivali job who were just as fed up with that place as I was.

To kick things off, we threw a little gathering at my place for the new company. Saloni invited all the managers from our previous job, but I missed out on that because I was stuck in a meeting with a client. By the time I got back, the party was over. Saloni mentioned that our old manager had been asking about me. She even had a chat with Tony over in Saudi and told him about our new venture. Apparently, he was green with envy, congratulating us as if we'd just got engaged rather than starting a business. It left me puzzled – was she hinting at something or just trying to gauge my feelings?

Things got a little complicated after we started the company. Aside from courier services, we had all these other products lined up too. Saloni roped in one of her mates as our receptionist, and we split our time meeting clients and hustling for business. More trips to Nashik followed, where we rented a small room with a bed for our office. It was a bit cramped, but it worked for us. I was stationed there for two months with Saloni dropping by occasionally. We'd crash at the office after long days, me on the floor with a cotton mattress and her on the cot.

Our first day was exhausting. After visiting a bunch of clients, we came back, had dinner, and hit the sack early. The second day, we visited Taparia Steel – their factory was fantastic, with piped music creating this chilled-out vibe. That night, it was freezing; as the wind howled through the cracks in the window, Saloni ended up snuggling closer to me for warmth.

At first, we kept our backs to each other. But then, I reached out, and she pulled me in closer. It felt electric, my hand on her waist, and we ended up tangled together under the blankets. Things escalated pretty quickly – one moment we were just trying to stay warm, the next we were kissing like it was the most natural thing in the world.

That night spiraled into a haze of passion. We shared everything – both our laughter and our secrets – as the cold outside forgotten, wrapped up in each other instead. The next day, all our plans revolved around our company and our budding relationship.

When Saloni had to head back home after a whirlwind weekend, things took a turn. Days passed, and I learnt from one of our courier guys that she was seeing someone again – her ex, the one who'd gone down the wrong path and promised he'd sorted himself out. Just like that, the world I built with Saloni crumbled. I wrapped things up in Nashik, put a local guy in charge, and returned to Bombay, feeling like a ghost of my former self.

Life became a blur of odd jobs and trying to catch up with missed opportunities. I remember running into Saloni a few times, and each encounter left me feeling hollow. She was with her boyfriend, completely ignoring our shared past like it was just a fleeting moment in time. Eventually, I pulled away, moving on and changing my number.

In the end, I found myself diving into work, finding a new job in a software company and discovering a knack for data entry. It wasn't the grand life I envisaged with Saloni, but it was something. I was learning and evolving while clinging to memories of what could have been with a bittersweet twist of fate.

Life goes on, they say. And so I slowly crafted a new story for myself, one page at a time.

Chapter 8

Once our factory workers had arranged for a musical program in an auditorium. We had to purchase tickets for them. We went to the program. Madhuri Dixit's song 'Mera Piya Ghar Aaya' was just released. One girl had brilliantly danced to the song. That was the highlight of the evening.

One girl from the accounts dept. was sitting beside me. She was Gujarati, and around five feet 2 inches in height. The next day I shifted her to my Department citing some problem with her system. She worked for 2 weeks there. Then our chief accountant had her shifted back to her department.

Once our office people have arranged for an overnight picnic at Mud Island. As Saturday was a holiday and Sunday we normally have a holiday. They thought that two days trip would be nice. We all collected money from the members who wants to go to the picnic.

We rented a minivan and went to Mud Island. Someone already booked rooms and arranged for cooking by the staff. We went to the beach for swimming. I wore a short and went further into the sea. Generally, I don't know much about swimming but could handle myself in the water.

There was a recently joined girl Lisa, she was catholic and thin-bodied. She wore a single-piece swimsuit. She also came along with us and was swimming with us. Some people were swimming at the edge of the sea. We went further and the water is safe on Mud Island. While she was swimming, I dived into the water and pulled her from under the water, the first time she was scared. Next time she took it playfully. We swam together playfully enjoying the water.

After one hour of swimming, we came out of the water and had our bath. Later we had lunch with the others. After an hour we decided to take a walk on the beach.

We walked for 15 mins when we found our group had disappeared, we sat down near a clump of trees. We were talking for some time, and Lisa was asking about me and my family, and where I was staying. I told her the details and we were talking for some time.

I decided to take the initiative and put my hand on her shoulder. She moved a little closer to me. I turned my face towards her and kissed her

on the cheek. Lisa responded by turning her face and kissing me on the mouth. We kissed for some time. We enjoyed ourselves by kissing for some time and returned to our friends.

When asked we told them we just went for a walk on the sand as we felt a little heavy in the stomach after lunch.

In the evening we had some games and dances with the group. We slipped outside when someone asked where are you going? Just for a walk, I said.

We went a little further and choose an empty cottage and asked for a room, they obliged as the rooms were not occupied by anyone. I paid for them and got the keys. We went inside the room and started kissing. Later we removed our dresses and fingered each other. Lisa gave me a blowjob and in turn, I licked her fresh pussy simultaneously pressing her boobs.

When she was ready, she asked me to enter her. I made her sit on her knees and bend forward and enter from behind. Her pussy was tight and moist. I removed my penis before ejaculation as I don't want to leave my semen in her. Next, I turned her around and start playing with her pussy until she is satisfied. We spent some time resting and returned to our group.

Once, our factory workers organized a musical programmed at a local auditorium, and we were all roped in to buy tickets for it. Excitedly, we headed to the event. At the time, Madhuri Dixit had just released her catchy song, "Mera Piya Ghar Aaya," which got everyone buzzing. The highlight of the night was definitely a girl who performed an incredible dance routine to that very song; she absolutely stole the show!

I was sitting next to a girl from the accounts department. She was a petite Gujarati girl, standing around five feet two inches tall. The following day, I managed to shift her over to my department under the pretext of some ongoing issues with her system. She worked with us for a couple of weeks before our chief accountant decided to send her back to her old department.

Not long after, the office crew decided to arrange an overnight picnic at Mud Island. Since Saturday was a holiday and we usually had Sundays off too, they figured a two-day trip would be a blast. We all chipped in, collected money from those keen on going, and rented a minivan for the journey. Once we arrived, everything was sorted; rooms had already been booked, and the staff had prepped meals for us.

As soon as we settled in, we hit the beach for a swim. I donned my shorts and ventured further into the sea. To be honest, I wasn't the best swimmer, but I could manage well enough. There was this new girl, Lisa, who had recently joined us. She was slender with a sunny disposition and wore a stylish one-piece swimsuit. She joined us in the water, and we all enjoyed splashing around.

Some of the group played near the shore, while Lisa and I swam a bit farther out—thankfully, the water was quite safe at Mud Island. While we were having a laugh in the waves, I decided to dive underwater and give her a playful surprise by pulling her down with me. The first time, she looked startled, but the next time she played along, and we ended up swimming about like kids, just enjoying the moment.

After about an hour of frolicking in the sea, we dried off and joined the others for lunch. Once we were all fed and feeling a bit sluggish after the meal, we thought it was time for a leisurely walk along the beach. As we strolled for about 15 minutes, though, we noticed that the rest of our group had mysteriously vanished. We ended up sitting down under a cluster of trees, and Lisa began chatting with me, asking questions about my family and where I was living. We were getting along splendidly.

Feeling a bit brave, I placed my hand on her shoulder, and she instinctively moved a little closer. I then turned to her and kissed her on the cheek. To my surprise, she responded by turning her face towards mine and kissing me on the lips! We briefly got lost in the moment, sharing a sweet kiss for what felt like ages before remembering we had a group to rejoin. When we finally returned to our friends, they teased us

about disappearing, to which we just laughed and said we'd gone for a stroll to work off our lunch.

The evening rolled in, and we joined everyone for games and dancing, enjoying the festive atmosphere. But when someone questioned where we were heading, we managed to play it cool and said we were just popping out for a breath of fresh air. We wandered off a bit further, found an empty cottage, and asked if they had a room available. They were more than happy to oblige, as they had rooms ready and waiting.

Once inside, we couldn't resist each other. We started kissing again, and before long, our clothes were off, and we dressed and fingered each other. Lisa gave me a blowjob and in turn, I licked her fresh pussy simultaneously pressing her boobs.

When she was ready, she asked me to enter her. I made her sit on her knees and bend forward and enter from behind. Her pussy was tight and moist. I removed my penis before ejaculation as I don't want to leave my semen in her. Next, I turned her around and start playing with her pussy until she is satisfied. We spent some time resting and returned to our group.

Chapter 9

As a manager, I had the privilege of traveling in AC coaches or by air. For trips to Delhi, I preferred the Rajdhani Express, while for visits to Madras, air travel was my choice. When traveling to Delhi, I would board the train around 4 PM, reaching the city by 9 AM the next morning. This schedule allowed me to check into my hotel, freshen up, and be ready for work by 11 AM.

My visits to various branches were mainly for software updates or resolving server and system issues. Occasionally, I had to travel on short notice, in which case I opted for air travel.

On one occasion, I booked a seat on the Rajdhani Express in a two-tier AC sleeper coach, securing seat number 1, a lower berth. When I checked the passenger list posted outside the compartment, I noticed the next seat was assigned to a 27-year-old woman named Loveleen Khanna. Upon boarding, I settled into my seat in a coupe designed for two, complete with curtains for privacy.

Just as the train was about to depart, a lady arrived and took the seat beside me. Confirming it was her seat, she responded affirmatively. She was about 5 feet 3 inches tall, with a slim figure, elegant appearance, and minimal makeup, exuding natural beauty. She seemed like someone you could proudly introduce to your family.

We introduced ourselves, and I mentioned that I was traveling to Delhi for work. She shared that she was attending a wedding. Our conversation flowed easily as I explained my work with computers and software while she talked about her own activities. During our chat, I mentioned staying at a hotel in Noida Sector 1, and she revealed she would be staying with relatives in Noida Sector 22. We continued talking until around 10 PM.

Eventually, we both began to doze off. She rested her head on my shoulder and fell asleep. After some time, I gently woke her and asked if she wanted to sleep properly. She agreed, so I offered to take the upper berth while she stayed on the lower one. We exchanged a polite "good night" with a brief kiss before settling in for the night.

The next morning, we exchanged contact details. I gave her my hotel and office numbers, while she shared her relative's landline number, as

mobile phones were not common then. Upon arrival in Delhi, we shared a cab, and I dropped her off at Sector 22 before proceeding to my hotel.

Two days later, Loveleen called my office to ask how long I would be in Delhi. I mentioned I'd stay for at least a week due to system and software upgrades. She invited me to attend the wedding she was in town for, saying she would introduce me as a friend from Noida. I agreed.

That evening, I attended the wedding dressed in a suit, having since upgraded my wardrobe to carry formal wear for meetings. It was a grand Punjabi wedding with lively guests, drinks, snacks, and non-vegetarian dishes. Everyone was welcoming, and a young man around 20 seemed particularly attentive, frequently asking if I needed anything. I suspected Loveleen had asked him to look after me.

After a few drinks and some delicious snacks, I enjoyed the festivities, which concluded with a lavish dinner. As the night ended, Loveleen asked if she could visit my hotel room the next day. I agreed, as I had booked a double room in anticipation of such a situation, claiming my wife would join me later to comply with hotel policies.

The following morning, I picked her up and brought her to my hotel room. I told her to feel comfortable, freshen up, and order room service if needed, as I had urgent work at the Delhi office. I assured her I'd return as soon as possible.

At the office, I handled meetings with vendors for system upgrades, issued instructions, and finalized contracts for both the Delhi and Noida offices. After completing my tasks, I returned to the hotel, where the receptionist informed me that my "wife" had gone shopping.

Loveleen returned an hour later, carrying several shopping bags. She had bought clothes and other items for both of us. We relaxed on the balcony with tea, chatting until the evening.

At around 8 PM, she changed into a saree, and we headed to the hotel restaurant for dinner. I ordered drinks and snacks, and we spent about an hour and a half enjoying our conversation and drinks. Later, we opted for the buffet, which had an excellent selection, making it a better choice than ordering individual dishes.

After dinner, we took a brief walk outside before returning to our room around 11 PM. We watched some television and eventually decided to retire for the night.

Once on the bed, we started taking things slowly, as if we have all the time in the world. We started by kissing which went on for infinity. We forgot the time as if the time froze. Slowly I started coming down and kissed her on the chin. Then down to her throat. Slowly down to her chest. I went over slowly by her blouse and kissed her stomach. Then I reached her navel. Then I moved down to her legs and started to come slowly up by lifting her saree and petticoat. I reached her knee and went on pushing her saree up over the thighs and continued kissing her. When I reached her pelvic region, I removed the pin holding her saree and pulled the saree aside. Reached for her petticoat knot and pulled it releasing her petticoat. I pulled the petticoat down exposing her underwear. Now I went up slowly and released the buttons on her blouse. I removed her blouse exposing her bra. Now I started kissing the exposed part of my breast. I put my hands behind her and unclipped her bra and slowly released her bra from her body exposing her breasts. In the dim light, they looked divine. Slowly pressing her breasts, I put my mouth to her nipple. She was moaning a little. I removed my clothes and sat beside her, she was sleeping face up on her back. I kissed her again on the mouth. Slowly kissing her I came down and reached her navel. Now I pushed her panty down and kissed her on the cunt. Slowly removing her panties, I was moving down with my mouth, and I completely removed her panty. Now slowly kissing her, I came up to her cunt. I pushed my tongue through the lips of her vagina. She arched backwards with pleasure. I separated and bent her legs, so her cunt will be exposed. Now going deep into her vagina with my tongue and started moving it inside. Now sitting on my knees, I started moving from her cunt to her stomach, breasts, and throat and reached her lips. Now I touched my penis to her cunt. She guided me inside. I started a rhythmic movement of my hips and she matched it with her movement. Next, I made her turnover and made her sit on her knees. For the first time, I tried anal intercourse with her. I bought some Vaseline and applied it on her ass hole. I slowly inserted it into her anal. Slowly I started pulling and pushing it into her anal. After 2 mins I pulled it out and inserted it into her vagina and started a rhythmic movement of my hips while holding her hips. Having spent I

rolled over and put my head on the pillow. Now she started kissing my body. From mouth, she came down to chin to throat. Then she started kissing my chest, this went on for 2 mins. By this time my penis started to get hard. Now she sat on me guided my penis into her vagina and started moving up and down until she is satisfied. Spent she rolled over and lay beside me. I took her into my arms and kissed her on the mouth.

I got up, wore half pants, and lit a cigarette while standing on the balcony. I felt a strange twinge in my heart, as if something bad was about to happen. We went back to sleep, but around 4:30 AM, the phone rang. It was a call from home, informing me that my father had suffered a heart attack and was admitted to the hospital. They urged me to return home immediately.

After hanging up, I asked Loveleen if she wanted to accompany me to Bombay, and she agreed. I called the reception and requested two tickets on the earliest available flight. They confirmed a 7 AM flight and booked the tickets for us. I packed my bags and helped Loveleen with hers. We asked reception to send a bellboy, then I settled the bill with my credit card and requested a cab. I tipped the bellboy who helped with our luggage and we headed to the airport.

Chapter 10

I arrived at Santacruz Airport and booked a cab for her to go home while I took another cab and returned to my place. Upon reaching home, I was informed that my father had already passed away. The authorities would hand over his body after the customary post-mortem. Many of my father's friends and colleagues had gathered at our home to offer their condolences and await the arrival of his body.

I called Loveleen to inform her of my father's demise. She assured me she would come as soon as possible and was at our home within two hours. I introduced her to my mother, brother, sister, and brother-in-law, who had just arrived from Hyderabad. Since my brother was the eldest, he carried the lit pot during the final rites. We reached the crematorium, where my brother lit the funeral pyre while I stood beside him.

The following day, we collected my father's ashes and placed them in a pot. My brother and brother-in-law decided they would immerse the ashes in the Ganga River. My boss and colleagues visited to pay their respects and offered any assistance I might need, which I acknowledged gratefully. Later, my friends also visited to offer their condolences.

On the 11th day, we held a memorial function attended by nearly a thousand people, reflecting my father's popularity among his colleagues and acquaintances. The previous day, we had performed the mandatory puja rituals. After the ceremony, we went to the seashore for another puja and then returned home. Once all the rites were completed, the guests departed for the night, as only close relatives were permitted to stay.

The next day, my mother inquired about Loveleen. I told her that I had met Loveleen at a function and liked her. My mother called Loveleen and spoke to her for a while. Since no celebrations could take place for a year due to mourning customs, my mother asked Loveleen if she would be willing to wait. She agreed without hesitation.

Later, I accompanied Loveleen to her home to meet her parents. During our conversation, we discovered that one of my friends was related to her and was, in fact, her cousin. Her parents spoke with my friend, who spoke very highly of me. They accepted our proposal and agreed to wait for a year before fixing a date for the wedding.

PART 3

My Married Life

Chapter 1

A year after my father's passing, Loveleen and I spent as much time together as possible.

Two months after his death, we had to vacate our quarters, and my mother went to live with my sister. With the help of friends, I rented a flat near Loveleen's house. My brother reluctantly moved to a house he purchased in Ulhasnagar. Loveleen occasionally accompanied me on my tours.

We cherished Sundays and holidays together, enjoying each other's company. Over the year, Loveleen explored various career paths before deciding on interior decoration. She secured a job with a reputable firm and earned a steady income.

Meanwhile, I started my own software firm with financial support from friends while continuing as a manager at my job. Time flew by quickly. Our families eventually fixed a wedding date, and preparations began.

Relatives from across India attended the ceremony, which was celebrated with grandeur. After the wedding, we honeymooned in Ooty, traveling via Chennai. We stayed in a cozy cottage for a week before returning to Bombay.

We bought our own house and hired Loveleen's firm to handle the interior design. She decorated the house beautifully, and we held a housewarming ceremony two months later.

As months passed, we both became increasingly busy. I focused on my job and software firm, which was gaining traction due to a product I developed. We had high demand, steady turnover, and began taking on development projects. I managed the developers, while my partner handled client relations and collections.

Loveleen began planning her own interior design business with friends who were ready to invest in her leadership. Our personal time together dwindled. We mostly spoke on the phone about work during weekends, and our weekdays were consumed by our careers.

We discussed having children, but Loveleen wanted to wait until her business was stable. Our careers consumed us, creating emotional

distance. After six months, we acknowledged the strain and decided to take a week-long trip to reconnect.

It took two weeks to finalize the dates and arrangements. We chose Goa, flying there and staying in a beachfront hotel. Despite initial efforts to relax, work kept intruding. Conversations were sparse, highlighting how far we had drifted.

We tried sightseeing, ending with an evening cruise, but the gap persisted. Exhausted, we returned to the hotel, watched TV, and went to bed. The next morning, while sharing coffee on the balcony, we had a brief moment of closeness, but a sudden work emergency forced me to cut the trip short.

Upon returning to Bombay, I resolved the software issue, but the failed trip deepened the distance between us. Within a year, we began living separately and planning a divorce. Though I hadn't moved on, I heard rumours that Loveleen was seeing someone else.

Counselling and discussions didn't bring us back together. Eventually, we finalized our divorce. Loveleen expanded her business to Delhi, and we rarely met after that. I tried to reconnect, but she avoided me, and our lives continued on separate paths.

Chapter 2

Here's a rewritten version of your text:

Unexpectedly, my life took a significant turn during our company's expansion. We were interviewing developers for new roles, having recently registered as a private company and secured new investors. Our aim was to expand into new territories, starting with a marketing division in Bangalore to cover the southern region, with plans for other areas.

Our software product had become quite popular with clients, leading to more referrals. However, the Y2K bug caused widespread concern among U.S. companies, who started hiring developers—even those with minimal experience—to upgrade their systems. Many companies outsourced this work, and we were fortunate to land a project to upgrade existing software. We received the compiled, running software with sample data and were tasked with redeveloping it using the latest technology.

During our interviews with experienced developers, I met Joy, or Jocelyn Fernandes. At 31, she had returned from working in the U.S. for seven years due to unavoidable circumstances and was willing to join our team within our modest budget, despite her previous U.S. earnings. Given her extensive experience, we offered her a Team Lead position overseeing 10 developers.

Joy quickly proved her worth. Within the first month, she took ownership of the product, efficiently managed her team, and brought the project to a viable stage. It was like developing the project from scratch. We knew how the software worked, but understanding and documenting its intricacies took significant time and effort. I closely monitored the development, receiving daily updates from Joy and discussing necessary

changes. Being well-versed in the software, I regularly tested it, identified bugs, and reported them to Joy for correction.

Prior to accepting the project, I spent time with the original users to understand their software's functionality. We successfully completed the project on time, earning a bonus from the client, which I shared with the team, giving Joy a significant portion. This gesture strengthened her trust in me. We celebrated the achievement with a large party, inviting staff from all branches. Completing the project on time earned us goodwill and recognition as reliable and trustworthy vendors from U.S. clients.

Joy and I began spending Sundays together, eventually making it a regular thing. We've now been going steady for over six months. Curious about her past, I asked why she returned to India from the U.S. She revealed that after completing her degree, she pursued further studies in the U.S., where she met and married a fellow MS student. As an only child, her parents assured her that she would inherit their assets.

However, post-marriage, her husband revealed his true colors, demanding her salary, liquidating her stocks, and eventually asking her to get money from her parents. His addiction to alcohol and drugs led to aggressive behavior, including physical abuse. Suspended from his job and with no income, he became increasingly mean. With the help of friends, Joy fled back to India. She eventually found this job through a friend.

Sympathetic to her story, I understood why she was initially cautious about trusting me. Over time, she began to trust me as I appreciated her work and dedication. She saw me as a mild-mannered, confident leader who explained rather than shouted at staff. While dating and spending time together, we maintained physical distance. I wanted to avoid triggering her painful memories and waited for her to take the initiative.

Chapter 3

We got an invitation to try to bid for a big contract from a US Client. I flew to New York with Joy.

I booked two rooms for us. We were there for 2 weeks for going through the project and submit our proposal and timelines for the project.

Joy had a lot of input in the preparation of proposals. She gave achievable timelines without dragging the project over time.

Seeing the timelines and project proposals, they have asked us for cost estimates. We gave them reasonable cost estimates, which they accepted.

We got the contract signed. The company gave us a party in honour of signing the contract. We went to the party in the evening.

After the introductions were over, we took a drink each and went and stood on the balcony looking over the city. We were sipping our drinks slowly and stood silently.

Then I heard a voice calling Joy from behind. I looked at Joy she was frozen. Her face became as white as chalk. From her expression, it is evident that she recognized the voice and was scared of the person.

I moved and I stood in front of her. He was drinking from a bottle. He came forward and looked at her snarling. She cowered behind me, scared.

He went around me at a distance and reached the parapet wall. There he smashed his bottle on the wall and came at her threateningly.

I sidestepped, pushed her aside and when he reached me I struck my foot at him. Running into my foot he slipped and fell forward on his own bottle.

He must be injured from the bottle, he started making some gurgling sounds. I called security and they called the police and ambulance. We had to go to the police station and had to give our reports of the incident. Evidently, it was an accident of his own making, they let us go. The next day we went to the courts and she filed for divorce citing yesterday's incident.

After completing all the formalities, we returned to India.

With the incidents during our trips bringing us together, we started to spend more time together.

I purchased an adjacent flat on my floor when it came up for sale, thinking it would be good to combine the flats when the necessity comes up. I asked Joy to come and stay at the flat. As it will be more feasible to work together and spend more time with each other.

Even after becoming neighbours and spending time travelling to and from the office, we kept our relationship to a friendly level only.

We could save more time discussing the projects while travelling. We were mentally closer than physically. Once I asked her opinion about having children. She had very positive beliefs, unlike Loveleen . She said she was waiting for her divorce proceedings to be completed. When she becomes a free bird, she will think about marriage and having children.

PART 4

Joy's murder and after

Chapter 1

Three months later, Joy received confirmation from her lawyer that her divorce was finalized. Overjoyed to finally be free from the nightmare, she invited some close friends over to her flat and cooked for them herself.

In the following three months, our project kept us extremely busy. As the project reached a critical stage, we were all under considerable stress, especially Joy. As the Project Lead, she was responsible for overseeing every aspect. Unlike the previous project where I was heavily involved in checking the completed parts, this time I was mainly handling the Requirements and Deliverables, leaving the bulk of the responsibility to her.

Though we often went to the office together, we rarely returned home together. If I got home first, I would send her car to pick her up. Joy worked tirelessly, pushing herself and the developers to their limits. Her dedication and leadership earned her the respect and admiration of the entire team, who were willing to go the extra mile to complete the project.

I was considering promoting her to Project Manager and had the papers prepared for her promotion. Then, the unthinkable happened. Her ex-husband was released from jail on a technicality. He took the next flight to Bombay with revenge on his mind.

It was the night of December 31, 1999. We were having a party at my house, which was on the top floor. I had arranged a drinks party on the terrace, and everyone was having a good time. As midnight approached, we started the countdown. At the stroke of midnight, firecrackers lit up the sky with loud bangs. Amidst the celebrations, I noticed Joy was missing.

I asked around, and a catering boy mentioned she had gone down to get some wine. I went to my flat but didn't find her there. When I pushed her flat door open, it swung inside to reveal a horrifying scene. Joy lay in the centre of the hall with her throat slit, and her ex-husband sat beside her in a drug-induced stupor, his head between his knees.

Reacting quickly, I called for an ambulance and the police, explaining the situation. I applied a wet cloth to her injury, but when the ambulance

arrived ten minutes later, the paramedics said her condition was critical. They administered first aid and took her to the hospital.

The party was abruptly forgotten as everyone gathered downstairs. I sat down, clutching my chest in pain, and eventually collapsed. A neighbour who was a doctor checked on me and suspected a mild heart attack, calling for another ambulance.

At the hospital, I received the devastating news that Joy had been declared dead on arrival. In a state of shock, the doctors gave me a sedative to help me sleep.

The next day, January 1st, was a holiday, but staff members began visiting me one by one. The board called an emergency meeting to discuss the situation, deciding that since I was familiar with the project's progress, I should determine its future.

It took me two days to regain my senses and a week to recover from the initial shock. I called the project team and promoted Joy's top team member to the Team Lead position. Despite knowing no one could ever truly replace her in the company or in my heart, I had no choice but to let life go on.

Chapter 2

After some time, I decided to rent out Joy's flat. I had initially purchased it with the intention of combining our flats, but with her absence, I put up an ad for renting it. Two days later, a couple with their 15-year-old daughter, Preethi, contacted me and came to visit the flat. They wanted her to join a nearby college and stay close to it. When I saw her, I felt a protective instinct, as if she were my own daughter.

I assured her parents that I would look after her like my own, and they were satisfied with my attitude. They entrusted her to my care and left. From then on, I took it upon myself to ensure her well-being. My driver would drop her off and pick her up from college. After the incident with Joy, I had started to reduce my workload and delegate more responsibilities to others.

With the project completed and payment received in full, I began to take things a bit easier. A few weeks later, Preethi asked if some of her friends could come and live with her, having already obtained permission from her parents. I agreed, thinking it would be good for her to have some company. Two more girls joined her in the flat.

A month later, Preethi's aunt, Pauleen, came to visit her. She rang my doorbell, introduced herself, and asked about the details of the murder that had occurred in the flat. I explained everything to her—how Joy had worked with me, how I had given her the flat, and the tragic events involving her ex-husband on the night of December 31st. I also shared how deeply I was affected and how I was coping with the loss.

Pauleen was sympathetic to my situation and reassured that the kids were not affected by living in the flat. Before leaving, she came back to my flat to say goodbye. I offered her a drink, and she agreed to have a glass of wine. I poured myself a whiskey, and we sat down to talk. She asked about me, and I shared my personal and professional details. We had a heartfelt conversation for about two hours, and it felt good to open up to someone after a long time.

I then asked her if she would like to go for dinner, and she agreed. We went to a restaurant, had dinner, and I dropped her off at her flat before returning to mine. The following Sunday, Pauleen visited Preethi in the morning and then came to see me. I offered her a coffee, and she accepted. I made us both filtered coffee, which she enjoyed, as it was her first time trying it.

As we sat and talked, she noticed a packet of cigarettes. I asked if she would like a smoke, and she said yes, taking one from the pack. I mentioned that I had quit smoking after my heart attack. We sat there in silence for a while, and I was reminded of the times I used to smoke with Saloni, feeling a twinge in my heart.

Sensing my thoughts, Pauleen got up, came over to me, and kissed me. I held her tightly, and she rested her chin on my shoulder, wrapping her arms around me. We stayed like that for some time before she let go and sat beside me.

Chapter 3

Pauleen began visiting me frequently during her free time. As I gradually recovered from the trauma, I resumed going to the office, trying to immerse myself in work. We were preparing documentation for a major project proposal from a US client, and knowing Pauleen's experience with stenography, I asked her to join me as my PA. She agreed immediately and joined our firm, becoming a constant presence in my workday.

I suggested that Pauleen stay with her niece, Preethi, so we could be closer and commute together. She readily agreed, and now she was with me both at work and at home. After work, she would freshen up and join me to discuss pending tasks, sometimes bringing unfinished work home. I gave her a new laptop to facilitate her work.

Dinner became a shared ritual, with Pauleen, Preethi, and me dining together. After some time, Preethi's flatmates moved out, and when Pauleen offered to pay rent, I refused, telling her to treat the flat as her own.

We started taking small trips together, always including Preethi. Over time, Pauleen and Preethi became integral parts of my life.

Chapter 4

It was some months after the incident. It was a Sunday, we were all having lunch and discussing the picture we had just seen.

When the bell rang our servant went and opened the door. I heard him asking what she wanted.

The servant called me to say some Loveleen came to meet me.

I went into the hall, Preethi and Pauleen following me. My ex-wife Loveleen was sitting there. She got up came to me and hugged me and said what you made of yourself? You became so thin, concerned look on her face.

I had seen her possibly after five years. She was looking as I have seen her last time. The few years we spent together are running through my mind.

I introduced my two guests as my PA and her niece and they were staying in the next flat.

The two of them left us alone and went to their flat.

Loveleen inquired about the incident, referring it to a murder at the new year party.

I don't know, how much she knew about my relationship with Joy.

I replied to her as cordially as possible. My mind is still on the few years we spent.

Loveleen said that she wants to close the office in Delhi and shift to Bombay. She was feeling stifling with the weather of Delhi too hot and too cold. She planned to continue working with the office here and maybe appoint someone else there.

There seems to be some love left in her eyes as if she is reliving the time we spent as I am doing.

We kept our chats through tea and snacks which went into dinner time. I asked her if she would like to go to a restaurant or have home-cooked meals.

Loveleen said she would like to cook for me and the servant would be helping her in the preparations.

I said I will check with the neighbours as we planned for dinner before she came. I went and told them that my ex would like to cook for me, would they like to come in for dinner?

They said they had other plans, as they already fixed dinner with some friends. It seems they want to avoid meeting my ex over dinner.

I went back and told her to prepare for us only and sat and looked at some documents sent over by my PA. Made some changes and sent it back to her.

After finishing my work, I switched on the TV and started watching a cricket match.

After preparing dinner, Loveleen said she will freshen up and went into the bedroom.

When she left for Delhi, I put all her leftover dresses and clothes in a suitcase and I told her to come and collect them. She must have remembered those dresses and asked me, where I kept that suitcase.

I showed the suitcase in the guest room and she collected a dress and went to the bathroom and I came back to the hall.

She had a bath and she wore the dress she selected from the suitcase.

I remembered I bought that dress for her 30th birthday. My mind went to that birthday party. It was the last birthday we celebrated together, and by the time of the next birthday, she left for Delhi. So many things come flooding my mind.

Loveleen came and sat beside me on the sofa and kissed me on the cheek. Shall we start dinner or do you want to have a drink before dinner?

I asked her if she would like a drink. She said she would. I poured us drinks and we sat down to watch the TV.

We slowly sipped our drinks and refilled them again. She wanted a fag, I gave her the packet and told her I stopped after my heart attack.

Loveleen took a puff and let out the smoke. She sipped a little of the drink and drew smoke and let it out and snubbed the fag in the ashtray.

We finished our drinks and went into the dining room. We sat opposite each other and started having our dinner.

Loveleen was telling me to have this and that and was serving the food items. She knew my likes and dislikes and prepared the food accordingly.

I thought of the times, we were together and I was eating absentmindedly whatever she was serving. When I felt I had enough, I told her to stop and went and washed my hands, came back and sat on the sofa.

My mind was still in the times after marriage. My heart was crying. I sat silently and looked at the TV without seeing anything.

Loveleen finished her dinner and came back and sat beside me. She saw the mindset I was in put her hands around me and pulled me towards her.

I put my chin on her shoulder and wept uncontrollably, bringing up all the emotions I had held back for all these years.

Loveleen took me to the bedroom and laid me on the bed. She covered me with the bedsheet. I said to her don't leave me alone Love.

Loveleen said she would come in a minute.

Went into the hall switched off the TV and lights and came back to the bedroom. Switched off the lights and came and laid down beside me.

I held her hard and went to sleep. When I awoke it was 8 am, I must have slept without disturbance after a long time.

I got up went to the bathroom and came out after brushing. Loveleen kept the coffee ready for me.

We both had coffee silently looking at each other. It seemed unbelievable to me, I could not yet believe that my Love was sitting in front of me and if I blinked she would disappear.

I was just staring at her. Loveleen asked what happened. I asked her you will not disappear, no?

She said she is not going anywhere. I finished my coffee and handed her the packet of fags.

She refused. I dropped the packet on the table. I sat there oblivious to the surroundings.

It was a while after everything had happened—months, actually. A lazy Sunday afternoon found us gathered around the lunch table, animatedly chatting about the film we'd just watched. That's when the doorbell rang, and the servant went to answer it. I caught a fragment of their conversation; he seemed to be asking the visitor what she wanted. Then he called out to me, saying that some Loveleen had dropped by to see me.

Curiosity prickled at my mind as I stepped into the hall, Preethi and Pauleen trailing behind. And there she was—my ex-wife, Loveleen—sitting there with a familiar look in her eyes. She stood up, closed the distance between us, and wrapped her arms around me. "What have you made of yourself?" she exclaimed, concern lacing her tone as she examined my thinner frame. It struck me that it had been nearly five years since I'd last seen her, and she looked much the same as I remembered.

I introduced her to my guests, my PA and her niece, who were staying in the flat next door. They promptly left us to our own devices, sensing the need for privacy. Loveleen, ever the one to delve into matters, inquired about "the incident," hinting at the murder that had occurred at the New Year's party, though I wasn't entirely sure how much she knew about me and Joy. I kept things cordial, my mind drifting back to the years we'd shared.

As we chatted, the conversation meandered through various topics, eventually landing on her plans to close her office in Delhi and relocate to Bombay. The weather in Delhi had been suffocating her—too hot in summer and too cold in winter. She mentioned her intention to continue working here, perhaps delegating someone else to manage things back in Delhi. For a moment, I caught a glimpse of nostalgia flickering in her eyes, like she, too, was reminiscing about our time together.

The hours slipped by as we nibbled on snacks that turned into dinner planning. I asked her if she preferred going out for a meal or if she'd

rather have something home-cooked. With a sparkle in her eye, she replied that she'd like to cook for me, her determination apparent as she said the servant would help her prepare. Before heading to the kitchen, I checked in with my neighbours, who politely declined the invitation, opting instead to avoid a dinner with my ex. That was fine; it would just be the two of us.

Once I cleared that up, I settled into some documents my PA had sent over, tweaking a few details before sending them back. When I finished, I flicked on the TV, letting the sounds of a cricket match fill the space. Loveleen popped her head in after a while, saying she'd freshen up, disappearing into the bedroom.

I still remembered the suitcase I'd packed with her things when she left for Delhi—dresses and clothes she had left behind. When she asked about it, I showed her the suitcase in the guest room. She picked out a dress, a lovely number that I'd bought for her thirtieth birthday, and headed to the bathroom. I couldn't help but reminisce about that birthday party—the last one we celebrated together before she moved.

After her shower, Loveleen returned, draped in that dress, and I felt a wave of emotions wash over me. She sat beside me on the sofa, leaving a soft kiss on my cheek. "Shall we start dinner or do you want a drink first?" she asked. We opted for drinks, and soon we were sipping and watching TV, the atmosphere charged with a familiarity that felt both comforting and strange.

Loveleen took a drag from a cigarette after I told her I'd quit post-heart attack. Her puff of smoke lingered in the air, weaving into the evening as we transitioned to the dining room. Dinner was a feast of flavors tailored to my likes and dislikes—she knew me well. I ate absentmindedly, lost in memories of our shared moments.

Once dinner wrapped up, I excused myself to wash my hands, still ruminating on our past. Loveleen returned after clearing her plate, sensing my mood. She wrapped her arms around me, and in a moment of vulnerability, I rested my chin on her shoulder and let go of the tears I'd held in for so long. It was cathartic, spilling out all those repressed emotions.

She guided me to the bedroom, tucking me under the covers. "Don't leave me alone, love," I murmured, seeking her warmth. "I won't be long," she said, slipping out to switch off the television and lights. When she returned, she lay beside me, and I clung to her, finally drifting off to sleep.

When I woke, it was eight in the morning. I felt surprisingly refreshed for the first time in ages. I got up, brushed my teeth, and found Loveleen had already brewed coffee. We sat in comfortable silence, locked in each other's gaze—could it really be? My love was right there in front of me, and I half-wondered if I blinked, she might vanish.

She caught on to my thoughts and asked what was wrong.

"You're not going to disappear, are you?" I inquired foolishly, my heart racing. "No, I'm not going anywhere," she reassured me, and I finished my coffee, handing her the cigarettes. She waved them off, and as I dropped them onto the table, I lost myself again in the moment, oblivious to everything else around us.

Chapter 5

Bell rang and she went and opened the door, our servant was standing out with the milk packets, he put the milk packets in the fridge and asked what I would like to have for breakfast.

I pointed my finger at Loveleen and said she knows what to make. The bell rang again. The servant went and opened the door. Pauleen walked in and asked me are you not ready? We will be delayed.

I said I will come in late you take the driver and go ahead. If I need it I will ask for the car.

Pauleen took my briefcase as it contains already signed important documents and went away.

I sat back on the sofa and looked at the ceiling blankly. My mind was blank.

Loveleen touched my cheek lightly and went into the kitchen.

After sitting there for some time, I went and had a bath and came out wearing something that came to my hand. I went and sat at the dining table.

She put something in front of me. I ate it without recognizing what I am eating. My mind was numb and I was in a state of trance.

She took me to the bedroom and laid me on the bed and made love to me.

When I am awake it was around 3 pm. I got up and went to the wash basin put some water on my face and came to the hall.

Loveleen was sitting there flipping through some magazines and asked me, do you want to have lunch?

I shook my head and came and sat on the sofa.

I felt relaxed after a long time as if I had not slept for a month and now slept to my heart's content.

I sat and put my hand on Loveleen's thigh. She has not moved.

I looked into her eyes. Only love can be seen in those eyes.

The bell rang, jolting me out of my daze. I shuffled over to the door and opened it, revealing our servant standing there with a couple of milk packets in hand. He quickly stashed them in the fridge and then shot me a question about breakfast. I lazily pointed at Loveleen, lounging in the other room, and said, "She knows what to make."

Just as he was about to head off, the doorbell chimed again. He went back to the entrance and opened it, letting Pauleen in. "Are you not ready yet? We're going to be late!" she exclaimed, a touch of urgency in her voice.

I waved her off, "Just go ahead. I'll take my time. If I need the car, I'll ask for it." Pauleen grabbed my briefcase, knowing it was stuffed with important documents I had already signed, and then left in a huff.

I plopped back onto the sofa, staring blankly at the ceiling. My mind felt utterly vacant. Loveleen, sensing the mood, gently brushed her fingers against my cheek and headed into the kitchen.

After a while, I finally decided it was time for a shower. Emerging from the bathroom in whatever clothes happened to be closest, I ambled over to the dining table. Loveleen set something in front of me, and without really looking at it, I started eating. Honestly, I didn't even know what it was; I was simply in a trance, my thoughts floating away like clouds.

At some point, she guided me to the bedroom and, well, let's just say we got lost in each other for a while. When I finally woke up, it was around 3 p.m. I stumbled to the wash basin, splashed some water on my face, and made my way back to the living room. Loveleen was there, flipping through magazines like she had all the time in the world.

She looked up and asked if I wanted lunch. I merely shook my head, sinking back onto the sofa again. It felt so good to relax, as if I hadn't had a proper sleep in a month and had finally made up for it. I reached out and rested my hand on Loveleen's thigh. She didn't flinch, just kept gazing

at me with those eyes that radiated nothing but love. In that moment, everything felt right.

Chapter 6

Loveleen asked the servant to call the driver to come to the house.

When he arrived, she took him to her place and brought her clothes and required items.

Loveleen went into the kitchen and spoke to the servant in a hushed voice. Now I am in no position to care about anything.

She told me to get dressed up. I methodically got up and wore whatever is in front of my eyes. She asked the driver to keep the car ready and we went by car to a mall.

She took some dresses for me as if I have neglected to do shopping in her absence. It was true, I have nothing new in my wardrobe.

From there she took me to a restaurant, she ordered something I just ate it. After finishing we came back to the house.

When we reached home, she told the driver to go back to the office. After some time, Pauleen came with some papers to sign, seeing I am in no position to look at the documents, she looked at the documents and gave the documents safely to be signed and put aside others saying, he is not feeling well, he will sign tomorrow.

Pauleen threw a glance at me and left. She must have called my friends.

One by one my friends started landing at our flat. They used to call Loveleen Bhabhi. When they were asking her what happened.

She started scolding them for what condition they left me in. Can't you take care of your friend, when he went through so much? Is this way to care for your friend?

Nothing was going into my mind, I was just looking at the person talking, moving my head from person to person.

At last one by one, they left telling me to take care and telling her we will know you will take care of him.

It has taken me a week to come out of this. Slowly I gained a full conscience and started to take care of myself.

After a week, I went back to the office a rejuvenated man. I reviewed the progress of the work. By now it was running like well-oiled machinery.

There should be one person to switch on and switch off. Everything runs like clockwork.

I reviewed the projects and gave some tweaks where required. Asked for the changes, where required.

I was my old self. When I reached home I refreshed and sat on the sofa.

Loveleen gave me tea and sat beside me and said we should have a baby.

I was surprised and asked what?

Loveleen said you heard correctly, we should have a baby.

No words came out of my mouth, I just nodded my head up and down in affirmation.

Within a week we had a registered marriage with close friends present.

Loveleen asked Pauleen and Preethi to vacate the flat and showed them an alternate flat. She promised them that she will take care of the rent.

I was in no mood to mind her actions. She has put her firm to make changes to the flats combining them as one. She got the other flat bedrooms decorated as children's bedrooms.

Loveleen had that look in her eye—determined, with a hint of mischief. She summoned the servant and asked him to fetch the driver. When he finally arrived, she whisked him off to her place like it was the most important mission ever. I watched as she rummaged through my clothes and gathered the essentials. There was an urgency about her, like she had an agenda she was eager to execute.

I slipped into the kitchen, and in a conspiratorial whisper, I confided in the servant, "Honestly, I can't be bothered with anything right now." Loveleen, however, wasn't having any of it. "Get dressed up," she insisted, and so I shuffled along, grabbing the first thing that caught my eye. Never one to argue with her when she was in this mood, I complied.

With the driver instructed to keep the car ready, we set off to the mall. Loveleen acted like I had completely forgotten what shopping even was during her absence. To be fair, she might have had a point—I hardly had

anything fresh in my wardrobe. We picked out a few dresses, and I swear, if she could have added color to my life with fabric alone, she would have.

After our mini shopping spree, she decided we needed to refuel. Off we went to a restaurant where she ordered for me. I barely paid attention, just eating whatever came my way. The whole day felt surreal, almost like I was on autopilot.

When we finally returned home, Loveleen sent the driver back to the office and settled in. A little while later, Pauleen popped by with a stack of papers for me. She took one look at my dazed expression, assessed my lack of focus, and decided that most of them could wait—"He's not feeling well, he can sign tomorrow," she said as she whisked away the more pressing documents and gave me a knowing look before leaving.

Before I knew it, my friends started arriving at our flat, one after the other, calling Loveleen "Bhabhi" like it was the most natural thing in the world. They all wanted to know what had happened, and Loveleen didn't hold back. "What kind of friends are you? Look at the state he's in! Can't you at least check on him?" Her scolding turned into a lecture, and I felt like a bystander in my own life, just watching everyone rush around me. One by one, they left, telling me to rest up, convinced that Loveleen would take care of everything. Little did they know, it took me a week to pull myself out of that fog.

Eventually, I began to reclaim my life. After a solid week of cocooning myself, I strutted back into the office feeling brand-new. I went over the projects and everything was running so smoothly it almost felt like a well-oiled machine. I made a few tweaks where necessary, and there I was—my old self again.

When I got home, I flopped onto the sofa like it was my throne, sighing in relief. Loveleen joined me with a cupper and casually dropped a bombshell: "I think we should have a baby." I blinked in disbelief, trying to wrap my head around it. "What?" was all I managed to stutter out.

"You heard me," she said, grinning. I just nodded, feeling a mix of shock and excitement swirl inside me.

Just a week later, we had a registered marriage with our closest friends. Loveleen was on fire, asking Pauleen and Preethi to move out and sorting them another flat, assuring them that she'd cover the rent. Honestly, I didn't even bat an eyelid—her plans were in motion, and I was just along for the ride.

Before I knew it, she was combining the two flats into one, branding it as our new haven. The kids' bedrooms were already being decked out with all sorts of playful decorations, and I couldn't help but chuckle at how quickly things had escalated. Life was about to get a whole lot more interesting!

Chapter7

Within a year we had a son and we name him Atul. The visitors were saying the baby is taken after his mother. He had her looks, which seemed lucky.

After a month we arranged a party for Atul's arrival. Parties are considered necessary to meet people and increase our contacts.

When our son was 4 years old, we had our second child, who was a baby girl, we named her Reena.

We purchased the Interior designing company from her partners and registered it as a private company.

Now she appointed a CEO for the company and herself as chairperson. Now we can offer good schools for our children. We can provide them with all the luxuries they needed.

The children had their own transportation, they had their own car with a driver to go to school and come back and where ever they want to go, like going to their grandparents. But we did keep them in our hearts.

Not to let them feel neglected, we used to spend time with them. Enquiring them daily about what is happening in their life. Generally keeping a close watch on their life. As they are growing up we kept a close watch on their friends. As friends are most influential in their life and they will have a lot of influence in their formative years, we started to treat them as friends. Giving bits of advice whenever required, refraining, when we felt they may not take our advice willingly.

A year slipped by, and before we knew it, we were celebrating the arrival of our son, Atul. Everyone who visited couldn't help but remark how much he resembled his mother. It seemed she'd blessed him with her striking features, and we couldn't have been luckier. To mark this new chapter, we threw a proper party to welcome Atul into the world. We figured, why not? It's always nice to gather friends and expand our network a bit.

Fast forward a few years, and when Atul was just four, we were blessed with another little bundle of joy—a baby girl we named Reena. Time to make some big moves! We decided to buy out her partners in the interior

design company and turned it into a private enterprise. With my wife at the helm as chairperson and a sharp CEO by our side, we were ready to conquer the world—or at least the local market!

Life quickly turned into a whirl of luxury for our children. We made sure they attended good schools, and didn't skimp on any comforts. They each had their own car and driver to whisk them to school or any other outing, including visits to their grandparents. Yet, despite this whirlwind of activity and privilege, we were determined to keep them grounded.

We made it a point to check in with Atul and Reena daily, asking about their days and keeping tabs on their lives. We knew that as they grew, their friends would become increasingly influential, so we decided to embrace those friendships, treating their mates as part of our extended family. We'd slip in the odd piece of advice here and there, but we learned to keep our mouths shut when we sensed it wasn't welcome. After all, navigating the teenage years is tricky enough without a parent butting in too much!

In the midst of it all, we aimed for balance—juggling our careers, our children, and making sure that, no matter how busy life got, our hearts always remembered to keep those family connections alive.

PART 5

Loveleen dies in an accident and later

Chapter 1

It was 2007. On a rainy night, Loveleen met with an accident.

We went running to the hospital, she was on her last breath. She took my hand in her hand said to look after the kids and closed her eyes.

Doctors put her on a ventilator. But due to a hemorrhage in the brain, she was declared dead the next day.

Now after six years I was again left alone by her. It struck me like a blow, but for the kids' sake, I controlled myself and finished the formalities.

The kids were at such an age, that they could not understand what happened. Reena was looking for her mother, she is just 1 year old and could not ask what she needs.

Atul was playing with his toys oblivious to the situation at home.

During this, Pauleen took care of everything as a good PA should act. Pauleen was what a good PA one can expect to have. As she was fully aware of my state, she took things at home in her stride and started to act accordingly. She became my right hand during the next few days.

Some relatives advised me to marry again for the kid's sake. I did not agree with them, nobody knows what kind of woman she will be.

There were stories of stepmoms treating kids badly. They are a few movies on this. I appointed nannies to look after the kids and gave overall supervision to Pauleen.

Now instead of coming to the office, Pauleen was staying at my home and looking after the household matters.

I gave her an allowance to run the house. I checked for a few days, how the nannies were looking after the kids and how Pauleen was supervising them, satisfied I left her to do things her way.

Pauleen shifted and started to stay in Reena's room in the children's wing.

It was 2007, and on one of those dreary, rainy nights, everything changed. Loveleen had an accident. We rushed her to the hospital, our hearts pounding and fear gripping us. She was barely hanging on. As I held her hand, she looked up at me with those weary eyes and managed to say,

“Look after the kids.” With that, her eyes fluttered shut for the last time. The doctors rushed to put her on a ventilator, but the next day, we got the news. A brain hemorrhage had come out of nowhere, stealing her away from us forever.

Six long years had passed since then, but it still felt raw. Losing Loveleen hit me like a truck, leaving me reeling. I had to hold it together, though—especially for the kids. They were still so young, and I couldn’t let them see how much I was hurting. As I finished up the hospital formalities, I felt numb.

Little Reena was just a year old, searching for her mother in the chaos, not quite understanding why things felt so different. Atul, on the other hand, was blissfully unaware, happily playing with his toys, lost in his own little world. Meanwhile, Pauleen—I can’t say enough good things about her. A fantastic PA and a rare gem; she stepped right in to help keep everything afloat. Knowing how unsteady I was, she managed things at home like a pro.

Some well-meaning relatives decided to weigh in, suggesting that I should marry again for the kids' sake. I just couldn’t agree with that. Who knows what kind of woman would come into our lives? There are countless stories—mostly from movies—about wicked stepmothers mistreating kids, and I wasn’t about to gamble with my children's happiness like that.

Instead, I hired nannies to help care for them and put Pauleen in charge of overseeing everything. To my surprise, Pauleen stepped up in ways I didn’t anticipate. Instead of sticking to her office routine, she moved in to stay at my home, running the household seamlessly. I even gave her a bit of an allowance to manage things. For a few days, I kept an eye on how the nannies were treating the kids and how Pauleen was managing the whole show. Once I was satisfied, I let her do her thing.

It wasn’t long before Pauleen settled into Reena’s room in the children’s wing. She made it her own, creating a comforting space for the kids. I

could see that under her watchful eye, life was slowly finding a way back to some semblance of normal. It wasn't easy, but with each passing day, I felt a little more hopeful, knowing that maybe we could find our way through this together. The road ahead was bound to be tough, but at least we weren't alone anymore.

Chapter 2

I was more than ever dependent on Pauleen. She was practically running my house. Kids started calling her mom. And she acts like a mom, telling everyone she encounters to refer to them as her children.

As before, I kept my distance from her. After marrying Loveleen, I have not touched any other woman. I called my old friends Raj, Krishna, Shekar and Harry to have a party.

I have not been in touch with others from the colony. We drank until late in the night. I asked my driver to drop them off, and they all stay near to one another.

After a long time, I had too many drinks. As I was walking in a stupor, Pauleen came over and caught me and took me to my room.

Pauleen laid me on the bed. With all the drinks I had and with the talks with my friends about Loveleen, I was in such a state, I had thought Loveleen was standing before me.

I said, "Loveleen don't go away leaving me alone."

She said I will not go anywhere, and sat on the bed consoling me. I caught hold of her hand put it on my chest and closed my eyes, that is the last I remembered what happened.

I opened my eyes and looked at the watch, it is 6 am. I turned around on the bed, Pauleen was sleeping beside me on her inner garments. I looked at myself, I had only on my underwear.

I tried to think about what happened. All I remembered was Loveleen standing in front of me, I was holding her hand and telling her not to go away leaving me alone, and holding her hand to my chest.

I got up and went into the bathroom, relieved and had brushed my mouth and went to the Kitchen. I prepared a cup of coffee, brought it to the hall and sat down on the sofa.

Absentmindedly I picked up a fag and lit it and took a drag. I stopped smoking but I keep a packet for visitors.

Being smoking after a long time, a little cough escaped my throat. I snubbed the fag in the ashtray.

I sat sipping coffee. Pauleen got up came out of the bedroom and went to the children's bedrooms on the other flat through the opening connecting both flats.

She looked at them, finding them still asleep, went into the kitchen and bought herself a coffee and sat beside me.

Normally she would sit on the other sofa, I did not say anything, just staring at the coffee mug.

Pauleen asked me are you having a hangover?

I said no.

Hearing the sounds from the children's bedroom Pauleen and went over there.

I got up took a bath and readied myself and went into the dining hall. Pauleen was preparing the breakfast and put it in front of me. Methodically I ate it and went into the hall.

Took the daily newspaper and started reading it. After finishing the paper, I threw it on the table and went into the dressing room.

At the time of renovation, Loveleen made the second bedroom a dressing room, with cupboards and all. I dressed up and came out to the hall and sat down.

Called the driver to come up. He came up, took my briefcase and we went to the office.

After a long time, I was early to reach the office. Went into my cabin and started looking at the documents.

I worked for an hour at a stretch. I was signing the approved documents, making changes where required and completing half the pile of documents.

I asked for a cup of tea, had tea and started to attack the documents. It took me two hours to complete all the pending documents.

I got up and went to the development area had a talk with the project manager and checked the progress of the projects.

Finding Pauleen's niece Preethi, I went and had a word with her. After completing of degree, Pauleen had her appointed to the firm.

Preethi was asking about the kids. I said they are doing fine under her aunt's care, and asked her to my cabin for a cup of tea.

I asked her opinion of Pauleen looking after the kids, looking for any deception in her voice. She said she loves them and looks at them like her own kids. I asked her if she would like to come and stay with us for some time.

Preethi said she would prefer her present accommodations. I told her she can go to her seat.

I called the lawyer and sat and thought about the future course of action.

When the lawyer came I explained to him what is required of him.

I asked him to prepare a trust fund in the name of the children. With substantial stock and fixed deposits, so they will not face any hardship in any event and asked him to prepare my will providing for Pauleen and the balance to be transferred to the kids in the event of my death.

I told him that if Pauleen agrees, I would like to marry her. Prepare the documents and keep them ready. As I have not talked about marriage with Pauleen, I would like to finalize the documents after consultation with her.

I recorded the whole conversation and gave him a copy in case needed in the future.

I found myself leaning on Pauleen more than ever. Honestly, she was practically running the whole house. The kids had started calling her "Mum," and she soaked it up, proudly telling everyone they were her little ones. Meanwhile, I kept my distance. Ever since marrying Loveleen, I hadn't so much as touched another woman.

One evening, I decided to throw a party and invited my old mates—Raj, Krishna, Shekar, and Harry. I'd lost touch with a lot of others from the colony, but these guys always knew how to have a good time. We drank until the early hours, sharing stories and reminiscing about Loveleen.

As the night wore on, I lost track of time and had more than a few too many. I asked my driver to drop the guys off since they all lived close to one another. Stumbling through the house, I could barely maintain my

balance when Pauleen appeared out of nowhere, steadying me and guiding me to my room. She laid me down on the bed, and in a drunken haze, I thought I saw Loveleen standing right there.

“Loveleen, don’t go away! Don’t leave me alone!” I slurred, clinging to the illusion. But it wasn’t Loveleen; it was Pauleen, sitting beside me, assuring me, “I’m not going anywhere.” In my tipsy state, I grabbed her hand and pressed it against my chest, desperately seeking the comfort I missed. That’s the last thing I remember before drifting off.

I woke up groggily around 6 am and turned over, half-expecting to see Loveleen’s face. Instead, there was Pauleen, snoozing beside me in her nightwear while I was down to my underwear. My mind started racing, desperately trying to piece together what had happened. All I could grasp was the memory of holding onto Loveleen’s hand and begging her not to disappear from my life.

I slipped out of bed and stumbled into the bathroom, relieved myself, and brushed my teeth. Then I made my way to the kitchen and put on a pot of coffee. I plopped down on the sofa in the living room, trying to clear the lingering fog of last night. Absently, I reached for a cigarette—something I had given up ages ago but kept around for visitors. I lit it and took a puff, immediately coughing. I snubbed it out in the ashtray, shaking my head at my own foolishness.

Just then, Pauleen emerged from the bedroom and drifted into the kids’ rooms through the adjoining door. She checked on them, found them still sleeping soundly, then wandered into the kitchen for her morning brew. She slid onto the sofa beside me, which was unusual; usually, she’d plop down on the other sofa. I was too lost in thought to say much, just staring into my mug.

“Feeling hungover?” she asked, concern etched on her face.

“Nah,” I replied, not really paying attention.

Hearing sounds from the kids’ room, Pauleen stood up and headed back to see them. I took the hint and went for a shower, getting myself ready for the day. When I stepped into the dining area, Pauleen had laid out breakfast. I ate methodically, feeling slightly more human with each bite.

After breakfast, I grabbed the daily newspaper and started reading, tossing it aside when I finished and heading to the dressing room. Loveleen had turned the second bedroom into a lovely dressing space, complete with cupboards and mirrors, and I quickly got dressed before heading back into the hall.

I called for the driver, who soon arrived, ready to whisk me off to the office. Surprisingly, I got there a bit early—first time in ages. I settled into my cabin and dived straight into a pile of documents. An hour passed, and I was already signing off on approvals and tweaking what needed changing.

After a while, I called for a cup of tea, sipped it while tackling the remaining documents, and finally managed to get everything cleared away in just two hours. Feeling productive, I decided to pop by the development area and check in with the project manager about how things were going.

While I was there, I bumped into Pauleen’s niece, Preethi, who had just graduated and started working with us thanks to Pauleen’s encouragement. We exchanged pleasantries, and I asked how the kids were doing. She replied they were thriving under Pauleen’s care, which made me feel good.

“Fancy coming to stay with us for a bit?” I asked, casting a glance at her for any hint of hesitation.

“No, thanks,” she replied diplomatically, clearly content where she was.

After a bit more small talk, I waved her off and settled back into my thoughts. I called in the lawyer and, as we discussed business, it struck me what I really wanted to do. I asked him to set up a trust fund for the kids, ensuring they’d be financially secure, regardless of what might happen.

We also discussed my will, making sure Pauleen would be provided for while leaving the rest to the kids if anything happened to me. And if Pauleen was on board, I wanted to marry her. The thought felt surreal, but deep down, it felt right. I didn’t mention any of this to Pauleen yet; I just wanted the paperwork ready for when the time came.

Before we wrapped up, I made sure to record the entire conversation and handed over a copy, just to safeguard my intentions for the future. You never know where life takes you, do you?

Chapter 3

After completing the other engagements, I went home.

I called Pauleen and had a long talk about marriage, kids and if she would like to have her own kids.

I asked her opinion of the will I asked the lawyer to be prepared. She agreed to the marriage proposal and said she loves the kids and she would not like to have further kids.

About the will she is satisfied and asked me to put a clause after her, her share should go to the kids.

I called the lawyer and explained the changes required in my will and also prepare a pre-nuptial agreement to be prepared, he said he will make the required changes and will bring the will to be signed tomorrow.

I called our purohit and asked him to fix a date for our wedding. Pauleen was calling her parents and her niece and spoke to them about the wedding. She prepared and sent her resignation to the HR Manager. She was still working on the company payroll on deputation to my home. We both prepared ourselves for the future and awaited the wedding day. After finishing my other commitments, I headed home. I called Pauleen, and we had an in-depth conversation about marriage, children, and her feelings about having any of her own. I also shared my thoughts about the will I had asked the lawyer to prepare. She accepted my marriage proposal, expressed her love for the kids, and stated that she didn't want to have any additional children. Regarding the will, she was satisfied but requested a clause stipulating that her share would go to the kids.

I reached out to the lawyer to discuss the necessary changes to my will and to draft a prenuptial agreement. He assured me that he would implement the updates and bring the revised will for signing the following day. I also contacted our purohit to schedule our wedding date. Meanwhile, Pauleen called her parents and niece to inform them about the upcoming wedding. She submitted her resignation to the HR Manager, although she was still on the company's payroll while working remotely at my home. We both focused on preparing for our future together as we eagerly awaited our wedding day.

PART 6

Married Life with Pauleen

Chapter 1

The year 2008.

We had a simple wedding with close relatives and friends from both sides and our office staff, who are known to both of us.

Atul is now 6 years old and Reena is now 2 years.

Atul is now in 1st grade. Reena, we are thinking of putting in Playschool after the summer holidays. Pauleen slept in the bedroom with me for some days and went back to her room.

I kept my physical distance from Pauleen. Now she is sleeping with Reena, and Atul is in the other room. Pauleen is fully involved with the kids. I am continuing with my work. Days turned into weeks, weeks turned into months and months turned into Years. I kept a close watch on the activities of both kids. Closely watching their activities, if they are moving from their path, I would be ready to bring them back to their path.

I asked Pauleen to join the Board of Directors for Loveleen's Interior decoration company. In her free time, she can look after our interests in the company. She agreed to it as she will not be confined at home. Her experience as PA will come to some use. In 2008, we had a simple wedding surrounded by close relatives, friends, and our office colleagues who knew us well. Atul is now 6 years old and in the first grade, while Reena is 2 and we're considering enrolling her in playschool after the summer holidays. For a while, Pauleen shared the bedroom with me, but she eventually went back to her own room. We decided to keep a respectful distance physically, and now she sleeps with Reena while Atul stays in the next room. Pauleen has immersed herself in caring for the kids while I focus on my work.

As time passed, days turned into weeks, weeks into months, and months into years. I made sure to keep a close eye on both children, always ready to guide them back on track if they veered off course. I suggested that Pauleen join the Board of Directors at Loveleen's Interior Decoration Company, where she could manage our interests during her free time. She welcomed the opportunity, appreciating that it would keep her

engaged beyond the confines of home, and she felt her experience as a personal assistant would be valuable.

Chapter 2

The year 2017.

Atul is now in 10th Grade, and Reena is in 7th Grade. Reena is more studious than Atul.

Atul seems to have lost interest in his studies somewhere along the way.

Everyone says to him, now you are in 10th concentrate on your studies.

I told him don't worry about what others are saying. Study as you like, and when you see your marks in internals, you will know how much you need to concentrate. Extra-curricular activities are as much important as studies. Concentrate on things, which you think require your attention. Think both from your heart and mind. There should be some balance between studies and other activities. They say you need work-life balance, you need studies and other activities balance. We will have this talk about your studies on New Year's Eve. Or you can make a new year's resolution about studies then. In 2017, Atul is now in 10th grade, while Reena is in 7th grade. Unlike her brother, Reena is more dedicated to her studies, while Atul appears to have lost interest in his academic pursuits along the way. Many people are advising him to focus on his studies since he is now in 10th grade. I told him not to worry too much about their opinions. He should study at his own pace, and when he sees his internal marks, he'll understand how much focus he truly needs. It's essential to recognize that extracurricular activities are just as important as academics. He should prioritize what he feels deserves his attention, finding a balance between his studies and other interests. Just as one needs a work-life balance, it's crucial to balance academics with other activities. We can revisit this discussion about his studies on New Year's Eve or he could consider making a New Year's resolution regarding his academic goals then.

Chapter 3

April 2018.

Exams being finished, Atul is now relaxed.

All his friends decided to celebrate the successful completion of the exams. Atul asked for permission to use the Terrace for the party. I agreed, thinking they would be having a party close by.

With Pauleen's supervision, they got all the dishes prepared. They ordered cool drinks for the party. Being at home, they all know no hot drinks will be permitted.

At around 11:30 pm, a girl from their group fell over the parapet wall of the terrace. Nobody seems to have watched what happened. Everyone's saying they did not see anything.

Police and an ambulance were called.

Police took statements from all the people present. Her details came out the next day.

Her name is Neha. She is from a middle-class family. Her father works in a private firm as an accountant. She has a younger sister.

If someone pushed her, she doesn't seem to have any enemies.

Jumping by herself, she did not have any problems. If it seems to be an accident, the parapet wall is not of short height.

Everyone's perplexed by the incident. What? Why? How? The only thing known is when. In April 2018, with exams behind him, Atul was finally able to relax. His friends decided to throw a celebration to mark the successful completion of their tests. Atul asked for permission to use the terrace for the party, and I agreed, assuming they would keep things relatively low-key. Under Pauleen's watchful eye, they prepared various dishes and ordered cool drinks, knowing that no hot beverages would be allowed at home.

Around 11:30 pm, a girl from their group, Neha, suddenly fell over the parapet wall of the terrace. Strangely, no one seemed to have witnessed the incident. Everyone claimed they didn't see anything. The police and an ambulance were called promptly, and officers took statements from

all attendees. The next day, we learned more about Neha. Coming from a middle-class background, her father worked as an accountant in a private firm, and she had a younger sister. It was unclear why she fell; no one had any enemies, and if she had jumped, it was without apparent reason. The height of the parapet wall was considerable, leading everyone to wonder if it was indeed an accident. The incident left us all perplexed, grappling with the questions: What happened? Why did it happen? How could this have occurred? The only certainty was the time it happened.

Chapter 4

Sub-Inspector Narendra Chauhan was assigned the case of the "Jumping Girl," a name coined by the media. Initially, police statements yielded no clues. However, three days later, the post-mortem report revealed a crucial detail: the victim was 10 weeks pregnant. The foetus was sent for a DNA test, but it did not match anyone present at the scene.

The investigation then shifted towards collecting DNA samples from the men in her life, including friends and relatives who had recently interacted with her family. Despite three months of effort, the identity of the foetus's father remained unknown. Under these circumstances, the police considered both murder and suicide as possibilities—either she was killed by the unborn child's father or took her own life after discovering her pregnancy.

A breakthrough came when the call log from her phone was examined. She had received a call just before the incident. When questioned, the phone's owner stated that he had lent his phone to a girl he encountered on the roadside. Her scooter had broken down, and her phone's battery was dead. She used his phone to call for help and returned it, saying someone would arrive shortly. She declined any further assistance, and the man continued on his way.

This raised several questions: Who was this girl? Why did she make the call? Could it have influenced Neha's death if it were a suicide? If it was murder, what role did the call play? The case remained riddled with unanswered questions.

The police then examined CCTV footage from locations Neha frequented but found no leads. However, a significant clue emerged from footage taken during her birthday celebration the previous June at an upscale restaurant. An unknown man, around 25 years old and seemingly from a well-off background, had wished her. He was neither part of her school circle nor known to her friends.

Further investigation with the restaurant staff and CCTV footage from the parking area revealed that the man arrived on a bike registered to Vinay. Scrutinizing Vinay's credit card statements and activity, the police discovered a pattern—he frequently rented rooms at a three-star hotel, often accompanied by different young women.

CCTV footage from the hotel and discreet inquiries with some of these women revealed Vinay's disturbing activities. His modus operandi involved luring innocent girls, taking them to the hotel, and coercing them into compliance. If they resisted, he would use date-rape drugs, film compromising footage, and later threaten to release the videos if they spoke out.

In Neha's case, it appeared Vinay had drugged and forgotten about her. When she contacted him three months later, revealing her pregnancy and threatening to expose him, he panicked. To silence her, he hired a professional killer.

The killer's accomplice, a young woman, had made the mysterious call to Neha, luring her to the rooftop near the water tanks. Once there, the assassin ambushed her, covering her mouth and pushing her off the terrace. He managed to escape undetected by CCTV by using a route through the first floor.

After Vinay's exposure, numerous victims of his blackmail came forward to testify against him. As a result, Vinay was arrested and denied bail, awaiting sentencing for his crimes.

Chapter 5

Atul received a B Grade in his SSC exams and decided to pursue the commerce stream. He joined the 11th standard commerce with plans to complete a B.Com with computers and later pursue an MBA. Reena, now in the 8th standard, desired her room, leading Pauleen to start sleeping in my room on a separate bed. Pauleen also arranged another bed in the dressing room.

As the children grew older, life settled into a routine. Pauleen found more free time and engaged in kitty parties, meeting friends at restaurants and clubs, and attending board meetings for Loveleen's company. Occasionally, I heard rumours about her meeting someone, but I chose not to dwell on it. I trusted that she would return home and stay loyal to the children as long as I avoided confronting her about her actions.

Reena's friends frequently visited our home for combined studies, finding the hall comfortable for their sessions. Atul was rarely home, and Pauleen often assisted Reena and her friends with their studies, as she had experience giving tuition during her college years. She prepared snacks for them and made sure they were comfortable. Reena's friends enjoyed studying at our home and didn't mind Atul's occasional presence, appreciating his courteous demeanour and showing interest in becoming friends with him.

Chapter 6

In 2018, Reena was in 9th grade, while Atul was in 12th grade. Atul had developed a strong passion for sports, particularly cricket. Together with his friends, he formed a cricket team that actively participated in various matches held around Mumbai. Every Sunday, a tournament would take place at one location or another. Entry fees were required for participation, but fortunately, this was never a concern for them. The tournaments varied in formats, including 10-over matches, underarm cricket, and single innings games.

Meanwhile, Reena was exploring a different path, drawn towards fashion. Her interest led her to frequently visit Fashion Street, where she would spend hours browsing through the stalls, admiring the diverse collections on display. Whenever something caught her attention, she would make a purchase, adding to her growing sense of style.

Chapter 7

In 2019, Atul completed his 12th grade and joined B.Com Computers, while Reena entered 10th grade. Determined to focus on her studies, Reena set aside her other interests this year.

A new girl, Molly, joined Atul's class. She was pretty, and Atul noticed her immediately. One evening, while returning home, Atul saw Molly walking and offered her a ride. Though she initially declined, explaining her brother was delayed, Atul insisted, and she eventually accepted, sitting beside the driver. Reena introduced herself, and Molly replied, "I'm Molly, in your brother's class."

When they reached Molly's building, Atul reassured her, "It's no trouble; we pass this way often. You can join us whenever you like."

The following Saturday, the driver had an emergency and took the day off. Pauleen, their stepmother, offered to drop off and pick up the kids. On their way back, they saw Molly again. This time, Reena asked Pauleen to stop. Molly introduced herself, and Pauleen responded, "I'm their mother." When Molly noted that Reena and Atul didn't resemble her, Pauleen gently explained, "I'm not their biological mother. After their mother passed away, I raised them as my own."

Curious, Molly asked Pauleen why she was driving that day. Pauleen explained the driver's absence and that their father preferred Atul not to drive regularly. Molly inquired about their father's profession, and Pauleen replied, "He owns a software firm."

Atul then invited Molly to his cricket match the next day. Molly agreed, and Atul promised to pick her up at 9 a.m. On match day, Atul arrived at her building early. Molly joined him on his bike, and they headed to the stadium, where Atul introduced her to his friends. Molly sat with the other girls and observed the dynamics of the group, wondering who Atul's girlfriend might be.

When Atul came to bat, the girls cheered loudly for him. Molly thought he must be their star player. He performed exceptionally well, both as a batsman and a bowler, leading his team to victory. Afterwards, Atul took Molly out for a meal, where she asked if he had a girlfriend. Atul confided in a tragic incident involving a girl from their group who was murdered

two years earlier, which had made it hard for him to form close relationships since then.

They finished their meal and took a short bike ride before returning to the stadium for the next match, which Atul's team also won. Atul called Molly their lucky mascot and invited her to their house afterwards. Molly felt a strong connection with Pauleen and expressed her wish to meet her again.

At their home, Molly admired the design of the flat and learned it was the work of their late mother, Loveleen, an interior designer. Pauleen affirmed that though she wasn't their biological mother, she loved Atul and Reena as her own.

Later, Atul took Molly to meet his friends, who decided to watch a movie together. During their outing, Molly's brother stormed into the restaurant, angrily dragging her away after someone had informed him of her presence there. Atul, confused, continued with his friends but later shared the incident with Pauleen.

The next day, Pauleen visited Molly's house. Whatever was discussed remained private, but Molly returned to college that afternoon as if nothing had happened. Her attitude towards Atul changed, and she began spending more time with him and Pauleen, often visiting their home and growing closer to the family.

Chapter 8

In 2020, reports of Coronavirus infections emerged from China, leading to city-wide quarantines. Indian students returning from China faced disruptions in their studies. When SSC exams were scheduled, they were cancelled, and results were declared based on other criteria instead of final exams. As expected, Reena received an A+ grade.

The entire country was placed under quarantine. People were restricted from going outside and required to wear face masks. Companies shut down, and where possible, people worked from home. The entire economy nearly came to a standstill, with only emergency services and food processing units operating.

Molly moved in with us, bringing some of her belongings and sharing Reena's room. During this period, Reena and Molly grew close. With theatres closed, people turned to OTT platforms like Amazon and Netflix for entertainment, making them essential services.

We had to continue paying our employees despite limited work. While we could defer and reduce salaries for trainees and probationary staff, permanent employees received full pay. Some employees worked from home, contacting clients, gathering requirements, and performing maintenance tasks, which was a new experience for many. Within 15 days, operations had streamlined with heavy reliance on the Internet and phone communication. Online meeting apps such as Zoom, Google Meet, and WhatsApp became widely used, replacing earlier platforms like Skype.

Colleges shifted to online classes, making virtual learning the new normal. People began cooking their own meals as domestic help was mostly restricted from entering housing societies, causing household routines to become chaotic.

Even after the lockdown lifted, we chose to continue working from home for a while longer. Throughout the year, work-from-home remained the norm. Eventually, we had to let go of temporary staff as caseloads remained high despite partial reopening.

Chapter 9

The year 2021

When we thought coronavirus cases would go down after the vaccine was introduced for Frontline warriors. And then people started getting vaccinated. We checked out accounts at the end of the year. After cutting down on the staff and working from home with the developers, we just broke even. We were happy we did not run into heavy losses. We retained our clients and developers. Now the staff is reluctant to return to the office. They say they are saving so much time travelling. Which they can put to good use. They have a valid point. But those who can't work without supervision are the main problem. From April, the coronavirus's caseload increased. We are still trying to cope with the coronavirus. We have to wait and see when the coronavirus can be put behind us. What we can do is wait and see. Completing my dictation, I send the file to my assistant to take the recordings and prepare the documentation.

Epilogue

1st January 2021.

I heard the doorbell ring and went and opened the door. A man was standing outside with an invitation in his hand. I opened it and looked at the invitation card inside.

“You are cordially invited with family to the New Year
function at Hotel Taj, Mumbai on 9th January 2021.
Attendance is compulsory.

Invited by:

Kumar’s Grand Alliance.

RSVP: 7893642582

I asked the man standing outside, “What is this?”

He said, as mentioned in the invitation, attendance is compulsory.

I called the number on the card. The call answered and said yes, Mr. Kumar, are you available to attend the function. I asked what is this function. He said we are facilitating you to meet all your friends and family members. I said ok I will be coming. He said don’t forget to bring your family. I said OK.

To be continued

