



THREE IDIOTS AND A WISE MAN

Kumar's Parallel Timelines

RAVIKIRAN

SEASONING OF WOOD

Three Idiots and a Wise Man

Series: Kumar's Parallel Timelines

RAVIKIRAN

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This book is dedicated to all my friends who have helped in writing this book. To my family, who supported me and gave their invaluable opinions and Ideas for the story.

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Cast of Characters

1. Kumar: the wise man of the story, born in Vijayawada, Andhra Pradesh, India. The story starts with him entering college.
2. Sreenivas alias Sreenu: is Kumar's first friend from college, they hit off well from the first day.
3. Pradip: Sreenu's classmate and their close friend.
4. Sneha: Kumar's love interest and classmate in junior college.
5. Raj: Womanizer, drinker, smoker a man with all the qualities one should never have, but a good man at heart.
6. Krishna: A boy from Goa came to Bombay to become someone.
7. Shekar: Raj's neighbour and his best friend, asked Raj's help in proposing to his love interest.
8. Neetu: Raj's interest and Kumar's classmate.
9. Sahithi: Kumar's Friend turned fiancé turned wife.
10. Leena: Kumar's & Sahithi's eldest daughter. Born in 1990 Jan.
11. Reena: Kumar's & Sahithi's Second daughter Born in 1993, April
12. Atul: Kumar's & Sahithi's Son was Born in 1997, August

PART 1

Kumar's Junior College Life

Chapter 1

The year 1979, the month of June.

Kumar

It was my first day in college. I was away for 2 years from Vijayawada. Up to 8th, I studied in Vijayawada, I studied my 9th in Vizag and my 10th in the village. Due to my father's job postings, I had to go to different places. Now I joined college which is quite a distance, it took me around 30mins to walk from home to college.

At the time of my SSC exams, I used to get headaches. After coming back to Vijayawada, I got my eyes checked, and the eye doctor gave me a negative number for my spectacles. I brought a spectacle and was wearing it for a month.

By now I become quite comfortable wearing them. I stood at the door of the classroom and looked around the room. It had 3 rows of benches, the last row girls were sitting and the other two were occupied by boys.

I have a first bench syndrome if there is one. I prefer to sit on the first bench. I feel if I don't get to sit on the first bench, I would get lesser marks. When in 7th standard when the first bench was not vacant, I used to sit on the first bench without a table. I used to put books on my thigh and used to write. On the 10th even though I joined 1 week late I could occupy 1st bench and be the first person on the bench. I looked around and found no first benches free. Then one person saw me and called me with his hand signs.

I went to him, he said, "my name is Sreenu."

I said. "I am Kumar."

Sreenu said, "you can sit with me."

I dropped my notebook on the table.

Sreenu

It was the first day of college. Classes start at 10 am. My brother dropped me at the college by rickshaw. I was there by 9:30 am.

I looked up where my class would be and went up to my class. The class is big and had three rows of benches. Around 8 benches for a row. I found a bench in the second row of the centre row and put my new notebook on the table.

I looked around the room students were coming one by one. To my left were benches for girls. It was customary in this college for the girls to occupy the benches to the left. I did not find any known faces.

It is now 9:45 am. One dusky boy around 5 feet 4 inches in height wearing spectacles standing at the door looking around for a place to sit. When I saw him, I thought I found a scapegoat. I can ridicule him, call him names, and generally make fun of him. He is the perfect guy to be bullied.

I called him to my table and told him to sit there. He obliged by putting his notebook beside my notebook and said His name is Kumar. I said my name is Sreenivas people call me Sreenu.

Pradip

I am Pradip Agarwal. Business is our profession. I know Sreenu for the last 5 years. We both went to the same school and we both have businesses on the same Lane. We had a wholesale business of medicines. Sreenu's eldest brother runs a typing institute another of his elder brother runs a tent house, where they rent tents and utensils for functions. Besides our shop is their type institute and opposite to that is their tent house.

I came to the class and found Sreenu talking to a new boy, I went to Sreenu and said, "you also joined this course."

Sreenu said, "yes, we business people should take commerce, which is suitable for us."

Sreenu introduced us. Finding an empty seat at his table I dropped my book and sat beside Kumar.

Sneha

In the 10th standard, I got 59% marks. I thought I cannot offer to take science and should take commerce instead. However, I applied to both the streams of Science and Commerce, and I got admission in commerce, so I joined commerce.

I went to the classroom and looked around, there are three rows of benches and on the rows farther to the door, where some girls were sitting. The other two rows were occupied by boys. My eyes fell on the second bench in the centre row, a dusky boy seemed familiar. We had a clinic on our lane and he seemed to visit the clinic. I also saw him on their terrace a few times. He seemed to have come to the town recently, as I have not seen him before.

Ravikiran

I found him looking at me, I gave him half a smile and I went and sat on the second bench behind some girls.

I looked at him, he was sitting beside Sreenivas. I learned the new boy's name is Kumar when sir asked to give students their introductions. He said he is from Vijayawada only. Must have shifted from somewhere else.

Chapter 2

Kumar

We had 3 classes of 1 hour each in the mornings and 2 classes of 1 hour each in the afternoons. We had a 10-minute break after 2 classes. At 1:00 pm we had our lunch break of 1:30 hrs. The college was quite a distance from one town and the bus service was erratic. Students were given ample time to go and come back for lunch. Classes would run up to 4:30 pm. We had 5 subjects, of which 2 are languages and non-language are Commerce, Economics, and Civics (CEC) and the languages English and Telugu.

After a week Sreenu started ragging me. He would call me names like Chasmis (one who wears spectacles), Nalloda (one whose skin is dark), etc. Once he was telling Pradip, that he did not have it for urinating, he had a hole.

I didn't understand what he is referring to then. I just smiled and let it ride. After some time finding no reaction from me he stopped bullying me.

I thought patience is what wins in the long run. Instead of fighting with him, I made it so he would stop calling me names. If I fought with him, all the other students would have started calling those names.

After college, I would go home and drop off my books, freshen up, and used to go to my grandfather's clinic. I would help him, with the patients by giving numbers to patients, calling them one by one, prepare syringes. Then we used to have glass syringes with steel-tipped needles. We had to sanitize after every use by boiling in the water.

One day Sneha came with a fever. I recognized her from our class. Her house is the first one on the lane. She stays on the first floor. I asked, "what happened", she said she had a fever since the morning.

I checked the waiting patients and said I will send her inside. After the patient came from the room I took her to my grandfather and said, "she is my classmate and she had a fever."

Grandfather said, "let me check", gave her a thermometer and asked her to put it in her mouth. He took his stethoscope and checked her breathing. He said not a big problem and gave her some medicine and said to take it for 2 days 3 times a day.

I took her outside and told her don't worry, by tomorrow morning it will clear up and she will attend classes tomorrow.

I thought I should not send her home alone and said, "I will drop you at your home."

I told the next patient to go inside and took her to her home, which was close by and waited on the road waiting to see her going up the floor. She came to the balcony and waved at me, I waved back and went back to the clinic.

Sometimes grandfather sends me to get some medicines. I started going to Pradip's shop to get medicines. I had to pass Sreenu's tent shop while going to the medical shop. If Sreenu is there I would say hi to him, normally he would call inside saying have a tea and go. If the medicines are urgent, I would say later and would go to the medical shop else if nothing urgent, I used to go inside and he would send some servant to get tea for us.

We would stand at the entrance to the shop looking outside and drinking our tea. There used to be two sisters walking past the shop. They were from our college but the science stream. Sreenu said showing them, I like the younger one from our school. They were from our caste and our families know each other. Now I started looking for her. I would wait at his shop with him until they pass on the road.

Sneha

Since the morning I was feeling feverish, and I did not go to college. By evening the fever was not receding, I asked my sister Choti to take me to the clinic.

Choti dropped me outside the clinic and went away. I went inside and stood there.

Kumar came and asked, "what happened?"

I said had a fever from the morning.

Kumar checked my forehead with his hand and said only slight fever, I will get you checked immediately.

When the patient exited the room, Kumar took me inside instead of other waiting patients. Told the doctor that I am his classmate and I had come with a slight fever.

The doctor gave me the thermometer and told me to put it in my mouth and checked my breathing, and then checked the thermometer and said no problem only fever, and gave me some medicines.

Kumar bought me out and told the next patient to go in took me to my home left me at the stairs and waited until I went up to the first floor and waved to him. Then he turned and went away.

I thought so nice of him, so concerned for my health. Good boy I said to my mom, Kumar is the doctor's grandson, he came and dropped me at home and did not even take fees. My mother said is that so?

Sreenu

I was sitting in my brother's tent house. Whenever my brother has some work, he would make me sit in the shop and go. If he does not have any work, I would go and sit at the typing institute. I would practice and look after the students.

One evening I was sitting at the tent house and was looking outside. Kumar was passing, he said hi, and I said hi.

Kumar stood there hesitating, I asked him to come inside have tea, and go.

Kumar hesitated a second and came inside.

I asked Ramu to bring tea for us. He went and bought tea in a flask and poured and gave us tea. I looked out and found Jamuna and her sister Savitri going to their home. I told Kumar I like Jamuna from school. We were together in school. I like her for 5 years. Jamuna and Savitri are from our caste. Our families know each other. After finishing my studies, I will send my brother to Jamuna's home for asking her hand in marriage.

From that day Kumar used to come to our shop and stand with me waiting for them to pass. He must be interested in Savitri. What a man! What he is doing? He is not from our caste, why is he following our girls? I am not wrong in ragging him.

In the meantime, my brother came and told me to collect money from someone. I said Kumar let us go and took him on one of the rickshaws to collect money and came back. Kumar went away.

My brother asked, "why are you taking him with you", I said, "just for company."

The next day afternoon my brother took me on the rickshaw to the college. I found Kumar walking on the road, I stopped and asked him to get in the rickshaw. He hesitated and said it is no problem, I can go on a walk. I said come on no problem.

Kumar sat down and we went to college. These rickshaws are rented by us exclusively for our use. We pay the daily rent and extra based on trips.

Pradip

Sreenu brought Kumar to our shop and told him he can buy medicines from us, as we give good prices. Normally we don't sell loose medicines. He wants medicines for the clinic and would buy in sheets, it is acceptable to sell to him. We agreed to sell him and told him to ask for any medicines which are not available in the market, we would get them for him. Give us a list of medicines normally prescribed by your grandfather, we would keep them in stock for you.

Kumar seems a nice boy, we all help in our business, and he helps his grandfather in the clinic. I heard his father is working in Bombay.

I heard about Bombay but have never been there. Sreenu unnecessarily bullies him. I told Sreenu not to do that. He used to be that way in school also.

That is why Sreenu did not have many friends in school. I speak with him because we are neighbours. He always talks about Jamuna. She is good-looking, but he could not even talk to her. He adores her from afar. What a cinematic love story.

Chapter 3

Kumar

The next day I went to college and when I saw Sneha coming in, I went to her and asked, "how is your health now?"

Sneha said, "the fever came down last night only. Now I am fine, so I came to the college."

I came back to my bench and she went to her bench and sat down. Sreenu asked, "what are you talking about with her?"

I said, "yesterday she came to the clinic with a fever, I am asking her how she is feeling now."

Sreenu said Ok.

Now Pradip asked, "what happened?"

Sreenu said, "Sneha had a fever and went to his grandfather's clinic and now she is fine and came to the college."

Pradip said huh, huh. Sneha and her bench mates were talking in a low tone. Her bench mates looked at me and turned their gaze away.

Sneha

The fever came down in the night itself. By morning I was feeling well and decided to go to college. When I entered the class, Kumar came and asked, "how are you feeling", with so much concern on his face.

I smiled and said, "I am ok" and went and sat on my bench.

My bench mates were asking why haven't come to college and what Kumar is asking you.

I said, "I had a fever and went to his grandfather's clinic and his grandfather checked and gave me some medicines, he came with me and dropped me at my house, and waited until I reached my door."

They said, "Oh!", and looked at him. I blushed a little. I tapped on the shoulder of the girl next to me.

Sreenu

Now see that in the first year only Kumar is behind the girls. Now, Jamuna, I like her for the last 5 years, she is in the same college, but I could not talk to

her. I could talk to her only if we meet at a function. Now Kumar is meeting with Sneha at home and speaking to her in college, a lucky guy.

I must pass on a message to Jamuna, how should I do it? I will take Kumar with me.

I asked Kumar to come with me and we both went to the science wing, which is between periods. I went to her class called Jamuna out and passed on the message. We both came back to our class.

One work is completed. I am finding him dependable. He would come with me whenever I asked him to come. He would not make excuses, even if he has some work, he would say we need to come back fast. The only problem with him is he doesn't like to ask for money from his grandfather. What can you do without some money?

Chapter 4

Kumar

After college, I went to the clinic. On the way, I looked up at Sneha's balcony. Sneha was standing there, when I looked up she waved her hand and mouthed hi. I waved and said Hi in a low voice. When the clinic cleared of patients, I came out and stood outside the door.

Sneha came down and was speaking to her neighbours on the ground floor standing on the steps of the road. I smiled from the clinic door and she smiled back from there. After finishing talking to the neighbour she came slowly to the clinic as if to get checked.

I asked her to come inside. I sat her at the waiting patients' bench, we started chatting.

That day patients were very few, if any came I sent them directly to see the doctor. We could chat without interruption. I had some notes with me, whoever comes would think we are studying. She was copying the notes she missed classes. After some time, Choti came looking for her and said, "mummy is calling you."

Sneha said, "let me finish this chapter, I will come in five minutes."

Choti went away.

Sneha said, "I will meet you later and went away."

Normally we have homework or classwork only for accounts. In other subjects, we have to take down notes, when the sir is giving notes or listen to the sir explaining.

Our Telugu sir was the most popular. He used to wear spectacles. He used to press the centre of the spectacles with his forefinger up and used to explain the story. If he pressed his finger on the spectacles meant he will be explaining something romantic. Telugu Chapters were of two types Poetry and Prose. Poetry was of the higher language Telegu, to the standard of Sanskrit. Prose or stories are also of the same language and contain very high language Sanskrit words. He used to explain them in such a way student would listen with apt attention. In stories like Shakuntalam, which is a love story, he would explain love in such a way students don't want to miss his class.

My favourite subject is accounts. I used to finish solving all the questions beforehand and look at the sir when he explains the answers on the board.

One day I and Sreenu bet that my answer is correct and he said my answer is wrong. As my balance sheet is balancing, I thought my answer is correct. He said the bet would be the loser had to take others to a movie. When the final answer is written on the board, he changed one item and a different answer came out and my answer was wrong. Next week I had to take him to the movie. I had to borrow money from my grandfather. Then I decided not to bet with anyone even when I am sure I am right.

One day my grandfather went to meet his lawyer. He had land in Nakrekal. It was given to him for treating the landowner with some serious ailment. The patient was cured by my grandfather's medicines and in appreciation of his service, the landowner had given him a piece of land near a school. Some people in connivance with the gram panchayath had taken illegal procession of land and built themselves a shopping complex. The lawyer had filed a case in court for taking the procession of land.

I was sitting on the terrace and finishing my accounts homework. Sneha came up to her terrace and waved her hand.

By showing her hand she asked why are you not at the clinic?

I showed her that by signing doctor is away. She showed by sign come, I showed sign wait I am coming.

I took the keys to the clinic went there and opened the door. She came after 5 mins with her books. We put books in front of us as if we were studying. While chatting we completed our homework, helping each other.

After half an hour, Choti came searching for Sneha. Chitti was asking, "where do I have to search for you? I thought where you went away from the terrace. Mummy is calling you."

Sneha said, "let me finish this question, I will come", muttering something under her breath, Choti went away.

Sneha said, "now I have to go, I don't know what she will tell mother."

I said, "Ok bye, I will close the clinic and will go"

Sneha

I left the clinic with books in my hand, and I was thinking about what Choti was telling mummy.

Seeing books in my hand, mom was about to say something, interrupting her I said, "I had a doubt, so I went to ask Kumar, he is the best student in our class."

Mummy said Okay, Okay, come and have dinner, it is getting cold.

We finished the dinner in silence. I was thinking about Kumar. I wanted to spend more time with him. In college, we can't speak with each other. After college only, a limited time is available. The best time would be coming and going time from college. At present for my transport father arranged for a rickshaw. I should ask him to join me in the rickshaw or go for a walk with him. I must plan something. Thinking about him, I went to sleep.

The next day I asked the rickshawala, "can I have someone else with me in the rickshaw?"

He said to have an extra person, you must pay extra.

My payment is made by my father, if I ask him to pay more he will doubt. Kumar may not have extra money, let me ask him, based on his answer, I will plan something.

The next day I asked, "Kumar, what do you think of coming with me in a rickshaw?"

Kumar said, "Ok."

I said, "now my father pays 10 rupees for a month for the rickshaw, if you pay another 5 he will take both of us."

Kumar said, "my father is in Bombay, and he sends some money to my grandfather, which he keeps. I don't have any money. If I have to pay for a rickshaw, I have to ask my grandfather for it. I don't feel like asking for money from my grandfather. If I take any money I feel obliged. Because he is feeding me and giving me a place to stay, I am working at the clinic for free."

I said, "ok if you feel so strongly about it, don't ask him for money. We will think of another way."

The next day I made an agreement with the rickshawala, he will take us to college for 4 days a week and he will take 2 days off and we will go by walks for those two days. He can choose those two days, whenever he wants off, and tell me a day in advance.

Now Kumar comes in the morning and waits at the clinic and I will go pick him up and we both go to college together. While coming back, he will drop off somewhere at the road turn. Those two days we can walk together. It is a long walk of 30 minutes. But 30 minutes feels like 5 minutes if I walk with him.

Kumar

I felt very embarrassed when Sneha asked me to pay for the rickshaw. I never felt bad about not having any money as of that day. I was always aloof about money. If I have it, I can spend it, if don't have it no problem, it was my outlook on money.

But saying no to Sneha, I felt my stomach turning inside out. I kept my feelings inside and said to her "I can't get the money."

Sneha said ok, but it seems she is disappointed. But what can I do, I don't want to ask my grandfather for money. The elder son of my aunt also stays with us. His parents have gone to Madras. But their family was with them for a long time. For as long as I remember aunt with her children stayed with her grandparents. My Uncle is in the Military, sometimes when they are in cities, my aunt used to go live with him. If he is posted in sensitive areas, she would come and stay with her parents. Now my uncle is retired due to some health issue, he got a posting in Madras Customs and they went there leaving their elder son here to complete his schooling. Now he is in 8th standard, he is in the English medium school where Sreenu studied. It would take him 5 minutes to reach school. But for everything he comes for competition with me.

Grandfather used to have lots of money, but he lost all the money in the Lottery tickets business. He took the dealership and was supplying lottery tickets to sellers. He used all the money for the distribution of prizes and the Lottery people refused to reimburse him and he lost all his money and he has to look after the clinic to earn day-to-day expenses.

The only land he had in Nakrekal was land grabbed by some people. He was spending all the money on court cases and lawyer fees.

I felt helpless in this matter. However, Sneha made a compromise in this matter. She asked the rickshawala to take two days off and take us for 4 days. This way we could ride together for four days and walk for two days.

I joined Sreenu's brother's type institute to learn typing.

First, he gave me the worst typewriter in the institute. When I hit a key, it jumps two letters. He said it is the typewriter given to beginners. I felt like when I joined 1st class, I had to learn the first letters.

After a week he gave me a better typewriter. Now I can learn to type faster. I always pick up things very fast.

After exams, Sreenu asked, "shall we go to a movie?"

I said ok.

Sreenu said we will go to a matinee.

I said but I will miss typing class.

Sreenu said if the next class if it is vacant you can use it.

I thought if I had informed Sreenu, it would be enough.

But when I was typing in the next class, Sreenu's brother came to me and asked, "why are you typing without permission?"

I said, "I took permission from Sreenu."

He did not say anything. It was at a month's end. Next week I would be going to Bombay. I told Sreenu, that I will be going to Bombay, so I am not paying this month's fees. Later he came to me and said you should have taken permission from my brother. I said no problem, he must have thought I was stopping due to his brother's scolding.

Sneha

One day father saw me walking from the road end towards our house. Kumar was walking behind at 10 paces.

Father asked, "why are you coming on walking."

I said, "the rickshaw dropped me at the corner as he had some urgent work."

Father said, "Okay."

I felt relieved it has somewhat come out in the open. I have to see how long I can contain this matter. The next day to show I came by rickshaw, I called mom from the road asking for some money.

When she sent money with Choti, I took the rickshaw to take me to the shop and came back home on a walk.

Normally the rickshawala would put down the top, so the heads will be hidden from anyone watching from the road and also give shade from sunlight.

The Dussehra holidays came. Now we could sit in the clinic in the name of combined studies. Once I told my mother I am going to the movies with my girlfriends and we went to a movie. We sat in the hall holding each other's hands and watched the movie. I thought this is the way to enjoy life.

Navaratri is uniquely celebrated in Vijayawada. There would be a procession in the night with different characters from Puranas. Leading the procession would be Narsimha Avatar. The person who wore his head would be moving from side to side. It was said wearing the head of Narsimha would bring Narsimha onto his body.

Ravikiran

Then there would be a line of chariots with Ram, Lakshman, Sita, and Hanuman. Krishna, and his wives. Parashurama, and the likes of him. They will be passing on the road for nine days. It will culminate with Durga Devi's and Shiva's Boat Yatra in River Krishna.

Diwali came and went.

Pongal holidays came and went.

Now the 1st year exams came. We were either studying in a clinic or on our terraces, looking at each other. Exams finished and holidays came. Kumar wanted to go to Bombay for the holidays. After his family went to Bombay, he has not gone there even once. He told me to come to the clinic so that he will call from Bombay. For that, he had to go to his father's office. He told me to come on Thursday at around 12:30 pm. If he has a change of time he will inform his grandfather. After 2 weeks he called the clinic and we spoke for 15 minutes. Next time he called to say that he will be back in Vijayawada next week.

Kumar

I had to book tickets to Bombay 2 weeks in advance for me and my grandfather's nephew, who wants to come with me. His father, my grandfather's brother is a businessman and they spoiled him rotten.

We both took Konark to express from Vijayawada and got down at Dadar central.

My brother came to pick us up. We caught a local train to Santacruz caught a bus and reached Vakola.

There we had to walk a little into the colony. We reached a wall between our colony and Airport. Our flat is on the first floor. It consists of two rooms and a combined kitchen.

The Backroom is big, the front room contains an attached bathroom and toilet separately. In the connecting place, a washbasin is put up. The kitchen extended partly into this room, so the front room became small.

In Bombay area is everything. Two rooms are luxurious.

There are class 4 quarters in our colony they are so tiny and they don't have attached bathrooms instead have common bathrooms. Those quarters look like matchboxes. They have around 20 to 30 flats in a single long building.

Ours is six flats a building. Flats don't touch each other. Three sides are flats are connected through the walkway.

Ground floor houses have an open area in the backside, where they can have gardens.

But we had a good view of the airport. There are no steps to the terrace. We overcame this by climbing the walls.

We had two neighbours belonging to Kerala on our floor and below us on the ground floor are a family from Gadwall of the Himachal region. And beside them are two Maharashtrian families. Gadwalls and Maharashtrians are good friends, they were there for a long time. Gadwalls are a family of 2 sons and two daughters. Elder sons work in Railways and others are students.

Maharashtrians are three girls who call their dad Dada, and Mummy 'aayi'. While I was there Maharashtrian's Elder daughter met with an accident while returning from Temple. A military van hit her and run away. One man took her to the hospital, he came to their home after putting her in the hospital. His whole shirt was drenched in blood. She did not survive and the military people said it was not our van.

My mother's cousin is a troublemaker. While he spent all of his time looking at Airplanes from our balcony, I spent time walking around and looking at the surrounding areas.

At 15 minutes distance is the Kalina university campus. The station is around 15 mins by a walk on the other side. The bus ticket cost 20 paise. Those were days.

When I went to the vegetable market it was on the roadside people made makeshift shops and sell vegetables.

Behind the market is a bakery. There they sell Pav, it is a kind of local bread. I think the price is 10 for 50 paise. They are soft, they are our buns but salty. Buns there in Vijayawada, even Bread tastes sweet. These pavs are salty and not sweet.

For 10 paise they give green chilis, ginger, curry leaves, and coriander together is called masala. In Vijayawada, we had to purchase everything separately.

People are very fashionable. Unlike Vijayawada, most people wear frocks and some Punjabi dresses. In Vijayawada, most of the girls in our college wear the traditional half saree, they have not yet caught up with wearing Punjabi dresses. In Bombay, some people wear more fashionably. One day our neighbour's wife wore a see-through saree without a petticoat as must be going to a party, her panties can be seen under her saree. Another time I

saw a girl wearing a knitted top with holes in it like a sweater and her bra is clearly visible. This I am talking about the 1980s.

Here in Bombay, we can sit beside girls on buses and trains. Which is taboo in Andhra. In Andhra even when we sit beside them at a distance they would look at us like how dare you to sit here? That is the kind of people you see in Bombay.

On my ground floor flat, there are two girls elder one is medium built and the younger one is a little plump, very fair, and around 5 feet in height, I heard them calling her Dee. I liked her at first look. I used to stand on the steps and wait for her to come out to have a look.

I couldn't talk fluent Hindi, if anyone asks I used to reply in English. I used to read a lot of books, so I can form words in English, if not perfect at the beginning. As time went on I could speak well enough.

Sometimes I had to go to Prabhadevi Office to call my grandfather. There is a bus going there from our area. Otherwise, I had to take a bus to Santacruz station and there to Dadar by train and from there had to walk for 20 mins.

2 months went away in a jiffy. We visited Juhu beach, Chowpaty, Churchgate, Marine drive, VT, Gateway of India, and Byculla Zoo. From the Gateway of India, we went to Elephanta caves by boat.

The road leading from Churchgate to VT has roadside 2nd handbook shops. I bought some books there. When the time came to go back to Vijayawada on one side I was happy that I will see Sneha again, on the other side I will be missing Bombay, their girls and beach and everything.

I spent two months in Bombay and returned to Vijayawada for continuing my second-year Inter.

Sreenu

Kumar went away to Bombay for 2 months. It seems he is going angry with me. He thought informing me about the change in timing would be enough. I troubled him a lot when he is new in college. But now I miss him. He would come with me anywhere just by asking. Never said he can't or didn't have time or some other reason. I am feeling guilty for ragging him. He never retorted back, everything he took smiling. I am feeling bored with too much work.

Pradip

Why does Sreenu seem sad? Normally he would be enjoying the holidays. This time he seemed different. Is he missing Kumar? Did Kumar have so much influence on him? Or is it because he could not see his girl Jamuna?

I asked, "why he is like that", but he did not answer me.

Chapter 5

Kumar

At last back to Vijayawada. The train was delayed and we reached around 8 pm. By the time I reached home, my grandfather closed the clinic and was back at home. I came home had a bath and went to the terrace. Sneha was making rounds on the terrace. I waved at her and she waved back. I said by the sign that we will meet tomorrow. She showed an ok sign. I went down had dinner, again went up to the terrace had a walk for 20mins and came down and went to sleep.

The next day I went to the clinic on the way waved at Sneha standing on her balcony and then checked the medicines and prepared a list of medicines to be bought and went to Pradip's shop.

Gave Pradip's brother the list of medicines and told him to pack and keep them ready with the bill.

Then went and looked up at Sreenu. He was not in either shop.

I told his elder brother, now I am back and will come back for typing in the evening. Went to the tent house and asked his other brother, "where is Sreenu?"

He said, "Sreenu went to meet some client."

I said, "I will come back later" and went to the Pradip shop collected medicines paid for them and went to the clinic.

By this time Sneha came and was waiting for me. I said to her "I went to get medicines. There is a shortage of medicines as there is no one to get them."

Sneha

The train was supposed to come at 6:30 pm, he should be home by 7 pm. Why is he not coming to the terrace? At last, he came to the terrace and waved to me, I waved back. Now I can sleep peacefully. I missed seeing him for two long months. It was dark but in the little light from street lights, I can see his outline. By seeing him I felt how much I missed seeing him. What would I do if I can't see him forever? If something happens to him can I live? So many thoughts were running through my mind. I shook my head to stop those thoughts, thinking he is in front of me, that is all I need. Still, there is time till Monday for the colleges to start. New class, how would it be? Have to wait and see.

The next morning, I got up early and had a bath and breakfast. I was standing on the balcony and waiting when he will go to the clinic. While passing he waved and went into the clinic. He immediately went somewhere with a list in his hand. I thought must be something urgent, and waited for some time, I couldn't contain my impatience and went to the clinic. I had to wait for some time before Kumar came in with an apologetic face saying sorry, had to get these medicines immediately. I said no problem, I am waiting for you to come. At last, I saw him from near. Two months is a long time, how I missed him. Did he miss me as much as I missed him? He did not seem to have missed me much, otherwise, he would have waited for me to come. My thoughts were running riot. I shook my head.

Kumar asked, "what happened?"

I said, "nothing, felt like something fell on my head, it is nothing".

I thought he looked at me strangely as if I am going mad. It is true I am going mad, by missing him and now seeing him. He makes me crazy, that is what is happening. Again, my thoughts were running riot. It is not safe, otherwise, I would have hugged him. Now I felt I have to hug him. I know his grandfather had gone home for lunch and would be back after 5 pm.

I asked him to show me the doctor's exam room, he took me inside the room and I took his hand and took him behind the curtain to the check-up table. I stood before and looked into his eyes and hugged him hard and released him and came out and sat in the chair.

Kumar came and sat beside me.

I said, "I had to do it, I can't contain my impatience anymore".

Kumar said, "I also needed it, but could not ask for it. Thanks for it."

We sat for some time in silence, absorbing the feeling of the hug into our bodies. I got up and said I will come back in the evening and went back home.

I had lunch and went and lay on the bed. The after-effects of the hug were making my heart flutter with such a feeling, and keeping that feeling in my heart, I dozed off.

When I woke up it was 5 pm. I remembered what I told Kumar, I will come back in the evening.

I washed my face, put on a bindi, and went running to the clinic.

There was a patient with an injury. Kumar was cleaning the wound and putting on a bandage on the wound. After completing the bandage, he gave him some medicine and the patient went away.

Now the clinic is empty. By sign, I asked, “where is your grandfather?”

He said, “not yet come.”

I told him to come to the exam room while going to room.

He came behind me and asked, “what?”

“I want one more hug”, I said.

He closed the door ajar and I again hugged him to my heart’s content. I stood for possibly a minute and released him and came out of the room.

It was as close as can be possible. I sat down on the chair and his grandfather came inside and asked, “any problem”, and I said, “no problem.”

He went into the room and Kumar came out.

Then the deluge of patients started, and we did not have much time to talk to each other.

I am handing out numbers and Kumar was taking the patients and handing them medicines when they came out. I was helping where ever possible. Two hours went by and the flow of patients decreased.

After half an hour all the patients are cleared. I took leave of him and went away.

When going home the after-effects of the hug came back to me and hit me in the chest like a pike.

I went home in a trance, had food my mother put on the plate and went and lay on the bed thinking about the hug and the press of his body on my chest and the hands around my body.

Kumar

After seeing her after two months bought the memories of the time we spent.

I kept staring at her thinking how beautiful she looks in her half-saree. When seeing her I forgot the girls I watched in Bombay. I forgot the time I spent there.

I felt a twinge of love in my heart for her. This is the first time I felt such a way about anyone. Now I know what love feels like. It is a feeling washing over you, that is love.

She asked me to come to the exam room. I took her to the exam room, we went inside and she hugged me from the front. She pressed into me, I put my arms around her hugging her. Her small boobs were pressing into my chest. I felt a small movement in my loins.

Before I could react to her hug, she removed my hand from her behind went and sat in a chair. I went and sat beside her. I was still feeling her body around me. We sat there in silence for some time. She got up and said I will come in the evening and went away.

The feeling of love I had for her increased many folds. Now I am confused about what I want from her.

What I felt for is lust or love. In a confused mind, I went home and had lunch and sat down, thinking about what I should do.

I reviewed my life, now I am in my 2nd year Inter. I have some techniques but not enough to earn a living. I don't have any financial backing from anyone. I am in no position to think about love and what kind of life I can give her. Nothing. I can't give her shelter over her head. I can't keep her fed three times a day. I can't provide her with any comforts she may require. I am a nobody. I don't have any authority to love her.

As for lust, I am not the kind of person, who uses girls and leave them as per convenience. Our parents have inculcated that much decency in us. I was just confused. After some time, I took the keys to the clinic and went and opened the clinic, and sat down.

After some time Sreenu called and said, "my brother told me that you came back."

I asked him, "are you there for some time?"

Sreenu said, "yes."

I said will come to wait for me and went to his shop. I went inside and sat down.

Sreenu started to apologize, "I have hurt you so much with my words, I missed you so much when you went to Bombay, I realized how much I depend on you, and it was bad of me to talk like that in the past."

I said, "don't worry, I don't keep anything in my mind or heart. I forgot that a long time back, but I don't know what I am doing. I fell in love with Sneha. I think she also loves me. I don't know what to do?"

Sreenu asked, "what age are you 17? Why are you thinking about love now, your whole life is in front of you. You think about the future. What do you want to become? At least finish your degree. Then you can get a job, and then you can think of Sneha and her love. If I were in your position, I would do the same. Even though I have two businesses to look after, if I have to marry now, I would not have to worry about money. But I would not do that, I will think of finishing my studies and then will think of girls. Don't you think, I could have proposed to Jamuna, I could have done that long back. But what is the use? I want to become someone, I want to stand on my two feet before I could propose to any girl."

After hearing those words, I started thinking that whatever Sreenu says is correct. Now I can't think about Sneha or her love or my lust. I have to think about my studies. I can't forever work for my grandfather, I have to make something of myself. I should keep my love for Sneha hidden under my steel interior. I got up and said thanks for the advice and went to the clinic.

Grandfather has not yet come, I opened the clinic and sat down. After a few minutes, Sneha came.

She must have seen me coming from her balcony. When she entered she asked me, "where is grandfather?"

I said, "not here yet."

While walking toward the exam room, told to me come with her.

I went inside behind her into the room and asked, "what?"

She said she wanted one more hug.

All my resolve after my talk with Sreenu melted away. I shut the door and hugged her hard. We held together for a minute and I released her and she went and sat in the chair.

It was perfect timing, just then grandfather walked in and asked her, "any problem", and she said, "nothing."

He came inside the room, I acted as if adjusting something and went outside. Then patients started coming one by one. The waiting room started to fill and I was sending one by one and looking after the patients. It took us two

and a half hours to clear the rush. Sneha said bye and went away. Grandfather said close up and come. I cleaned up the room packed the garbage and put it aside. Closed the clinic and reached home.

Chapter 6

The year 1980 Month of June after the summer holidays

Sneha

Starting day of college 2nd year. Father decided to drop me at college on his Chetak scooter.

Now I don't have a chance of going to college with Kumar.

It seems my father has some doubts about me, otherwise, why would he decide to drop me, college is on another side of his regular route. Now he has to drop me off and come back to go to his office. How can I tell Kumar about this?

I came out onto the balcony to see if he is anywhere near, to warn him.

However, when my father took me to college, I saw him on the clinic's steps, he must be waiting for me.

With signs, I told him to go to college on his own.

I looked back and he nodded his head.

For the 2nd year, we were allotted a new classroom. Students sat as if they were sitting in their seats for the first year.

I went to my seat and sat down. My bench mates asked, "what happened."

I told them "my father decided to drop me at the college."

Saritha asked, "did your father doubt you?"

I said, "I don't know, he didn't ask me anything."

I also thought, that if he had any doubts, he would not let me go to the clinic. I told the mother that I am helping in the clinic during the holidays. I used to go there for a phone call from Bombay. I used to help as well in the clinic.

Slowly I learned some works at the clinic. I my told mother I am thinking of going for Nurse training. After doctors' nurses are in demand. With nurse training, I could get a job anywhere. I have not thought about nurse training. Just a reason to go to the clinic.

I know my father can't bring me to college every day. It might be something else.

So many thoughts were running through my mind. Sir entered and started taking attendance. After that, he started the lesson, and I turned my mind to the lesson.

At the time of the break, Kumar came to me and asked me in a low tone, “what happened?”

I said, “my father decided to bring me to college and I don’t know how long will this go on.”

Kumar

I was waiting at the clinic for Sneha to come and we will go together to college. I have to start or I will be delayed. I was in two minds, will she come or not?

Sneha has not given me any indication that she will miss class today. I collected my books and came out looking towards her house, first I did not see her behind her father, and as the scooter crossed me, she told me to go to college with signs.

I nodded my head and started to go to college at a brisk pace so as not to get delayed.

I reached class just 2 minutes before the bell.

The next day her father arranged for a rickshaw for Sneha as usual. It seems he could not contact the rickshawala, so he took her to college himself. So, one problem is solved and our routine of rickshaw and walking continued.

Normally Sneha brings her lunch box, I used to go home and have lunch and come back.

Sometimes Sreenu used to give me a lift in his rikshaw, but mostly I used to walk to and fro.

Sneha said you don’t go home for lunch, I will bring it for the two of us. I had a habit of having a hot meal, if she brings it will be cold, I am in two minds to accept her invitation for lunch or go home and have lunch.

One is to sit with Sneha and have lunch or walk for 1 hour for lunch. Tough decision to make.

Finally decided to go home for lunch, otherwise what they will think at home?

Our daily routine of sitting in the clinic in the evening continued. We could finish our homework and help in the clinic and be together for some time. We could accomplish all these by being at the clinic in the evenings.

On holidays we could spend more time together. After that day when we hugged, we have not attempted that again.

I thought if we tried again that what would be my reaction, thinking that got me scared and I avoided getting closer to her.

Sitting beside each other, touching each other bodies, and holding hands are more than enough. If I hugged her again, I know I could not contain myself and I don't know what length would I go.

We made it a routine to study and help in the clinic.

Father asked, "would I like to come to Bombay for Dussehra or Pongal holidays?"

Thinking about what I will miss, I said I could not come as I do not want to inconvenience my grandfather and he could not manage the clinic himself.

I made a tent on the terrace, we used to make a tent and prepare Diwali crackers when we were small.

During the Dussehra holidays, we both took our books to the terrace and told grandfather that we are studying on the terrace.

We used to cosy up and used to sit for hours and only come down for lunch or tea.

I like to sing and I used to sing the latest love songs for her in a low voice.

We know nobody will disturb us, the grandmother doesn't come up to the terrace. Those fifteen days were heaven for us.

Sometimes Sreenu and Pradip used to come and sit with us.

We used to discuss movies and current affairs.

We are non-vegetarians and Sneha's parents were vegetarians. When asked about us she said to her parents we are Vaishnavas, indicating brahmins. But we are separated from them and we eat non-veg.

Some of our relatives perform pujas in the temple as brahmins, they keep to Vegetarianism.

She used to have lunch in our home. We normally have non-veg on Sundays only. Slowly she started to have non-veg with me. She liked our food and continued eating with us without informing her family that she is having non-veg with us.

When the holidays finished, we went back to our routine.

Sreenu

Colleges have started, and now we are in the second year and we had to take our studies seriously. We need to at least finish our degree to make something of ourselves.

Kumar is not visiting me like before. Only when he comes for medicines, he would visit me.

Kumar said he is very busy helping his grandfather. He said now more patients were coming to the clinic. Sometimes patients spill outside onto the road. He had to arrange for the patients to sit outside by placing benches.

The increase in patients has something to do with Kumar, his way of dealing with patients or their treatment or something.

Kumar has charm, he can charm his way into anything. Now Sneha is also helping him at the clinic. They make a good pair.

They work in coordination without speaking anything. Just a look from him and she understands him and acts accordingly. I never saw them fighting about anything. I would like to have a relationship like theirs.

I told Pradip about their relationship, and he agreed with me and said, “the best relationship I saw.”

He said, “I don’t know how they will behave once married, but they act like a couple who understand each other”.

I agreed with him. During the holidays, I went to his house. They made a good place on the terrace to sit. We had a good time discussing things.

Time flies there, why, I don’t know. Being with them makes a unique experience.

They are like two people with one soul, that’s all I can say about them. What happens in the future only God can tell.

Tomorrow classes start, and I have to prepare.

Pradip

Had a long talk with Sreenu. He seems to be jealous of Sneha and Kumar. He was telling me they were the best couple and all, but his demeanour shows he didn’t have a relationship like them.

Sreenu could not even talk to his girl. Only speaks to her at functions that both of them attend. That is also only hi and bye.

Sreenu has to look after his brothers’ businesses. I have to look after our business. Kumar has to help in the clinic, which too he is using to his advantage. He takes Sneha’s help and over that he is with her the whole time.

Now in the holidays in the name of studies, Kumar takes Sneha to his terrace and has gala time.

I don't know what they do the whole time. He is a lucky guy to get a girl like her. He must have been born into a good star. He kills two birds with one shot. When Sreenu said we should be like them with our girls, I totally agreed with him.

I would be getting married to a girl my family fixes, that is the custom. They will look at girls' families, their business worth, and how it will help them to grow in business. My family is business-minded.

We are a Marwari family, business-minded and Sreenu is also from the Vysya family, they are also business people. I don't know how they feel about Sreenu's marriage. Maybe they want him to have an arranged marriage.

So many things to consider and we have four to five years for this to happen, I should not think about this now.

Mostly our girls are fair but whether are they beautiful is another matter. My family only looks at their worth, not the girl's beauty, over that they will say how beautiful she looks, even though she is an ugly duckling. That is the problem with arranged marriages.

Previously they did not even consult the boys before fixing the marriage, he could look at her face only on the first night that's also in dull light. The whole day they will be covering their faces with their saree pallu. Those were days, nowadays the families let us at least have a look at the girls and sometimes they give permission to speak to her. Otherwise, we did not know if she is dumb until a few days after marriage, they can always act if they don't talk in front of elders. After marriage, we can't do anything.

It is not like in western countries, where we can divorce if we don't like her. Even if we raise our voices, the families would silence us saying aren't we living together, it is never heard in our community about divorce, they would say our noses will be cut in front of elders.

They are concerned more about their noses and not about our life. I don't know why they always bring their noses in between as if they are living for their noses. It is their noses or their turbans.

Even if I love someone, I couldn't ask my family for love marriage. First, they will see how much money she had, and next, they will see if she is from Marwari or not.

Next, they will see if she is beautiful or not, if they did not find her attractive, they will reject her instead of seeing her through my eyes.

It is now a little better than the 1960s or previous to that.

The college starts tomorrow and I hope I will find a junior to my liking.

Chapter 7

Kumar

Our routine continued for the year. Daily we were going to college either by rickshaw or by walking as the day demanded. On holidays we were spending on our Terrace. Our tent we made strong. On the ground, we built a stage to raise the bed, so water will not seep into the bed. I used wooden planks and grass to build a stage on that we used old bedsheets to make up the bed. It is very cosy to sit and sleep. I could sleep at the night there.

Except in winter, it wouldn't be very cold. Other times there would be dew early in the morning. It would form like raindrops in the morning. Our tent would save us from the dew. I drew a wire to the first floor and arranged for light. I bought a bed light switch and I can switch it on and off from the terrace.

I am always trying to improve things. I will not sit down until everything is perfect.

Now Pongal holidays have come, they will be from Christmas to Pongal. It will be the last holiday before exams. Holidays have come and gone.

We enjoyed those 20 days. Also studied and worked in the clinic.

This year Sneha's grades have improved from last year. So, Sneha's mother had not objected to our combined studies.

Now she is also learning in the clinic, once her mother cut her finger during vegetable cutting, and Sneha swung into action, cleaned her cut, and put on a bandage.

She bought a TT Injection from the clinic and gave it to her mother. Her mother is happy that she learned a lot from going to the clinic.

2nd-year exams are nearing. We were given preparatory holidays. Now both Sreenu and Pradip have come to study with us.

Exams have come and gone, and we did well in the exams.

I booked my tickets to go to Bombay. Only one week for us to be together.

Daytime we are spending in our tent and other times we are at the clinic or she is at her home and I am at my home.

Before I am going to Bombay, we thought we should be together for one whole day. We fixed a day took some snacks, water, and some books retired to our tent, and closed the curtain.

Ravikiran

We spent a full day there reading books, singing songs, and generally cosying up with each other. We had a wonderful time and spent the available time to our heart's content.

I took leave from Sreenu and his brothers, Pradip, and last Sneha. I caught the train and went away to Bombay, unaware that would be my last sighting of Sneha.

Sneha

Exams were completed and we spent one day together before he went away. The day arrived and he took leave from us and caught the train. I went to the station to give a send-off.

My eyes were filled, when will I see him next? Will he come back in two months or will he stay back in Bombay as his father suggested? Only time will tell.

Sreenu, Pradip

We all went to the station to give a send-off.

We spent two years together. Done a lot of things together.

After completing Inter now he is going away to Bombay, will he return or will he join a degree in Bombay?

What will become of Sneha?

Questions and Questions with no answers in sight.

PART 2

Kumar starts his life in Bombay

Chapter 1

1981 month of May

Kumar

After a year I am back in Bombay. Nothing has changed. The boy who is staying on the ground floor now has come to 10th. He called me to play with their cricket team. They made the small pitch in an open place. I brought a tennis ball for them. We played from 5 pm until we can't see the ball. Then one boy took us to the Wada pav stall. We all had Wada pav there. This is the first time I had Wada pav. They break the pav in half put on green chutney and put a WADA in between. They also serve Bajji pav. Instead of wada, they put four bhajjis in between the pav. Bajji pav was better tasting than wada pav. He paid for the wada pavs. I was told he works as a lineman in the telecom dept. and extra money he earns, he spends like this.

After a week my father spoke to the grandfather and he said that Sneha remembers Kumar. My father asked, "who is Sneha", I said, "she is my classmate and she also helps in the clinic. I left her to help our grandfather, so I could come here. I will come after two days to talk to grandfather."

After two days I went to Prabhadevi and spoke to Sneha. She said she is doing ok. Everything working fine at the clinic. After two days grandfather called and said Sneha went to her grandparents' house for the summer holidays, and now he is without a hand to help.

I said, "I will ask Sreenu to help a little. Especially in the evenings, when the rush would be more."

Sreenu agreed to go and help. Why she did not inform her before going to her grandparents? She had not returned to the clinic after the holidays were finished. Now, grandfather asked his other grandson to help in the clinic, Sreenu showed him the work and left.

I asked Sreenu to check with Sneha's parents. Sreenu went to Sneha's house to enquire about her. Her mother closed door on his face saying she is not coming back. Now I am in two minds, if she does not return, there is no use going back to Vijayawada. I think it is best to stay back in Bombay and join the degree here.

I got admission to a college in Vile Parle. Mithibai college in commerce stream. Also, during the holidays I went for CA Entrance coaching. I wrote the CA entrance exams and waiting for the results. One of the boys from our cricket team also wrote the CA exams.

Now another 2 months went by, there is no news about Sneha. I asked Sreenu to check if she has returned.

Sreenu went to the clinic and waited for her sister to come over on the road and asked what happened to Sneha? She told that at home there was some fighting about Sneha and she was taken to their grandparent's house and left there. She will be studying there only. She will not return until she gets her degree. Now it is confirmed that our affair has come to the knowledge of her family.

Sneha

Kumar went away to Bombay. Now I have only a clinic for my time pass. Also, I wait for him to call, I wait on the telephone. One day by mistake I talked about eating non-veg. My mother caught my word and told my father about my eating non-veg. Father asked the mother if I had non-veg, what else could I have done? Mother asked, "you told me they are brahmins, how come they are having non-veg?"

They made a big issue of this and took me to my grandparents' place. When degree colleges started they got my admission there and were told not to come to Vijayawada until I finish my degree. I don't have any way of informing Kumar. What would he think of me? He did not give me his number or address. We never thought this day would come. I don't have any other option than to let it go.

Sreenu

Kumar rang me up and asked to check about Sneha. It seems she has not returned from their village. I went to the clinic and waited outside if Sneha's sister comes out, so I can confirm her details. She said she got admission to college there and she would not be coming home until the completion of her degree. I informed Kumar and said he better stay there.

Chapter 2

Kumar

It was two months since I joined Degree College. I sat in the canteen and checked the schedule for CA Classes.

Two boys approached me and one said, "Hi, I am Raj and he is Krishna."

I said, "Hi."

Raj asked, "are you in 1st year B.Com.?"

I said, "yes."

Raj asked, "do you have a Neetu Khanna in your class."

I said, "yes, I know her, Neetu is just coming over here."

Neetu is walking towards us and came over to me and asked, "Did you join for CA?"

I said, "yes."

Neetu asked, "my brother wanted to join in CA can you give me some details?"

I said, "one second, these guys were asking something."

Raj told Krishna to sit down. And told to me you carry on we are not in a hurry.

I told Neetu "there are two ways, did your brother finish his Degree?"

She said, "yes."

I asked, "did he get above 50% marks."

Neetu said, "yes."

I said, "then he can join directly into CA. He has to go to the CA institute in Church gate and fill up the forms and pay the fees, he will be studying CA."

Neetu said, "thanks I will ask my brother to meet you to get details."

I said Ok.

Neetu went through the main door and exited the canteen. I looked at her until she is outside. Now I turned to the two guys and asked, "what can I do for you?"

Raj said, "I want her introduction."

I said, "you should have said that when she was here. Tomorrow she will bring her brother then I can give you an intro."

Raj asked, "are you staying in Vakola?"

I said, "yes, in P and T Quarters."

"Do you practice typing in Kazi's Institute?"

I said, "yes."

"I stay in the same society and he stays in the chawl behind the market."

I said ok.

Raj asked, "shall we go get a fag?"

I said, "ok, let us go."

We went out and had a fag and came back.

I asked, "do you want to have tea?"

Raj said, "yes", and asked Krishna to get us Tea.

Krishna went and bought 3 cups of tea. In the meantime, some girls came and sat on our bench. They were talking to Raj. Some guys came and said hi to Raj and went away and sat down on another bench.

I asked, "Raj, which class are you in?"

He said, "I am in 1st-year B.Com."

I said, "I had not seen you in class."

He said, "I don't attend classes."

I got up and said, "time to go home."

Raj said, "We are also coming with you."

We walked to the station and caught a train to Santacruz and caught a bus and got down at Vakola.

Krishna said, "we stay behind the bus stop.

Raj said, "we stay inside there in that society. Come I will introduce you to my friends."

I said, "we have cricket practice, I will come after 6:30."

“Come to the typing institute I will be there.”

I went home and changed and went to cricket practice.

Raj

I told Krishna I saw a girl in a white churidar at Mithibai, I named her Chandini, she looked like Sridevi from the Chandini movie. I want to meet her and make friends with her. Come we will go to Mithibai.

Krishna said, “Ok let us go.”

We both reached Mithibai and went into the Canteen. I saw a guy looking familiar sitting on a bench and going through some books. I went to him and made introductions and asked, “do you know Neetu”, which is her real name.

Kumar said, “yes, she is coming over here.”

Instead of speaking in front of her, I asked Krishna to sit down and I also sat down.

Neetu came and asked him something about her brother doing some course, he explained to her what to do and she said she will ask her brother to come and speak to him.

What I did not understand is that she is the lone girl in her family, she doesn't have a brother. I thought maybe some cousin brother.

I asked him about getting an intro, and he said to come tomorrow, and she will bring her brother.

I said ok and thought maybe another day. And asked him to come for fag. We both went and had a fag. We had tea and he got up to go home, I said we will also come with you. And went to Vakola after getting down I asked him to come and meet our friends.

He said he will come later.

We stood outside the institute and were having a fag and I was telling about the girls going into the institute.

One girl from our building went into the institute, I said, “her name is Maria, and she had a boyfriend. Another girl went inside, I said, “her name is

Padmini she was dating that Chicken shop guy and his parent did not approve of her and they broke up.” Another girl in a skirt and coat came up. I said, “she is Sandhya and she stays near the police station.”

Then my other two friends came I introduced them as Shekar and Harry. He said hi to them and shook their hands. I introduced Kumar to them and I said, “he is in the same class as Chandini and he stays here in the colony.”

Kumar

After cricket practice, I went to the institute. He was standing at a paan shop having a fag.

I stopped and said hi to him.

Raj asked, “to have one” showing his fag, I said, “not here.”

At this time one fair and beautiful girl went inside the institute, Raj said, “she is Maria and she had a boyfriend”, as you don’t try her, she is already engaged.

Another girl with a small mouth went in behind her. I have not seen any girl with such a small mouth. It reminded me of the mouse.

Raj said, “her name is Padmini and she was the girlfriend of the chicken shop guy”, pointing towards the chicken shop. A Muslim guy was cutting a chicken.

Raj said, “their family did not approve of her and they broke up.”

Then another girl went inside, she was wearing a skirt, shirt and a coat. She looked posh, Raj said, “her name is Sandhya all call her sandy and her house is near the police station” as if her father is in the police.

Another two guys walked towards us, he introduced a tall guy as Shekar and another guy as Harry. Raj said, “Shekar had a bar and restaurant at Pipeline road and Harry is working in Bandra.”

Then we went to the institute for practice. I used to wait until the institute closed. After closing Instructor Bharathi and another girl, Sahithi and I used to go home together. I used to drop both off and then go home. First Bharathi’s home comes. Then Sahithi’s home. I had to take a small detour, but I did not mind. Sahithi and I used to talk and walk, so I did not mind the

detour. I could talk with Sahithi freely. Sometimes, we used to stop outside her house and continue talking. We are not tired of discussing things. Chatting is natural for us. I have not spoken to anyone else after Sneha like this.

Krishna

I like Triza. I can't tell her that. So, I asked Raj for help.

Raj asked, "what are her timings."

I said, "at 6 pm she goes to collect milk from the Dairy farm."

Raj said, "let us go and see."

We three of us went to the dairy and he took a bag from a nearby shop and we stood there. When she collected milk, we went with her to her home and we went back to our place.

Now he is asking me to come to the Mithibai canteen for seeing Chandini. He just goes around girls and does not achieve anything. Just a time pass for him. We went to the canteen, and one guy from her class was sitting there. I saw him coming to the typing institute. We were talking to him when she came to him and started asking something about CA.

When she went away Raj asked him for an intro with her. He told us to come tomorrow. Later we went with him to Vakola. Later on, we met outside the institute. Raj was telling about the girls going inside the institute. After some time Triza came to the institute, when she went inside, Raj said to Kumar, Krishna is behind that girl, he could not say I like her to her. We went inside the institute for typing practice. I asked Bharathi, the girl who looks after the institute to provide me with a seat beside Triza. I went and sat down on the seat beside her. Looked at her and smiled, and she smiled back. While typing we were talking in low voices. Kazi was not present, he must have gone for Namaz. When Padmini got some problem with her typewriter, I saw Kumar calling Bharathi to look at her typewriter. Raj's warning must have worked.

Neetu

It was two months since starting college. I was looking at Kumar. He is around 5 feet 5 inches, a little dark but had a charm on his face. With his

spectacles, he looks intelligent, with a kind face. There is a magnetism in him and a know-all kind of face. He speaks courteously with all.

I heard he got admission to CA. Rajesh wants to join CA, I should ask him for details. After class I went to the canteen, he was sitting there and two guys were speaking with him.

I went and asked, “can you give me details about joining CA?”

Kumar explained, but nothing went into my mind, I said, “I will call my brother tomorrow, please explain to him.”

Those two guys were looking at me rather than staring at me, I gave them half a smile and went away. After reaching home, I called Rajesh and told him to come to college tomorrow, he will get details about CA joining.

He said, “he will be there by 4 pm.”

The next day I took Rajesh to the canteen, Kumar was sitting with those two guys in front of him. I went and sat beside him and told Rajesh to sit in front. Kumar looked at me and said, “hello. These two are Raj and Krishna” indicating the guys sitting in front.

He told them this is Neetu Khanna.

The guy Kumar indicated as Raj said, “Hi, Neetu are you Punjabi? I am also Punjabi”, as if we are relatives.

I smiled and said, “hi”, and asked, “Kumar, please explain to my brother about joining CA, he got copies of his marks lists.”

Kumar took the marks lists and checked and calculated and said, “you can get direct admission into CA or ICWA if you like. Go to the Churchgate office which is near Aayakar Bhavan. You collect the application form and fill it submit it there with fees. After getting admission you can pay admission fees and Group fees. You can also select a college for attending evening classes.”

Rajesh said, “he will go and try, if he has any other enquiries he will come and meet me, and leave.”

I asked, “why he is only speaking in English, don’t you know Hindi.”

He said, “I knew little Hindi not enough to speak fluently. I just came from the South.”

I thought oh, that is his slang, it is south slang, he speaks.

I asked, “from where you come?”

He said, “I am from Vijayawada, I studied up to 12th there. My father is working in Telecom, so we came here after my father’s transfer and we are staying in Departmental Quarters, near the old airport. These two guys also stay nearby”, indicating the two guys he introduced as Raj and Krishna. “He is also in 1st year B. Com{, indicating Raj and indicating Krishna “he is doing a course on A/C repairing. He came from Goa.”

Indicating Raj, he said, “his father works at Century Mills, they came from Pakistan at the time of Partition.

I said, “my father is a businessman, my mother is a housewife and I am an alone child. We stay at the Malad Oshiwara colony. Please come for Navaratri Garba in our building. It will be starting this week.”

Before Kumar can answer Raj said, “we will certainly come. He may not know the area”, indicating Kumar, “I will bring him with me.”

Kumar

Neetu came with her brother and I gave him instructions and he went away. Neetu was sitting beside me and asking me for details about my family. I told her the details. She invited us to Navaratri Garba in her colony. Before I can answer Raj said, “we will come and he will bring us.”

Next Saturday we went to Neetu’s house maybe a little early. Raj wants to meet Neetu’s family. We went to her house and rang the bell, Neetu opened the door and her mother was behind her. She introduced each of us.

Neetu said, “this is Kumar, he is from my class and he joined CA and he is helping Rajesh with his admission.” Next, she introduced others as this is Raj, this is Krishna, this is Shekar, who are Kumar’s friends. When Raj saw her mother, he started speaking in Punjabi to impress her. She gave us snacks and some cold drinks.

I looked around, and Neetu said, “I will show you around”, and took me to show her house, they had a three-bedroom house. Her father seems to be loaded. Raj was still going on and on with her mother.

After half an hour we all went down to the Garba area. The music was about to start. It started with Garba, which is played by moving around and clapping.

Next the dance with sticks, Dandiya. Throughout the dandiya, Neetu was dancing beside me. This went on for an hour, and we took leave and went home.

From what I have seen from Neetu’s behaviour, it seems she is interested in me more than Raj. I didn’t think he would have any chance. From what I understood about him is that this is all timepass for him and he is not serious about her. He would go behind any girl he finds attractive. He is that kind of person.

Overall it seems Neetu is interested in me, thinking of the good week I had, I went to sleep.

Neetu

Ravikiran

Kumar came home with his friends. I introduced them to my mom, especially Kumar. Others I just introduced with names. But Kumar is my classmate who also is helping Rajesh to get admission to CA. But Raj did not give mom a chance to say anything. Mom gave them snacks and drinks. I showed Kumar my house and especially my room. He seemed impressed with our house. In my room he inspected everything. From my bed, table and chair where I study and posters on the wall. He looked at the photos and enquired about the people in the photos. Some are with friends and some are with relatives. Some are photos of our home in the village. Overall his impression seems to be amazed at all this. Next, we went to the dance floor and we danced together, he kept me by my side throughout the dance. A positive indication that he also likes me. Let us see what happens.

Raj

Now I have connected with Neetu's mother with my Punjabi. The first step is accomplished, now I will impress Neetu with my dancing skills. During the dance, I was looking at Neetu, but she doesn't seem to be interested in me. She was in her own world, dancing to the tunes of the music. Will she be ever interested in me? What else I can do to impress her? I must put my brain to use.

Krishna

We went to Neetu's house. Raj caught her mother unawares and hammered her with Punjabi. They served us snacks and some drinks. Neetu took Kumar to show him the house. Later we went down to the dance floor. Neetu doesn't seem at all interested in Raj. She seems more interested in Kumar. Kumar has personality, and charm and looked bright and intelligent. In front of him, Raj looked pathetic small and too eager to please. He is the shortest person in our group. Why she would choose Raj? I found a Marathi girl to connect with. During break had a small chat with her. She said her name is Sonali. I will take her number.

Shekar

I don't know why I follow Raj. The only reason he told me he will fix the girl I like. He was following her for some time and gives her presents from me as a secret admirer. We are only here for his moral support. I don't know why he needs support. Once he starts he would not stop talking. Let us see if I can find any girl in their colony.

We went to the dance floor. People were just coming in. Music started and people started dancing. I found a girl looking at me. She is above average girl. During break time, she came toward me. She has introduced me to Meghna and she is studying in 12th.

I said, "I am in 1st year B. Com. And my name is Shekar Shetty. When she heard the name Shetty, Meghna asked, "are you in the hotel business?"

I said, "we have a bar and restaurant in Santacruz."

Then the music started and we started dancing again.

Chapter 3

Kumar

After Saturday Dandiya at Neetu place, on Sunday we went to another function in our colony. We have different cultures of people in our colony. As my father is the president of the Colony Welfare Association, we had little advantage there. Normally outsiders are not encouraged to attend the dandiya, I could get admission to them there.

I thought of asking Neetu to attend our function, but her house is very far and to send her in the night would be a problem, someone must go drop her at her home. That also would not be a problem. But I decided against asking her, if I had told Raj he would have jumped at the thought. He must have thought about it, but it was not at his place, he might not have given much thought. Whatever, I have not invited her. Maybe once more we will go to her place.

The function was arranged in the main open area. On one side a stage was arranged for music and the grass was cut and tarpaulin was placed all over the ground. As it was used for cricket the ground was a little uneven in the centre, it was filled with mud, and over that tarpaulin was placed to make the place even. At least 150 members must have attended the event. On one side some snacks, cool drinks and water were arranged. Our cricket team was at full strength. Many other known people are present. All the people from our building were there. Raj tried to flirt with some girls without success. They ignored him. However, the day went well.

For the nine days, we were attending somewhere or other dandiya programs. Dussehra holidays are completed and we are back to college.

Neetu did not mention anything in class. But after the class, I was sitting in the canteen, and Neetu came over and asked, “why you did not come again to our dandiya?”

I said, “we were visiting other places. I thought to ask you for our dandiya but thought it was very far and you will be inconvenienced.”

Neetu said, “you could have at least asked me, I would have come with my brother.”

I said, "I have not thought of that, I was thinking about how can I send you back alone at that hour. Whatever happened, happened. What is the news?"

We were chatting for some time and Raj came with Krishna.

Neetu said hi to them and continued talking to me. Raj must have felt excluded, he said, "I will have a fag and come", and went outside.

Then Neetu spoke to Krishna, "how much have you learned?" she asked.

He said, "another 3 months of training is required."

Seeing Raj entering the canteen, she said, "bye, will meet tomorrow" and went away.

I told Krishna, did you see her attitude towards Raj, she is trying to avoid him.

Krishna said, "I also felt the same. How will he feel if we tell him that?"

The next day she was asking me why are you taking them.

I said, "they are not even my friends until that day you came to ask about CA. Raj wants to have an intro with you, that's why he was making friends with me and hanging with me. He just flirts with everyone, he thinks of himself as a Casanova."

Neetu

After the holidays we met in the canteen.

Kumar told me he thought of calling me to his colony's dandiya.

He should have called me at least to inform me of the dandiya at his colony. I would have decided to come or not. When they all came all this way to my house, why I would not go to their colony? Is he feeling any complex? He might have thought I am fairer than him and he is dusky, he might have thought he might not be up to my standard or was it the money we have? What could be his reason for not asking me?

I asked, "you should have at least informed me about the dandiya in your colony I would have come with my brother."

Kumar said, “sorry, it never crossed my mind you would have come with your brother.”

His apology seemed genuine. It means he would have liked me to come to his colony dandiya. That is a relief. I thought he might not like me, he is only speaking to me because of Raj. Raj must have realized by now I was not interested in him. What if he is Punjabi, he is short, even though he is fair, not much to look at. His face is filled with pimple marks. Over that he is not even Punjabi, he is Sindhi. Also, he doesn't seem to be from our college. The only thing he seems to have is confidence. Whatever it may be, I have to find what feelings Kumar has for me. He does not seem to be aggressive. I saw lots of people come for his advice. It is just two months since he joined and people go to him for advice. I went to him for my brother. He has something practical to say to everyone. If they put it to practice or not is their lookout. Overall Kumar seems a nice guy. They are not in business but his father is a gazetted officer. According to Kumar, his father is also the Secretary of the Accounts Officers Union. He must be having some influence. I have to take him away from these two and speak to him.

Kumar

The next day I was sitting in the canteen, Neetu came over and said, “come with me.”

Raj was looking at me, with a question mark on his face.

I said to Raj, “I will meet you later”, and went with her.

Neetu took me to a restaurant a little further down the road and we sat down.

Neetu asked, “what is your opinion of me?”

I said, “you are beautiful, intelligent and from a good family. I like you, but I have to tell you something. I will not tell you lies. In Vijayawada, I had a friend, Sneha. We were together for two years, we worked together, we studied together and we ate together. We were not physical but we were together for every moment available. Her family had a misunderstanding about her eating non-veg and sent her away to an unknown destination. I could not find where she is and the information is that her family asked her not to come home until she completes her graduation, after that they will

marry her off without my knowledge. I am trying to forget her. My heart aches for her if I think about her. If you don't have any objection to that, I am ready to be your friend and let us see where this goes", and I waited for her answer.

Neetu waited for a minute, I can see her thinking hard. I thought if she is thinking this much, she might reject me and go away. But her next words surprised me, she said, "I will also be truthful to you, for the last two years I had a boyfriend, Uday. Last year before the exams he broke up with me for a silly reason. I am also a little heartbroken. If you can forgive me for that, I don't have a problem forgetting yours."

I said, "thank you, let us be friends first and see how this develops."

Neetu

I took Kumar to a restaurant and asked, "what is your opinion of me."

Kumar said I am beautiful and intelligent and he likes me. And he told me about his past. After thinking for a minute, I thought I should come clean and tell him about my affair with Uday. He did not object to this and I said if you can forgive me and I would forget about this and he said let us be friends. Now to keep the other two away is the only way to manage this relationship. One way is to attach some girl to Raj otherwise I have to tell him to his face that I don't like him. Otherwise, ask for his help to make me and Kumar come together. I think that would be the best idea to implement.

The next day I caught Krishna and asked him to get Raj for me. He went inside and asked Raj to come outside.

I took him to the pan shop and got him a fag and asked, "can you help me?"

Raj took a drag and asked, "what can I do?"

I told him that I am interested in Kumar, but he does not seem interested in me. He was telling me he had an affair and his heart is broken.

Raj said, "I didn't know, he did not tell me about it. Let me check with Kumar. I will do whatever in my power to help you", he went back into the canteen.

I left for home assured now I have seen his behind.

Raj

Ravikiran

Neetu gave me work, to fix them up. If someone asks me to fix their relationship, I couldn't resist. It is my weakness. Even though I like her very much. But she is interested in Kumar and asked me to fix that.

I went and sat beside Kumar.

Kumar asked, "where did you disappear?"

I said, "I went for fag. I met Neetu going home. She said you had an affair where you are from, is it true?"

Kumar said, "yes."

I asked, "please tell me all the details."

Kumar said, "her name is Sneha. She was staying near our house and she was from my class. They both used to meet at his grandfather's clinic and after some time I taught her clinic work and they both used to look after the clinic. During holidays they used to study on my terrace. When I came to Bombay after exams, her family took her away to her grandparent's house and she joined college there and asked her not to come home until she clears her degree. Now I can't meet her for three years. Now I got to forget her as her parents would not let me meet her and would marry her off before she enters Vijayawada."

"Are you ready to forget her?" I asked him.

"I am trying to", Kumar said.

I asked, "what is your opinion of Neetu?"

Kumar said, "she is beautiful, intelligent and from a good family, I like her but you are interested in her, how could I think about her?"

I said, "don't worry about me, she told me that she likes you and I want what she wants. If you like her to be with you don't mind me. I just liked her, if you need any help don't hesitate to ask me."

Kumar

It seems Neetu played her game well. Raj came to me and said, you can have her. Now I don't have to worry about him. He would find another girl, he is after one girl or another.

Three months passed. I have written the CA Entrance exams. Expecting results any time soon. Neetu and I were going steady for the last 3 months. We were either meeting in the canteen or some other place. We have been to the movies once a week. I have not discussed Neetu with Raj again.

One day Raj came to me and said, "Neetu is taking painkillers and she is abusing them. I saw a packet of Ibrufen in her purse."

I did not ask him, how he saw it. When next I saw Neetu, I asked, "are you taking painkillers?"

Neetu asked, "how do you know?"

I said, "Raj told me. If you have some problem with pain you could have told me I know harmless medicines which would not be additive."

Neetu said, "nothing like that I sprained my ankle, so I took one pill only. If any pain persists, I will tell you."

I said, "Remember this, for any medical needs, I am here."

Neetu said, "ok, let us go and have some snacks."

I got CA Entrance results and Passed and got admission into CA Inter. I selected NM College as a coaching centre so it would be easy to attend classes. Now I have to decide to take Articles or Auditing. Articles training would be for 3 years and Auditing would be for 4 years. I have to produce a completed certificate from a CA for getting a CA Completion certificate.

I asked my father if he knew any CA so I can get a certificate with limited training. With my Degree and CA classes, I would not have enough time for Training.

Dad contacted some people and came up with a solution. The CA will provide the certificate of completion after the period, I had to get trained on holidays, they will not pay the stipend but I had to sign receipts. I agreed to it as it serves my purpose.

One day Neetu called me to her home to go to a function.

I went to her house, and she opened the door and said, "I am getting ready, please wait 5 minutes, my parents already left."

Neetu went into her bedroom. She called me after 5 minutes. I went to her bedroom and knocked on the door, and asked, “did you call me?”

Neetu said, “come in, fix this zip for me.”

I went in, and she was facing the mirror and her back was towards me.

Neetu said, “fix this zip it seems struck.”

I could see her back, I felt like touching her back instead I pulled the zip up and came back and sat in the hall.

Neetu came out and said, “let us go.”

We went to the function hall by auto. After two hours at the function, I expressed my desire to return home, and Neetu said, “I would like to go home, will you drop me home?”

I called a taxi and asked him to drop me at the station via Oshiwara.

We sat in the taxi, we got down at her house, she asked me, “to give me company until my family comes home.”

I said ok and paid for the taxi and we went to her flat.

Neetu said, “I will change and come”, and she put on the tv and went to her bedroom. After five minutes, Neetu called me, I went into her bedroom, she was in her nightdress. She came towards me and hugged and kissed me. I kissed her back, we were standing there for a few minutes kissing.

Then the doorbell rang, I went and opened the door, and Neetu’s family entered the house.

Neetu came from inside and said, “we were waiting for you, I asked Kumar to wait until you came” and I said, “I will take leave now, I am getting delayed.”

Her father said, “I will drop you at the station.”

I said, “ok.” He came down and dropped me at the station, I caught a train and reached home.

Neetu

When we returned from the function by taxi and having failed in the last attempt in the bedroom, I thought I should try once more.

I asked, “Kumar, come and wait with me until my family returns.”

Kumar agreed and came up, I Put on the tv and told him to wait until I will change and come.

After changing to nightwear, I called him. He came to my bedroom and I hugged him and kissed him and he kissed me back, we stayed like that for some time, then the doorbell rang, how come they are so early.

Kumar went and opened the door. After they entered the hall I came from my room as if Kumar was in Hall and I was in my room changing.

I told my parents I asked him to wait until they returned and Kumar got up to go and my father said, “he would drop him at the station.”

They both went away. Mother looked at me and went to her room to change. She came out after changing and asked, “what is your opinion about Kumar.”

I said, “we are good friends and he cares for me. He is concentrating on his studies. Now he got admission to CA, he will not have much time. During the day he will have degree classes and evening CA classes and on holidays he needs to attend CA training. I don’t think we will have much time for each other. This might be the last time we are together. That is the reason I called him up but we did not get time to talk.”

Mom said, “forget him for the time being, you have time to think about the future. Don’t get tensed up thinking about it”, and went to her room. Thinking about the second failure, I went to my room.

Kumar

I changed and lay down on the bed, thinking about what happened today. What was she thinking calling me up? Did she call the first time for that? By coming early did they save me? Or her? So many questions, with no answers. Thinking about what could have happened I went to sleep.

The next day After class we met in the canteen.

“Sorry about yesterday”, she said. “I wanted to talk to you, but could not get time as my parents returned earlier than I thought.”

I asked, “what do you want to talk about?”

Ravikiran

“In the mornings and afternoons, we will have classes. In the evenings you will have CA classes and on holidays you will have to attend training with CA, our only time will be this time between classes. This will go on for the next three years. When will we get to enjoy any life? I don’t think we can continue like this.” And she went away.

I thought what happened now? Did she break up with me? Yes, that’s what happened. No issues, my studies are more important than any girl. If I could forget Sneha, what Neetu would be in front of her? Forget her.

PART 3

Kumar joins as an Accountant

Chapter 1

The year 1985 month of January.

Kumar

I completed My degree last year. Now I was waiting for the CA final results.

They are expected today. I went to the CA office to check the results. I got first class. I had to wait for the Marks list and certificates. For the time being, I can look for a job. I started looking in the newspapers I found some positions for CA completed and applied. I got a call from Godrej in Vikhroli. I attended the interview seeing my academic qualifications they appointed me for the Accountant position. I went over and filled out the forms and I was given 1st February as the joining date. I went and met the Chief accountant on 1st Feb.

CA said, “let us go and meet Chairman.”

We went to meet Chairman, outside Chairman’s office, Chief accountant told me to go inside and wait I will just come in a minute.

I went inside, Chairman’s PA was sitting at her desk. I was surprised to see her there. It is Sahithi, I said, “Hi, you are here?”

Sahithi has changed a little, she cut her hair short, and was appearing modern.

Sahithi recognized me and said, “Kumar, what are you doing here?”

I said, “I came to meet Chairman.”

“Are you the new Accountant?”

I said, “yes, I just completed my CA and it’s my first job.”

“I am working here for the last 6 months, my sister got me a job here. She is working in this company and she got me a referral.”

Meanwhile, our Chief accountant came and said, “let us go.”

We went and met the chairman and came out I signed her to call me.

I went to my cabin and sat down.

After a few minutes, Sahithi called me.

I asked, “where are you staying?”

Sahithi said, “the same place, Vakola.”

I said, “we shifted to Wadala colony. It is a three-bedroom flat, so we shifted there. I completed my degree last year and just completed my CA now.”

She said, “I completed my degree last year and my sister got me a job here. Ok, let us meet after the office.”

She gave me her extension number and said, “before leaving give me a call, I will meet you at reception.”

At 6:30 pm I called Sahithi, and she said, “I will be at the reception in 10 minutes.”

I went down to reception after 5 minutes. She came there after 2 minutes. We went to a restaurant nearby and sat down.

I said, “you have changed a lot.”

“My sister told me to look modern to get this job. So, this is my look. We were meeting what after 3 years?”

I said, “after joining CA, I stopped coming to the institute.”

“Did you have any girlfriends?” Sahithi asked.

I said, “no when I joined CA she broke up with me since then I have not thought about girls.”

Sahithi asked, “what, she broke up with you for joining CA?”

“She thought I would not give her any time”, I said.

We had tea and left the restaurant. We took an auto and reached the station. We got down at Kurla, and she caught the bus and went to Vakola, I changed trains and went to Wadala.

Sahithi

Someone opened the cabin door, I looked up and was surprised to see Kumar standing there. He just joined as an Accountant. We met in the evening, it took me back three years when Kumar used to drop me at my house. We used to have long talks. We talked about what we were doing. After having tea, we took an auto to reach the station. We took the train and

we got down at Kurla, I went by bus home and he took another train to Wadala.

I reached home and my sister had come for a visit. I told her about Kumar, who was dropping me at home after typing class, and now joined our company as an Accountant. He has done CA and is now joined as an accountant.

“CA?” she asked surprised.

Yes, I said, “he just completed CA.”

She said, “very good.”

I said, “I met him after three years. He has left everything for his studies. His girlfriend left him for joining CA, what kind of girl she is?”

Sister said, “must be stupid.”

“Yes”, I said, “must be stupid. The girl who marries him would be lucky.”

Sister said, “must be lucky.”

I had lunch and watched some tv and later went to sleep thinking about Kumar.

Kumar

The next day we met in the canteen at lunchtime. We remembered our time in the institute, and I asked about others at the institute.

I said, “I have not been in contact with anyone. Raj and Krishna, I spoke with them a few times, and have not met them after shifting to Wadala. You should come for lunch on Sunday.”

Sahithi said, “Ok.”

I gave her the address of our house and gave directions. In the evening we went home like yesterday. After reaching home I informed mom that we are getting a visitor tomorrow. I will go to the market in the morning and get something.

Normally on Sundays, in the morning I get a fag on the way and go to the market and get Mutton or chicken or fish one each week. I decided to get mutton today.

I went and brought mutton and my mother prepared mutton, rice and chapattis. Sahithi came around 12:30 pm. I introduced her to my father and mother. My brother went somewhere. My sister was at her aunt's place. Sahithi sat down on a sofa, and my father also sat down and was talking to her.

Sahithi told them about herself and her family. During these talks, they found some common people known to both of them from the Vakola colony. We had lunch and later we decided to go somewhere.

She suggested we go to a movie, I checked the newspaper and decided to go to a nearby theatre at Sion. We went and watched a movie and later she caught a bus and went home. By the time I returned home, my father called up the common friends and spoke to them about her family.

After coming back, he asked me about her.

I said, "I know her for three years back. I have lost touch with her for the last three years. But we used to be good friends."

Father said, "you just got the job, and wait for some time, before thinking about marriage."

I said, "just my thought, I wanted her to meet you all, so she will have an idea what kind of family she would be expecting."

My Father said, "when I get time I will go and visit their family."

I said, "Ok."

This way my journey with Sahithi started.

Chapter 2

The year 1986 Month of March

Kumar

Sahithi and I were going steady for one year.

One day father received a call from Vijayawada that our grandfather expired. We purchased tickets in black and went to Vijayawada.

My father has completed the final rights. My mother's cousin took me to a bar and we had some drinks. I came back home had some dinner and slept.

The next day I went to meet Sreenu, he was working with a firm supplying chips. I went with him and he was supplying and collecting payments from customers.

Sreenu said, "I had written railway exams and expecting results."

We talked about our classmates and Jamuna.

Sreenu said, "Sneha has come to Vijayawada and told me to tell inform her when you visit."

I said, "I would be here for another 10 days at least."

After two days he informed me that Sneha would like to meet me and gave me a time and place for the meeting.

I went to meet her.

Sneha told me that her parents had fixed her marriage in her caste. Marriage will be in 3 months and asked, "what are you doing?"

I said, "I completed my degree and CA. Now working with Godrej. I have a fiancé from the same office. We were engaged for the last year."

She said, "I wanted a final hug from you." I obliged her and left.

My Father's elder sister bought a marriage proposal for my sister. He was in his LLB final year. His father is the principal of a college. His father and my aunt's husband were cousins.

We completed all the formalities and left Vijayawada.

I got some books and my grandfather's golden ring with bluestone.

I started to wear it immediately. He lost the case in court against the land grabbers. Those papers were useless, father took them and said, "I will see if anything can be done."

Grandfather's sister went to live with her other brother. Our grandmother went to live with her other daughter in Chennai. We came back to Bombay.

I was in consultation with some friends from CA about starting our own CA firm or joining as partners with a CA firm.

I am getting a good salary, but also some offers from big companies. I have to decide what to do.

One day I went to Sahithi's house to meet her parents.

While coming back I went to meet Raj. He has all the gossip.

He said Neetu has gone back to her old boyfriend Uday. She asked for Raj's help in getting them together and he helped her. After that she filled Uday's ears against Raj and Uday is not speaking to Raj.

Krishna was working with an a/c firm as a serviceman. He is getting a good income and planning to upgrade his house.

Shekhar is looking after the bar and restaurant.

Harry married his girlfriend. Once I met her when Harry asked me to teach her accounts. He is planning to go abroad to look for work.

Chapter 3

The year 1987 Month of April

Kumar

My sister's marriage was planned to be performed in Hyderabad.

The groom's family told us they will make all the arrangements.

We went there by bus as railway tickets were difficult to get.

Sahithi's family also attended the marriage with us.

All through the journey I and Sahithi were chatting sitting side by side, I don't know how we can chat for such a long time, but we had not lost touch. It was from the beginning when I started to drop her at home. We used to stop outside her house and chat, we had such a rapport.

Made for each other was the comment of the relatives we met at the marriage. My cousins were asking where you caught this girl. All the ladies were asking her how she knew me, and where we met.

She said, "we used to go to the same type of institute and we did not meet for three years one day Kumar landed in our office. And we connected immediately."

She was having some difficulty speaking with our relatives. Someone worked as a translator between them. Having completed the marriage, I and Sahithi's family returned to Bombay. My parents with my sister went to the groom's father's house.

While returning to Bombay, Sahithi's parents were asking about my elder brother's marriage. I said, "he was not interested in marriage. He always says he doesn't want to get married. It won't be a problem for our marriage. But we would like to wait a little time to settle down."

PART 4

Kumar's Life with Sahithi

Chapter 1

The year 1987 month of October

Kumar

It must be the tension of performing sister's marriage, after coming back, my mother took ill.

We got her checked up without any result. We got her angiography done. Which showed negative results. There is no problem with her. Doctors gave her some medicines and sleeping pills.

But she wouldn't believe the doctors who said her problem is not physical but mental. She was mentally affected. Doctors advised getting her checked by a psychiatrist. But she would not listen to this.

Mom asked are you calling me mad, and refused to visit the psychiatrist. My sister came to visit for my mother's angiography. She was five months pregnant. During the test, my sister was with her mother full-time at the hospital.

This time Sahithi became invaluable to us. She helped us wade through the troubled times, with her presence and her helpful nature.

It is said that those who stand by you in times of struggle are better than those who were with you in good times only.

But my sister could not see our happiness, she was jealous and started filling our mother's ears with all kinds of negative thoughts. It made it more difficult for her to recover.

I thought about what to do, we can't send her back to her husband. She is now seven months pregnant. They would not look after her properly. I am in quandary. My mother started taunting me about Sahithi being Maharashtrian, this and that.

She did not have those opinions, it was my sister doing. I thought of taking company quarters and going and living there. But her health condition has stopped me from doing that, as a safety measure, I applied to the company to allot a flat for me. My sister gave birth to a baby boy. After three months she went away to her husband's place.

Sahithi

Kumar's mother was taken ill after his sister's marriage. At first, we thought it was fatigue. When she did not fully recover, they had got all kinds of tests were done. Even she had angiography, which showed she did not have a problem. Finally, doctors declared it is not physical but mental. She is mentally disturbed. But she is not ready to accept it and called doctors names for calling her mental patient. She started taking heart medicines prescribed to others. Which increased her anxiety.

I heard her talking to Kumar about me but could not understand her as she spoke in their language. Only thing is that they have taken my name.

When I asked, "Kumar, what she is saying", he said, "nothing important."

He applied to get a flat from the company. I thought he might be thinking of staying separately. This must have started after his sister's visit.

I heard about sisters-in-law behaving abnormally toward brother's wife. Even though we are not yet married, if she doesn't like me, I have to think about priorities. But Kumar's application for a company quarter showed his thoughtfulness towards our relationship. He would stay away from his parents if the need arises. That is all I would expect from him. If he would support me under any circumstances, I can do anything for him. His sister gave birth to a baby boy. After three months she took the baby and went to her husband's home.

I thought now his mother would come to normal. She seemed conflicted, but her daughter's constant complaining must be affecting her. She was very sweet when I met her. She did not have any problems with caste, language or anything. It was enough for her that I have love for his son. She can understand Marathi. Being in Bombay for the last 8 years she must have picked up some Marathi. She also watches Marathi movies. She must understand some Marathi. Kumar also does not speak but he understands well. Maybe he did not get an opportunity to speak. Now he will get to speak to our parents.

After his sister went away, she started to slowly become normal. After a week she started to act normal. Now I understood where her key is, it is his

sister. To maintain good relationships with Kumar and his mother is to keep his sister away from his mother as much as possible.

Chapter 2

The year 1988 month of March

Kumar

My mom went to her daughter's place to live with her for some time.

Father took her there and left her there thinking that would at least bring her some mental peace.

Father was always travelling. As the Secretary to the All India Accounts Officers Union, he needs to travel to where there are meetings with local unions. Where some action needs to be taken. Previously he worked as an enquiry officer for suspended employees, so he used to advise the employees who are in trouble. He used to give speeches about how they can avoid trouble with authorities. After 2 months, she asked our dad to bring her to Bombay.

Even though she loves her daughter she could not live with her. After three months sister brought her son and left him here and went away. Now mom's problems started, she could not handle the boy alone, someone had to be with her. Sahithi took leave and was with her for some time. But she could not get leave forever.

As the PA to Chairman, it was a very responsible job. Luckily, we had a landline, throughout the day she was getting phone calls asking for files and information regarding this and that. It was as if she is needed constantly at the office. Unable to take the pressure of working from home she cancelled her leave and went back to her house. Now I had to appoint an ayah for the kid, to look after his needs during the day.

Sahithi

Kumar's sister bought her son and left him to be looked after by her mother, it was his mother's suggestion only. If she can't look after the boy, why she would ask him to be left here?

I had taken leave and tried to help her. When I took leave, I had to put in a replacement for my position. But the moment I took leave the replacement girl was calling constantly asking where is this file, where is that item. Unable to the constant pressure, I had to cancel my leave and rejoin the office. One thing this proved is that they can't manage without me at the office. I felt proud that I became indispensable at the office. Now I am given an assistant to help and learn the work.

Kumar appointed a day ayah for the kid, but could not get a full-time ayah. I have experience with my sister's kids. But with this boy it is different. I tried to come to Kumar's house in the evenings and look after the kid for some time and going back has become difficult. I tried to stay back at his house, but my mother said what society will think and advised me to get married. Another way would be to send the kid to his mother.

Kumar's mother, at last, could not take this anymore, and she asked his sister to take his kid away. She came and took her kid back.

We all heaved a sigh of relief. Now my thoughts went to having our kids. What we will do if we had kids, would I need to stop working? Working as PA to Chairman is a prestigious job. I could ask any department head for any favours. The salary is also good. Both of us working we could lead a good life. We are thinking of booking a house. On both of our salaries, we could take a loan and buy a house. That is thought for another day after marriage, for which we have not fixed a date. I should talk to Kumar about this.

Chapter 3

1989 month of March

Sahithi

At last Kumar's parents agreed to perform the engagement after 4 years. We had our families, staff from our office and friends. We are yet to fix a marriage date. Still, engagement is a step forward. During these four years, there is no scope for promotion, I got good increments. This is the only way to retain good employees. Kumar became Deputy Chief Accountant. He is in line to become Chief Accountant. He has the qualifications, knowledge and experience to become a Chief accountant. Then he will be reporting directly to Chairman.

Kumar

After our engagement, the next step would be marriage, and I am looking forward to that. I have kept my patience, we never discussed our physical relationship but it is our unspoken understanding to wait until marriage. We had our occasional hugging and kissing but we kept it at that. If she wanted, I might have gone forward, but she never gave any indication. It was her upbringing and mine. We both had the same values regarding life.

Chapter 4

1989 month of November

Sahithi

Our marriage was fixed for this month. Both of our families agree to the date, as the ceremonies are to be performed by the bride, and they agreed to perform as per our Maharashtrian customs. Rather mixed customs. Some customs are fun items like, they have a custom of the groom becoming sanyasi and trying to go to Kashi and the bride's brother gives him some water and tells him he will give his sister's hand in marriage and ask him not to go. So mixed custom ceremonies are performed. After marriage, we wanted to go on a honeymoon, but they had a custom of spending three nights here. We booked our honeymoon for after three days. Before our first night, they had a kind of ceremony with Nariyal. They called it some kind of giveaway, Garba Dhanam. After that, they send us to our room. After nearly five years we were together physically. We spent three days or nights and went away to Goa for our honeymoon. It was winter and Goa would be a good place to spend.

We spent one week in the water, on beaches and in our room. It is the best time we had in our whole life. These days have bought us closer not just physically but our souls have become one.

Kumar

Our marriage was performed as per customs. The next day was fixed for our first night. Which went as per both of our expectations. After three nights we went to Goa for our Honeymoon. We enjoyed swimming, laying on the beach and spending the remaining time in our room. We went sightseeing on a day trip. Discussed our future together and what to do and what not to do.

I said, "we should not stop the natural process, of having babies. Given an example of my cousin, who has delayed and at last, could not give an offspring."

She agreed, let the nature take its course. If God wants to give we should not refuse.

We had been married for one month now. We are fully involved with our office work. Daily we are coming and going together to the office. That day she was delayed and I had a party with some friends to attend, I told her that I would drop her at home and go.

She said, “she was delayed and she would go home on her own.”

I went to the party and returned around 11:30 pm. When I found Sahithi had not returned, I rang up the office enquiring if she had left. The security informed me that she left around 8:30 pm. Now, where is she?

I rang up her parents, and they said, “she has not come to their house.”

I was concerned and looked at the telephone list kept, looked up her assistant and rang her up.

She said, “she left before Sahithi.”

I went over to the police station and lodged a missing person report. As she is the PA to the Chairman of the Godrej, they took the complaint immediately and booked an FIR.

I rang up the Chairman and informed him of the developments. I asked, “if she is working on any important work.”

He said, “nothing of the sort.”

At around 4:30 am I received a call from some unknown person. He told me he has to give you some sensitive information. He said, “your wife said you are working on a Tender document, if you need to have your wife back you need to give us the details.”

Now I understood they had kidnapped her for getting the tender details, she was working. Sahithi must have told them that she is not working on them, instead must have told them I am an accountant working on those documents. I am not aware of those documents, but I said, “give me a call after 45 minutes at the office, I will go to the office and check the documents and let you know the details. And also, don’t hurt her, I will give you the details.”

I immediately rang up the chairman and explained the call to him.

He said, "I am coming to the office, you wait at the gate of your house, and I will pick you up there."

I dressed up and went down and waited at the gate. He came after 10 minutes, I got in and the driver drove the car fast. As it is early in the morning, there is little traffic. We were in the office in 25 minutes. On the way, we discussed what needs to be done. We will prepare a dummy tender document and give him the details and ask him to come and pick up the copy and return my wife, in a kind of exchange.

We informed the police of the developments. They will be on standby. If not now, they will be caught at the time of tender submission. We will inform the appropriate authority for the tender process or the police will inform them if they can't catch them at the time of exchange. We received the call at 5:45 and we explained the details of the exchange, we will give them a copy of the tender documents in exchange for Sahithi. They agreed to that and gave a time and place for exchange. We informed the police to be on standby until it is safe to catch them without any harm to Sahithi. As they are dummy documents, they would be useless to them, even if they use the figures and prepare their documents, the whole process would be cancelled and the tender will be re-issued.

I went to the place agreed with the kidnapers in the company car and we exchanged the documents with Sahithi and we returned.

In the car, she broke down and started crying.

I said, "you did a great thing taking my name. We could take the necessary action."

She said, "but you had to give them the documents."

I said, "we gave them dummy documents, if they prepare their document based on that their tender would be disqualified. We have fudged the figures and calculations."

She hugged me and said, "what a brilliant idea."

We went home and informed her parents, that she is back at home. I told her to take a rest, I will call back and went to the office. I went to Chairman and explained the details of the exchange.

He said, “he will inform the tender authorities about the kidnap for the information and let them take appropriate action.”

I went to my office and rang up home. I was told Sahithi is still sleeping. I checked urgent works and cleared them and informed the Chief accountant, that I would be going home and that if he needs anything, please call me and went home.

I went to the bedroom and slowly opened the door, she is still sleeping. Seeing her sleeping peacefully, I went and kissed her on the cheeks.

She asked, “sleepily you have come home?”

I said, “yes, I will change and come.”

She said, “I will come out.”

I went to the bathroom washed my face and changed into a nightdress and came and sat in the hall. She got up and had a bath and came and sat beside me.

I asked, “how are you feeling now.”

She said, “ok.”

I asked, “are you scared when they kidnapped them.”

“No, they have not scared me, just asked me to provide the tender details.”

I said, “I did not have the details with me and gave your name thinking you will know what to do in these circumstances. I know you are not the type to freeze when you are in tough situations. I know you will do whatever is required without hesitation.”

She hugged me from the side and kissed me on the cheek.

Sahithi

I don't want to remember what happened that day, when I came out of the office, I caught an auto to take me to the station, they stopped me on the way and transferred me to a van threatening me with a pistol. They took me to a closed factory, where they asked me to give tender details.

I said, “I don't work on tender documents.”

They said, “as PA to chairman you should be typing them.”

I said, “my husband is in the Accounts Department and they prepare the documents, I do not.”

When I said my husband, they took his number and called him. When he informed them to call after 45 minutes at the office, they believed him and did not treat me badly. After he informed them that they will exchange a copy for me, I took a breath with relief.

Kumar must have thought of a way to give the document and get me back. Later they took me to the designated place and exchanged for the documents. I felt relieved.

We went home and I slept away. When he came back home and I felt a kiss on my cheek, I awakened. I went and had a bath and came out.

Two months passed after the incident. I felt a little sick in the morning.

I said, “Kumar, I am feeling sick.”

Kumar said, “let us go to the doctor.”

I said, “I might be pregnant, I missed a month and now this.”

We went to a nearby lady doctor, she asked us to get urine tested at a nearby diagnostics centre. We got tested and it came positive. I came home and informed our parents. They congratulated us. We went to the office and informed our bosses and colleagues and then informed our friends.

Kumar said, “I am planning a party for Saturday at our house.”

Chapter 5

1990 month of January.

Kumar

We had a baby girl. She was healthy and beautiful. Next Saturday I arranged a party for everyone. I have invited friends and colleagues. Raj is in front of these parties. He is still looking for a girl. Krishna, Shekar and Harry were there.

Sahithi was talking to her friends and explaining how she had to face kidnappers. Raj went in between and asked her questions. He wants to impress her friends. The night was one of the best days we had.

Sahithi

I looked at the baby and forgot all the pain I had to go through. She was just a little red ball. She was healthy, that is all I thought of.

After 3 days I got discharged and we went home. Next Saturday, Kumar arranged a party for the new arrival.

It was around 12:30 by the time all people left. I went to the baby's room and looked at her, she was sleeping peacefully. I kissed her on the forehead. I went and changed. Came and lay on the bed. After a few minutes, Kumar came and changed and lay on the bed. I have around 4 months leave left.

It was the 21st day when the baby's name ceremony and cradle ceremony is celebrated. We decided to name her Leena. A first naming ceremony is performed. Then she was placed in a new cradle we got her.

There were close relatives from either side. After completing all ceremonies, I was passing the mother-in-law's room, I heard Kumar's sister telling her mother something in their language, and I heard the words Kidnapping and pregnancy.

I thought what is she talking about? I went to Kumar and told him your sister telling your mother something, I heard the words Kidnap and pregnancy, what is she talking about?

He said, "I will check" and went to them.

Kumar

Sahithi came to me and said, “your mother and sister were talking something about kidnap and pregnancy.

I said, “I will check what it is.”

I went and asked, “mom, what are you talking about?”

Sister was about to say something, but I said, “you don’t speak in between, you tell me” I asked mother looking towards her.

Mom said, “she was telling me about the timing of her pregnancy, she was pregnant 2months after the kidnapping.”

I asked, “so?”

My mother said, “she asked if it is your daughter?”

I told them it is not Sahithi you are suspecting, you are suspecting me. Do you believe that I can’t give birth to a child? Do you think I don’t know what she went through? Even if something would have happened, my relationship with her would not be changed, she would be my Sahithi, the girl I loved for 5 years and know for 8 years before marriage. I am not Ram to send her away. We don’t know what happened then. For what reason he had sent her to Ashram? There were a lot of secrets hidden in those stories. Some are translation problems, some are specifically misleading. Why do you think Ram sent her to Valmiki Ashram? What do you think those Ashrams were? They were Labs. She was having some problems with living in the Forest for such a long time. Ram thought she would have a problem giving birth to twins, so he sent her to Valmiki Ashram, where she could birth safely. Why did she not return to Palace again? Was she ashamed? No, she was dead by the time Ram went to collect them. He knew she was dead at childbirth. So, he let Lav and Kush be raised there for some time. You have to read between lines. Seeing in the movies, we think otherwise. I know I am not Ram, but I know my Sahithi, she would have said if she had faced any such incident. I would have known. It would not matter, I am not such a fool to punish her for something she has not done anything wrong. You never talk like this again”

I said to my sister, "I know you have a dirty mind, you mind your family don't enter into ours."

I caught Sahithi's hand and dragged her out into our room.

She hugged and kissed me on the cheeks and said, "I know what kind of person you are. You have proven that today with your words and actions. You are my golden boy."

Sahithi

The speech Kumar gave to his mother and sister has given me such confidence. I don't know if anybody would have said those words about their wives. But that day he was my god, his reputation has risen in my heart to such a level, that there is no measure. I thought with this I could live my life without being sorry or without any sad Feelings. I thought that was the ultimate thing anyone can do or say about their spouse. I could not contain myself I had to hug him. We are always discreet in front of our parents. But that day I had to hug him. I felt so happy, I would not have felt so happy in my whole life.

I said, "let us go somewhere out."

He asked, "what about the baby?"

"Your mother can look after her."

I got ready and told my mother-in-law we would be back in half an hour and I took him to the Ice cream parlour.

He asked, "wouldn't baby get cold", I said, "no problem."

I ordered two ice creams. We ate and came out. There was a paan shop outside. I told him if you want to have a fag, you can have it. He doesn't normally smoke at home. Only at work in a limited quantity. I smelled smoke when he goes to the market on Sunday. That is the only time, he does not smoke when we go out together. He said, "no thanks", I asked the man sitting in the shop for fag and gave it to him and said, "have it."

He lit it reluctantly and smoked a little and threw it down and subbed it.

Leena is 3 months old, thinking about the future, I arranged for her to have an ayah. She will look after the baby during day time. I will have a month to

Ravikiran

supervise her and see her work. After I re-joined the office, mother in law could supervise the ayah.

Chapter 6

1991 month of January

Sahithi

It is Leena's first birthday. We have arranged a party on our terrace. Kumar's elder brother Ram's friend Prakash, who have an orchestra. Prakash is a good singer and sings Mohamed Rafi songs. Ram arranged lighting, speakers and everything. The guests had a great time that night. They would not leave their seats until the last of the songs. I was getting calls the next day saying great party that was. Leena was learning fast, she is taking small steps. She got a front tooth. She was trying to speak words like mamma.

Raj's marriage is fixed, it was an arranged marriage. On the day of marriage, I couldn't go as Leena was not feeling well, she was not letting me go. I decided to skip the marriage.

Kumar

At last, Raj decided to get married. His parents have fixed the marriage, it was brought to him by some of his relatives. He got her landline number and tried to call her. He called me to come to Bhandup to introduce her.

I went to the restaurant he indicated, he was sitting at a table, and he said, "she would come."

He was very excited. At last, she came and he introduced me and I congratulated her and said, "will certainly attend their marriage."

He planned some outings with her, I left them there and returned to the office.

Raj's marriage day has come. Sahithi could not make it at the last minute.

I called Krishna, he said, "Shekar and Harry would be coming along."

He asked me, "pick us up from Vakola", I said, "ok."

Went over to Vakola and picked them up. We went to the marriage hall.

It was at Bhandup. We went inside the hall, and Shekar went and inspected the food preparations. He was fascinated by the people making nan roti.

Harry wanted some beer. They are not providing any hot drinks at the venue. We went out and brought some beer and sat in our car and had a beer and smoked. After finishing two bottles of beer each we went in and had some snacks there.

Then Raj arrived in Baarat. They exchanged garlands and finished the remaining rituals. After marriage, they arranged their first night at a Hotel in Santacruz. The marriage party went away. I dropped them off at Vakola and returned home. Leena is feeling better and sleeping. I gave Sahithi the details of the marriage. We went to sleep.

The next day was a Sunday, we got up late. It was around 10 am, the phone rang and I picked up the receiver and said, "hello."

There was no sound from the other side. After ten minutes the phone rang, I picked up the receiver and said, "hello", there was no sound on the other side. Again after 10 mins, the phone rang again. I let it ring, and Sahithi came from inside telling me why are not picking up the phone, Leena would be disturbed.

I said, "someone making blank calls, nobody speaking on another side."

She picked up the phone and said, "hello." She heard what the other person saying and said, "there is no one here by that name and put down the receiver."

She said, "he asked for Ranjan and I said no one is here."

I said, "Ok."

The same thing repeated in the evening.

This time she said, "someone is asking for Reena."

Sahithi

It was around 10:30 am, the phone was ringing incessantly, I went and saw Kumar sitting there, I asked, "why are not you picking up the phone?"

He said, "someone making blank calls."

I went and picked it up, the person asked for Ranjan, I said, "there is no one by that name."

The same thing happened in the evening. This time he asked for Reena, I said, “there is no Reena here.”

Now I got suspicious, the morning call voice and the call voice now seem familiar. Who could it be, thinking I went into the kitchen to make tea.

The next day around 10 pm the call came. I picked up the phone, and this time he asked for Nicki, I said, “there is no one here” and slammed the receiver.

When I coordinated the voice with the names he asked, somewhere in my brain I felt I recognized it, but could not place the voice or names. Thinking I went to the bedroom and lay down. That voice from the phone call was resounding in my head. I could not sleep well, and early in the morning, that voice struck me. There was a guy Suresh near our house, who used to follow me and I never gave him any room for manoeuvring. Suddenly he stopped following me. I thought nothing of it, must have gone somewhere. I remember someone saying that he was sent to jail. I can't recall the details. I shook Kumar awake.

He said, “sleepily what happened?”

I said, “I remembered who is making those blank calls. One Suresh was staying in our neighbourhood. Those names he was mentioning were somehow connected to him. I recognized his voice.”

He said, “ok, we will see later” and went back to sleep. I tried to get back to sleep, but my sleep went away. I got up, went to the bathroom, brushed my teeth and went into the kitchen. I heated milk and poured myself a cup of coffee, came to the hall and sipped the coffee and thought what could I do?

Kumar

Sahithi wouldn't let me sleep when she is disturbed. She shook me up, I was fast asleep. I asked her sleepily, “what happened?”

She said, “she remembered who the caller was.”

I said, “we see will later” and went back to sleep. But my sleep was disturbed and I could not get back to sleep. I rolled on the bed for some time.

I touched where Sahithi slept, could not find her and I was awoken fully, I got up went to the bathroom, brushed my teeth and went to the kitchen. I prepared myself a cup of coffee, I shouted, Sahithi do you like a cup of coffee, she replied no, I had one.

I brought my cup and sat on the sofa. I asked, "Sahithi, what are you thinking?"

I remembered who is calling, there is one Suresh near our house in Vakola, who used to trouble me, one day he disappeared, and someone said he was sent to jail. I will go and check with the mother, maybe make enquiries with the neighbours."

I said, "be careful. Don't go out alone."

She said, "I will be careful."

Sahithi

I went to mom's house and asked, "do you remember Suresh, who used to trouble me?"

Mom replied, "yes."

I asked, "What happened to him?"

She said, "I heard he was arrested and their family went away."

I said, "I think he is the one making the blank calls to us."

She said, "be careful."

I said, "I know I had to be careful, please check with neighbours, if someone saw him around", and left.

I reached the office and told Kumar, "he is not staying in that area, their family went away. I asked my mother to enquire around if anyone saw him."

Kumar said, "while coming to the office I visited the police station and explained the situation. They said they would get his records from the concerned police station."

Before leaving for the office, the call came, I picked up and this time he was asking for someone else. I asked, "is it you, Suresh? Why are you doing this?"

He said, "because you put me in jail."

I asked, "I put you in jail, what are you talking about?"

He said, “you are the one who informed the police.”

I said, “I did not inform the police.”

“Don’t tell me lies”, and he cut the phone.

We left the office around 5:30 pm and reached home around 6:30. Lots of people gathered around at the main entrance. We looked at what is the problem.

My mother-in-law was sitting there, when she saw us she started crying, I asked, “what happened”, she said, “I couldn’t find Leena. I brought her down to play on the swing. The watchman came and someone asked for Kumar, I told him you must be on the way. I turned back and she was missing.”

I asked, “who was asking for Kumar?”

The watchman replied, “One man around 25-30 years old with a beard and moustache, was dressed shabbily, I did not let him come in and said I will check and came to the park. I know your mother-in-law would be here on Swings at this time. He must have come from behind me, I don’t know how he could lift the baby and go from here in front of me. He must be having someone with him.”

We went to the police station and filed a complaint.

They said they are already on the job of identifying the person and his whereabouts.

Kumar

I was shocked to see people standing around inside the gate. My mother has a habit of bringing Leena to the park in the compound, Leena likes the swing very much. If she was not taken to the swing at the designated time, she would become restless. Mom must have thought it was safe inside the compound. Now Leena missing, how Sahithi and my mother are affected? Who will console them? How can I console them? We went to the police station and booked a case of kidnapping. They said they are looking into the matter.

I went to Krishna’s place and asked him to check with his friends. If anyone knew Suresh and his whereabouts.

He said, "he will check with friends from the area."

I thought what else can I do? I went to Sahithi's house. I checked with her mother. She said, "nobody knew where they went. They just disappeared one night after their son's arrest. Maybe they were ashamed of his acts."

Now we don't have any other option than to let the police find the persons responsible.

Sahithi broke down when no news of Leena was available. She went into a kind of depression. She was not eating anything. Not even drinking water. I had to forcefully make her drink some tea.

I told her, "if you break down like this, what you will do when she returns home? Police will find her and return her home. Don't worry, she will certainly return."

I had to take her to bed and let her lay on the bed. I called the doctor and explained the situation.

He said, "wait for a day, if she does not become normal, we will take her to the hospital."

I went and looked at her in the bedroom. She was sleeping, but her face seemed in pain. I sat beside her on the bed and looked at her thinking about all the times we had fun and now what she made herself of. By sitting on her side, I dozed off. I got up around 3 am. She seemed to be sleeping. I lay down and went to sleep.

The next morning, I got up and found Sahithi already up and getting ready. I looked at her and found her, unlike yesterday, she was enthusiastic and ready to search for Leena.

I asked, "shall I come with you?"

She said, "no need, you go to the office, and I will go and check."

I went over to the office and met the chairman and explained the circumstances.

I said, "Sahithi may not come to the office until she finds Leena."

He said, "let Sahithi take whatever time she needs."

We made all kinds of tries to get information. We printed photos of Leena in the newspapers. We put ads on the TV. We offered rewards for the information on Leena. Nothing showed any results.

Slowly finding no results, Sahithi started to attend the office and waited for any call that will result in finding Leena.

She still cries to sleep into the night. But overall, she recovered to lead a normal life. Normally this kind of incident brings a divide between couples. But in our case, it has brought us closer, it is not that we were far apart, it has not brought a divide between us. She was blaming herself for this. She told me he thought I called the police, so he took my girl. I am responsible.

I said, "if he had a misunderstanding, how are you responsible?"

She would listen to nothing of it.

Days turned into weeks, weeks turned into months and months turned into years. Leena was not found. Police could not find any trace of Suresh or Leena.

After 3 years we had another baby girl, we named her Reena. After the birth of Reena, Sahithi was trying to forget Leena. But on her birthday, she would be inconsolable. Now she is trying to see Leena in Reena. When Reena did something, she would remember Leena did this that time. Sahithi becomes very possessive of Reena.

It was Reena's third birthday. Suddenly Sahithi remembered Leena and started crying. She felt a bile rise in her mouth went to the bathroom and vomited. When nausea has not subsided, I had taken her to the doctor. The doctor checked her and confirmed that she is 8 weeks pregnant.

After 7 months we had a baby boy, we named him Atul.

Chapter 7

1997 month of January.

Leena

Now I am seven years old. My dad has a software firm and my mom looks after the Interior decoration firm which belongs to Loveleen aunty. We all stay in a big bungalow. Loveleen aunty has a son named Dhruv. He is the youngest in the house and all pamper him very much including me. I like him very much. My brother Atul thinks he is elder than me, and his twin sister Reena, and they behave like they are elder than me and they can order me. Our school bell rang and I was the last to come out of the room. I saw Atul and Reena walking toward the car. We daily come and go to school in the car, our mother sends it with the driver.

In the beginning, Chitti used to come to pick us up, nowadays she is very busy with Dhruv and we go with our driver. I called them Atul, and Reena, they turned towards me and something happened.

I stood before our house at the beach. I went to the gate and banged on it. The watchman opened the gate and asked, "whom do you want?"

I told him to open the gate and let me in.

He asked, "whom do you want to meet?"

I said, "mummy."

He asked, "who is your mummy?"

I said, "Sahithi", and he asked, "who is your daddy I said, "Kumar.

He said, "they don't live here."

I saw D'Souza uncle walk by, he used to come to dad's office and his daughter Nikita used to teach us. I called him and told him the watchman is not opening the gate.

Uncle must be knowing the watchman. He asked, "Kamble, what happened?"

The watchman said, "she is telling her mother's name is Sahithi and her dad's name is Kumar and she lives here. There is no one here, they don't live here. In fact, no one lives here and the owners come in a year or two."

He said, "I know that." He asked me, "where is your house?"

I said, "these four bungalows are ours only. The last bungalow is my dad's office. Your house is opposite that. We used to live in the second house and Loveleen aunty used to live in the third house and now we all have shifted to live here. Where is Nikita Teacher? She did not come to teach us."

He said, "I will take her to the police station and enquire with them."

Sahithi

Leena would be 8 years by now. Where are you, Leena? In what condition are you? Every year this month we are advertising Leena's Photo and offer a reward for any information on Leena. Every year we are increasing the reward amount. But till now we have not received any credible information about finding Leena.

Kumar

I have been giving ads on tv and in newspapers every year offering a reward for any information on Leena. Till now we have not received any information. This year I decided to give ads on Local tv channels and local newspapers all over Maharashtra. If she was taken it outside the city, someone would have noticed. We have to make a try.

Almost three months later we had our first information on Leena after 6 years. Someone called the police and said, "one old couple had brought a 1-year-old baby into their village. The old couple said their son and daughter-in-law have died in an accident and left this baby. No one suspected them. They have left the village after 2 years. Where they went away nobody has an idea. Now we have an idea she is alive and we have to find her anyhow."

After collecting information from the police, we went over to the village, where the old couple raised Leena for two years. We took one person who can sketch the persons from descriptions. We collected information from the source and had the sketch prepared for the old couple. We rewarded them as promised.

We again ran the advertisements of the couple offering a reward to them or anyone offering information about them.

One day we received a call from Santacruz west police station. They said, “we have a girl named Leena asking for Kumar and Sahithi. We took our car and went over there. A girl of around seven years was sitting on the bench. When she saw us, she got up and ran to Sahithi and caught her calling mummy, where did you go.”

Sahithi said, “where did you go.”

She said, “I went to our house and there is no one there, D’Souza uncle brought me here and spoke to the police here and they called you.”

The SI said, “we know about her being kidnapped, when she said your names we recalled your ads in newspapers and tv. So, we called you. But she was telling us about staying in the Koliwada area. We will enquire there.”

Sahithi

I can’t explain what I felt when I met Leena after so many years. I hugged and wept my heart out. I thought about what became of Leena, how she would look when she went missing and now all grown up. She looked well brought up and spoke excellent English. She also speaks with me in Marathi. She is acting like she was missing for a day, not all these years. We took her to our quarters.

She met her grandmother and said you are not taking me to play on swings. She speaks in Telugu with her grandmother. And the surprise was when she met her siblings. She recognized Atul and Reena but started laughing saying you have become so small. Now act and show you are elder than me.

She asked us, “what happened to the bungalows on the beach? Did you lose everything and had to come back to stay with Thathayya?”

We were perplexed and asked, “did you stay at beachside bungalows?”

She said, “yes if you take me there I can show you.”

I asked, “what were we doing there?”

She said, “mom was working for Loveleen aunt’s company. And dad had a software development business, and Chitty used to look after us. We also have Sunitha aunty staying with us and Joy used to come with her for lunch.”

After hearing her it is also so much confusing. She went to Atul and Reena and said, “remember you are younger than me and I am your elder sister.”

At least she was in her own surroundings. She seemed happy staying there. Did she dream all that? Somewhere I read to face these kinds of situations some children make up things. But her English and her behaviour are as if she is studying in a good school. She told us her school is near Santacruz station, she goes to her school in a car with her siblings. Where did she stay?

Chapter 8

1998 month of January

Sahithi

We celebrated Leena's birthday after 7 years. We had a big party and called all the people we are associated with. After all these years I was elated to host the party. There were talks in the office that the Chief Accountant may retire at the end of March. Then Kumar would be promoted as Chief Accountant. It would be the biggest promotion for him.

Kumar

On March 31, we had given a send-off party for Chief Accountant, who is retiring today. I received my promotion orders today. From tomorrow I would be the Chief accountant.

On 1st April, I have taken charge as the Chief Accountant. One by one staff members came to congratulate me.

Sahithi

I am proud of Kumar today, he became Chief Accountant in 13 years. It is a very prominent position in our company. I was PA for many years.

I am happy with my three kids. I am happy that I could do my job and could raise my kids, that is all I cared about.

Leena is 8 years of age, Reena is 5 years Atul is 1 year. Leena and Reena go to school, and Atul is looked after by either of the grandmothers. Mother-in-law was a little hesitant to look after Reena at the beginning, after the incident of the kidnapping of Leena. But she overcame that, and she loves the kids very much. My Father-in-law's retirement is coming near. We need to arrange for a house immediately. I think there are new developments near Bhandup, which are very suitable for us. Our savings should be enough for a 75 per cent upfront payment and the balance can be taken as a loan. With the new salary, Kumar can get better loan offerings. We should start looking for houses.

Kumar

Our chief accountant's retirement brought another glaring future in front of us, my father's retirement slated for next year. If he retired we need to give up our quarters and need to shift to our own house. I enquired with some friends and came up with a new development of skyscraper apartments at Bhandup. We can get 4-bedroom apartments at our price range and with a little loan, we can fulfil our new house dream. With the loan, we can save money on the tax part also.

We went and looked at some flats and finally decided on a flat on Rainbow Apartments on the 9th Floor. It was a three-bedroom hall kitchen flat. By making small tweaking we could have extra room. The flat would be ready in 3 months and then we could make our own interior decorations.

After 6 months we have shifted to a new flat. My father was not ready to leave the quarters. I said to him, "let brother stay there until we have to vacate the quarters."

Chapter 9

1999 month of January

Sahithi

Leena is in 4th grade and Reena is in 1st Grade, Atul is 1 and a half years.

They are enjoying life in the new flat. It has all the facilities for the children to play.

Children's exams were completed and they got summer holidays. In the meantime, Kumar's uncle's youngest son's marriage is fixed with his aunt's youngest daughter. Their bother was the youngest in his family. The marriage is slated to be performed at Madras. Father-in-law asked us, "we all should go to the marriage as it would be the last marriage in this generation."

We planned for all of us to go to the marriage. I have not been to Madras anytime. My brother-in-law said, "he has some other work and could not make it to the marriage in time."

We booked tickets by train and we all went to Madras. It was the first time the kids had to go on a long train journey. We booked a hotel near their house. The marriage was performed in a temple. We attended the marriage and returned to the hotel. Father-in-law has switched on the tv in the room. When he saw the news on the tv he called us to come and see it. There was a scroll running with breaking news. There were visuals from the site of a building collapse in Bombay. The name was of our building and the area was ours. We could see our surroundings in the visuals. It was our building that had collapsed. All our furniture, household items everything turned into rubble. We are left with only what we have with us.

Luckily, we had not handed over the quarters. Kumar's brother was staying there until they take away the quarter. I thought at least we have a roof overhead. But everything we earned all these years has gone down the drain.

I looked at Kumar. He was calm as a cucumber. I thought doesn't he have any feelings? There was no concern on his face. Whatever we earned for the last 10 years has been lost forever and over that, we have a housing loan for which we had to pay without having a house. Still, he is so calm.

He caught Atul and kissed him on the head. Next Reena and then Leena as if they are not there in the house and missed the collapse. Still reports coming in about the number of dead. Seeing his reaction, I calmed down, at least we are safe, this marriage is a godsend.

The tv reporter is saying that the land over which the building was built was once a marsh and it was filled to make the building.

I looked at Kumar, he caught my eye and said, “nothing to worry about, I had taken the precaution of Insuring the flat and its contents. All is not lost. We can recover something from this ordeal.”

I got up and kissed him for his foresight.

Kumar got up and said, “I will go to Bombay immediately, and you can go to Bombay on the day we booked tickets. I will check with the authorities and do the needful.”

He booked a flight ticket to Bombay and went over.

Father-in-law rang up his elder son and enquired about the accident and said, “we will be coming back to the quarters.”

We will have some problems with sleeping arrangements but we can manage.

Kumar

After a long time, we met all the relatives. We have not been to Andhra for a while. Everyone was asking about Leena and her ordeal. Some relatives have asked us to visit their places. After the marriage, we went to the hotel.

Seeing the building collapse something got stuck in my throat. But I am happy that we are away from the building. At least I had the foresight to insure the flat and its contents. I will go and file claims. I booked tickets to go to Bombay and packed a bag and left for the airport. I went to the local police station and confirmed our safety and asked for an FIR for filing the claim. After completing the formalities there, I went to our quarters. After reaching the quarters called our office and informed them about our building collapse and informed them that all of us were safely in Madras. Called

Ravikiran

Madras informed them about the progress of the situation and said, "I will come and pick them up from the station."

I went to the station and picked up the family returning from Madras.

Sahithi said, "she met more relatives at the reception organized the next day, which you missed. They were all asking about you. I had to explain the situation in Bombay to them. Those who know about the collapse said you were lucky that you came to the marriage."

We came back to the quarters by cab. I went and purchased some mattresses. Other immediately required items are food items and some clothes for the children. It seemed like starting a new family. At least we are all in one piece.

PART 5

Life after Leena's return

Chapter 1

2005 Month of January

Leena

I'm in 10th now. Preparing for SSC exams this year. I have been studying hard. I am sure to get good marks.

SSC Exams finished and we got summer holidays.

Grandfather's elder brother expired in the village and we all went over there. This was the first time I had visited a village. I was told I was in a village in my childhood and I couldn't remember much from that time. Father told me that village was transformed from the time he studied his 10th here. We went to his school and looked it over. Dad told me that the school has not changed much, it was as it was 25 years ago. Same buildings, same ground, same everything. Then he went to meet his old friends.

There was a boy who came to me and asked, "are you the girl who came from Bombay?"

I said, "yes."

"I heard someone kidnapped you when you were small."

I said, "yes."

He asked, "what was your experience?"

I said, "I don't remember much. The only thing I remembered is that I was raised by some old couple. Then they took me to Bombay and I was somewhere and dad came and took me to a bungalow. In fact, we had four bungalows side by side that too at the seaside. Then I stayed there for some time and then I was back in Thathayya's house."

He asked, "what are you studying?"

I said, "I just wrote the SSC exams."

He said, "I wrote inter 2nd year exams."

I asked, "Inter, what?"

"It is 10+2", he replied.

"What is your name?" I asked.

He said, "Venkat."

I asked, "what is your relation to my grandfather?"

He said, "your father and my mothers are brother and sister. My mother's father is the elder brother of your uncle in Madras."

"OK", I said.

Grandmother called and I went over to her.

Sahithi

I had trouble conversing with Kumar's relatives. Younger and my age people are easy to converse with, I can speak with them in English or Hindi. The only problem with older people. They don't understand anything other than Telugu. If they call me I had to take someone along with me. Sometimes it is funny how they translate the sentences. There is always some loss of words, which gives funny meanings. Leena is the best translator I could find, I can tell her in Marathi and she could translate into Telugu. Where did she learn that? This is my first trip to their village. It must have been a village once. Now, most of the fertile land turned into developed plots. There is a bus depot and it became a town than a village. What Kumar told me his school has not changed but the way to the school used to be empty lands earlier, now they were all buildings or shops. He went to check if any of his old friends are there.

Kumar

Been here after a long time. I did my 10th here. After that only once I was here before going to Bombay. This must be after 25years. I went and looked at my school. It was as it was all those years ago. They must have done repairs. On the board which shows the toppers for that year, I looked at the name against the year I have done my 10th. Mithali Sharma was the girl I competed against. Seeing the board, I remembered my 10th life here. We used to play cricket every Sunday. We used to play ball badminton near our house and also in school. We enjoyed school life very much.

Nagraj used to stay near our house. We used to study together on a terrace opposite his house. I was told he has a shop on the main road. I went to him

Ravikiran and spoke with him I enquired with him about other classmates. Some of them are still in the village and some have moved away. After speaking with him, I came back to my cousin's house.

Sahithi

I am a little scared of whom the girls are interacting with. I don't know anyone here, that is the reason for my insecurities. After whatever functions are completed we returned to Bombay, rather Mumbai.

Kumar

My children never knew about my village or my relatives until now. I wanted to know their reaction when they meet them. I hope they made new relations and friends during the visit. That is the reason when the relatives asked them to visit their places, I have not objected. I know until we went over to Bombay, how close we were to our cousins. We used to visit them for all functions and holidays, which our children missed. These kids' grandparents are in the same city and they used to be raised by both of them as per convenience. Until now they have not visited any relatives outside the city.

Leena

I got an A+ grade in my SSC exams. I am happy and thinking about what stream should I take. Should I get into CA like my father? Or Software as the new thing in the world. Or go into CS like mom. I have so many choices and options. I thought if I take science I still could go into any of the above. Finally, I decided to take science in junior college. I got admission to Mithibai college, my father's degree college.

Sahithi

Leena got college admission. I said for the first day I will take her and drop her in the college. I took her to college paid the fees and took her to her class and left her there.

Leena

I went and sat on an empty seat. After some time, my friends from my school, who have joined this college have come and said hi to me and they

sat beside me. I am happy some friends would be with me in college also. At the time of the break, we went to the canteen. The canteen was as father described it. He told me the stories of what happened there. How Raj uncle had met him there, and what kind of drama he enacted there. Finally, to his surprise, when father learnt that he does not belong to the college. We went and sat at a table. One of the girls went and brought some samosas. While eating I looked around. On another bench some girls and boys were sitting, they seem to be our seniors. Slowly students were coming inside and tables are getting filled.

I felt a spooky sensation and had a glance at the side table. A guy was looking at me when my eyes fell on him, and he smiled. I looked at him for a second and turned to the girl sitting beside me and said, "that guy is looking at me and smiled when I looked at him."

She looked at the side I indicated and said, "he is still looking at you." After finishing our snacks, we got up and went to our class.

When the college finished we started to go to the station to catch a local train. I thought someone was following me and looked back, no one was there.

Rahul

I am studying in 12th at Mithibai College. Today I saw a girl in the canteen. She looked at me and turned her face away. When I saw her, I felt I have known her, but couldn't recollect where.

The next day I was entering the college and I saw the same girl getting down from the car. I stopped and looked at her. Someone got down from the driver's seat. It must be her mother. When she turned towards me, I recognized her. She was staying near our house in Vakola. Later we moved to Andheri and we lost contact with their family. She was my father's rakhi sister.

I went over to the car and called her aunty. She stopped from entering the car and looked back at me. I said, "aunty I am Rakesh's son, we were staying in Vakola, don't you remember?"

She asked, "Oh, you are Rakesh bhayya's son, Rahul no?"

I said, "yes, you remembered me."

"I saw you when you were this little. This is Leena", pointing to the girl I saw in the canteen.

I said, "is she the one who was kidnapped? Sorry, sorry I should not have said that."

She said, "it's ok, she is accustomed to the people asking. How is your father? I have not seen him for many years."

I said, "He is ok, aunty. I am getting late aunty, will see you later", and went to class.

Leena

The boy who was looking at me yesterday came and spoke to mom. At lunch break, he came to the table and spoke to me. He was telling me how they knew my mother for a long time and when I was kidnapped, how they all looked everywhere. How my mother was heartbroken when I was not found. Break time is finished yet he has not finished his story of my kidnapping. He said he will speak with me later and went to his class. We went to our class. None of my friends knows this story, they heard with apt attention to what Rahul was saying. They had a lot of questions that they wanted to ask him.

When I went home in the evening, I went and hugged mom.

She asked, "what happened", I said, "I am just happy that you have not stopped looking for me until I am found."

"Ultimately, we would have found you. The person who kidnapped you has abandoned you with those old people. Then they left for Bombay, they must have feared the police might reach their house and they sent you back. I am happy we found you. That is all that matters in the end. We always think about what kind of life you had during that time. You would have been raised as princesses in our house instead of you being raised in a poor house of a pauper."

I said, "thank you mom", hugged her once more and went to my room.

The next day when we went to the canteen, my friends were eager to ask him questions. They started bombarding him with questions. They even went into personal questions about my father and mother. How did they meet?

We heard they are from different languages, is their marriage is love marriage?

He replied to them from what he knew, for some questions he said, “he will enquire with his parents.”

One girl from our group Sheila took a liking to him. She said to me, “he is so cute na?”

I asked, “is he?”

Rahul

I thought I will impress Leena by telling her kidnapping story, she does not seem impressed instead all the girls started bombarding me with questions. I don't know the answer to many questions. I have to get more information from my parents. One girl from their group Sheila seems to be taking a liking to me. She is good-looking, but I need to get more information about her before committing to anything. Leena's father is the Chief accountant and Sahithi aunty is the Company Secretary. Both are in good positions, they will come in handy when I need any help professionally. I should keep in good books with them. About Sheila I don't know much, I have to get more information. She seemed to be from a good family at least.

The next day I went to the canteen as usual. When they started asking questions, I told them first to introduce themselves and tell me about themselves before I can answer their questions. They all introduced themselves and when Sheila's turn came she said, “my name is Sheila, and my father is a businessman. We have a Packing can manufacturing unit in Bhandup.”

I thought about packing cans, and what profit they would get.

But when she said they live near Prabhadevi exchange in Dadar, that raised my interest. That is an upmarket area. Her family must be loaded. What she is I could not place her. She speaks in Marathi with Leena but does not seem Maharashtrian. Gujarati? Maybe.

I asked, “Sheila, what is your father's name?”

She Said, “Kirit Trivedi.”

Yeh, she is Gujarati. One problem with Gujarathis is they don't eat non-veg. Better to follow Leena only.

Leena

I was watching Rahul speaking with the girls.

When Sheila said she stays in Dadar he seemed interested but when she said her surname is Trivedi his reaction changed. When he came to know she is Gujarati, he seemed disinterested. Maybe he thought they don't eat non-veg. I told Sheila that.

We are planning to celebrate Atul's birthday. We planned a party for this. I invited all my friends and also Rahul. I told him we are only serving non-veg only. He had come with one of his friends. All my friends had come. After cake cutting and distribution of cake. I went for dinner with my friends. Rahul had come behind us. Sheila took a plate and put non-veg food on her plate. Seeing her eating non-veg Rahul's demeanour has changed. He was full-on smiling and talking jokingly. I thought my calculation was correct. He stood beside Sheila and had his dinner, talking to her jokingly. I thought my plan has worked. I don't have any interest in Rahul, if Sheila is interested in him, she can have him.

Rahul has started hanging out with our group. With him, some more of his friends started sitting at our table. Now we became a group of guys and gals.

Sahithi

Rahul has come to Atul's birthday. At first, he seemed interested in Leena but by the time they left, he seemed more interested in Sheila. At least his interest had shifted. I wouldn't recommend him at this juncture to anyone. I asked Leena about Rahul, and what she feels about him.

She said she doesn't have any opinion about him. It seems Sheila is interested in him and Rahul also interested in her. My intuition is correct. At least Leena is not interested in boys at this juncture. That is a relief.

Rahul

At last, I found Sheila is not a vegetarian. So, it won't be a problem if her family is vegetarians, which I feared in the first place. If I go by points, Sheila likes me, she is from well to do family, and in the future, if they agree to my

and Sheila's alliance, they would be better than Leena's family. So, after careful consideration, I thought that Sheila is better than Leena financially. But Leena seems to be their leader, I had to keep her in good books. That's why I started to hang out with their group and my group members started following me seeing the girls in their group.

I got quite a good opportunity to check the theory when Dussehra came. It is time for dance, Garba and Dandiya. I can go to their building and check their status.

Leena

It is time for Garba and Dandiya. We have decided to go to a Paid Garba function. We brought tickets for all of us and went there. We enjoyed ourselves there. The next day we went to Sheila's Society Garba. We all went to her building. She invited us to her flat. Rahul was behind us. We all went up to their flat in the lift. It was a double flat converted. It has a double hall four-bedroom flat. Seeing this flat Rahul's eyes popped out. We had been to her house before. But it is his first visit. Seeing him I doubted his intentions. Did he have a love for her or did he come here to check their money? Mobile phones were just coming into the market, they were costly and the call is also costly. But having a mobile has become a status symbol.

We wanted to enact a prank on Rahul. When we were at the canteen, Sheila received a call.

She started crying after receiving the call.

We all surrounded her and asked, "what happened."

She said, "our factory in Thane has caught fire and total equipment has been destroyed. We became paupers."

Hearing this Rahul just disappeared from the scene. Now it has become clear that he was there for her money. I pointed to her, "see what happened I told you about Rahul, he was after your money only."

Sahithi

What are these kids up to? I don't understand them when there is Garba at Sheila's place they took tickets and went somewhere else. Then the next day

they went to Sheila's place. What is the need of wasting money? When they will understand the value of money. Only time will tell.

Leena

I thought Sheila would learn a lesson from the prank on Rahul, but she had not stopped liking him. The next day when she saw him, she went and spoke to him.

She said, "we had played a prank on him."

He acted angrily and said, "he went to Thane to check on the factory site. When he went there was nothing of the fire accident."

In the first place, they did not have any factory in Thane, instead, they had a factory in Bhandup. Secondly, she knew he did not go to Thane. But she was blinded by love. She would not listen to us.

Sheila

What is Leena doing? What she is trying to do? Why she is trying to break us up? If she does not love him, she should not interfere in our matters. She says she does not have any interest in Rahul. Why should she care about him? She says her mother knows his parents and they are decent people, why she should care?

Leena

I know Rahul's family is good people. But I don't know about Rahul and I don't want my friend to be hurt. I know about these boys, they will play with girls until they are no longer a plaything and then discard them like garbage. Sheila with him might last longer, but what is her future I can't foresee.

Rahul

I was approached by a man named Raaj. He said he wanted to speak with me in confidence. He told me to come with him, his boss wants to speak with me.

He took me to a hotel in the Juhu area on the beachfront. From his room, we can see the sea. I was told to sit down. I sat down on the sofa. Raaj sat beside me and the man addressed me.

He said, “my name is Rakesh and everyone calls him RK. Do you know Sheila Trivedi?”

I said, “she studies at our college.”

He asked, “what do you know about her?”

“I know her father is a businessman and he has a Tin packing manufacturing unit in Bhandup.”

“What else you know about him?” he asked.

“Nothing else except they have a flat at Prabhadevi.”

Raaj got up and went to him and spoke something in his ear. Rakesh showed his hand to Raaj to stop him. Raaj came back and sat down beside me.

“We have a job for you, if you work for us we will pay you 10Lakhs.”

I was surprised what kind of job pays 10lakhs? Whatever the job may be, I am ready to do anything short of murdering someone.

I asked, “what do I have to do?”

“First, you have to agree to do the job, once you agree to it you can’t go back on your word. If you say you can’t do the job after we explain the job, you can’t get out of this room. If you agree to a job and later you won’t do what is asked of you, we will find you and you will pay for it. You have to agree to it or you can get up and walk out of this room.”

I thought about getting up and going out but the thought of losing 10 lakhs made me sit there and give a word that I would do whatever was asked about me.

Rakesh signed Raaj, Raaj got up and removed money from a cupboard and gave me. I looked at it, and it is a 1000-rupee bundle, if there are 100 notes in that it would be 1lakh. I pocketed the money.

I asked, “what I had to do?”

He said, “I will tell you when the time came. Raaj will contact you and will give details.”

Raaj gave me a mobile phone and said, “we will contact you on this.”

This is the first time I am holding a mobile in my hand.

I got up and asked, "can I go?"

He said, "we will contact you on that, keep it with you all the time."

I came out of the hotel and looked at the phone. I set it to silent and went to college. I put the money in my locker behind some books.

After two days I got a call on my mobile. I cut the call and went out and called them back. They cut the call and called back.

I took the call and said, "hello."

Raaj was on the call, and he said, "there will be Housie in the club and you have to bring Sheila there on Saturday."

"Then what do I have to do?" I asked.

He said, "nothing else", and cut the phone.

I thought only going to Housie with Sheila on Saturday, it is very easy.

I went to my locker and took out 10 notes and pocketed them.

I went to Sheila and asked, "will you come for Housie on Saturday, I got some free passes."

She asked, "can Leena also come?"

I thought a minute and thought what is the problem if she brings Leena with her, and said, "ok you can bring her also, I will ask for an extra pass."

I went there in advance and brought three entry passes and came back to the college.

Sheila said, "I will go home first and then we will come to the club.

I said, "ok.

Sheila

I went home and changed into party clothes and gave one to Leena. We both reached the club, and Rahul is waiting at the gate. He took us inside the Housie Playing area. He sat us in the chairs there.

He asked, "do you want to have something."

I said, "cool drink." He went to the stand and brought us drinks.

Again, he went and brought us housie tickets for the next game.

Rahul

I was waiting at the gate and they got down from the cab. I went to them, paid for the cab and took them inside, I gave the tickets at the gate and we entered the housie playing area. There are chairs arranged in the front. And also seating area like in a stadium. We were early and very few people have come. We went and sat on the chairs.

I asked, "what they will have?"

Sheila said, "cool drinks."

I went to the cool drinks stand. Raaj was standing behind the cool drinks stand.

I asked for two cool drinks.

He asked, "why do you have two girls with you?"

She is her friend. It would be easier to get them than say no to another girl and she does not go out without her."

He said, "smarty."

I took the drinks he gave me, he said, "don't drink yourself give them only."

I understood that he is trying to drug them or something. I thought it was easy to work.

Housie started, and the man started calling the numbers.

Leena and Sheila were noting down numbers on their tickets.

Again, I brought another couple of drinks for them. They drank them up.

The game finished. I went and got another set of tickets for them.

Sheila asked, "aren't you playing?"

I said, "my hand is unlucky."

Leena

We were enjoying the housie. Rahul is supplying us with house tickets and cool drinks. How come he has become so considerate? Maybe he is trying to woo Sheila by throwing money. Where did he get so much money? Is he sponsored by anyone? Who would sponsor him? I don't know if he had a wealthy friend who would do this for him. What is his end game? Is it to impress Sheila? What is the need to impress Sheila now?

Sheila

I think I had lots of cool drinks, my bladder is bursting.

I asked Leena, “accompany me to the toilets.”

It is the middle of the game and there was no one at the toilets. I went inside one of the stalls. I washed my hand and face and both of us came out.

The toilets were on another side of the stadium. When we came out two ladies came from the other side and started asking something in an unknown language. We were telling them to excuse us. they put something on our noses. We could not breathe and we fell. I saw Leena dropping to the floor and that is the last thing I remember.

Leena

We came out of the toilets and someone closed our noses and mouth with a cloth and I saw Sheila and me falling on the floor. Then we woke up in a kind of godown. There were some parcels placed around and in the centre part, we were tied on two chairs. I looked at Sheila, she is still unconscious. My head was throbbing as if I am having a strong headache. It seems we were kidnapped. I remembered what dad had taught me all this time. I was kidnapped when I was months old. Mom also was kidnapped once for some papers. He had already prepared us on what to do in the event of being kidnapped. It was a kind of survival technique he instilled in us brothers and sisters.

One thing is not to panic. Panic makes us do stupid things like trying to run away which could lead to accidents or being caught and punishments. Second observe your surroundings, which will come in handy. Third, know your enemies. Understand what they want. the way they are behaving. Target the boss. To do that first find who is their boss. The person who gives orders is most probably their boss. If he is not the boss, he will most possibly be using the boss’s name to keep others under control. He has taught us all this throughout our life. He said these things will come in handy in life also. He has also sent us to learn self-defence. He always says defence is the best form of offence. Sometimes he also says offence is the best form of defence.

So, you have to learn to use them judiciously. I saw Sheila move a little, it seems she is coming to consciousness.

Kumar

It was around 11:30 pm. I have received a call from Mr. Trivedi, Sheila's father. He was concerned that their daughter has not returned from their outing, and she told him she will be going to the club for Housie night. When he called her cell there was no reply, it was switched off. He tried calling the club, but the housie was finished more than an hour back. When he inquired about the kids, they said only adults were around in the bar and no kids are allowed there. He waited for some time when there is no sight of the kids, he called me to enquire if Leena has come back.

I said, "I know they were together and Leena also has not come back."

He said, "I am getting tensed up here please do something."

I said, "I am coming to their place" and took their address and told Sahithi the situation.

She said, "she is also coming with me." We both took the car and went over to their place.

Sheila

When I woke up we were tied up to chairs. I started to shout to let us out.

Leena shushed me and said, "don't shout. We will find a way out. Let us see what they want. Maybe they want money. They must be trying to contact your family. Be patient, we will find their intentions."

We sat there waiting for someone to enter the room.

Leena

When Sheila gained conscience, I silenced her and said, "don't make noise. Let us see what they want."

We waited for someone to enter the room. After some time one person came inside the room. He was wearing a kind of monkey cap on his face. He said, "to Sheila do you have your dad's mobile number? His phone is coming busy."

I thought he must be calling everyone trying to find Sheila.

Sheila showed her mobile and told him that number would be in that.

They must have switched off the mobile when they picked us up.

He switched on the mobile and it started to ring. He took the mobile outside after seeing who is it from. It must be from her father.

Kumar

We reached Sheila's society and went to her flat. It was on the 12th floor. We knocked on their door. Someone opened the door.

He must be the servant. I said, "I am Kumar", and he said, "come in sir, Trivedi Saab is waiting for you."

We went inside, he was on a call with someone.

I asked, "whom are you talking to. I am trying her friends from the list she has."

I said, "if you keep on calling, she can't reach you, put down the phone."

He said, "her mobile is coming switched off."

I said, "then try again on her mobile."

He tried and said, "now it is ringing.

When the person other side picked up the phone he said, "hello beta are you there?"

He listened to the other side and said, "don't do anything to my baby, I will do whatever you ask" and then it seems the call was cut short.

He said, "he is saying they have kidnapped my daughter along with your daughter, I am sorry that your daughter became collateral damage in this."

I said, "don't worry about my daughter, bringing both of them back is our target, it is lucky for your daughter, my daughter is also with her. I have trained her for this kind of situation. Once my wife was also kidnapped for some papers, we have got her back and they could not use the papers."

He exclaimed, "you have trained your daughter for these situations? Which department do you work in?"

I said, "I am an accountant, but due to the situations, we have faced we had to make them ready for this, when she was small Leena was kidnapped and we got her back after 6 years."

"Oh!", he said, "I am sorry, you had to face these situations."

I said, "we know someone from the department, who deals in these situations, I will call my boss to speak to them, if he speaks they will take note immediately."

I rang up Mr. Godrej and explained the situation, they have not asked for anything at this point, we expect they are after money."

He asked, "can he arrange for the money."

I said, "we don't know how much they are about to ask, maybe he can arrange some amount."

I asked, "Trivedi, how much he can manage."

He said, "I don't know I can borrow from some friends may up to 50lakhs."

"Ok, we will deal with that when they ask for money. My boss told me he will ring up his contact person immediately."

Trivedi said, "but they said we should not contact the police."

I said, "they all say that don't worry, police know what they are doing, we should follow their instructions and our children will be safe. Please look into collecting some cash, if the need arises."

After some time, Mr. Godrej called and said, "I spoke to the person in charge, and they said they will start monitoring and surveillance immediately. They will be sending someone, when they call give them your address and phone numbers."

I said, "ok" and he cut the call.

After half an hour we received the call that their team is ready and took our address and telephone numbers likely to be called and said they will here within the hour.

Now it is 4:40 am, and we are waiting for the team to arrive. I went to the gate and waited for their arrival. After 20 minutes they arrived in a cleaning crew van, I instructed the guard to let them pass. Trivedi already called him

up and instructed him to follow our instructions. They came inside and parked at a side shown by the guards.

Someone walking by asked, "what is happening."

One of the people said, "we came to clean up the building. We received the order from the Society."

Mumbling something about not being informed in the meeting, he went away. They brought the equipment to the lift and reached the 12th floor.

He introduced himself as DCP Paramveer. I introduced myself as Kumar and introduced Trivedi.

I said, "both of our daughters were kidnapped."

He instructed the other to set up the systems.

He continued the interview with us.

He asked, "where do you think they could have been kidnapped?"

I said, "they informed us that they are going to the club for Housie night."

He asked, "with whom did they go, have you any idea?"

Sahithi interjected here and said, "They were taken there by Rahul, who studies in their college and is a senior to them. I know their family for some time."

"Do you have their number?" he asked.

She said, "I don't think they have any number, I might have their address", she rummaged through her bag and brought out a small notebook.

She looked through the book and gave them Rahul's address. He sent a constable to verify that address and call from there. By the time they have arranged their equipment and are ready for any call.

Chapter 2

Leena

It must be early morning, light started coming through the glass windows. No one came inside except to take Sheila's mobile. Some talks can be heard from the other room, but it is not clear what they are saying. One or two names can be heard, Raaj and RK sir were the two names used most. Who are they? Are they involved with this or is some kind of contact they were talking about?

I tried to speak to Sheila, but my throat become dry and only coarse words came out. Sheila looked at me.

I asked, "how are you feeling."

She said, "like hell. My throat became dry."

I said, "mine too. What do you think they are doing?"

She said, "they must be planning how much to ask and where to get it delivered."

I asked, "what is your family's position for paying the ransom?"

She said, "I know my family has money, but I don't know what my dad can pay at a short notice. Maybe he can ask for a loan from his business contacts. I don't have any idea about money. I only know what he gives me a monthly allowance."

"I think they will not ask them to bring money here, they may ask it to be paid at an isolated place or a public place. If they ask us to bring it to a public place, they will not take us there. If they ask them to bring the money to an isolated place, they may take us with them. But there is only a slight chance of that."

She was just listening to all this with an open mouth.

She asked, "how do you know all this?"

I said, "I read books in my free time. Also, my father taught me all this as a precaution. You know I have been kidnapped as a child and also my mother was kidnapped for some papers. So, he had taught me all this. I didn't tell

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you but I learned Karate and defensive fighting. You are lucky that I am with you, don't worry. I'm here with you." All this I was telling her in a low voice.

One person put his head through the door and looked at us. I signed him for some water. He turned back and said, "they are awake and she is asking for water."

Someone said from behind, "then go and give them water."

He closed the door and brought a glass of water to us. First, he took the water to Sheila and made her drink a little and then brought it to me and put it in my mouth. I drank a little. It burned my throat due to dryness. I got a little cough. I stopped drinking and then asked him to give me more by signs. He let me have some more water and went away.

I asked, "Sheila, did she recognize him?"

She said, "his face is not visible, but he seems to be around the canteen. I think I saw a person like him in the canteen, maybe canteen staff."

I said, "I also felt I have seen him somewhere, as you said maybe in the canteen. If we can see his face we might recognize him."

I started thinking if he is around the canteen either they are using the people around us or they were planning for a long time. I think another way, they are using the people around where people move around. Like hotels and colleges. They target people where they can get some money like Sheila. They must have studied their family status. Sometimes, what happens is people act more than they are actually worth. Then it would be a problem. What is the actual status of Sheila's father? I think by this time dad must have been involved in the kidnapping drama. If he could get out of my mom without any financial loss, he could do the same for us also. Even though these people must have told them not to involve the police, the police must have been involved by now. Let us wait and see.

Looking at Sheila I said, "don't worry, your father will do the needful."

Kumar

It has been an hour since they set up the equipment and sat around waiting for the phone call. Even when someone called Trivedi said, "I will call later", and cut the call.

As time passes Trivedi is getting restless. He is saying they are not calling.

I said, "they must be deciding what to ask or where to bring the money."

Hearing these words, he calmed a little. He sat down on the sofa near the phone, he keeps staring at the phone.

It is around 7:15 am when the phone rang.

He looked at the technician who is handling the equipment, he nodded to pick it up.

Trivedi lifted the receiver and said, "hello", in a coarse voice.

After hearing what was said on the other side, then he said, "ok I will do that", then he listened and said, "I have not informed anyone".

He put down the phone and said, "they are asking for a 1crore rupees as ransom and he is telling me not to inform the police, I have not informed the police, you have, so I have not told any lies."

I smiled at him and said, "can you manage that amount?"

He said, "I might collect around 50 lakhs from friends and my liquid assets."

DCP said, "do you want to give your money or do you want us to help in this matter?"

Trivedi asked, "how will you help, I can't collect that much money in such a short time."

DCP said, "I can arrange the money, which we keep for this kind of situation. The money will be marked and some money contains exploding colours. If the seal is broken it will release a dye, which can't be removed and it will take years to clear off."

Trivedi said, "ok, that would be a better idea. Even collecting from friends, and selling stocks would take some time."

DCP said, "I will arrange for the money. When did they say they are expecting the money? They gave us one day to collect the money."

I asked, "only a day? They should give us more time."

DCP received the call from the constable who went to Rahul's house. He reported that he has not returned home yesterday night. His parents are not

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aware of his whereabouts. He does not have a mobile phone. They are saying if the girls are kidnapped he would have been kidnapped with them. You stay there and see if he returns home. If he returns home, bring him here.”

He said, “ok.”

Sheila

I don't know what I would do without Leena. She gave me strength by telling me soothing words. Her words have an effect on me that brought my inner strength out. I feel confident about our getting out of this situation in one piece. These situations are horrible. We were tied to chairs for how long, I don't know at least for the last four or five hours. It is very cramping to sit in one place for so long. I think one should have the training to face this kind of situation. They show in the movies, they are tied and tortured. We could not sit for this long, how did they bear the torture? If they come near I would say what they want, without them even touching me. What is the time now? I couldn't see my watch.

I asked, “Leena what is the time?”

She also couldn't see her watch and said, “must be 7 am from the light outside looking at the windows. How long we have stayed here like this?”

Hearing the time, I felt the need to go to the toilet. I shouted I want to go to the toilet. No one responded. Leena also shouted. Either there is no one or they could not hear through the door. It is not possible they could not hear through the door, we heard voices through the door. So, no one must be there on the other side of the door. So, what should we do, for the toilet?

I asked, “Leena what should we do?”

Kumar

Around noon Trivedi received a call, after the go-ahead from the team he picked up the receiver, and I picked up headphones and put them to my ears.

Trivedi said, “hello”, the other side asked, “are you able to collect the money?”

Trivedi said, “you said 24 hours.”

The other side said, “are you able to collect the money or not?”

Trivedi looked at me. I mouthed yes.

Trivedi asked, "I can manage the money, where should we bring it?"

He said, "I will give you a call in an hour and cut the call."

I looked at DCP.

He said, "we are getting the money here. We have a specially made bag, it has tracking, what is called a Global positioning system. It works through satellites, even though we don't have proper satellites here we can use US Satellites. If satellites are unreachable we have another system it will locate the bag within a 2 km area. We can track the bag through this also."

I said to Trivedi, "nice technology. When the money arrives, you tell them you are ready with the money, where should I bring the money, stress the word 'I', don't use 'we'."

Trivedi said, "ok." We sat down and waited for the call.

After one and a half hours we received the call to bring the money to the area as follows. If you go from Santacruz west towards Juhu, there comes a road to the left which goes to a dead-end at Juhu Koliwada and the right goes to Juhu beach. You go to the dead end and go to the beach and our men will come and collect the money from you there."

Trivedi said, "how do I know those are your men?"

"They will say have you brought Sheila's money, then hand it over to them."

Trivedi said, "ok." And the line was cut.

I said, "I will go to the dead-end and wait there beforehand. Send a plainclothes man with me. They think they can get away from there after collecting the money."

I took my car and went over there with Sahithi. We went over to the last building before the beach. It was a 2-story tiled house. We thought the first-floor balcony would be a good place for a lookout. I went up and knocked on the door. One short, bald and fat man opened the door.

Seeing us both he said, "what can I do?"

I said, "I am Kumar and she is my wife Sahithi."

He said, "glad to meet you. I am D'Souza."

I said, "showing the plainclothes policeman he is a policeman. We have not come for you", and told the policeman to show his id.

He showed his id, and D'Souza checked and said, "ok."

"Our daughter has been kidnapped and the kidnapper asked us to bring the money to the beach", and showed him the beach opposite his house. "So, we want to sit here and watch the transaction."

He said, "ok you can do it from here. We set up a camera in a strategic place for taking photos, it would be hidden from the road. It is a very good place, thank you, Mr. D'Souza."

"It is our pleasure to help", D'Souza said.

He provided three chairs for us to sit in. He brought three cups of tea and gave us.

I said, "thank you very much."

D'Souza said, "you are welcome, ask for anything."

He went inside. After some time, a girl came up the stairs. She was tall, slim and dark, she must be his daughter.

He came out and said, "she is my elder daughter, she is working as a Nurse."

I said, "good." After some time one fair, short and slim girl came up. She looked at us and stopped in front, he came out and said, "they are sitting on police business, and said to us, "she is my youngest daughter, Nikita."

I said, "glad to meet you."

She went inside. She was asking in a low voice what had happened.

He said, "in a low voice their daughter was kidnapped and kidnappers were exchanging the money at the beach. They are keeping surveillance. The man with them is a police constable. I checked his id also."

She said, "ok."

She came out and said, "I am sorry about your daughter. What age is she?"

I said, "she is in the 11th standard."

She asked, "Which college?"

I said, "Mithibai."

"Ok good", she said, and went inside.

It is around 5 pm. I received a call from the DCP that they fixed the time around 5:30 for the transfer. We sat looking at the road for any movement. I called D'Souza and told him to tell us if any new people are moving around in the gully.

He sat with us looking at the road. Constable sat behind the camera ready to take photos. We are sitting with full attention to the transfer of the ransom. At 5:34 we saw the car belonging to Trivedi coming toward us. Constable photographed the arrival. Next, we waited for them to show up on the beach. No one arrived. We waited till 6 pm and I rang up DCP to say that the kidnappers have not arrived for collecting the ransom.

He said, "wait for some more time."

I said, "it is getting dark, we can't photograph them any longer."

He said, "look around anyone suspicious persons are moving."

I said, "we are trying that for the last hour. Only the residents are moving around. We have the house owner confirm the same. He knows all the people around here."

When it became too dark, I went down to the Trivedi's car and said, "we should return. You start and we will follow you to your house."

I returned to the D'Souza house and thanked him for providing support.

He said, "it is my pleasure."

I said, "if you need any help please ask us", and gave him my card.

He took the card and said, "if you need any typewriting repairs please tell me."

I said, "I will certainly inform you if we need anything", and came down.

We sat in the car and drove over to Trivedi's residence. By the time we reached his house, it is around 8:15 pm.

We parked outside the gate and went inside. By the lift, Trivedi met us.

We all rode up to his flat. He rang the bell and his servant opened the door.

DCP said, "we have received a message from Jogeshwari police station that two girls have contacted their police station that they have escaped from

kidnappers and they have shown them the kidnappers who were bound up on chairs.”

“They have asked to call their father. When they called, DCP has taken the call and asked them to arrest and take them to their police station and he will come and complete the formalities.”

I asked, “shall we go and collect our kids.”

He said, “they are already being brought here.”

Everyone is happy that the kids are returned without any problem.

Leena

We have been brought to Sheila’s house in a police car. We went up and hugged our parents. They asked us how we have rescued ourselves from the kidnappers. I explained in detail the events that conspired today.

Sheila said, “I had to go to the toilet very urgently. I shouted and no one came. We thought no one might be there. We were thinking about what to do.”

“Then I shouted again, one man came with a monkey cap on his face. I said we had to go to the toilet. He looked at both of us thinking about whom to free first. He thought I am important; my father will provide the money. So, he freed me first and took me to the toilet and brought me back and tied me and then he untied Leena next. As I did not try anything, boldened by my inaction, he was a little easy with Leena. He freed her legs first and then he freed her hands. When Leena was sure he freed her, she kicked him in the groin. He caught his groin and started rolling on the ground. I kicked him once more and went and untied Sheila. Then both of us tied him to the chair. We put some old clothes in his mouth, so he would not shout when someone comes. Then we found two wooden pieces and went and stood near the door. Then another man came looking for the first man. When he entered through the door, he turned toward me and was surprised. Then Leena hit him on the head, and we both tied him also, and came out and enquired about a police station nearby and informed the police about the kidnapping and tying the kidnappers. They went to collect the kidnappers from the warehouse. And we asked them to call our father. When they called Sheila’s house number the police DSP spoke to them and rest you know.”

This is what we told our parents if you keenly listen to this story you would find some inconsistency in the timings. Yes, it has not happened as we told the story. Someone came to help us out. It was around 3 pm, we called out for a glass of water. We heard some sounds outside and someone came inside and he was not wearing a hoodie. He was having a knife in his hand.

Sheila said, “don’t hurt us.”

One of them said, “shhh....” to Sheila.

She kept quiet. He came and cut her rope and then mine.

He asked us to help tie the people outside the room. With their help, we brought and tied them down.

We came out he closed the door and asked, “where is the nearest police station?”

Another person said, “must be Jogeshwari police station.”

We sat in his car and he drove us to the police station. He told us not to mention them, or we will get in trouble with our boss. He will scold us. So, you make up your story and tell them you have done this on your own.”

We nodded our heads and they dropped outside the police station and reminded us not to mention them. So, we went inside and told the police and showed their hideout and they caught them.

Kumar

We are happy that our daughters have returned safe and sound. Also, they got a chance to show their fearlessness through their actions. Now Sheila’s confidence also must have improved. My training paid off at last.

I asked them, “if Rahul was responsible for their kidnapping?”

Leena said, “it does not seem to be the case.”

We said goodbyes to Trivedi, I asked Trivedi, “what is your first name”, and he said, “Kirit.”

I said, “good to meet you Kirit”, and we went home.

When we reached home both Reena and Atul came and hugged Leena. I told Leena to take a rest, as they already had something to eat at Sheila’s house.

Leena

When they asked if Rahul was responsible we told them he may not be responsible. But we know he is somehow responsible. We had to find out how he is responsible. I told Sheila that, we will take our revenge, why should we involve our elders? That is both of our views.

We went to college normally. We came out during the break and went to Rahul's locker. We have seen him entering the combination multiple times. I remembered the combination and entered it and the lock opened. We looked inside there was money in the back of the locker under some books. We picked the money with a handkerchief and they were 1 thousand-rupee notes bundle and some notes were removed. The bundle must be 1 lakh, where did he get the money? Did the kidnappers give him the money to help them? We replaced the money where we found it and closed and locked the locker.

So, it is confirmed he had helped the kidnappers for money.

I told Sheila to act as if we don't know anything about Rahul. He did not come that day to the college. The next day he came to the college with a sling to his hand as if his hand is hurt.

We went to him and showed sympathy for the hand and Sheila asked, "what happened to your hand?"

He said, "when I was waiting for you outside the toilets, someone hit me on the head and I fell on my hand. When I woke up I was in the hospital, they only discharged me today morning."

I thought tell more lies we are waiting for you, you are acting as if you don't know anything.

From that day onwards, Sheila started acting more friendlier than before with Rahul. Our first aim is to make him spend all the money he collected from the kidnappers.

One day I wore a small chain with a locket. I showed it to Sheila in front of Rahul.

Sheila said, "Oh! So nice I want one."

The next day he brought her a chain with a locket with the letters RS.

He has taken her to the restaurant for a dinner, I accompanied them. This way we made him spend all the money. When his pockets emptied, he could not offer to give her anything. We thought he has used all the money he had with him, she started a fight with him.

He said, "I can't talk with you and went away."

The next time he tried to talk to her, she turned her head away. This way she tried to keep him away. He could not tell anyone what happened to him. After some time, whatever gifts he had given her, she sold for whatever she could get and donated the money. This way we have taken our revenge on him.

Kumar

After two weeks of the kidnapping drama, Trivedi called us to his house for lunch. We have connected with him but we could not speak much about ourselves before. So, we went to his house on a Sunday.

They have prepared Gujarathi style food. We enjoyed lunch and after lunch, we sat down and we chatted about our lives. He thanked us for the support at the time of the kidnapping.

I said, "our daughter was also had been in trouble. However, everything went well for our daughters. Did the police inform anything about the kidnappers?"

"One person named Raaj and another boy who was working in the canteen in the college. He was paid by Raaj to inform them about the rich students in the college. Then Raaj would enquire about the families of the students informed by the server. Now, who has employed Raaj is the question? He says a person named RK has employed him. He always meets him in the hotel suite he was staying in. The room was booked by a fake person with a fake address. There was no one at the address mentioned in the register. They are trying to find the person who was staying in the room. If they get any lead, they will follow the lead and they will inform us."

He got up and brought a gift for Leena and said, "this is for your bravery."

Ravikiran

She said, “thanks”, and picked the gift. Inside the box, she found the latest brand of mobile phone. She is happy to receive the mobile phone.

She said to Sheila, “now we can keep in touch.”

Leena

Sheila’s father has given me a mobile phone for saving his daughter from kidnappers. Now both of us can keep in touch.

Our next plan is to find who has kidnapped us. Rahul might know who it was. But according to the police, they failed to find who is Raaj’s boss. Even though he might have met him, he may not know the full details. What other way we can find out about him? there does not seem to be anyway. The persons who have saved us might know. But we never saw them again. We have to think about the ways, we need to brainstorm on this point.

Kumar

I don’t think we need to care for who has kidnapped our daughters anymore. He may not try to harm them. It seems he has only limited members with him. which is the reason for his failure.

With Trivedi, I have discussed the repercussions of the kidnapping. I don’t think they will try to do the same again with us. The kids seem to have returned to normal, rather their confidence has increased by giving them a beating and throwing them in jail. They feel invincible.

I told them don’t be complacent. Always be on the lookout for danger.

Sheila

Dad gave Leena the latest mobile phone, it is better than the one I am having. But I am happy that he has rewarded her this way. What she did that day could not be done by any boy. She had shown incredible courage and she had shown me the way. Now I know not to believe anyone blindly. But we have taken revenge on Rahul. I will be careful in the future.

Leena

We want to continue our revenge on Rahul, we don’t want him to be studying in our college anymore. We started a rumour that he got a lakh of rupees and he blew that money on gambling. It changed mouths and finally

became he blew the money on bar dancers. Everyone started to look at him like an untouchable, unable to bear the harassment from his friends he took T.C. and went away.

It is very easy to ruin one's reputation, to earn a reputation is very difficult. He has paid for his misdeeds. Sheila trusted him and he let her down. She should have punished him for his deeds, what we have done is a small lesson he should remember for his life. Now we want to get on with our lives.

Chapter 3

2006 month of January

Sahithi

I don't know what happened, but Rahul's parents stopped speaking with me. They saw me and crossed over to the other side of the road. Forget them, who cares.

Leena's birthday is coming up. She will be 16 this year. What kind of birthday party she would want, I have to check with her. After last year's kidnapping drama, she became a bolder and much more confident girl. Sometimes it goes extreme as she would speak up when not necessary. But I let it go as the girls need to be this way in the present world.

I went to Leena's room, she is preparing for college, I asked, "how do you want to celebrate your birthday?"

She said, "how your birthday is like to be celebrated."

I said, "don't joke with me, Shall I have the birthday party here at the house?"

Leena replied ok.

I said, "you can call your friends. You tell me how many are coming, and I will arrange dinner accordingly."

She said, "ok."

Kumar

Sahithi said, "I am arranging a birthday party for Leena. You can call your friends and let me know how many are coming."

I said, "ok." First, I called Trivedi and called them to come with his family. From our office, I called our M.D. and other staff who are close to me at the office. It seems to be a big party, so I advised them to have it on the terrace.

Sahithi said ok to the proposal.

Leena

Mom asked me to call my friends for the party. Sheila will be there and the other friends I have invited. Dad said he also invited Sheila's family.

We had a good birthday party this year.

Kumar

All the kids were having a party on the terrace. Sahithi is overseeing the party.

I took Mr. Trivedi and my friends to the flat and I entertained them with drinks.

After a long time, I met Raj, Krishna, Shekar and Harry. Harry returned on leave. I told them about the Kidnapping story of Leena and Sheila. I introduced Mr. Trivedi as Sheila's father.

They said to Mr. Trivedi that his daughter is a brave girl.

He said, "both are brave girls. How they could have gotten away from the kidnappers is a brave thing to do."

They all agreed to that. They were served dinner in the flat and the four of them left together. Then Mr. Trivedi called his daughter and his wife to go home. One by one the guests left and we were left to clean the house and terrace.

I asked, "Leena, how is the party?"

She said, "the best party I had until now."

I said, "the credit should go to your mother, who arranged the party."

She kissed her mother and said, "thanks for the party."

Leena

We planned to study at Sheila's house for the 11th final exams. We studied hard and got good grades on the exams. We spent the summer holidays watching movies on the tv and spending time with friends. We went shopping in the fashion street and brought many dresses. The summer holidays were completed and we were back to college.

Chapter 4

The year 2007

Kumar

It was raining heavily. They were unseasonal rains brought on by depression in the Arabian sea. I am returning from Pune where I went to check the accounts of our branch office.

It was around 8 pm and we just entered Mumbai. The driver is driving carefully due to the heavy rain. From behind a car came driving rashly and overtaking us and crashed on the curve into a ditch.

Our driver stopped the car and we rushed to the spot. The other car driver is trying to get out and we went and helped him to come out.

He said, “madam is in the back seat.”

We opened the back door with difficulty and she was on the floor of the car, we brought her out and checked her pulse. Her pulse is thread and I decided to take her to the nearest hospital. I remembered there is a hospital on the way.

I asked the drivers to lift her and put her in our car. I sat in the car and pulled her in and put her head on my lap and sat, the other car driver sat in the front and our driver drove to the hospital.

When we reached the hospital, the driver got out in a hurry, went inside and they brought a stretcher and put her on that and took her inside.

We went behind them and they took her to the emergency room and we waited outside. I asked the driver for the details of the lady.

He said, “her name is Loveleen Khanna and she is MD for an Interior designing firm. They were delayed to a party and she said to go fast. When they crossed our car, he lost control as he missed the turn and crashed into the ditch.”

I asked, “do you know any relatives of hers?”

He said, “she was divorced, and he has a number for their manager.”

We called from the payphone at the hospital and no one picked up and they might be at the party. I asked, "do you have the phone number for the party place."

He said, "I did not have any other number."

Her purse we left in her car. The doctor came out and asked, "who has come with her?"

I said, "we brought her."

He said, "she needed immediate brain surgery can you arrange for the money?"

Without another thought, I showed him my business card and said, "I will arrange for the money you go ahead and make arrangements for the surgery."

I called our chairman and said, "I need the money urgently for surgery."

He said, "he will arrange the money and send it to the hospital with his driver."

I said to the nurse the money was arranged and will reach in half an hour.

They started the surgery preparations and our MD's driver reached with the cash.

We deposited the cash at the counter. They informed the surgeon about the cash deposit.

We went and waited at the Operation Theatre.

After four hours the surgeon came and said, "we have to wait for her to come out of anaesthesia to tell anything about her condition. You better go home and come back in the morning, she will not be conscience until then."

I asked the doctor, "shall I leave the driver here?"

He said, "not needed, you better come tomorrow, we will take care of her until then, we have your number if anything is needed we will give you a ring."

I said to the other car driver, "come I will drop you at where ever you want."

We dropped the driver and reached home.

Sahithi was waiting for us.

She asked for the status of the lady in the car.

I said, "it will be known only tomorrow. Let us go to sleep."

I got up as usual brushed had coffee and had a bath and readied myself.

After breakfast, our driver arrived, and I went with him to the hospital.

The nurse informed me, "she has not gained consciousness and that the doctor would arrive soon, and then you can speak with him."

I went to her room and sat down in a chair beside her bed.

Her head was bandaged and she was given oxygen through an oxygen mask and glucose through an IV.

I took her hand in mine, I felt a sensation run through me. I felt as if I knew her for a long time. I tried to remember meeting her at any time. I couldn't recollect ever meeting her. I held her hand and stroked her hand. After perhaps half an hour, she opened her eyes and asked, "where am I?"

I said, "you are in a hospital. You met with an accident yesterday night and we were passing and brought you to this hospital. They performed emergency brain surgery as you had a head injury."

She asked, "who has come for me?"

I replied, "no one came, and we did not have any details with us."

She asked, "if no one came who paid for the surgery, it would cost a lot?"

I said, "I arranged for the payment you can think of the payment later. Can I call anyone?"

She said, "my ex-husband is in Delhi. We had a big quarrel before the divorce and he might not come. My parents are no more. Practically I don't have anyone. I will call my manager to arrange for the payment."

I said, "don't worry about payment, we are there for you. Don't worry about anything."

In the meantime, the doctor arrived and checked her and said, "you had a miraculous escape. Your surgery is successful and you will recover in no time. You are conscious and your memory does not seem to be affected. It is a good sign."

He said to me, “you have acted in the nick of time, if we waited for someone from her side, we could not say what could have happened.”

She said, “looking at me thanks for everything.” I sat there holding her hand. After some time Sahithi came with Chairman to visit. Mr. Godrej wanted to see what was so urgent that I had asked for money. I introduced them to Loveleen.

They spoke to her for some time and went back to the office. I tried reaching the manager of her firm but there was no reply. After some time, her driver came and informed her that the office was closed today due to yesterday’s party and they are given a holiday.

She said, “it is ok. Go and arrange for the car to be towed and repaired. Inform the insurance and do the needful.”

He left. I was left alone with her and asked, “what is your story?”

She told her story slowly. How her parents fixed her marriage with a person brought by some relatives. How it has come out that he was impotent and they divorced him. She has started her own interior designing firm and running it. She has gone out of the city and was returning in a hurry for a party where she was supposed to get a big order. How due to the rain she was delayed and asked the driver to go fast and he had an accident. Rest you know.

After completing her story, she asked about me.

I said, “you have met my wife Sahithi and my MD who had come to visit. I am working with him as Chief accountant. I have three kids eldest is Leena, the second is Reena and the third son is Atul.”

She asked, “your wife is Maharashtrian and you seemed South Indian.”

I said, “ours is a sort of love marriage. We knew each other for some time and when I joined the firm she was already working as PA to the chairman. We restarted from there and were married for 17 years.”

She said, “it is a long time to live together.”

I said, “we had our ups and downs, we went through them together. We had our daughter kidnapped at age of one and found her after six years. Recently

she was kidnapped along with her college mate. They both got out with their bravery before we could pay the ransom.”

We kept chatting and she was not tired instead it helped her recover. In the evening the doctor visited her and checked and informed us that she is recovering very fast at this rate she can be discharged early.

She thanked me and said, “your chatting helped me relieve the tension in my heart.”

I said, “when I saw you in the car, I felt a connection to you and wanted to save you under any circumstances. That’s why I have not wasted a single second telling the doctor to go ahead with the surgery. I immediately arranged for the money to pay the hospital.”

She said, “I felt the same way when I awoke and you were there in front of me holding my hand. I was breaking my head trying to remember where I had met you.”

Her driver returned with some money and gave her.

She said, “check with the hospital if they need any money to be paid to them.”

The driver went away to check with the manager.

I said, “we had deposited enough to cover all the charges, you don’t worry about the bills.”

She was discharged after one week. I said to her, “come and stay with us for some time. You don’t seem to have anyone to look after you. At our house, you can spend some time with our kids as time pass.”

She agreed to my suggestion and I took her to our house. Sahithi was pissed off at first for not taking her permission.

When Leena saw her she said, “Loveleen Aunty, where is Dhruv?”

Loveleen asked, “who is Dhruv and how do you know me? Did Your dad tell you about me?”

Leena asked, “did you not recognize me? I am Leena we are your neighbours and Dhruv is your son. He must be two years now. Did you forget everything after the accident?”

She looked at me as to what is she talking about.

I said, “after coming back from kidnapping, she is talking like that only. She is saying I have a software firm near your house. The first house is our firm and the second house we stayed in and the third house belongs to you. She must be dreaming all these days.”

Loveleen called her near and kissed her and said, “now we will stay close by ok. And I don’t know about Dhruv, maybe I will get a son and name him Dhruv.”

She has connected with kids and she spends time speaking with them. She got them gifts and showered them with love. She stayed with us for two weeks.

She reluctantly said, “I would like to go to my house.”

She packed her bags and she called her driver. She invited the kids to visit her whenever possible. I took her house phone number and office number. She told us that she will get our house decorated and send her executive.

When her workers came, she personally came to supervise the work. She asked the kids for a picnic. They agreed and Leena said she wants to bring her friend Sheila with her and Loveleen agree to it.

Out of the three, she liked Atul and she pampers him. whenever she comes home she would bring something for him. We thought as he is the youngest, she pampers him. She used to make an excuse to come to our house.

I had to go to Pune on an urgent matter. My driver took a week’s leave. No other driver is available from our office.

I asked Loveleen to loan her driver for going to Pune.

She said, “she will drop me off and pick me up as she is also going to Pune.”

I agreed to her proposal and we went to Pune in her car. We chatted on the way and generally enjoyed each other’s company. She gave me her number in Pune to call up when I completed my work.”

I called her in the evening to say I had to stay overnight as I have not completed my work and if she wants she can return.

She asked, “where are staying”, and I gave her my hotel name and number.

She reached my hotel around 8 pm and came up to my room.

I was surprised to find her there.

I invited her in and asked, "did you get another room? They don't allow guests to stay overnight."

She said, "I told the reception I am your wife and got the room upgraded to a double room."

I asked, "do you want to drink something?"

She asked, "what do you have?"

I looked in the fridge and said, "there are some cool drinks."

She said, "let us go to a restaurant."

I dressed up and we went to a nearby bar and restaurant. I ordered drinks for both of us and we sat sipping our drinks. Then we ordered dinner and came back to the hotel. We watched tv for some time chatting. Then I told her to sleep on the bed and I will sleep on the sofa. I took a pillow and bedsheet, went and lay on the sofa.

She called me and said, "why don't you sleep here?"

I said, "I am sorry, I will not sleep with any lady other than my wife. You be comfortable there."

I got up and ordered coffee and woke her up. She woke up and took the coffee cup from me and said, "good morning."

I said, "good morning. I am going to the office; do you want to keep the room."

She asked, "when does your work will be completed?"

I said, "today most probably."

"Then I will stay in the room, let me know when you are returning."

I said, "ok, I will do that."

I went and had a bath and dressed up and ordered breakfast. We had breakfast and she said, "she will drop me at the office."

I said, "it is close by, I will go on a walk."

My work got completed by 2 pm.

I rang her up and said, "I am ready to go to Mumbai."

She said, “she will come to my office in half an hour.”

I said, “I will be ready.”

I came out of the gate when I received her call.

I got in the car and she asked, “do you want to go to Mumbai or shall we spend some time here, possibly watching a movie?”

I thought for a minute and said, “let us go to a movie.”

She must be craving my company, she came all this way for me, I should do something in return.

We went to a nearby theatre took tickets and sat down. She linked her hand to mine and sat. I did not mind it. I made myself clear yesterday night. I am sure she would not dare to do it again. A little closeness would not matter. After the completion of the movie, we started for Mumbai.

On the way, we stopped and had samosa and tea. We continued our journey to Mumbai. She again locked her hand in mine and sat. I moved a little near to her. She put her head on my shoulder. I touched my head on her head and moved it away. We sat enjoying each other company.

She dropped me at my flat and went away.

I opened the door and went inside.

Sahithi asked, “why delayed”, I explained to her I had to stay back to complete work and told her what happened in the night with Loveleen.

Leena

Our exams finished and the summer holidays have started. We have done well in our exams and I expect an A+ grade in my results.

We were sitting in the canteen and brainstorming what to take in B.Sc. One of our Science teachers came and asked, “what are you doing here.”

I said, “we are discussing what to take as a major in our degree.”

She said, “take biology.”

I asked, “why?”

She replied that it has a great future. Now everyone will be running to take up computer science and she explained what else can be done with the

subject. After speaking with her we decided to take biology as our major in our degree.

Sahithi

After their return from Pune, Loveleen approached me and asked me, “give for adaption one of our kids.”

I rejected her request and said, “how can I give one of my kids to you in adaptation?”

She showed her disappointment and said, “I could not live alone.”

I asked, “why don’t you take some orphans for adaption?”

She said, “I don’t want any orphans, I like your kids.”

Out of frustration, I said, “then come and stay here.”

She said, “it is a good idea.”

Loveleen

I wanted to adopt one of Kumar’s kids. I asked Sahithi, but she refused my request. But she gave a better idea to come and stay with them. I saw for sale board in their society. I will buy a flat there and I can be closer to them. What an idea.

I asked the watchman who else is staying there on their floor and likely to sell.

He said, “one of the neighbours who stay on Kumar’s left side is going over to the USA.”

I asked the watchman to speak to them about selling their flat. I will give a good price.

He had a word with them and took me to meet them. They are ready to sell with furniture and all. I don’t need the furniture but I took it as it is at the price suggested by them. I gave some commission to the watchman.

They said they will be going in a week’s time and asked me to let them use it until then.

When they vacated, I put aside unnecessary things and told the watchman to dispose of them and keep the money. I removed some of the items and gave them to the watchman. Some of the furniture I will get repaired by my staff. I

gave the flat to my staff to redecorate as per my choice. I got the second bedroom as a children's room. In a month's time, the house was ready for occupation.

On a good day, I got the housewarming ceremony done and started living there.

Now I can visit the kids anytime.

Sahithi

On an angry note, I told Loveleen to come and stay here. She did just that. She brought the side-by-flat and started living here.

I told Kumar that she seems to be stalking us.

He said, "she must be feeling lonely, she doesn't have any close relatives. She must be considering us as only close people. She also likes our kids, especially Atul. She has formed a bond with him. have you seen the kids' room in her flat? It seems she has got that room done for them only."

"I fear she might try to take away our kids."

He said, "she is not that kind of lady, she wants to keep close to our kids only. Have you seen what kind of gifts she gives them?"

I said, "she asked me to give one of our children for adaption."

He said, "what, you did not tell me?"

I said, "she must be asking just like that, without any intention of going ahead with that."

"At least you could have warned me", he said.

I kept thinking that she would try to get our kids away from us. but her actions do not seem to do that. She would say to the kids your mum would be waiting, go home. It seems she just wants to spend some time with the kids. I watched her actions for some time and thought that she is harmless.

Loveleen

One day I went to see the children after coming from the office.

Kumar opened the door and said, "Sahithi and the kids went to her parent's place.

I went and sat on the sofa. We were talking about this and that.

I asked, "what are you doing for dinner?"

He said, "I will prepare something."

I said, "come to my flat I will prepare something for us both."

We both went to my flat. I brought a bottle of whisky with two glasses and placed them on the table. I brought some snacks to go with the drinks. He poured two drinks and I sat down and sipped with him.

He asked, "are you missing the children?"

I said, "I came early to see them and they went away. I really miss kids, I divorced for the kids. But I did not find anyone I liked. So, I stayed single. When I saw your kids, I felt I should have had kids. I thought about asking you, but you kept me away. I don't know what to do."

Kumar

She said, "she wanted kids" and started crying. I sat beside her and tried to console her. I kept patting her head for a long time.

After some time, she stopped crying and kept staring at the wall.

I took her hand in mine and asked, "how can I help you?"

She asked, "do you really want to help me?"

I said, "yes."

She said, "then give me a child."

I said, "how can I give you a child, Sahithi will not agree, she loves our children very much. Once she thought she lost Leena, she was inconsolable for a long time. Until we brought Leena back she was not herself. She would never agree to that. She is already doubting you for coming and staying here. She thinks you would take her children away."

Loveleen thought for some time and said, "I don't want your kids. I want a child of my own."

I said, "then find a man and marry again. I did not find anyone, that's why I am asking for your help."

I said, "shall I find someone for you to marry?"

She said, "I don't want to marry, I want a kid from you."

I said, "I already made it clear to you, that I will not sleep with you."

She said, "then give me a kid through artificial insemination. I am ready to spend any amount on that."

I said, "I don't know if I can give you kids through that."

She said, "let us try one time."

I said, "don't tell Sahithi I helped you, she would throw me out."

She said, "if she threw you out, you can come and live with me."

I said, "it seems you want me to be thrown out."

She said, "nothing like that if ever you are in trouble with your wife you can come and stay with me."

I said, "if I do that she would give me a divorce."

She said, "don't worry about all that, tell me do you want to help me or not?"

I said, "that is what I am telling you, if you promise not to tell Sahithi, then I will help you."

She said, "ok, I will tell her I got it from a sperm bank."

I said, "first let us go and get ourselves checked. But remember your promise. If ever you tell her, I will never see your face again in my life."

She said, "I promise on my unborn child."

The next day we went to a fertility clinic. I gave my sperm for checking, she asked them, "if her eggs were viable for bearing children."

We got reports after one week. They were viable and they gave us a date. I took her to the centre on that day.

Sahithi asked, "where are you taking Loveleen."

I said, "she is trying for kids through artificial insemination through a donor. They found a donor for her and they gave a date for her to come, so I am taking her there for moral support."

I took her there and they did the required procedures.

After three months her pregnancy is confirmed.

Chapter 5

The year 2008

Loveleen

I am happy at last I got a baby of my own. I named him Dhruv as Leena suggested. He is a bundle of joy. Even though I got a kid of my own I have not stopped loving Kumar's kids. I feel like they are my own kids and I love them like one.

Leena

We saw a news item in the paper about the haunted houses in and around Mumbai. It has become a hot topic in the canteen. Some guys are talking about daring to go and spend the night at those haunted houses.

I came home and asked, "dad, are there ghosts?"

Dad said, "we don't know for sure about the ghosts. But the world is filled with positive and negative energy. Sometimes negative energy manifests as ghosts. It swirls around you and makes you dizzy and you feel as if a ghost has come near you."

I asked, "how to face them and not fear them?"

He said, "when I am small I learned some mantras, which made me fearless when faced with such situations. I will teach you the mantra to face these negative energies, which removes your fear of them."

He told me the mantra and said, "you have to recite this mantra repeatedly, which will give you the power to face them. If you feel any negative energy around you, you can recite the mantra and your fear would vanish. To attain the power, it would take some time as it has to remove the negative energy from yourself."

I started to recite the mantra at certain times in the morning after having a bath.

After ten days I got a chance to test the power of the mantra.

On a Saturday night, the guys decided to spend a night at one of the haunted houses.

I said, "I will also come with them to the haunted house."

They laughed at me, girls get scared at the small sound, how can you come?

Which made me more determined to go with them.

Seeing my boldness, Sheila said, "I will also come with them."

They must have thought taking the girls with them would bring some authenticity to their quest, so they agreed to take us with them.

Seeing us girls two more guys have shown interest to come. At last, the group of eight people decided to visit the haunted house.

We collected torches, emergency lights, video cameras and some food items and water and went to the haunted house by 6 pm.

We divided into two groups of four people each.

Sheila said, "I will accompany you."

So, we have Rakesh and Sharma in our group. Rakesh took the camera and a torch. I and Sheila have our phone cameras and Sharma took an emergency light. At around seven o'clock after having some snacks, we started exploring the house. It was written in the newspaper, it was a mental hospital in the past. It was closed due to some murders in the hospital by a patient. It was also mentioned in the newspaper that the ghost of the patient and his victims roam the hospital.

In the other group, we have Akhilesh, Riteish, Sameer and Manjrekar. They took a camera and torches and an emergency light. As these emergency lights provide light for at least six to eight hours. So, we have taken them with us.

Our group started going through the east wing and the other group said they will go through the west wing.

We started going from room to room. If a room is unlocked we would open the room and record the room in a 360-degree view and come out and close the door and mark it with chalk on the door, that we have visited this door. The locked doors we marked with x.

This way we went through the east wing floor by floor. After going through three floors we came upon the terrace. We recorded the terrace and went to the west side of the terrace door.

It was unlocked and we descended the steps. We came to the third floor and looked into the corridor. It seemed empty. We went a little further and Sharma is walking in the front he must have struck something and he fell forward and the light in his hand fell on something and made a thud sound.

We trained our torches on what he slipped on. Someone is on the floor face down. Rakesh went and looked into the face of the person. It was Riteish and he seemed unconscious. He checked his breathing and said, "he seemed alive."

Looked at his back and turned him and looked at his front body. He does not have any injuries on his body. He must have been struck. He took some water from the bottle and put it on his face. He moved a little after a minute opened his eyes and asked, "where I am?"

I asked, "what happened?"

He said, "I was behind the others and I stopped and looked in this room. Someone hit me from the front of my head and I fell down."

"Did you see who it was?"

"It was just a shadow."

I said, "there must be someone here."

I pushed the door and looked inside from afar. No shadow moved inside. I moved the torch from side to side and then stepped inside mouthing the mantra dad taught me.

I stepped away from the door and looked around pointing my torch. No one seemed to be there. The room is almost empty except for a bed in the corner. No one seemed to be on the bed. I went close to the bed and it seemed slept on not dusty from a long time unuse.

I shouted guys it seems someone is sleeping here. The four of them came running inside. I showed the torch on the bed and said, "see someone must be sleeping here. There is no dust and the crumpled bedsheets seem slept

recently. He must have come near the door hearing your sounds and he must have struck you with this stick pointing to a stick beside the door.”

Sharma asked, “who could be sleeping here?”

I said, “who else could be sleeping here, some antisocial elements? Must be running away from the police or something. Or he could be one of the terrorists hiding here. They must have scared people coming near the building, we should get away from here it could be dangerous.”

We turned to the door to get out of the room, it was closed.

I asked, “who closed the door?”

Riteish who came inside last, said, “when I came in it was open, who could close it?”

He went to the door and tried opening it. It was locked from the outside. He got scared and shouted open the door. There was no response from the outside.

I went to him and said, “don’t get panic. We have options. Is anyone from your group have mobiles?”

He said, “I don’t know.”

I looked at the mobile and said, “there is no signal here.”

I went to the window and checked there is a single point signal.

I called daddy’s number. He picked up and said, “where are you calling from.”

I said, “we came on a mission and we are stuck in this room here. Someone locked us in.”

He asked, “where is the building you are talking about?”

I gave him the details and the address.

He said, “you lock the door from the inside and only open it when some known person calls you. I am reaching there.”

Kumar

When Leena called and said she was stuck in a room at a haunted house, I was angry she went there without informing me. I thought about who could

Ravikiran

be near the place where the building is. I thought Raj and I had his number and he could also bring Krishna. I called Raj and explained the situation and told him to get Krishna and anyone else available. I will come and pick them up in twenty minutes.

I told Sahithi I am going out on some work. Came down with my car keys and started to drive to Vakola. By the time I reached Raj's building, he was standing with another five persons from Krishna's chawl.

They all crammed into the car and we drove towards where the haunted house was located. Krishna introduced the people he had brought. One of the persons is a constable. I explained to them the situation we are going to face. We can expect someone there, most possibly they would already get away from there. Most probably no one will be there. But be ready to intercept anyone present there. There could be some students from Leena's college.

We reached the place in half an hour.

Leena said she was on the west side on the third floor. We went by steps to the third floor and we entered the corridor and I shouted "Leena".

There was a mild sound daddy from further down the corridor. I went to further inside and shouted and I heard Leena's voice there and a tap on the door.

I located the door from where the sound is coming and went and opened the lock. It seemed locked from the inside. I knocked on the door and said, "Leena open up."

She opened the door and hugged me saying, daddy.

I asked, "where are the others?"

"We have four people here and three are still missing."

Riteish said, "they went that side and turned left there."

We went to the side indicated by Riteish and started opening locked doors. Further down we found the three of them in a room terrorized thinking that they were locked inside by a ghost. When we opened the door, they were shouting don't harm us, we will do anything you ask us.

Leena shouted it is us come out.

They heard Leena's voice and came out into the corridor.

I said, "what is this stupidity, you should have informed someone before coming like this."

Leena said, "sorry daddy, I thought it would ghost and I can face them with your mantra. But here the situation is different."

I turned to the constable and said, "will you report this at your station? They can take up investigation who were staying here."

He said, "he will take care of it. I should get some recognition for my work."

I asked, "how you have come here."

They said, "they came by bike, if anyone going towards Vakola they can take these guys, and I will arrange for others to reach home. When everyone left I took Leena, Sheila, and Sharma and dropped Sharma off first and took them to our house.

From the house, I called Trivedi and informed him that Sheila is in our house and will return tomorrow.

He said, "thanks for the information."

I cradled the receiver and said, "go and sleep, we will talk tomorrow."

Leena took Sheila to her room. I said to Sahithi, "these girls went ghost hunting."

She said surprisingly, "ghost hunting!"

I said, "yes, they have not found ghosts but someone else, those people locked them up in a room I went and unlocked the door and brought them here."

Sahithi said, "these girls became too bold after the kidnapping, what things they are doing?"

Leena

Dad came in the nick of time to rescue us from the locked door. We are lucky that Sheila and I have our mobile phones and a signal was available there. Otherwise, we would have been stuck there for how long? We have to be careful in the future, we have to think about all the scenarios before

venturing into the unknown. If we don't have our phones what we could have done? Do the persons who helped us escape the kidnappers, would they have come? I don't know, why to take a risk that they would come or not.

Kumar

When Leena asked about ghosts, I have not expected her gang to go ghost hunting. I gave her that mantra to increase her confidence and reduce her fear of the unknown. Instead of ghosts, they have found a gang's hideout.

I have been informed by the constable from Krishna's chawl that he had informed his higher-ups regarding finding the hideout. When they investigated it was found out that they were planning a major attack on the city and they could recover a cache of weapons and other things like maps of the city marked for attack. No one was found during search operations but they found some fingerprints and some DNA which they are analysing and whose details are not known to him. At least something came out of their investigation. I told them without informing anyone don't do anything like this again. If they had no mobile what they could have done? I remembered when mobile phones were not there and we had to depend on paid phones. We had to go searching for phone booths.

Sheila

Dad scolded me for going with the group for ghost hunting. Why did I go with them when I have fear of ghosts? He asked, "how am I feeling after ghost hunting and not finding any ghosts?"

It has helped me boost my confidence. Leena has also helped me with this. She was the most confident person in the ghost hunt group. She was not scared of anything. Even at the most difficult times she has taken control of the situation and has brought us out of the house. I told dad about the mobile phone you have given us, which is instrumental in bringing us out of the house. Thanks for the gift.

Dad said, "you are welcome, I am happy that the gift I gave has brought some advantages for you."

I asked, "Leena, what is our next adventure and she replied we will take a little time off and concentrate on our studies, we will think about that after the exams."

Leena

Our 1st-year degree exams finished and the summer holidays have started. We have done well in our exams and I expect an A+ grade in my results.

Now I sat with Sheila and brainstormed what to do. Sheila said, "first we will watch some movies we missed."

We went DVD shopping and brought some Hindi and English movies we missed during our studies.

We sat and watched the movies for one week. After completing the movies, we thought about what we should do.

Unlike other summer holidays, we were feeling bored this time. We want to have the thrill of some action. The only thing we don't know is what to do. Then one day we had the chance to prove ourselves. One of our friends faced with a situation has asked for our help.

We went over to her and asked, "what is your problem, Pranavi."

Pranavi said, "her sister was taken over by a ghost."

I said, "we would like to see her."

Pranavi asked, "you don't get scared, no?"

I said, "I am not scared of ghosts. What is her name?"

Pranavi said, "my sister's name is Ravali."

Pranavi took us to her sister Ravali's room. Ravali is sitting on the bed her hair is open and in disarray. She was mumbling something under her breath.

I asked, "what she is talking about?"

She said, "we can't understand which language she is speaking."

I asked, "what is your mother tongue?"

She replied "Tamil."

I asked, "are you sure it is not Tamil?"

She said, "I am sure, I would have understood if she is speaking Tamil."

I went closer and try to catch her words. Nothing is intelligible. I thought what she is speaking is not what we hear daily.

I asked, "Ravali, what is your name?"

She said something and started crying.

I asked, "Pranavi why she is crying?"

"If someone asks her, she starts crying."

I asked, "how you decided she was taken over by a ghost? Everyone is saying it is an indication of a ghost taking her possession."

I called father and asked, "how to know if someone is possessed by a ghost?"

He said, "take some water in your hand and read the mantra I told you 12 times and put the water on that person's face, from the reactions it can be found out. if the person acts violently there is a possibility of ghost possession or if the person acts normal then it is not a ghost possession."

I cut the call and asked, "Pranavi, get me some water."

She brought a glass of water. I put some water on my right hand put the hand over the glass and recited the mantra as my father advised. Then I threw the water on Ravali's face. She just moved her head aside. It seems she is not possessed by the ghost.

I said, "see her she is not affected by the water I threw on her. She is not possessed, she must be mentally ill. My father told me schizophrenia patients behave like they are possessed. It is better to show her to a psychiatrist. It is a mental illness only not related to ghosts."

She asked, "how are you so sure of it is possession?"

I said, "the mantra water test, shows if she is possessed or not."

She asked, "are you sure?"

I said, "if you are not sure of my observations, I could ask my father to check."

She asked, "can you do that?"

I said, "I will call my father and see."

I called dad and told him the reaction she has given when I threw the water on her face.

He asked, “what is her physical appearance?”

I said, “she had open hair and it is in disarray, she seemed not to care about her surroundings and she is muttering something unintelligible. If someone tries to speak to her she would start to cry.”

He asked, “where are you?”

I gave him the address.

He said, “he will come there when he had some free time.” I cut the call and said, “my father said he will come and visit when he is free.”

Kumar

When Leena called and asked about ghost possession, I was surprised. When she called and said about the water having no effect on the girl I asked her about her actions. It seems she is affected mentally. I remember there is a homoeopathy medicine for that. I checked the collection of medicines we had and found the required medicine and it has to be administered with water as it is a mother tincture. I removed the name label from the bottle and kept it aside. Then Leena returned home and explained the events of the day.

I asked, “when can we visit their house.”

Leena said, “we can visit any time.”

I took the bottle of medicine.

Leena asked, “what is that?”

I said, “it is a medicine for her treatment. Don’t tell them that, we will say it is a mantra potent water, which will remove the ghost. They will believe if we say it will remove the ghost, if we say it is the medicine they will not believe us.”

Both of us went over in our car. Her friend took us to her room. I did some mumbo jumbo as if I am finding the ghost.

I asked, “what is your name.”

Ravali mumbled something. I put the medicine in half glass of water and gave it to her to drink.

Pranavi made her drink it forcefully.

I said, “give her this holy water mix in half glass of water every night before sleeping. Don’t give her anything to eat before giving her this water.”

Pranavi asked, “why at the night?”

I said, “the ghost will sleep with her so the mantra starts working with her. I will come and visit after two days.”

She said, “ok.” We left her and returned home.

I said, “to Leena to go and visit her tomorrow, see any change in her attitude. We will check this medicine for at least a week then we will see what to do.”

She asked, “what is her problem?”

It seems something mental problem from her attitude, I gave her medicine to treat her symptoms. It may take some time to clear her problems but we might know something in a day or two.”

Leena came back and reported that Ravali is slowly coming back to normal.

It seems the medicine is working. These medicines require belief in the medicine to work properly. They also need time to work out. Sometimes they take three months to a year to completely cure. Unlike allopathy medicines, these cures and not just give temporary relief. The main difference is allopathy medicines are given for problems like pains, stomach aches, etc. they don’t look into symptoms, or what causes the problems. These homoeopathy medicines are given seeing the symptoms not problems. They want to go to the root cause of the problem to treat them. Take the case of Ravali, she has some problem that is causing mental problems, it might be due to an imbalance of her hormones. This medicine would set right the hormones.

Leena

I have been daily monitoring Ravali to check the progress of her mental problems. Within a week, she was almost back to normal. In consultation with dad I told her to continue using the medicine or holy water as I told them, it will stop the ghost from taking her once again.

It is after one month and Loveleen aunty gave a party for Dhruv, and She arranged dinner at our house and a drinks party at her house. Dad was talking to his friends and after their party, they had come to our house for dinner. He must be talking about my kidnapping and he was telling them when they asked for 1 crore rupees and Mr. Trivedi is about to carry the bag and how he had gone there before him and waited opposite the beach.

One person asked, "where did you wait, on the beach?"

He said, "no opposite the way to the beach there is a one-story building and we waited on their balcony."

He asked, "did they let you wait there, did not object?"

Dad said, "there is a nice man Mr. D'Souza when I told him about our daughters being kidnapped and we were waiting for the exchange of money on the beach. He brought chairs and gave us to sit."

I heard the name and asked, "Dad, how is Nikita teacher."

He said, "Nikita is his daughter, how do you know her, is she your teacher in school?"

I said, "no, I told you I was staying in the bungalows near there, she is used to coming to teach us. She used to teach Chitti Hindi and English and etiquette."

He asked, "who is Chitti?"

I said, "I told you no, she is our Aaya, she used to look after the death of Sneha's mummy. So, Naanamma brought her from the village to look after us as aayi goes to the office too."

He asked, "aayi mean?"

I said, "Aayi means Sahithi mummy, Atul and Reena are twins and they are born to Sneha aunty. They are elder than me. That's why after seeing them here so small, I laughed."

He said, "it is all so confusing. Didn't you live with old people?"

I said, "when I was small I had lived there, then they wanted to go to Bombay to live with his son here. Then while we were coming out of the railway station, they met with an accident. Then I was taken to the Maharashtra Shakha Pramukh. There he spoke with someone and told me to sit on a

bench. After some time, dad came and took me to this big bungalow on the beachfront. There were aayi and Atul and Reena. Then when I told you about what I remembered from when I was small, he took me to Naanamma and kept me there for two days and later took me to the bungalow. Then I joined Atul and Reena in their school. Chitti used to take us to school in a car with a driver. Then she used to bring us back. On one side building, dad has a software firm and on another side bungalow Loveleen, aunty stays with Dhruv. Then dad got another building besides Loveleen's auntie's bungalow, then dad told aayi to get that building decorated so we all can go and stay there. There I got a room with Reena and Atul got himself a room with Dhruv. Then one day before I came back to you, I was coming out of the classroom and Atul and Reena were going to the car without me and I called them to stop and they looked back, but I was at the outside of the bungalow and you were not staying there. And D'Souza uncle took me to the police station and you came and took me to the house."

Dad asked, "so you mean to say you were with the old couple for some time and then you came to us at a different house and I was in the software business and mummy doing what?"

I said, "Interior decoration company run by Loveleen aunty."

"Ok, then we were all shifted to another house and then when you were at school and you came back to the bungalow and we were not staying there and you came back to us."

Now everyone listening to our conversation with open mouths.

Mommy came and asked, "so, you lived like a queen with us for some time before coming back here."

I said, "like a princess."

Mummy said, "crying ok, like a princess."

I asked, "why are you crying mummy?"

She said, "all these years I was thinking about what kind of life did you go through. Now I am happy that you could stay with us or at least one like us and who was better off. When you were home you had a good school dress on. Which school was it?"

I said, "it is in Santacruz west, you must have seen the label on the dress?"

She said, "I saw it and never thought to check it out. Maybe they will say you never studied there." She whispered something to dad. He shook his head.

Kumar

Sahithi said, "Leena seems to speak as if she had experienced all that. Otherwise, how can she tell all those details?"

I said, "when I went to check the place where they were going to exchange the money, we went and waited with a camera, we must have some photos with us."

I went and checked the photos we printed and looked at them. We took photos of people coming toward us. I showed Leena and asked her to pick D'Souza's daughter's photo. She took the photo and showed us. I clearly remember him saying Nikita, and I thought what a new name I never heard of it. Then she removed his elder daughter and showed, I don't remember her name. It seems she has experienced what she was telling about, but how is it possible? Me being in a bungalow and having a software company. I don't know abcd of software, I have been an accountant my whole life, and Sahithi worked as Chairman's PA. Then we are living in this flat after the quarters. But what about Loveleen and her son Dhruv? I took her aside and asked about Loveleen. "Where is Loveleen's husband?"

Leena said he was killed in Delhi by two gunmen. There were some rumours that her father who is a CM got him killed for something. I remember her telling me that both her parents were dead. What kind of world did Leena go and come to? Is it after her guardians were dead, did she go somewhere out of this world? Did someone save her and sent her away until the time she could come home to us? Is there someone saving her from danger?

I asked, "Leena tell me truthfully how you get saved from the kidnappers."

She must have felt she was caught in a lie, "sorry daddy, they told us not to tell anyone, they did not have permission to save us, but still, they saved us. Two men came and first took care of the two men the police caught and they untied us and tied them and took us to the police station and left us outside. They said don't tell anyone about us, or they will lose their jobs. It seems

someone keeping tabs on Leena, but why? Would they have the power to take her somewhere else and keep her there for such a long time? Is it some kind of guardian angel, who is keeping her safe? I heard about them in stories only, never encountered or heard someone actually encountering them. Is Leena some kind of blessed child? So, they trying to keep her safe. Or is it fate that she had to live in the village for a year and then she would live in a bungalow and then come back to us? Or is it kind of a science experiment? Where they fill the brain with such information, she would believe is true. I don't know anything now if I think like that. Where did Sahithi work before working with Loveleen?

Leena said, "I think she worked as a stenotypist. By the time I went there she is already working in Loveleen's firm and she has a car with a driver and an assistant."

I went to Sahithi and said, "you better get a job with Loveleen, that Sahithi is working with Loveleen and she has a car with a driver and an assistant too."

Sahithi said, "I also have an assistant here, we also have a car which I use. What do I need a driver for?"

I said, "it seems that Sahithi does not know driving."

Sahithi said, "don't play with me using Leena."

I said, "ok, sorry baba."

Ok, let me check what Leena said. She said Atul and Leena are Sneha's children and Sahithi does not have any children. Sneha died in an accident. And that Kumar must have married Sahithi to look after the kids. Because she is a working lady and my mother got an Aaya for the kids named Chitti from the village. Then I took Sahithi from steno's work and got her to work with Loveleen as a manager. Loveleen is divorced and her parents are dead here but there she is a widow and stays first in the next building, and then they got another building and they all shifted there. Why did he take her and put her in his own house? Leena said about a rumour that her father is a CM and for some reason got her husband killed. If we take this Loveleen as an example then it must be her idea to get the new building and shift there, for some reason she wants to stay close to Kumar. Is it business or love or fear or something else? She also said Joy and Sunitha are also staying with them

in the house. Now I don't know who they are. She also mentioned Mahira working with them. Is there a Chitti here also? I need to check.

I called home and mom took the phone, I asked, "is there a Chitti in our village?"

She said, "I think so, when you went there did you not meet her."

I said, "I seem to remember."

She said, "she is your uncle's youngest daughter."

I said, "ok, then what is she doing."

"I think she works in a school or something."

I thought at least a Chitti is there in the village. If needed we could have called her and instead we got someone else here as Aaya for the daytime.

I called Leena and asked, "where did they stay before coming to stay at the bungalows?"

"Aayi talked about having her house in Vikhroli."

I called Sunitha and asked, "did you have a house at Vikhroli?"

"I think my grandmother used to have two houses and one of them at Vikhroli, I did not have one. It was used for her treatment, my mother sold off the houses and had her treated and still, she passed away."

So, Sahithi had a house in Vikhroli passed on to her by her grandmother and here they sold it off for her treatment. That could be the reason to have Chitti as Aaya for them. They were staying separate, and they know they could not have an Aaya without supervision, so they got one from the village.

One reason he got companies and bungalows and he got all those people in his life. Except for Loveleen, I don't know anyone else. Is it because of all these people he got the money or because of the money he got all these people? At least I came to know someone else like me exists in this world. But what about Leena? Why did she go there and why did she come back here?

Leena

Our colleges have started and we immersed ourselves in our studies. Science is full of work, there is always writing records and things like that. Over that, we had taken biology as a major, which is one of the subjects we had to prepare a lot of records. Once we were taken on a tour. Where we had to collect specimens for our records. I and Sheela were collecting specimens and went away from our group. As we were searching for our group, two people came in front of us and warned us not to go that side as there is a steep drop and showed us the way to our group and went away.

I was breaking my head thinking about where I had seen them. In the middle of my sleep, I woke up suddenly and then I thought why?

I remembered the two people who showed the way, they are the ones who saved us from the kidnappers. It seems they are behind us and looking after us. But why?

I shook Sheela awake and said, “do you remember those two guys who showed the way?”

She said, “sleepily no, why?”

I said, “they are the ones who had saved us from the kidnappers.

Sheela said, “yes, ok “and went back to sleep.

The next day, while collecting specimens I tried to find them around, but they must be experienced to hide, I could not place them anywhere near us. So, I forgot them.

Without any further incidents, our college life is going on for the year.

Chapter 6

The year 2009.

Kumar

This year Reena has her SSC exams. I asked Leena to help her with exam preparation. Leena will be giving her second-year B.Sc. exams, so she can help her sister. But it was back of my mind where did she go when she was kidnapped.

Leena

This year my mom arranged a party for my birthday. As usual, the party was arranged on the terrace and dad arranged his own party in the hall for his friends.

I called all my friends and Sheela is beside me at the party.

Ravali and Pranavi also came. She is back to normal. Ravali went to dad and said, “thanks.”

Then he revealed to her it was not a ghost possession, it was some kind of mental illness. So, I had given you the medicine for that and you are cured.

She said, “is it so?”

Pranavi asked, “what are you thinking after your B.Sc.”

I said, “I want to become a scientist developing medicines.”

Ravali asked, “why?”

Leena replied to find medicines for unknown ailments, that is my aim.

Pranavi said, “so you will be doing M.Sc. in one of these Biotechnology, Cellular Biology or Microbiology.”

I said, “I will think about that after completing my B.Sc.”

Now Rahul has not come in front of us again. Sheela is also concentrating on her studies. Our exams went well and we started our routine of watching movies daily.

The days followed very fast for us with our college work and other activities.

Ravikiran

We completed our B.Sc. with good grades and I and Sheela have joined Postgraduation in Bio-Technology. Two years running in a jiffy.

We joined as Trainee research fellows to research Vaccines and their veracity on people. Now I am in a research lab developing vaccines and medicines for various viruses.

Chapter 7

The year 2014

Leena

Until now I have not met anyone to my liking. When we first entered our lab, we found there are the two guys who helped us with the kidnappers and the ones who warned us on our trip.

I went to them and said, "hello."

They said hello to us and introduced themselves as Vikram and Rohan.

We introduced ourselves as Leena and Sheila.

I told them thanks for rescuing us from the kidnappers. Are you following us?

Rohan asked, "why are you asking like that?"

I said, "you also warned us about the hills when we went on our trip."

Rohan said, "we were not following you we saw you going towards the steep drop and warned you. About the saving from kidnappers, we were told by a man named Bob, he has asked us to help you get away from the kidnappers."

Sheila asked, "who is this Bob, we are hearing his name for the first time."

Rahul said, "we also don't know, he asked us to help out rescuing two girls who were taken by some kidnappers and he stayed outside and sent us inside and when we came out he was nowhere to be seen. So, we dropped you guys at the police station and went our way."

I said, "when we saw you on the hills, I thought you were working as our guardian angels."

Rohan asked, "where did you get the idea?"

Sheila said, "she was kidnapped at the age of one and when at the age of two the kidnappers died she was sent somewhere. Where her identical father and mother were staying in several bungalows at the beachside. She stayed with them for five years and then she was returned to her parents."

I said, "I was confused for a long time did I really stay there or it is a dream? I had the same siblings there but they were elder and twins."

One girl came inside the lab and asked, “what are you so seriously discussing?”

Rohan said, “hi Tanvi this is Leena and Sheila, new research fellows. She was telling about her being abducted at the age of 1 and returning to her parents at age of 8. She was telling when her kidnappers died after one year, she was taken over to identical parents by some guardian angels and returned back to her parents after five years. She is asking did we have anything to do with that?”

Tanvi asked, “did you have something to do with that?”

Rahul said, “How can I, I must be a toddler then.”

Tanvi said, “come let us go and have lunch.”

We all went to the canteen for lunch.

Sheila

Seeing Rohan, I felt a little tingling in my heart. After Rahul’s fiasco, I was scared to get close to anyone. Over that Leena always discouraged me when someone came close to me by saying they are after my father’s money. Seeing how she saved me from the kidnappers, I had to listen to her. Maybe I have to thank her for my studies. If not for her I would have just stopped after my degree and would have married someone selected by my parents. Now I am working as a research fellow with this company and I have some future with this. I will not tell him about my father and try to act like a middle-class girl with him, let us see how he will react to us.

Sahithi

Loveleen has arranged a birthday party for Dhruv at her house. As usual Sheela’s family also came. After the kidnapping drama, Sheela’s family has become close to our family. At first, I had reservations about Loveleen, but as time passed, her behaviour has not changed. She would tell Dhruv to give respect to our kids as he should treat his elder siblings. She would treat them equal to Dhruv. If she gets any new dresses for Dhruv, she would get these three too. When she brought Dhruv a bicycle, she gave Leena Scooter to ride. Atul already had a cycle, otherwise, she would have given him one. But she got Atul and Reena something as a gift. She always gives them gifts.

Kumar

Today I was called to the Board Meeting. Thinking something up, I prepared to answer their questions and went to the board meeting. In the meeting, they passed a resolution that I will be made a director of the company. After all these years they have recognised my talent and made me a director. It is not about the money, it is a prestige to be made a director.

Leena

Tanvi seems to be interested in Vikram. But I don't think he is interested in her, at least romantically. Now after all these years Sheela is smitten by Rohan. I can see it in her eyes. Her eyes light up seeing him. He is 100 times better than Rahul. But I don't know how Rohan feels about Sheela. Maybe we need a few days to understand these guys.

Vikram came to us and announced that they are taking 10 research fellows to train in the USA.

I said, "great opportunity."

He asked, "if you want to get trained there, go and fill out the forms."

I asked, "will I get the opportunity for training?"

He said, "you will certainly get it."

I said, "Sheila, come with me", and we went and filled out the forms and came back. Surprisingly the five of us got the go-ahead for the training. We both went and applied for the passport. We never thought we would be going abroad and never applied for a passport. The passport office called us and handed us our passports and we went for visa processing. Everything went smoothly and we got visas to go to the USA for research training.

It was surprising how everything went so smoothly, we did not have to wait for our passports or visas. I heard people had to apply multiple times to get visas. Five of us with other five people from other departments went over to the USA.

Sahithi

When I heard Leena is going to the USA for training, I was worried about how she will stay away from us for so long. Then I remembered her staying away from us for 6 years. I know she is tough as nails. She has been trained to handle all kinds of situations. All these years I have not seen her with any boys. After the fiasco with Rahul, Sheela also kept away from boys. These two had been for each other all these years. They should keep each other company.

Leena

As the project for submitting our thesis, we selected a virus for the samples kept at the centre. I looked at the history of the virus. It was found in the forest near Andhra and Orissa border. There is no further history of who found it and under what circumstances it was found. First, we collected the sample and put it in an incubator for it to multiply. It was kept dormant all this time and once it woke up it started to reproduce very rapidly. We took it out of the incubator and put it in a container to check its progress. It just took 10 minutes to reproduce and was rapidly multiplying. We took extreme care and put the virus in a container with a rat. As suggested by our superiors we are taking extreme care that the virus should not get out into the environment. Then we put it in a special DNA analyser. When the DNA results came, we try to compare them to other DNA results available to us. None was found to match the existing one in the library. Now we understand it is very difficult to find a cure for this virus, which seems alien to us. We loaded the DNA results to our server, which we were told is one of its kind, it is a supercomputer with a speed reaching 1 exaflop. This computer is connected to the fastest internet available at present and it can search for information from all over the world for any matching cures. When it returned no information available, we understand we are going to face the toughest opponent in the universe. We looked at the mouse, it was dead an hour after being infected. We infected a mouse and left it with a bunch of mice. We switched on the recording and went to our cabin.

When Tanvi, Vikram and Rohan came to our cabin, we asked for their help as we understand we are going to face the toughest challenge of our life.

We sat down at our computer and I prepared the report of what we found until now. I sent this information to these three. Reading that they expressed to help us with finding the cure.

We all have assembled in the canteen discussing what to do next. We thought there is no urgency with the vaccine as we are not in any immediate danger. I saw a man enter the canteen. I said, "look who is that man, I think I saw him somewhere."

Vikram looked back and said, "he is Bob" and got up and went to him and shook his hands and asked, "what are you doing here?"

I went there hearing his name, as he is my benefactor, and others came behind me.

He shook hands with all of us and said, "let us sit and talk.

We went back to our table and Rohan asked, "anything for you, perhaps coffee or tea."

Bob said, "thank you, nothing for me you carry on. Now about the virus, Leena is studying, do you have any idea about that."

I said, "I studied the virus it seems to be very dangerous, and I checked it against the medicines already developed and found a combination to treat the virus, but I feel that won't be enough with this virus, it needs a vaccine to have effective containment."

Bob said, "whatever you said is true, but did you find the vaccine yet."

I said, "that is what we are discussing, and what type of vaccine should be developed for that."

He said, "I have got a vaccine developed for that virus long back but it was not documented or published, you can use the paper and develop the vaccine and can finish your thesis."

I said, "won't I get into trouble?"

He said, "it won't be a problem. If you want, I can give it to you in writing. You need to complete the vaccine creation immediately."

I asked, "what is the urgency?"

He asked, "do you know where the sample has come from?"

I said, "there is no history behind the sample."

Bob said, "the virus has come to our earth with a meteorite and they have secured the site by pouring a block of cement on that. Now due to an earthquake at the place where it landed, the cement block opened up and the surrounding areas are at risk, we need to vaccinate the people around there immediately."

I asked, "how do you know all this and how did you get the vaccine paper?"

He said, "I just picked the paper from whoever wrote it and I was following this virus for a long time. It landed in the year 1988. You first complete this vaccine and submit your thesis immediately and I will take up with the government about vaccinating the people."

We went back to the lab and created the vaccine as mentioned in the paper and tested it with the virus-infected mice and monkeys. Now we have to wait and see the results.

As requested by Bob I wrote the thesis on the cure and submitted it to our professor. When asked about the results, we said we checked against mice and monkeys and the results were satisfactory.

We went back to our room and Sheela switched on the TV. The news was running and after regular news, one news item caught our attention.

I asked, "Sheela do you have our professor's mobile no.?"

She looked through her contacts and said, "here it is."

I took the number and called him. I said, "Sir, did you watch the news?"

He asked, "what happened?"

I said, "there is some news of virus attacks in the interiors of the Visakhapatnam forest area, in India. It seems similar to the virus we have developed a cure for, you better contact the officials and inform them about the vaccine. You can take the credit but take the matter seriously."

He said, "wait someone is at the door."

Some discussion can be heard and he said, "he will call later and cut the phone."

The phone rang after half an hour and the professor said, "can you come to the office."

I said, "I will be there in ten minutes."

I called Rohan and asked him to come to the office as the professor called me there.

He said, "he will be there."

We reached the lab and by the time Rohan reached along with Vikram.

Rohan asked, "what happened?"

I said, "it must be about the virus, I saw on the news about the virus outbreak in the interiors of the forests, in India. It seemed similar to the one we developed a cure and I called our Professor, and while I was speaking he said someone came to his house and cut the call and now he asked me to come to the office room. So, I called you to accompany us."

We all went into the office room. We knocked on the door and opened it. Some people were sitting on the chairs and the professor seeing us said, "she is the one who developed the cure for the virus."

They all looked at me. I smiled and said, "hello sir."

Professor said, "these people are from the Centre for Disease Control under the Federal Government. They came to enquire about the vaccine you have developed."

They looked at me and one person with them seemed familiar but he sat further away.

One person asked, "how did you develop the vaccine?"

I said, "I have taken the virus for the thesis. We checked various medicines against the virus and one medicine combination worked, and for the purpose of vaccines, we have taken the inactive virus method and were experimenting with these fellow researchers. We could able to develop this vaccine and we checked against the resources available."

The head of their team told the professor to approve the medicines and vaccine treatment and send it to their team to start the production of the virus. They made him sign the thesis and got his stamp and gave me my copy and took one copy for their reference and went away. I saw Mr. Bob smiling at me while going with them.

On the occasion of completing my thesis, I invited the group to a party.

Chapter 8

Leena

After a week we got called to the Head of the Institution.

We went and I knocked on the door and asked, “can I come in sir?”

The head looked up and said, “come in and be seated.” We sat on the available chairs in front of him. He looked at a paper in front of him and said, “I have received a report from the Centre for Disease Control about your thesis submitted by you. They find the vaccine is very effective against the virus and they recommended you be appointed to the institute as Jr. Research Fellow. They have also granted our institute a grant of 1 Million Dollars for researching viruses and vaccines. This grant will be renewed every year for the next 5 years. So, here are your appointment orders”, and handed us our orders.

I looked at my order, it is showing a salary of 2000 dollars plus other perks. We told the head thanks and came out and I hugged Sheela.

Sheela said, “being with you I also received this job, thank you very much.”

Rahul asked, “how come you are drawing more than us?”

I said, “it must be the vaccine we researched for.”

Part 6

Chapter 1

The year 2019

Leena

Since last December we were hearing of a virus attack in China and now Chinese cities were quarantined. They named the virus Corona and we are hearing it is appearing around the globe. We were provided with a sample of the virus and we started our research into finding a cure for the same.

Two-pronged work we were doing. One is finding medicines to contain the virus or its severity and the second is finding a vaccine for the same.

I was expecting Mr Bob and will give me the formula for the virus. But as the days passed he was not anywhere to be found. The severity of the situation was increasing day by day and the solution was eluding us. We could not find a medicine which could contain the virus. By the time we could find some solution it has reached a pandemic stage.

We took a meeting and decided the only way to contain the virus is to inoculate the general population with a vaccine. We put all our efforts into finding a virus and testing. Finding a vaccine is not that much difficult, but testing and finding its side effects is a herculean task.

We finalised a vaccine and released it for general consumption.

When we thought we are safe from the virus, there were reports of the virus mutating. We got the samples and started to test the virus against the new mutations.

Chapter 2

The Year 2020

Leena

It is a new year and still, we can't sit relaxed as the reports of mutations come over from all over the world. Our whole time was spent checking new strains of the virus. We don't have any life outside the lab.

Epilogue

1st January 2021.

Kumar

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 is 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