**Part 1- The Roots**

**Chapter 1: Beginnings in the Wada**

*Kasba Peth, Pune – 1943*

The sun’s first light filtered through the wooden *jaali* windows of the old **Joshi wada** in Kasba Peth, catching the faded red oxide flooring in golden fragments. The once-grand mansion, now worn and weather-beaten, still stood with quiet pride. Its teak pillars groaned under the weight of decades, and the air inside carried the scent of sandalwood, dried tulsi leaves, and yesterday’s cooked rice.

Outside, Pune stirred to life. A distant *ghanta* chimed from the Kasba Ganpati temple. The clatter of wooden wheels and bullock bells echoed from the narrow alleys, and somewhere near Shaniwarwada, a hawker sang out, “*Bhaji-pala! Taaza bhaji!*”

Inside the wada, the stillness of dawn was broken by the faint whimper of a newborn.

In a dim, cramped side room of the wada’s second floor, **Rukminibai** lay on a cotton mattress, her thin frame swaddled in a faded green sari, damp with the effort of labour. Her hair was matted with sweat, her eyes hollow with exhaustion — not of the moment, but of years. She looked down at the small bundle in her arms, wrapped in soft old cotton, barely larger than her forearm.

“Vishwas,” she whispered. The name barely left her cracked lips. “Let this one carry what we could not.”

Fourteen children. Fourteen labours. Fourteen chances at a better tomorrow. She no longer had space for fear or delight. Only duty.

Vitthalrao, her husband, sat near the doorway, bent forward on a low wooden stool, his calloused hands rubbing his temples. A Railway worker now mostly without work, he had seen more strikes than celebrations in recent years. The British still held power, but the air in Maharashtra was thick with whispers of Gandhi, Quit India, ration lines, and vanished sons.

“Drink some water, Bai,” he said softly, offering her a brass tumbler.

She sipped and leaned back against the wall. Her eyes never left the baby’s face.

“Fourteenth child in a room meant for five,” she muttered. “This wada’s walls won’t stretch further, Vitthala.”

He smiled faintly, wiping sweat from his brow. “Our dreams will.”

She laughed — a dry, bitter laugh. “Dreams do not buy rice. Dreams do not stop a fever.”

He did not reply.

In the courtyard below, the sounds of other families began to rise — children chasing each other barefoot, a grandmother grinding masala, the clang of brass vessels. Life in the wada did not pause for anyone’s pain or joy. It simply moved — relentlessly.

**1945 — The Day Nirmala Left**

By 1945, the wada’s walls had darkened with damp, but its soul remained alive. It echoed with the calls of cousins, the rustle of sarees hung to dry, the thrum of shared gossip, and the occasional burst of radio static when someone managed to catch a broadcast from Bombay.

In the center room, sunlight streamed through green glass panes, casting a kaleidoscope on the stone floor. **Nirmala**, the eldest child, sat cross-legged before a half-filled steel trunk, folding her sarees with quiet precision. Her eyes were sharp, calm. At twenty, she had the grace of a woman raised in scarcity and the determination of one who intended to escape it.

Today, she was to leave for **Wardha** — as the new bride of **Gopinath Rao**, the *Deputy Collector posted in Wardha near Nagpur*.

He was educated, respected, and from a family far removed from the narrow lanes of Kasba Peth. The alliance had come through a distant relative — a miracle the family had not dared to hope for. In the wada’s eyes, Nirmala had married into a world they only read about in Marathi magazines.

Around her, her younger siblings watched in a mix of wonder and silent sorrow.

Little **Vishwas**, now two years old, stood near the door, chubby fingers gripping the frame. His big black eyes followed Nirmala’s every move.

“Akka...” he asked softly. *Are you going?*

She looked up and smiled, folding one last *Paithani* with care. Then she walked over, knelt, and cupped his cheek in her palm.

“Yes, chinna,” she whispered, “but not forever. When the cotton blooms and the wind smells of mangoes, I will come back. I promise.”

He nodded, though he did not fully understand. He clung to her sari’s edge for a second longer before Shanta, another sister, pulled him gently back.

At the threshold, **Gopinath Rao** stood tall, wearing a crisp white kurta. His presence was quiet but commanding. He carried the calm of someone used to giving orders — but also the humility of a man raised in principles.

Vitthalrao stepped forward and folded his hands.

“You’re taking our gem, Collector-Saheb,” he said with soft pride. “Take care of her.”

Gopinath folded his hands in return. “I will, Buwa. Nirmala is part of your soul — and now mine. She will have every respect and dignity.”

Rukminibai, wiping a tear from the corner of her eye, added with gentle firmness, “And you have married all of us, not just her. Do not forget that.”

“I won’t,” he said, bowing slightly.

Outside, a tanga waited with two steel trunks and a folded brass lota tied in a cloth bundle. Neighbours stood along the balconies, whispering. A bride going to Wardha — to a *Deputy Collector*! That was not marriage; it was an escape from the wada’s endless grind.

As the tanga clattered off toward Pune station, the wada exhaled a long, slow breath.

**That Night in the Wada**

That evening, the rain whispered gently on the tiled roof. The wada grew quiet — not asleep, just... stiller.

Rukminibai sat beside the *tulsi vrindavan*, murmuring a Marathi abhang, fingers rolling dried rice in a steel plate. She looked older that night — not just in body, but in spirit. Something had shifted.

Vitthalrao sat nearby, oiling a rusted lantern. The flame inside flickered, casting shadows on the wall beams.

Vishwas lay on a straw mat, eyes open, staring at the ceiling.

“She goes?” he asked softly, his baby voice unsure.

“Yes,” said Vitthalrao. “To a place far from here. Near Nagpur. But she will remember you.”

“Me also go?” Vishwas asked after a pause.

Vitthalrao chuckled, then leaned over.

“One day, my boy. Not just to Wardha. You will go even farther. Beyond what I can imagine.”

A breeze passed through the open jaali, rustling the papers tacked to the wall.

The wada, with all its crumbling beauty and echoes of past lives, seemed to hold its breath.

For in that old house — beneath beams soaked with years of struggle and whispers — a small boy named Vishwas had begun his quiet journey. Not yet a man, not yet a hope.

But something had shifted in the silence.

**Chapter 2: The Journey East**

**Wardha, 1950.**

Five years had passed since Nirmala had boarded that tanga outside the old Joshi wada in Kasba Peth. The faded walls of the wada still stood, still echoed with the chaos of shared lives, but something in her life had changed irreversibly.

Now, she had returned — as promised.

But this time, she was not alone. She came not as the daughter of the house, but as a woman transformed — wife of **Gopinath, Deputy Collector**, and caretaker of a new world in **Wardha**, near Nagpur.

She had come to take **three of her younger brothers** with her. Years of saving, adjusting, building a modest but secure life with Gopinath had led to this day. She and her husband had spoken about it many times — about the hunger they remembered, the narrow walls of the wada, the dreams that kept colliding with the ceiling.

Now they were ready — to offer these boys something more.

A life with **books**, with **space**, with **milk in the mornings** and **sleep without mosquitoes**. A life where they could read, grow, and breathe without feeling the weight of fourteen lives packed into one wada.

The night before the departure, **Rukminibai** moved like a shadow through the upper room of the wada, packing the boys’ jute satchels with the care only a mother could offer. She did not say much — just sniffled now and then, adjusting a fold of cloth, checking the stitching on a torn sleeve, slipping in a little pouch of jaggery and **chivda** for the journey.

Her fingers trembled over each lunchbox, pausing as if blessing them.

Downstairs, **Vitthalrao** sat cross-legged near the tulsi vrindavan, sharpening a pencil with a blade, lost in thought. His decision was made.

“I’ll go with them,” he said suddenly that morning, startling Rukminibai who sat oiling Vishwas’s hair. “Not just to hand them over. I want to see where my daughter lives now. I want to know… where my sons will become men.”

She nodded, too proud to show relief, too worried to protest.

At **Pune Railway Station**, the red-tiled platform bustled with vendors, coolies in red caps, children clutching mango slices, and cries of “*Cutting chai!*” The **Deccan Express to Nagpur** stood at the platform, its iron belly heaving with steam.

In the middle of this storm stood **Vitthalrao** with his three sons — **Vishwas**, **Narayan**, and **Suresh** — holding worn cloth bags, three steel tiffin is packed tightly with **poha**, **chiwda**, peanuts and **gur** wrapped in newspaper.

They were dressed in their best — simple khadi shirts, short pants, hair slicked back with coconut oil.

Around them was a stillness. That unique silence families feel when something big is changing — something that feels like both loss and a gift.

As the train began to rumble forward, Vishwas pressed his face to the window grill. He tried to capture it all: the chaiwala, the long platform, the temple dome near Camp, and somewhere behind, the old wada — now shrinking, fading into the smoke of memory.

The journey was slow and winding. At every small station, Vitthalrao bought oranges, or warm *batata vadas*, or just sat quietly. The boys dozed on and off, heads falling over each other, shoes slipping off.

Now and then, he would murmur a line:

“*God will see to everything... Study well and become something. Do not waste this.*”

There was no preaching, only a quiet insistence — like he was handing over his last hopes without asking for anything in return.

When they reached **Wardha Junction**, the sun was strong, and the air smelled of red soil and neem. The platform was quieter, slower than Pune.

But in that moment, **Nirmala stood like a lighthouse**, her green sari billowing slightly, a warm smile breaking through her disciplined poise.

She rushed forward.

She hugged **Vitthalrao first** — something she had not done in years — and he closed his eyes for a moment longer than usual.

Then she turned to the boys. “*Vishwas! Suresh! Arre, look at you — you have all grown so much!*”

She cupped Vishwas’s chin, looked into his wide eyes, and said softly, “You are not going back. Not for now. This is your world now.”

Standing a few feet behind was **Gopinath**, dressed in his government whites, Gandhi cap neatly pressed, leather-bound diary tucked under his arm. His face broke into a kind, patient smile.

“Welcome, boys,” he said, gently. “Your new home is ready.”

Their home in Wardha was not a bungalow — just a modest *Collector’s quarters* behind the tahsil office. But to the boys, it was a palace.

A small, clean room with two *charpais*, a shelf lined with books in English and Marathi, a calendar with Nehru’s face, and a kitchen that always smelled of fresh **Dal-Rice** and **ghee**.

Vitthalrao stayed two nights.

He watched Nirmala wash their uniforms herself. He saw Gopinath sit down with the boys and explain the difference between “discipline” and “fear.” He noticed the basket of oranges kept just for them. He noticed the silence — the kind that allowed thought, not suffocation.

He said little.

But on the **third morning**, standing near the Wardha station, Vitthalrao placed his rough hand on each boy’s shoulder.

“This is your new start,” he said, voice hoarse with dust and emotion. “Do not look back. Make your *Tai* proud. And make me forget the mill’s whistle.”

Vishwas wanted to say something. But his throat had a lump, and his eyes refused to blink.

So, he just nodded, holding his father’s hand for a second longer — longer than he ever had before.

As the train back to Pune pulled out, Vitthalrao leaned slightly from the door, watching his children recede — like he was leaving something more than his sons behind.

Nirmala stood on the platform with the boys, her hand resting on Vishwas’s head.

The air around them was warm and quiet.

Something within them had shifted.

They were no longer just **children of a chawl**.

They were now **wards of courage**, children of faith, brothers of a woman who had fought her way to dignity — and who now held the door open for them.

A new chapter had begun.

**Chapter 3: The Making of Vishwas (1950–1964, Wardha–Amravati)**

That evening in Wardha, as the family gathered on the cool stone floor for dinner, Gopinath’s booming laugh echoed through the modest home. The siblings — Vishwas and his elder brothers — shared stories over warm chapatis and steaming dal.

“Remember that lemon ice vendor near the bus stand?” chuckled one of the brothers. “He used to yell, ‘Barf ka gola, ek rupaye mein do!’”

Another laughed. “And how Vishwas slipped into that gutter chasing him?”

Laughter rippled around. Even Vishwas grinned, cheeks red. Amid the teasing, Nirmala placed a gentle hand on his shoulder.

“Now you will go to school, Vishwas. You will have food, books… and a future,” she said with quiet determination.

Her voice, firm yet full of hope, stirred something unfamiliar in him — belief.

**The New Beginning in Wardha**

The next morning, Vishwas wore his first proper school uniform — a clean white shirt and khaki shorts. He felt like a stranger in his own skin, unsure whether the neatness belonged to him. He walked nervously through the red-soil lanes of Wardha, holding an old satchel that had once belonged to Harish.

The school had whitewashed walls, a squeaky iron gate, and a yard shaded by neem trees. Inside, a teacher with silver-framed glasses looked up and smiled.

“You must be Vishwas,” he said, voice warm. “Come, we’ve been expecting you.”

Vishwas nodded, silent but alert. At the back of the room, near a window, he took his place — and with the first stroke of chalk on the blackboard, something inside him stirred. Letters, words… they no longer felt foreign. They felt like invitations.

**Growing Roots and Bonds**

Weeks passed. Vishwas fell into rhythm — school in the mornings, homework in the evenings, chores on weekends. Nirmala, ever gentle, ensured he never missed a meal, always asked about his lessons. Gopinath, stern but kind, would nod approvingly as Vishwas read aloud during dinner.

It was Anita, now a teenager, who became his quiet supporter. She peeked into his notebook one evening as rain poured outside and lamps flickered.

“Is that a poem?” she asked, tilting her head.

“Maybe,” he mumbled, shielding the page.

She read aloud; her voice careful:

“Ek nayi subah ke sapne… ek purani raat ka dard…”

“That’s beautiful,” she said. “You are different, Vishwas. In a good way.”

That simple validation — from someone he respected — made his heart thud in his chest.

Vinita, the middle child, often sat beside him while doing her schoolwork, occasionally asking him questions and giggling when he got mock serious. And little Harish — lively, full of questions — would tug at his arm and ask him to read from comics or explain poems he did not understand.

Over time, the siblings did not just become companions. They became his anchor.

**A Move to Amravati**

When Gopinath was transferred to Amravati in 1955, the whole family packed up their lives in Wardha. The new home was slightly larger, on the outskirts of the city, surrounded by tamarind trees and fields. The air smelled different — drier, tinged with dust and distant train smoke.

Vishwas adapted quickly. His new school in Amravati had a larger library, and he devoured books — Premchand, Nirala, Mahadevi Verma. His essays began to be read aloud in class. His teachers noticed.

“Your writing is honest,” said Mr. Deshmukh, his Hindi teacher. “It does not pretend. That is rare.”

Back home, Anita sometimes read aloud from his notebooks. Vinita copied his handwriting. And Harish proudly declared at school that his “big brother writes books.”

**Dreams and Doubts**

By the early 1960s, Vishwas had grown tall, soft-spoken, and reflective. His evenings were spent scribbling poems under the mango tree or on the terrace, Harish sprawled beside him, asking, “Will you be famous someday?”

Vishwas would smile. “I just want to write. That is enough.”

One evening, as he studied for his final school exams, Nirmala sat across from him, darning a shirt.

“You’ve grown,” she said. “From the boy who hardly spoke… to

**Chapter 4- The Glance That Changed Everything**

The May sun in Pune pressed gently on the city — not fierce, but insistent. In the Shivajinagar chawl, life unfolded in worn, familiar rhythms. Buckets clanged near the shared tap, radios crackled old Lata tunes, and the air was thick with turmeric, soap, and the metallic scent of rusted dreams.

Vishwas was back.

After earning a First-Class degree in Hindi Literature from Nagpur, he had taken up a clerical job at the Khadki Ordnance Factory. His days disappeared between ink-stamped ledgers and brown envelopes; his nights bloomed in borrowed books and loose pages of self-written poems. He lived alone in a small, rented room, owned little, missed no one — but felt strangely whole. Free. Anchored by purpose.

And then it happened — the glance.

He had stepped out for an evening walk, escaping the heat of his narrow room. The sky above Pune had turned molten — orange melting into grey. A breeze stirred, heavy with the promise of rain.

Near the common tap, she stood.

She was filling a brass *lota*, murmuring something to a younger girl. A simple purple cotton sari draped around her slender frame. Hair tied back in a precise braid. No bangles, no earrings — only a small black bindi and those eyes.

Sharp. Still. Curious.

She looked up. Their eyes met — only for a second.

But something shifted.

The breeze changed direction. Time paused just long enough to leave a soft tremble between them. A silent hum. Then she looked away. He did too. But the tremor remained.

Over the following days, he saw her again. And again.

At the tap. Near the corner temple. Waiting by the entrance of the chawl as the vegetable vendor yelled out prices.

Neighbours spoke in hushed tones — her name was Sunita. Her father, Rajaram, a retired railway guard, was said to be a man of sharp words and tighter principles. They had come from Latur recently, after some family misfortune.

Vishwas did not probe. But he noticed.

How she worked beside her mother without complaint. How she guided her younger siblings without scolding. How her laugh — rare but sudden — escaped like a bird startled from silence.

Then, one afternoon at the grocer’s, their fingers brushed as they reached for the same pouch of jaggery.

“Maaf karo,” she said softly, pulling her hand back.

He smiled. “Aap lijiye. Please… you take it.”

A pause. A nod.

“Thank you,” she replied, her voice low, and left.

That night, Vishwas opened his diary and wrote:  
*"Kabhi kabhi ek awaaz nahi… ek sanket se hi kahaani shuru hoti hai."*  
(Sometimes it is not a voice — just a signal — that begins a story.)

Their silence, now, was no longer empty. It held meaning.

She began to wear brighter colors. He started returning home earlier. She once left a marigold on the temple bench where he wrote in the evenings.

He saw it. Smiled. And later, with a piece of chalk, wrote on the same bench:  
*"Gulab nahi… par ek marigold bhi dil chhoo sakta hai."*  
(Not a rose, but even a marigold can touch the heart.)

But silence, in a chawl, is never truly private.

One evening, Rajaram spotted Vishwas standing near the chawl’s entrance. Their eyes met — Rajaram’s gaze was cold, interrogating. That night raised voices echoed from Sunita’s home.

“She’s becoming too modern,” Rajaram snapped. “Talking to strangers now? Who is he? No land, no family name. Just a clerk in a rented room!”

Her mother’s voice was calmer. “He is respectful. Educated.”

“That won’t feed her!” Rajaram thundered. “We’re not giving our daughter to a man who owns nothing but paper and ink.”

Vishwas sat alone that night, staring at the flickering lamp on his desk.

No land. No name. No ornaments to offer.

Just one thing: his resolve.

He wrote to his sister Nirmala in Nagpur:  
*"Tai… I have met someone. I do not know what the future holds, but I want to try. I will earn their trust."*

He began studying for the Public Service Commission exams alongside his factory job. Saved every rupee. Gave tuition to chawl children in the evenings. Skipped tea, new clothes, movies. He waited.

And then, one dusky afternoon, a gentle knock on his door.

Sunita’s mother.

She stepped inside hesitantly, holding a small steel *dabba*. “Modaks,” she said. “Sunita made them.”

Vishwas stood up, confused.

“She says she won’t marry anyone else,” her mother said, voice steadier now. “And Rajaram… he is a proud man. But not blind. He sees your truth. He has agreed. Quietly.”

He struggled to speak. “She… she wants this too?”

A smile. “Yes. With all her heart.”

The wedding took place on a crisp February morning in 1966, inside a quiet temple near Appa Balwant Chowk.

No shehnai. No long procession. No velvet tents or gold-threaded sherwanis.

Just family. Neighbors. A few kind souls.

Sunita wore a green *nauvari*, borrowed from a cousin. Bangles of green glass. A single gold *mangalsutra*, barely gleaming in the morning light.

Vishwas wore a clean white kurta. A trimmed moustache. And a smile that refused to leave his face.

As the priest chanted the sacred verses, Sunita looked at him — not shyly, but with the calm strength of someone choosing her path.

Rajaram stood at the back. Arms crossed. Watching everything.

But when the *kanyadaan* moment came, he stepped forward. Held Sunita’s hand and placed it in Vishwas’s.

His voice low, but steady. “See that she is happy. That is all I ask.”

That night, in the small room they now shared — half empty, but full of promise — they sat together on a thin cotton mattress.

A diya flickered in the corner. The scent of *mogra* clung gently to her hair.

“I don’t have a cupboard,” he said, a little embarrassed. “Only a trunk. But I will make space for your books.”

She smiled, brushing her *pallu* aside.

“And I don’t own silk saris,” she replied. “But I’ll keep your poetry safe.”

He looked at her, eyes full. “No one’s ever said that to me before.”

She leaned closer.

“Then you better get used to it,” she whispered.

**Chapter 5: New Beginnings, Tiny Paws & Little Feet**

Pune, Winter of 1967.

It was a crisp winter morning when Vishwas and Sunita moved into their new home — a modest but spotless government-allotted quarter within the sprawling Ordnance Factory colony near Pune. The walls were bare. The furniture, minimal. The kitchen smelled faintly of fresh haldi and the metallic tang of new steel utensils. And yet, to Vishwas and Sunita, it felt like a palace.

Their first evening in the house was simple. A kerosene stove hissed softly in the corner while Sunita stirred poha, the mustard seeds crackling in hot oil. Vishwas sat cross-legged on the cool floor, the *Sakal* spread across his lap.

“Petrol prices up again,” he muttered. “Two annas more.”

From the kitchen, Sunita chuckled. “Then maybe you’ll finally stop dreaming of that Lambretta scooter.”

He grinned. “It is not a dream; it is a goal. You will see. One day we will ride past Lakshmi Road like royalty.”

Later, they sat side by side on their small verandah, sipping hot tea from steel cups, watching the orange factory lights blink in the distance.

Sunita exhaled, voice low. “Feels like our own world now.”

Vishwas nodded. “Our own. At last.”

Weeks passed. Vishwas settled into a quiet rhythm — mornings at the factory office, chai breaks with coworkers under the banyan tree, evenings spent either scribbling into his worn diary or taking long, meandering walks with Sunita after dinner.

It was during one of those walks, under a violet dusk sky, that he spotted a litter of puppies near the colony gate. One tiny, scruffy pup with floppy ears and cautious eyes came tumbling out from behind a bush, headed straight toward him.

Sunita laughed. “He’s following you.”

“Then he’s got taste,” Vishwas replied, bending down to scoop him up.

Just like that, the puppy was theirs.

They named him Sheroo — part joke, part hope. The name of a lion for a creature who looked more like a squirrel on stilts. But Sheroo grew quickly into his name — mischievous, fiercely loyal, and utterly convinced he was the guardian of 32-B. He chewed up Vishwas’s Bata slippers with surgical precision, barked furiously at the postman as if defending national secrets, and chased invisible enemies in wide, dramatic circles across the verandah. But more than anything else, he was theirs — the first heart to fill that little house with unexpected joy.

One evening, Vishwas returned home earlier than usual. The house was quiet. Too quiet. In the kitchen, he found Sunita sitting on the floor, back against the wall, one hand resting on her stomach.

“You’re home early,” she said, her voice a whisper.

Vishwas knelt, concerned. “Are you alright?”

She looked up at him, eyes uncertain. “I… I think I might be expecting.”

The newspaper slipped from his hand. He blinked. “What?”

“I am not sure. But… it has been more than a month. And I feel… different.”

Vishwas sat beside her slowly, the words settling into his bones. Then, he let out a soft laugh — not loud, but full of wonder.

“Well,” he said, looking over at Sheroo curled in the corner, “looks like we’ll have to train someone to be a big brother.”

The next few months passed in a gentle whirlwind — doctor visits, whispered phone calls to elders, small gifts from neighbours, and age-old remedies brought by Sunita’s mother, who came to stay for a while. Laddoos made of *gond*, soaked almonds, warm turmeric milk — the kitchen brimmed with both nourishment and love.

Sheroo, meanwhile, grew visibly jealous. He began sleeping closer to Sunita’s pillow, growling softly whenever someone lingered too long near her.

Vishwas, who once read poetry for himself, now did so for two. Every evening, he would sit on the edge of the cot, one hand resting lightly on Sunita’s growing belly, the other flipping pages of Neruda or Tagore.

One night, under the slow whir of the ceiling fan, as street dogs barked in the distance and the colony lights dimmed into sleep, he whispered, “Do you think it’ll be a boy or a girl?”

Sunita, her eyes already closed, smiled. “Happy and healthy — that’s enough.”

He leaned over, kissed her forehead, and whispered to the tiny life inside, “We are waiting, little one. Your world is ready.”

And so, with no garlands left and no rituals pending, their real journey began — one of quiet companionship, laughter in scarcity, tea in shared steel cups, and poetry written between cooking and laundry.

**Part 2- He Plays with Hope**

**Chapter 1- The Courage in His Smile**

***August 10, 1967 – A Mother's First Battle***

The labour had been long. Sunita was exhausted — her body trembling from the effort, her breath still shallow, her skin glistening with sweat. But when the nurse finally placed the tiny, warm bundle into her arms, the world outside the hospital room seemed to vanish.

A weightless silence fell around her. Just her and her baby.

His skin was soft like rose petals. His tiny fingers, barely formed, opened and closed with delicate reflex. She slipped her index finger into his hand — and he held on, as if anchoring himself to this world.

That simple touch shattered her.

Tears welled up in her eyes — not from pain, not from fear, but from something much deeper. An unspeakable love. A bond so fierce and immediate that it felt like her heart had jumped out of her chest and curled itself into this little being.

**"My son,"** she whispered, her voice cracking with reverence. **"My beautiful, brave little boy."**

But just as the moment began to settle, a pair of footsteps approached — measured, purposeful. Vishwas looked up, still smiling, as the doctor walked in holding an X-ray. His face was neutral, but not unreadable. Something had changed in the room. Sunita sensed it instantly.

The doctor cleared his throat gently.  
**“There’s something we need to talk about.”**

Sunita’s body tensed. She instinctively pulled her baby closer.

**“Your son,”** the doctor began, his voice gentle, clinical, but not cold, **“has a condition… a physical deformity in his right foot. It’s called clubfoot.”**

The word sliced through the air like a blade.

**Clubfoot?**  
Sunita blinked. She turned toward Vishwas, who stood frozen, one hand on the cot rail. His face had gone pale.

The doctor continued, explaining bones and tendons, surgery and timelines, rods and plaster.

But Sunita barely heard the words. Her ears rang. Her heart clenched. Her mind rebelled.

**No. Not him. Not my perfect baby.**

She looked down. He was still there. Still warm, still sleeping. His chest rose and fell peacefully. How could something be wrong with him?

Tears streamed down her face as she placed a trembling kiss on her baby’s forehead.  
**“It doesn’t matter,”** she whispered fiercely. **“You are ours. You are perfect.”**

Vishwas stepped closer, gently placing a hand on her shoulder. His voice was hoarse.  
**“What… what does this mean?”** he asked the doctor. **“Will he ever walk?”**

The doctor hesitated, then nodded.  
**“With proper treatment, yes. But it will be a long road. Surgery within six months. Casts. Physiotherapy. It won’t be easy.”**

Vishwas’s fingers curled around the cot rail tighter.  
**“We’ll do whatever it takes.”**

Sunita nodded. Her tears hadn’t stopped, but her voice grew steadier.  
**“He will walk. He will run. Climb trees. Fall. Laugh. Like every other child. We’ll make it happen.”**

**February 5, 1968 — Surgery Day**

The morning sky outside the hospital was grey, like an omen. Inside, the air smelled of bleach, floor polish, and nerves. The paediatric surgical wing was quiet except for the occasional shuffle of nurses and a distant cry.

Sunita sat in a straight-backed chair, holding Aditya close to her chest. He was heavier now, more aware. He looked up at her with wide eyes, as if sensing something unusual.

She held him tighter, whispering lullabies against his hair.

**"You’re going to be okay, my jaanu. You’re so strong, stronger than Mummy. Just sleep a little, okay?”**

Vishwas stood at the window, watching out of glass. He turned when the nurse arrived.

**“It’s time,”** she said softly.

Sunita’s breath caught. Her arms instinctively tightened around Aditya. Her lips trembled against his forehead.

**“No… not yet. Just… one more minute.”**

The nurse nodded kindly and stepped aside.

Vishwas knelt beside them, brushing the baby’s cheek with his finger.  
**“We promised him, Sunita. We said we’d do this together.”**

She looked up at him. Her eyes were red-rimmed, full of fear.  
**“What if he feels pain and thinks we let it happen? What if… what if something goes wrong, Vishwas?”**

He didn’t speak immediately. Instead, he placed his hand over hers — both holding their son — and said quietly,  
**“We’ll carry him through it. And if he falls, we’ll fall with him. But we’ll rise too. Together.”**

She nodded. Slowly. Then kissed Aditya one last time before letting the nurse take him.

As the doors to the operation theatre closed, Sunita turned and buried her face into Vishwas’s chest. And for a few long moments, all they could do was hold on to each other.

**Post-Surgery — The First Smile**

Three hours later, the surgeon stepped out. His surgical cap hung loosely, sweat still on his brow.

**“It went well. He’s stable. The procedure was successful — tendon release, alignment, rods inserted. He’s in recovery.”**

Sunita and Vishwas exhaled together. A dam had burst inside them.

When they walked into the recovery room, their hearts broke again — but this time, in awe.

Aditya lay on a small hospital bed, the lower half of his body engulfed in white plaster. Wires crisscrossed his chest, beeping softly. He looked impossibly small, a fragile warrior wrapped in armour.

Sunita rushed to his side.  
**“My baby… my brave boy…”**

She took his hand, kissed it over and over, her tears falling freely now.

And then… his eyelids fluttered.

He blinked once. Twice. Confused by the lights. His mouth opened slightly. And then… he smiled.

A small, tired, peaceful smile.

**“Vishwas!”** Sunita gasped, her voice breaking with joy. **“He smiled! He’s in pain… and he still smiled!”**

Vishwas reached out, resting a hand on the baby’s tiny chest.  
**“He’s stronger than us both combined,”** he whispered.

The surgeon paused at the door and smiled.  
**“He’s one of the bravest babies I’ve seen. That smile? That’s courage.”**

**The Hard Days and the Dog Who Stayed**

The nights were the hardest.

Aditya cried in his sleep, shifting uncomfortably in his cast. Sunita would rise each time, half-asleep, rocking him, humming lullabies laced with tears.

**“You rest,”** Vishwas would say.  
**“I will… after he does,”** she’d whisper.

They learned to bathe him gently, to change his clothes without disturbing the plaster. Every movement was deliberate, every touch filled with love and fear.

Sheroo, their loyal dog, seemed to sense it all. He sat by Aditya’s crib each night, watching protectively.

**“Sheroo’s guarding the prince,”** Vishwas said one evening. **“Shift change in ten minutes.”**

Sunita chuckled through her exhaustion.  
**“He never leaves his post.”**

By the second week, Aditya smiled more. He babbled at Sheroo’s wagging tail, grasped at his mother’s hair, cooed when his father whistled.

**“He doesn’t play with toys,”** Sunita once said, rocking him. **“He plays with hope.”**

Every plaster change was a test — but they faced it as a team. Sunita by his head, whispering lullabies. Vishwas at his feet, holding his tiny toes. Aditya always cried. But he never screamed.

**The Final Cast — The First Kick**

Six months later, the orthopaedic surgeon leaned over Aditya one last time.  
**“Let’s take that cast off, champ. Let’s see what you’ve got.”**

Sunita held her breath, her hands trembling as the plaster was sawed gently away. Aditya winced, tensed… but didn’t cry.

The doctor stepped back, smiling.

**“The leg looks perfect. Aligned. Rods out cleanly. You’ll need physio, but… he’ll walk.”**

Vishwas dropped to his knees beside the cot.

**“Hey, champ,”** he said, eyes brimming. **“Want to try a kick?”**

Aditya looked down at his freed leg, lifted it slowly… and kicked. A soft, wobbly, glorious kick into the air.

Sunita gasped, hand to mouth.  
**“He kicked, Vishwas. He really kicked.”**

Vishwas laughed through tears.  
**“That’s it, my boy. First of many.”**

**The Lesson, He Gave Them**

In the months that followed, they came to realize something.

Courage is not a roar.  
It’s not armour or sword.

Sometimes, courage is a baby smiling through plaster.  
Sometimes, it’s a mother staying awake for nights without complaint.  
Sometimes, it’s a father swallowing his fear to speak strength into the silence.

Vishwas often leaned over the crib at night, stroking his son's cheek.

**“You’re already teaching us how to live, little warrior,”** he’d whisper.

And in that soft darkness, filled with dreams and healing, they found something more enduring than comfort.

They found *courage*.

**Chapter 2- At the Age of Three**

When Aditya turned three, a new chapter unfolded — kindergarten. A world of alphabets, crayons, tiffin boxes, and chaos. He wore a sky-blue shirt, too big for his tiny frame, and carried a red schoolbag almost half his size. But what stood out most wasn’t his uniform — it was the soft limp in his walk, the echo of his earliest battle.

His leg, though surgically corrected, was still regaining strength. Every step he took was a small triumph. But in the wild, innocent world of children, differences stand out — and kindness is often absent.

The school corridors echoed with laughter — some pure and joyous, others sharp, like glass splinters.  
Some children noticed his limp and pointed.  
A few giggled.  
Others, more thoughtless, began to whisper behind cupped palms.

One day, Sunita noticed something was off the moment Aditya walked in. He didn’t run to Sheroo. He didn’t ask for his favourite story. His eyes were downcast, and his shoulders slumped with a heaviness far too big for a child.

She knelt in front of him, brushing a strand of hair from his forehead.  
**"Aditya, what happened today at school?"**

He avoided her eyes. His tiny fingers picked at the strap of his bag.

**"They laughed at me… because I walk funny. They said I look broken,"** he whispered.

Her breath caught. A sharp pain shot through her chest. She gently pulled him into her arms, holding him tightly as though her warmth could erase the words he’d heard.

**"Oh, my baby… you are not broken. You’re whole — you’re brave. Do you know how strong you are? Those children don’t understand yet. But we do."**

Vishwas, who had just stepped into the room, paused when he heard her voice. Quietly, he walked over, knelt beside them, and placed his palm on Aditya’s back.

**"You know,"** he said softly, **"heroes aren’t born with capes or muscles. Heroes are made. They become strong by walking through pain. You’ve already fought battles most grown-ups never face. That limp? It’s not a weakness. It’s proof that you never gave up."**

Aditya blinked, uncertain. But in that moment, held between his parents, he felt something shift — a flicker of strength, not just from them, but within himself.

**In Primary School**

By the time Aditya turned six and stepped into the first grade, something beautiful had begun to take shape — his stride. The limp that once made him wobble across the floor like a wounded bird had softened into a gentle sway. He could walk with more balance now, chase Sheroo down the narrow garden path, and even attempt hopscotch with shy excitement when the neighbourhood kids played. His confidence had started to sprout like the first green leaf after a harsh winter.

But just as one cloud lifted, another began to form — slowly, silently, and with unsettling precision.

One morning, as Sunita helped Aditya button his school shirt, she noticed something odd. He was struggling to look straight into the mirror. His right eye seemed to drift, slightly inward, as if distracted by a thought it couldn’t shake off.

“Hold still for a second, sweetheart,” she said, pausing to gently tilt his chin up toward the light.

Aditya blinked, obedient and unaware.

She leaned in, examining more closely. “Look at Mama’s nose,” she instructed softly.

He did, but the misalignment was clear now. His eyes — once perfectly synchronized — no longer looked in the same direction.

For a moment, Sunita froze. She felt the back of her neck tighten, a thin line of fear creeping up her spine. She didn’t want to believe what she saw. Maybe it was fatigue. Maybe he didn’t sleep well. Maybe it was nothing.

But over the next few days, the inward drift of his eye became undeniable — especially when he was tired or concentrating. The squint, subtle but persistent, was now part of his expression.

They went to the ophthalmologist. The sterile white walls of the clinic, the bright eye charts, the mechanical clicking of the eye testing machines — it all reminded her too much of the hospitals from years ago.

After a detailed examination, the doctor looked up and delivered the verdict.

“He’s developed a squint — medically, we call it strabismus,” he said calmly. “It’s likely a consequence of early neurological strain or trauma. The good news is — it’s correctable. But he will need surgery.”

Sunita sat motionless, her fingers tightening around the fabric of her saree. Another surgery. Another waiting room. Another battle.

As if the universe had decided her son would earn his strength one scar at a time.

That evening, back at home, she tried to keep things cheerful. She helped Aditya with his schoolwork, made his favourite palak paratha for dinner, and let him stay up an extra half-hour to play with Sheroo. But the ache in her heart didn’t go away.

Things at school were getting harder too.

The same children who had once pointed at his limp now found something new to whisper about. Some kids giggled behind cupped hands, mimicking the way he tilted his head to focus. A few more vocal ones called him “cross-eyes” and “wobbly walker.”

He never cried in front of them.

But one afternoon, when he returned from school and quietly sat on the swing in the verandah, Sunita knew something had broken.

She walked out slowly and sat beside him. The swing creaked under her weight, matching the rhythm of the warm breeze. Aditya didn’t speak. He kept looking down at his socks.

Sunita placed her hand on his back gently, drawing slow circles between his shoulders.

“Want to tell Mama what happened?”

He shook his head at first, lips pressed tightly together, but his eyes shimmered with unshed tears.

She waited.

And then, in a voice so small it could have been the wind itself, he asked:

“Mama… why don’t they like me? Why am I so different?”

The words hit her like a blow to the chest. She blinked quickly, fighting the sting behind her eyes.

“Oh, my love…” she whispered, turning toward him, cupping his cheeks in her palms.

“You are not less. Do you hear me? Being different doesn’t mean something is wrong. Sometimes, the brightest stars are the ones that look a little different in the sky. You… you are one of those stars.”

He blinked slowly, digesting her words.

“But… I don’t want to be different anymore.”

Sunita bit her lip to keep her own emotions from spilling. She pulled him into her lap, held him tightly, and rested her chin on his head.

“I know. And I wish I could make it all go away, Aditya. But what makes you different now… is what will make you remarkable someday.”

He leaned into her, quiet and still.

After a while, he asked, almost in a whisper, “Will I have to go to the hospital again?”

Sunita nodded gently. “Yes, love. There will be another surgery. But we’ll be with you — every second. Every step. You’re never alone in this.”

He nodded slowly. And for the first time in days, he smiled. Just a little.

**The Second Surgery**

The eye surgery was scheduled for March 1973, just before the summer heat began to rise in Nagpur. It was the same hospital. The same sharp scent of antiseptic in the hallways. But everything felt different this time — heavier.

Aditya, now five and a half, understood more. He asked questions. He looked around warily. He held Sunita’s hand tighter. And Sunita understood more too — that it wasn’t just his body that needed tending to. It was his heart. His spirit. His confidence.

On the morning of the procedure, Sunita sat on his hospital bed, brushing his soft hair back with her fingers, humming the lullaby she used to sing when he was an infant. He clutched her hand like it was his anchor.

A nurse walked in quietly with a small pair of scissors.

“We’ll need to trim his eyelashes before surgery,” she said with a warm smile.

Sunita’s heart twisted.

His lashes — thick, black, and curled — had always been his most beautiful feature. Strangers often stopped to admire them. Even in the deepest hospitals, someone always smiled and said, *“What beautiful lashes he has!”*

As the nurse carefully trimmed them, a few strands fell into his eyes.

“Mama… it burns,” Aditya whispered, blinking rapidly.

Sunita swallowed the lump in her throat and leaned closer. “I know, baby. I know. Just a little more. I’m here. We’re all here.”

She held his hand tighter and kissed his forehead as they wheeled him away.

The surgery felt endless. Vishwas paced the corridor silently, fists clenched. Sunita sat motionless, her saree pleats bunched in her lap, murmuring prayers under her breath.

Hours later, he came out — his eyes bandaged, his body small and pale on the stretcher. He stirred slightly as they transferred him back to the room.

Sunita bent over him, brushing his hair again.

That evening, when Sheroo was allowed in for a brief visit, he padded quietly to the bed, sniffed Aditya’s bandaged face, and gently licked his fingers.

Aditya stirred, and a faint smile appeared.

Later, when Vishwas arrived with a bowl of vanilla ice cream, Aditya chuckled weakly.

“Papa… you remembered.”

“Of course,” Vishwas said softly, wiping a tear away. “How could I not?”

Recovery was slow — but it was wrapped in love.

Bedtime stories became sacred rituals. Sunita recited poems about brave tigers, soaring eagles, and clever foxes. Vishwas doodled funny cartoons on hospital napkins, drawing little stick men with huge eyelashes and tiny walking sticks, making Aditya giggle.

Sheroo curled beside the bed every night.

They brought toys — but he barely touched them.

One evening, Sunita found him in the corner of the hospital room, playing with a wooden spoon and a blanket. He had wrapped the blanket around his shoulders and held the spoon like a sword.

She watched silently as he leapt gently from foot to foot, whispering to himself, “Captain Brave Eye… going to save the kingdom…”

She turned to Vishwas and murmured, smiling through her tears, “He doesn’t need toys. He plays with hope.”

**A New Dawn**

Weeks later, the bandages came off.

The doctor adjusted the overhead light, leaned in, and smiled.

“The surgery went well. His eyes are now aligned. His vision is clearer. He’s going to be just fine.”

Sunita looked at Aditya’s face — and her breath caught.

His eyes, big and brown, shone with light and balance. The squint was gone. His gaze was direct, focused, full of quiet courage.

She placed her hands over her mouth, her voice breaking into a whisper, “He’s so handsome…”

Vishwas nodded, voice husky with pride. “Our little warrior. Look at him now.”

At home, Aditya’s steps were faster. His limp barely visible now. He raced with Sheroo in the courtyard, laughed with his mouth wide open, and looked people straight in the eye when they spoke to him.

He had been mocked, wounded, bandaged, and stitched.

But he had not just healed.

He had risen.

He had transformed.

**Chapter 3- A Bat, A Bouncer, and a Breakthrough**

**January 1981.**  
The air was crisp with winter's last breath, and the weak sun cast long slanted shadows across the playground. The school bell clanged at exactly 12:30 PM, sharp and urgent, announcing the lunch break like a trumpet before battle.

From every corner of the school building, children erupted like a flood — running, tumbling, laughing, shouting. Lunchboxes clattered open. Steel containers popped. The scent of tamarind rice, poha, and potato sabzi mingled with the dust and dried grass of the January field.

Aditya, now in **7th Standard**, walked calmly among the chaos, lunch already in his bag. He didn’t run like the others. He didn’t need to. At nearly 5’4”, he stood taller than most of his classmates. His walk, once awkward with the limp left by his childhood surgeries, had steadied. The bounce in his step had returned. His eyes, now sharp and aligned after months of treatment and care, reflected a growing self-belief. Not yet swagger — but something better. Quiet confidence.

At his side ambled his closest friend — **Ramu** — shorter, rounder, and always munching something.

“Wait till you taste this chakli, yaar,” Ramu said through a mouthful, handing him a bite.

Aditya smiled and took it. “Mmm… your Amma’s the best.”

Ramu grinned, proud. “Of course! She uses coconut oil. Secret ingredient.”

Their chatter was interrupted by loud cheers from the far side of the ground.

“Looks like a match is on,” Aditya said, eyes narrowing with interest.

Indeed. A full-blown cricket match was underway — **9th Standard vs. 10th**. A crowd had gathered already, with boys standing on the edges, some sitting on bags or climbing low walls for a better view.

“Come,” Ramu said, dragging him by the sleeve. “We’ll get a spot near the non-striker’s end. Shyam bhaiya’s playing!”

They made their way forward. Shyam, Ramu’s elder brother, was pacing near the boundary, checking field placements. The game was tense. The 10th-standard boys bowled fast — faster than what Aditya had ever seen in real life. The red leather ball zipped through the air, thudding hard into the keeper’s gloves.

“Dekh na,” Ramu whispered, wide-eyed. “That bowler… he’s a monster! They say he bowls bouncers!”

Aditya said nothing. His eyes were locked onto the pitch. The way the batters moved. The sharp crack of bat meeting ball. The art of footwork. He could almost feel the vibrations of the bat in his own hands.

It brought a memory — **his grandmother’s birthday gift**. A sleek wooden bat, slightly too big for his size, but full of dreams. He had spent hours swinging it in their small backyard, talking to himself, announcing imaginary centuries, imagining fields of spectators instead of rose bushes and laundry lines.

Just then, Shyam came rushing toward them, red-faced and breathless.

“Hey!” he barked. “We’re one short! Our opener twisted his ankle. We need a sub. NOW.”

Ramu raised his hands in mock surrender. “Not me, bhaiya! You know I’m a commentary guy, not a cricketer.”

Shyam barely listened. His eyes fell on Aditya.

“You. You’re tall. You look strong. You’ve held a bat before, right?”

Aditya froze.

“Me?” he asked, almost laughing. “No. Not with a real ball.”

Shyam didn’t care. He thrust a bat into Aditya’s hands. “You’ll do. Just watch the ball and swing. You’ll be fine. Let’s go!”

Ramu blinked. “Wait, wait—are you serious?”

But Shyam was already shouting to the others. “We’ve got our guy!”

Aditya looked down at the bat in his hands. It felt… heavy. The grain was solid, the handle taped with care. His fingers curled around it instinctively. His heart thudded in his ears.

Ramu nudged him. “Don’t die, okay?”

Aditya smiled weakly. “No promises.”

He walked slowly toward the pitch. Every step felt like a drumbeat. The boys quieted slightly, surprised to see someone new walking out. The fielders eyed him curiously. Some smirked. A few whispered, “Who’s this kid?”

The bowler — tall, lean, and with sharp features — looked annoyed. “You sure about this, bhai?” he asked Shyam. “Looks like he’s never seen a leather ball.”

“He’s got guts,” Shyam replied. “That’s enough.”

Aditya took his stance. His palms were sweaty inside the gloves. The ground seemed to tilt slightly. Everything else faded.

Just watch the ball, he told himself. Swing. Breathe.

The bowler began his run-up — fast, rhythmic, purposeful.

Thud-thud-thud-thud—

The ball was released.

A short-pitched bouncer.

It came roaring toward his upper chest — fast, rising, aimed to intimidate.

Time slowed.

Without thinking, his body turned. He pulled the bat up. Instinct kicked in.

**CRACK.**

The sound rang across the ground like a thunderclap.

The ball soared.

It sliced through the cold air, sailing high over mid-wicket, over the heads, beyond the shrub-lined boundary.

For a moment, no one moved.

Then—

“WHAATTTT!”

“Did you see that?!”

“Who IS this guy?!”

Boys from every corner cheered. Even a few teachers on duty looked up from their lunch under the banyan tree.

Shyam punched the air. Ramu shrieked, “You hit a HOOK SHOT! A bloody proper hook shot!!”

The ball took time to retrieve. When it returned, the bowler was now serious. Glaring.

Aditya took guard again.

The next ball — a full toss. Driven straight down the ground.

Then a short one — pulled behind square.

A yorker — somehow dug out and guided past point.

**The playground was alive.**

In ten minutes, Aditya had transformed. From the unknown 7th standard boy with a history of surgeries — to a cricketing sensation.

When the bell rang ending the break, a group of younger boys from 4th and 5th standards chased after him.

“Bhaiyya! You play for India one day?”

“You’re better than Gavaskar!”

Aditya laughed, breathless. For once, the spotlight felt warm, not harsh.

Ramu patted his back, beaming. “You just became a legend. I was *there*, remember that.”

That week, everything changed.

The annual **School Sports Week** began, and Aditya’s name was now everywhere. Seniors nodded in acknowledgment. Juniors pointed at him in the corridors. Even teachers gave him approving smiles.

One afternoon, while walking back from the library, Ramu tugged at his arm.

“Come, come! The high jump’s happening. It’s hilarious to watch!”

They reached the field. A small crowd had gathered. Boys were attempting to clear a four-foot bar, landing awkwardly into the pit of sawdust and cloth.

Aditya watched silently. Something stirred inside him.

“I want to try.”

Ramu turned. “What?”

“I want to jump.”

“You’ve never done this, have you?”

Aditya’s gaze was locked on the bar. “No. But I want to.”

He approached the PE teacher. “Can I try?”

The teacher glanced at him. “You’ve not signed up.”

“Please. Just one jump.”

The teacher shrugged. “Go ahead. Four feet.”

Aditya jogged back. Took a deep breath.

Ran.

Jumped.

**Cleared.**

Eyes followed him now.

The bar was raised. 4.5 feet.

He jumped again. Clean.

Now just three boys left.

**5 feet.**

He wiped sweat off his brow. The sun was hotter now. His breath came quick.

Ramu shouted, “GO, Aditya!”

He sprinted.

**Cleared.**

Only one other boy remained. The final round — **5.2 feet.**

Aditya ran hard.

Jumped—

His foot clipped the bar.

It fell.

The other boy cleared it.

Runner-up.

But as the medal was placed around his neck, the applause was thunderous. He spotted Ramu, leaping, cheering like mad.

That evening, at home—

“Papa!” he burst through the door. “I got a medal! Second in high jump!”

Vishwas stared in surprise. He took the medal gently. “This… this is beautiful, beta.”

He turned it in his hand, eyes shining. “Your first medal. I’m proud.”

Later that night, when Sunita came home from work, exhausted and dusty from the bus ride, Aditya ran to her with the medal.

“Maa! Look!”

She stared. Then blinked rapidly.

“Oh, Aditya…”

She pulled him close. Her tears soaked his collar.

The next day, **long jump and 100m sprint**.

Aditya couldn’t stay away.

Long jump: 9.2 feet. Then 9.6 feet. **First place.**

100m: Fast start, faster finish. He surged ahead.

**Gold again.**

Three medals. Three events.

As he stood on the podium, the sun behind him, medals glinting, the same classmates who once mocked his limp now clapped hard.

At home, he laid them on the table.

Vishwas clicked a photo.

Sunita put her arm around his shoulders.

“You’ve come so far,” she whispered.

Vishwas nodded. “And this is just the beginning.”

Aditya looked at the medals.

In that moment, he wasn’t the boy who limped, or squinted, or struggled in silence.

He was **Aditya** —  
A boy who had jumped higher, run faster, hit harder.  
A boy who had found his place.

And the world — once distant and out of reach — now felt possible.

**Chapter 4-When the Garden Went Quiet**

Aditya’s days were now filled with a new kind of joy. After his unexpected victories at the school’s Annual Sports Day — a silver in high jump, gold in long jump, and the winning sprint in the 100 meters — something had shifted. The shy boy with messy hair and a quiet smile was now greeted with claps and cheers during school recess. His teachers smiled more. Some even ruffled his hair affectionately as he passed.

He didn’t say much. But his heartbeat faster — not from the race, but from the invisible wings he felt now on his back.

Each afternoon, he ran home faster than the last. His legs carried him past the tea stall, past the bend in the dusty road, past the broken signboard near the gate of their housing colony. He didn’t even pause to change — straight to the backyard. **“Sheroo! Where are you? Let’s play!”**

But for two days now, there had been no bark. No bounding paws. No Sheroo.

**The Silence**

Vishwas stood quietly on the edge of the verandah, his shirt untucked, tie loosened, his slippers damp with dew. Before him lay the familiar patch of land — mango, guava, Sita phal, jamun trees lined the edge, their trunks worn with time, their branches tangled in winter light. A gentle breeze rustled dry leaves on the tiled roof, but Vishwas felt none of it.

He muttered aloud, mostly to himself, “He’s never stayed away this long.”

Sunita’s footsteps came from inside, her soft cotton saree swishing. She handed him a cup of tea and touched his elbow gently. “Maybe he’ll come back tomorrow,” she said.

He shook his head slowly. “He was old. And tired. I should’ve taken him to the vet sooner.”

“You did everything you could,” she whispered. “He was fading.”

Vishwas didn’t respond. His eyes remained fixed at the garden gate.

**Aditya’s Unknowing Joy**

Inside, Aditya was eating the snack Sunita had prepared that morning — poha with tiny bits of roasted peanuts. The steam had long gone cold, but he didn’t notice. His schoolbag lay half-open, notebooks spilling across the floor.

“Sheroo!” he called again from the kitchen door, mouth half full.

Only the crows answered.

He paused, listening, his face falling for a second — but then he shrugged it off and headed to the backyard with his bat and ball.

He played alone, as he often did when Ramu was busy. Tossed the ball against the wall, swung hard, imagined fielders diving, the crowd cheering. “Six!” he shouted. “India wins!” he grinned.

But the garden, though sunlit and bright, felt a little... *quieter*.

**The Realization**

That night, after dinner, Vishwas sat cross-legged on the floor, his voice quiet but firm. Sunita was beside him, and Aditya sat facing them, still in his sports jersey, knees pulled to his chest.

Vishwas cleared his throat. “Beta… we need to talk about Sheroo.”

Aditya looked up instantly. “He hasn’t come back. I know. But maybe… maybe he got lost? Or is with some other dog?”

Vishwas took a slow breath. “No, son. I don’t think he’s coming back.”

“What?” Aditya blinked.

“He was very old. And sick. You remember how he wasn’t eating much? How he just lay in corners?” Vishwas’s voice cracked a little. “Dogs… they sense things we don’t. When they feel their time is near, they often leave. Quietly. Peacefully.”

Aditya’s eyes widened. “So, he *left*... because he was going to… die?”

Sunita reached over, wrapping her arms around her son, holding him tight. Her voice trembled. “He didn’t want to hurt you, Adi. He loved you more than you know.”

“But I didn’t say goodbye,” Aditya whispered, his voice breaking. “He always waited for me after school. Every day. And now he’s just… gone?”

He buried his face into Sunita’s shoulder. “I didn’t even know he was that sick. I thought he’d get better. I should’ve taken him to the vet. I should’ve given him my biscuit that day—he looked at me, and I didn’t…”

“No, no,” Sunita rocked him gently. “Don’t think that way. He knew. He knew you loved him. That’s all he ever wanted.”

Vishwas looked away, wiping his eyes quickly. “He chose you. And you gave him the best years of his life.”

Aditya didn’t respond. That night, long after Sunita had fallen asleep, he sat on the verandah steps. The stars above blinked through a thin winter haze. The garden stretched ahead, shadows of trees dancing on the ground.

He whispered, “Come back, Sheroo. Please.”

But only silence replied.

**The Surprise**

Three days later, Vishwas was sipping tea with his colleague Mr. Joshi during a break at the office. Joshi stirred sugar into his glass cup and said, “Vishwas, listen... my neighbours’ dog just had a litter. Four pups. Pure Alsatians. One of them — I swear, he looks just like your old Sheroo. You want to come, see?”

Vishwas blinked. Something fluttered in his chest. He hesitated. “Really? Same face?”

“Same soulful eyes. Come. I’ll take you on my scooter.”

Minutes later, the two zipped through narrow lanes, the wind cool on their faces. When they arrived, the smell of milk, straw, and warmth filled the air. In a cozy basket lay four squirming furballs, eyes still shut.

One of them — soft brown with a hint of white on his nose — yawned, opened his mouth wide, and let out the tiniest, sleepiest bark.

Vishwas smiled.

**The Healing**

That evening, he came home, a strange light in his eyes.

“Adi,” he said, “Put on your sweater. Come. We’re going somewhere.”

“Where?”

“Surprise.”

They rode on Joshi’s scooter — Aditya in the front, Vishwas holding tightly from behind.

When they reached and walked into the neighbours’ courtyard, Aditya froze. His eyes fell on the basket. Four tiny puppies.

He stepped forward, almost in a trance. One pup, the soft brown one, stumbled toward him, nose twitching, and licked his palm. Aditya gasped. He knelt. The puppy climbed onto his lap, curling there like it had found home.

Tears welled up in Aditya’s eyes.

“Papa... he looks like Sheroo. But... he’s smaller. And softer.”

Vishwas knelt beside him and placed a hand on his shoulder. “Maybe... just maybe... Sheroo found his way back to you.”

Aditya laughed through his tears. “Can we take him home? Please, Papa?”

“We already have,” Vishwas said, eyes shining.

**Full Circle**

That night, when Sunita returned at 8:30 PM, tired and dusty from a long shift, she stepped in and paused.

There on the floor, her son was rolling with laughter, a little brown furball pouncing on his hair and biting his shoelace.

She covered her mouth in surprise. “What’s this? A new wild animal in our living room?”

Aditya grinned. “He’s *Sheroo Junior*! SJ!”

Vishwas chuckled. “Welcome to the family.”

The house filled again with barking, laughter, and the sound of feet chasing paws down the corridor.

**Chapter 5- Doctor, Dreamer, and Dog"**

The days rolled on, and it was now 1981. Aditya had blossomed into a tall, lanky teenager—thirteen years old and studying in the 7th Standard. His life was a mosaic of moments—some bright with laughter, others shadowed with uncertainty. But in the eyes of the neighbourhood, he was a rising star. His triumphs on the school sports field had earned him local fame. He had sprinted past the finish lines of several races, each victory adding another layer to his growing reputation as an athlete.

That summer, Sunita’s father gifted him a gleaming Hercules cycle—solid and proud, just like Aditya. It became his treasured companion, the steed of his teenage freedom. He rode to school each morning with a windblown smile, his tall frame hunched confidently over the handlebars, the world rushing past him in a blur of possibility.

Evenings were equally lively. He and his ever-loyal friend Ramu had joined the local sports club, where they had started learning to swim. The cold splash of the pool, the smell of chlorine, and the thrill of friendly races lit a fire in Aditya’s spirit. Their laughter echoed over the water, innocent and free.

Back home, there was a new addition—a black-and-white TV that Vishwas had purchased after much deliberation. It became a small window into a larger world. Aditya and Ramu now spent long evenings watching Charlie Chaplin’s antics and the electrifying moments of cricket matches.

Sheroo Junior—SJ—had by now grown into a handsome, energetic dog. Loyal, protective, and full of mischief, SJ was Aditya’s shadow. They were inseparable partners in every adventure, every walk, every quiet moment.

Yet, as the world outside brimmed with colour, changes were unfolding quietly in their little community. Mr. Gopinath and Vishwas’s sister, Nirmala, had passed away within the span of a year. In the wake of this double loss, Gopinath’s son, Harish, returned home after completing his MD. He was a young doctor, but beyond medicine, Harish carried a rare depth—a thinker, a reader, a man with a calm, luminous mind.

Vishwas, honouring a quiet promise made to his sister on her deathbed, took Harish under his wing. And soon, the bond between the elder and the younger man grew into something rooted in respect and quiet understanding. Harish, in turn, became a part of their family tapestry.

When Sunita voiced her concerns about Aditya’s poor focus on studies, Harish listened carefully. Despite his quick mind and memory, Aditya was academically drifting. His communication skills were underdeveloped, and beneath his confident exterior lay a fragile sense of self. Years of being indulged by Vishwas and Sunita had made him stubborn—he hated being told “no,” and often spent his afternoons wandering aimlessly with Ramu, preferring the thrill of the outdoors to the monotony of textbooks. His grades hovered at average levels, and Sunita’s worry deepened. The 10th Board exams loomed just a couple of years away, casting a long, anxious shadow.

Vishwas, ever the stoic, remained calm. “He’ll find his path,” he often said, not out of negligence, but from a deep, unwavering belief in his son’s inner spark.

Then, one quiet evening, Harish approached Aditya after dinner.

“Come on,” he said, patting SJ who leapt up eagerly. “Let’s go stretch our legs.”

Aditya looked puzzled. “Where to?”

“Just a walk. I will tell you stories… of kings, warriors, a scientist or two,” Harish smiled.

That evening walk became a ritual. Each night, the doctor, the dreamer, and the dog would step into the dusky lanes. SJ would strut proudly, puffing out his chest, often chasing off stray dogs like a guardian of the night. And as the world around them dimmed into silence, Harish’s voice would bring history alive-tales of Shivaji’s valour, of Galileo’s courage, of Lincoln’s grit.

One evening, as the breeze rustled through the neem trees, Harish asked, “Do you know why Shivaji was unstoppable?”

Aditya shook his head.

“Because he believed in himself—even when no one else did. You have got to start doing that, Aditya. You have strength. You just have not looked closely enough.”

Slowly, without pressure or expectation, Harish began guiding him academically too. After their nightly walks, they would sit on the verandah under the soft yellow light. Harish did not teach like a schoolteacher—he made things come alive. Photosynthesis was not just a process; it was a metaphor.

“Look at this mango tree,” he said once. “It needs sunlight to grow. Just like your mind needs knowledge. Feed it right, and it will bear fruits you never imagined.”

Aditya began to shift. Bit by bit, the resistance melted. He started asking questions. His curiosity, long buried under distractions, began to stir. He started spending more time on homework, reading ahead, revising what Harish had taught. Ramu, his loyal friend, grew a little distant—resentful, perhaps—that Aditya was no longer available for their usual mischief or swimming routines.

By September 1981, the signs of transformation were subtle but real. Aditya had started answering tough questions in class—Maths, Science, even Languages. His first 8th Standard unit test showed improvement: from 45% to 55%. Not dramatic, but enough to light a spark in Sunita’s heart.

And so, the months passed, the nightly walks continued, and so did the quiet tutoring sessions in the verandah. Harish was patient. SJ, always beside them, would sit curled up nearby, ears twitching to the rhythm of their conversations.

In May 1982, the 8th Standard results came. Aditya had scored 52%. A modest number, and yet for him, it marked a turning point—a rise from stagnation, the beginning of something more.

But Sunita remained anxious. Time was slipping away. The 10th Board exams were now barely two years ahead. Every percentile point mattered. She watched her son closely, her eyes searching for signs of promise… and hope.

**Chapter 6- "The Purpose Within"**

**September 1982.**  
The skies had cleared. The last of the monsoon clouds were drifting away, leaving behind the smell of wet earth and the soft sunlight of a fresh school term. Aditya, now in Class 9, was up early that Monday morning. The house was a bustle of hurried movement—Sunita was folding clothes, Vishwas was finishing his tea, and Harish was skimming through the newspaper with a pencil tucked behind his ear.

In the bathroom, the sound of water running and the occasional splash announced Aditya’s morning shower. SJ, the loyal dog, sat obediently near the bathroom door, tail thumping occasionally, waiting for his friend.

Suddenly, there was a familiar, frantic voice shouting from outside.

**"Aditya! Aduuuu! Aduuuuuu!"**  
Ramu’s voice was shrill and breathless, cutting through the quiet rhythm of the morning.

Sunita peeked out of the kitchen window and called out. “Ramu! What is it now? Do not scream like that so early!”

Before she could finish, Ramu burst into the house—sweaty, gasping, his school bag bouncing behind him.

**"Aunty… Uncle… Aditya… got 20! Full marks in science! Topper!"** he managed to say between heaves.

Vishwas put down his teacup and raised an eyebrow.

**"What nonsense are you blabbering, Ramu? The results are not even out yet. Are you dreaming again?"**

Harish looked up from the paper, amused.  
**"20 out of 20? In Science? That’s quite something."**

**"I saw it myself! Swear on my eggs!"** Ramu said, raising his hand dramatically.  
**"I went early to school. The peon opened the cupboard. I checked the papers. I was looking for mine first—thank God I passed with 7.5—but then I saw Atul got only 18... and then I saw Aditya’s name— ‘20/20 – Excellent!’ written by Ramkrishna Sir himself!"**

Sunita froze mid-step. Her heart skipped a beat.  
**"What?"** she whispered, almost to herself.

Vishwas stared at Ramu, still sceptical but visibly intrigued.

Just then, Aditya came out, towel around his neck, still drying his hair.  
**"What happened?"**

Ramu turned, his face glowing.  
**"Adu! You got full marks in science! Topper! I saw it myself!"**

Aditya stood still, stunned.

**"What are you saying…?"**

Vishwas smirked.  
**"Let us wait for the actual class to confirm it. Ramu is not exactly the Education Minister."**

Everyone chuckled, but Sunita could not hide the tiny glint of hope in her eyes.

**Later That Morning – School**

Third period. Science.

The tension in the classroom was thick. Ramkrishna Sir, known for his terrifying silence and legendary outbursts, walked in with a bundle of answer papers under his arm. His brow was furrowed. No one dared whisper.

He placed the papers on the desk and looked up slowly.

**"Your performance…,"** he began in his deep voice, **"...is better than I expected. But still far from ideal. Some of you think Board Exams are just another game of marbles. Let me remind you—you are just one year away from facing the real world."**

The class was frozen.

He flipped through the stack.  
**"Atul!"** he called sharply.

Atul stood up nervously.

**"What’s wrong with you, boy? Only 18 out of 20. You call this preparation?"**

The class gasped. Atul had never scored below 20 in science.

Ramkrishna Sir shook his head in disapproval. **"Your answer to Question 4 is completely wrong. Don’t let pride ruin your work."**

Atul nodded sheepishly and walked back.

Then came a pause. A deliberate one.

**"Everyone—stand up,"** Ramkrishna Sir commanded. The entire class rose instantly.

He looked at one paper and then called out, **"Aditya."**

Aditya stepped forward slowly, uncertain.

Ramkrishna Sir handed him the answer sheet.  
**"20 out of 20. Perfect. Not a single error. More than the marks, it is your reasoning that impressed me. This—"** he held the paper high, **"—is how answers should be written. Structured. Clear. Conceptual. Not mugged-up garbage."**

The class murmured in surprise.

He turned to Aditya.  
**"Well done. I did not expect this from you. You have made me proud. You are the example now. I want everyone to see his paper."**

There was a thunderous applause. Ramu clapped loudest.

Aditya stood stunned, his heart thudding, ears warm, unsure whether to smile or hide.

He sat down, his hand gently touching the corner of the answer sheet, eyes scanning the red-inked "Excellent!" with a strange new feeling inside—**pride**.

**That Evening – Home**

It was nearly 8 PM. Vishwas and Sunita returned on their new Lambretta, the evening air crisp and filled with the scent of jasmine from nearby gardens.

As they entered, they expected to see SJ running around, Aditya playing outside. Instead, they were surprised to find Aditya sitting at the table, books open, pencil in hand, eyes calmly focused.

Sunita walked to him.  
**"Adu…?"**

He looked up.  
**"Aai… look."**  
He handed over the science paper.

She took it with trembling fingers, scanning the marks, the comments. Her eyes welled up. For a few moments, she could not speak. She walked into the kitchen, pretending to do something, wiping tears silently.

Vishwas read it, smiled to himself, and nodded. **"Told you. The boy will find his way."**

**Later That Week – More Results**

Maths: **20/20**  
Hindi: **19.5/20**  
English: **18.5/20**  
Social Sciences: **19/20**

Aditya had ranked **first in class**, and **second in the division**. Atul had patted his back and asked for his notes. Even Bindu smiled warmly and said, **"Aditya, I didn’t know you were so good!"**

He felt something bloom inside. He was not invisible anymore.

**Sunday Afternoon – Harish Returns**

The door creaked open. SJ barked excitedly. Harish had returned from a conference. He dropped his bag, tired but smiling.

Sunita handed him a steel tumbler of tea and a plate of hot poha with lemon.

**"What's the occasion?"** he asked, taking the first bite.

She handed over the stack of answer sheets.

Harish read them in silence. Then he looked up, eyes shining.

He called out, **"Aditya! Come here!"**

Aditya shuffled in, holding a comic book.

Harish stood, pulled him into a tight hug.  
**"I am proud of you, beta. Truly proud."**

He looked into Aditya’s eyes and said softly, **"Everyone has a reason they’re born, Adu. A purpose. A mission. Most people never discover it. They just live, work, grow old, and die. But you… I hope you find it. Find it and chase it."**

Those words struck deep.

Aditya nodded. He did not fully understand, not yet. But something stirred inside—a quiet determination, a whisper of destiny.

And in the distance, the sky turned a gentle gold, as if smiling at the boy who had finally begun to believe.

**Chapter 7- The Game is Not Over Yet**

*March–June 1984*

The summer sun of March 1984 cast a golden haze across the narrow lanes of Tilak Nagar. Gulmohar trees bloomed with fire-red flowers, birds sang their restless summer tunes, and a sense of urgency hung in the air—**10th Board exams were just ten days away**.

But in one particular corner house, the atmosphere was different.

Sunita stood at the door to the study room, her brows knitted in disbelief. Vishwas leaned against the wooden pillar in the courtyard, arms crossed, quietly observing his son.

Inside, Aditya was not surrounded by textbooks. He was tapping a tennis ball against the rough outer wall in rhythmic precision—thup, thup, thup. His bat angled perfectly each time. His focus was fierce—but not on chapters or equations. His eyes followed the spinning ball, not a single paragraph from the geography book lying untouched on the desk nearby.

**“Aditya!”** Sunita’s voice cracked through the rhythm. **“Everyone else is studying day and night. You? You’re busy with your bat and that silly wall!”**

Aditya paused, the bat held mid-air.

**“Aai… I just needed a break,”** he said, avoiding her eyes.

She stepped in, her voice trembling between anger and anxiety.  
**“Break? Break? The exams are in ten days! Look at Ramu, Bindu, even Satish—they’re not even coming out of their rooms! And you? You give away your notes to everyone like some kind of teacher, and now you’re not even opening your books!”**

Vishwas sighed, stepping in. **“He’s been good all year, Sunita. Maybe he’s… got his own way.”**

Sunita turned, her voice rising. **“No! This is not done! This is 10th board! One mistake and everything is ruined. Why are you so calm, Aditya? Why don't you understand the seriousness?”**

Aditya didn’t reply. He simply walked to the kitchen sink, washed his face, and went back to his room. He didn’t argue, didn’t shout. He just picked up a comic book—**Tinkle Digest**—and began reading it as if nothing had happened.

Vishwas and Sunita stared, helpless.

That evening, Harish came home from the hospital, his shirt creased, stethoscope swinging from his neck. As he dropped his bag, Sunita pulled him aside.

**“Harish… please talk to him. He’s not studying at all. The exams are about to start, and he’s… he’s just playing cricket, reading comics! We are worried sick.”**

Harish listened, calm as ever. He walked into Aditya’s room, stood quietly for a moment.

Aditya looked up.  
**“Kaka…”**

Harish smiled faintly.  
**“You alright?”**

Aditya nodded.

Harish looked around the room. Notes were neatly stacked. Diagrams pinned. Equations scribbled on the softboard.  
He turned back to Sunita and Vishwas and said softly, **“Don’t worry. He’s ready. He may not show it the way others do, but he’s prepared. Let him be himself.”**

Sunita was not convinced. But something about Harish’s quiet certainty calmed her.

**April–May 1984: The Examination Period**

The exams began with English. Then Maths, Science, History, Marathi. A paper every four days. The schedule dragged on for almost a month, testing not just the students' knowledge, but their endurance.

Outside, the world turned into summer—**days of mangoes, peepal shade, long power cuts, and cricket matches on Doordarshan**.

Aditya came home after every paper, cool as cucumber. Never nervous, never frantic. After lunch, he’d pick up the bat and play a solo game of wall cricket. Evenings were spent swimming at the local pool or playing with SJ. At night, he’d walk with Harish along the canal, SJ chasing shadows and barking at frogs.

It drove Sunita crazy.

**“Look at him! No stress! No seriousness! Is this how toppers behave?”** she muttered to Vishwas each night, who responded only with a tired smile.

**3rd June 1984 – The Day of Results**

The air was thick with tension that morning.

Sunita was cleaning the tulsi plant, muttering prayers. Vishwas sat with his newspaper but kept checking the clock. Harish had already left early for the hospital.

Suddenly, a familiar sound pierced the stillness.

**“ADITYAAAAAAAAAAAAA!!!”**  
It was Ramu—again breathless, again running, again shouting at full volume.

Aditya came out of the bathroom in his towel, water dripping from his hair.

**“What now, Ramu?”** he called out.

**“YOU ARE A CHAMPION, MAN! 87.5%! SECOND IN THE SCHOOL! JUST TWO MARKS BEHIND ATUL!”**

Aditya blinked. **“What?”**

**“Yes! I just saw the board at school! 87.5%! You topped in Science and Maths! And I think… in English also maybe tied. You are second in school! Atul got 89.5%. He just beat you by two in Marathi!”**

Vishwas looked up from the veranda. **“Are the results out?”**

Ramu shouted again.  
**“YES, UNCLE! FULL RESULTS ARE ON THE NOTICE BOARD! HE’S GOT 87.5%! SCIENCE – 92, MATHS – 95! Everyone's talking about it!”**

Vishwas jumped in joy. **“Adityaaaaaaa!”** he shouted and hugged his son, still dripping in his towel.

Sunita came running from the kitchen, wiping her hands on her saree pallu.

**“Is it true?”**

Aditya grinned. **“Looks like it, Aai.”**

She hugged him tight, her tears soaking his wet hair.  
**“You scared us so much… you stupid, wonderful boy.”**

Harish came home that evening with a box of sweets.

**Celebration That Night**

The small house was alive with laughter and the smells of fried snacks. Sunita had prepared **batata vadas, kothimbir wadi, coconut barfi, and her special masala sev.** Vishwas had brought cake from the local bakery. The dining table overflowed.

Friends poured in—**Ramu, Satish, Navin, Bindu, Nelakshi, Ramesh, Rajesh.** Even Atul’s younger brother came with a congratulatory note.

**“Topper in Maths and Science, haan!”** said Bindu, punching Aditya playfully.  
**“Looks like I’ll be copying from *you* next year too!”**

The house echoed with laughter, stories of exam day mishaps, and jokes about future careers. SJ barked excitedly, tail wagging like a metronome.

Late into the night, after the guests had left, and the vessels were washed, the house settled into quiet again.

**A Walk and a Thought**

Harish, Aditya, and SJ walked along the moonlit canal. The bridge at the far end of the road had become their usual resting place.

Aditya tossed a stick for SJ who darted across, barking wildly.

Harish sat down on the ledge, legs dangling. The moonlight reflected off the water, and the warm wind stirred the tamarind trees.

**“Aditya,”** Harish said, his voice calm and steady.

Aditya turned.  
**“Hmm?”**

**“The game is not over yet.”**

Aditya sat beside him, curious.

Harish looked at him thoughtfully.  
**“You’ve done well. Very well. Your marks show strength in Science and Maths. But now comes the next decision.”**

He paused, choosing his words.

**“You have to choose what kind of science interests you. You’ve shown skill in both Maths and Physics, but also in Chemistry and Biology. Over the next year, reflect on what excites you more. Is it numbers and forces? Or molecules and life forms?”**

Aditya nodded slowly.

Harish smiled.  
**“This is the time. This next step may decide the course of your life—Engineering, Medicine, Research, anything. But choose with your heart, not just your marks.”**

Aditya sat in silence, the breeze lifting his hair, the moonlight painting silver ripples across the water. SJ curled up beside them, panting softly.

**“I’ll think about it, Kaka,”** he said at last.

Harish smiled and placed a hand on his shoulder.  
**“I know you will. You’ve always had your own way. That’s what I admire about you.”**

The night deepened, but for Aditya, something had dawned—a quiet realization that **life, like cricket, is a game of timing, instinct, and choice**.

And the next innings was about to begin.

**Chapter 8- The Fall Before the Flight**

Aditya had found his calling.

Through Class 11, he was steady, focused, and flourishing. **Mathematics and Physics came to him like rhythm to a trained musician**, precise yet instinctive. Concepts that confused others seemed to unravel themselves in his mind.

He had long discussions with his physics professor, **Mr. Nanivadkar**, who saw a rare spark in him.

“You have the mind of a physicist,” Mr. Nanivaddekar said once, pausing thoughtfully. “Your assumptions are clean, your calculations sharp. Don’t waste this. Take **Physics, Chemistry, and Maths** for HSC. And if you ask me—**go for Computer Engineering**. It’s a growing field. You’ll love it.”

Aditya, eager and grateful, nodded. He now had a direction, a dream.

He poured himself into studies, **attending lectures, extra classes, studying Biology too**—just in case—but his heart beat louder for circuits, logic, and numbers.

**February 1986.**

The **preliminary board exams** began—a trial run before the real battle. Aditya sailed through Physics and Chemistry. Only **English remained**.

After finishing his English paper, he rushed out of the exam hall, eager to get home and start revising for the finals, just **15 days away**.

He was riding his prized **BSA slr cycle**, a gift from Harish for his 10th-grade success.

But that day, in his haste, he had made one mistake.

He wore **chappals** instead of shoes.

On a narrow road near the junction, a **learner’s car lost control**, skidding directly into his path. In a flash, Aditya veered left, his reflexes sharp—but his **right foot slammed against a road divider**.

The car didn’t touch him. But the divider did.

He felt a **crack**. A wave of pain. His **toe was hanging**, twisted unnaturally. The nail bent. The skin torn. A sharp **black-blue swelling** began creeping up his ankle.

But somehow, through sheer will, he got back on his cycle and pedalled home—gritting through what most would have fainted from.

Home was empty. Sunita and Vishwas were at work. **Only SJ was there.**

SJ whimpered when he saw the blood and bruises. He licked Aditya’s broken toe gently, almost as if trying to heal it with love.

Aditya lay there, crying, in helpless pain.

Two hours passed. Then three.

At **5:30 PM**, Vishwas returned. One look and he dropped everything.

Without a word, he **scooped Aditya into his arms**, placed him on his scooter, and drove straight to the **government hospital**.

The doctor didn’t mince words.

**“The toe is fractured, dislocated. You’ll need urgent surgery. We can’t handle it here.”**

Vishwas was stunned.

The doctor gave first aid, a heavy dose of painkillers, and advised immediate orthopaedic attention.

Vishwas ran to the nearest post office. **Called Harish.**

By 7 PM, they were at Harish’s hospital, where **Dr. Rao**, a top orthopaedic surgeon, examined Aditya.

X-rays confirmed their worst fear.

“The toe joint is crushed. We’ll need to remove splinters, align the bones, and **fuse the joint**. He may never move that toe again. But if we do this right, he’ll live pain-free.”

Dr. Rao looked at Aditya.

“When did this happen?”

Aditya, barely conscious, whispered, “Around 3… when I was coming home.”

The doctor blinked in disbelief. “You handled this pain for *five hours*? Incredible…”

By **9:30 PM**, the operation theatre was ready.

SU, unaware of everything, waited at the station, wondering why V hadn’t come to pick her up. After half an hour, anxious and confused, she took an auto home.

She entered an empty house.

Panic rose in her throat. She called her parents. Her brother. No one knew.

Finally, she dialled Harish

His voice was calm. “Come to the hospital. Don’t worry. He’s in surgery.”

The **operation lasted two hours**.

Tiny bone fragments were removed. **Two micro steel pins** were inserted to hold the joint. Muscles realigned. The damage was controlled.

At **2 AM**, under pale fluorescent lights, Sunita, Vishwas, and Harish sat beside his bed.

Aditya stirred.

His eyes opened. Dizzy. Confused.

Then he saw Sunita.

A faint smile crossed his lips—the same smile he had given her as a baby after surgery.

Sunita broke down.

Vishwas turned away, wiping his face.

Harish stayed still, one hand on Aditya’s shoulder. Then ordered strong coffee for everyone.

Dr. Rao came in.

“Surgery went well. The wires will hold the joint for 6 months. He’ll be on plaster for at least a month.”

Aditya was discharged three days later. The **pain was still intense**, pulsing like a drumbeat in his foot.

Two days before the **HSC Board Exams**, Harish sat down with Aditya and his family.

“He can take a break. Appear next year.”

But Aditya, pale and exhausted, shook his head.

“I’ll go this year. I don’t want to waste time.”

Viswas and Sunita were stunned. But they didn’t stop him.

“We are with you,” Sunita whispered, holding his hand.

The exams were **torture**.

The **painkillers dulled his focus**. Studying was nearly impossible. He slept through books. Still, he appeared for every paper.

It was a war of **willpower over weakness**.

**May 10, 1988. Result Day.**

The family was tense.

Aditya didn’t know what to expect. He had barely studied. His dreams of Computer Engineering felt distant, almost absurd.

Then came the news.

**95% in Physics, Chemistry, and Maths.**

The family erupted with joy. Sunita cried. Vishwas couldn’t believe it.

They applied to **all top engineering colleges** for Computer Science.

But when the final lists were out… Aditya had **missed the last seat of computer engineering faculty at the Government College by just 1.5 marks**.

He was heartbroken.

Depressed. Withdrawn.

On a Sunday afternoon, Haarish came over with a **brand-new BDM cricket bat**.

“Well done, champion.”

Aditya didn’t look up. “No use. I missed Computer Engg.”

Harish chuckled. “So what? Join **Electronics Engineering**. The subjects are same in the first year.”

Aditya looked up. “Really?”

“Yes. Score well, and we’ll apply for a branch change. I’ve already spoken to people in the university.”

A spark returned to Aditya’s eyes.

Sunita brought sweets. Vishwas cracked a joke. SJ wagged his tail and jumped on the bed.

The plaster came off in a few weeks.

The pain faded.

The future was still open.

**Chapter 9- Wires of Will**

The **plaster was gone**, the limp was healing, and Aditya had finally stepped into the world he once thought had slipped away — **Engineering College**, albeit in **Electronics**, not Computer Science… not yet.

Still, **he adapted quickly**. By July 1987, college had begun. He cycled to lectures, sat in labs, made new friends, and threw himself into the world of resistors, capacitors, logic gates, and equations. The dream of Computer Engineering lingered like a distant lighthouse. He would earn his way to it — one paper at a time.

An entire year flew by.

He worked hard, pushing himself. He knew the rule: **only top scorers would be considered for branch change.** And he was ready to prove himself.

**May 1986.** Exam season.

Aditya had completed his **first paper** successfully. The momentum was right. The pressure was high. But his confidence had returned.

That night, he fell asleep peacefully.

But by midnight, **a dull ache began crawling up his right foot**. Familiar. Sinister.

He tried to ignore it.

By morning, the ache had bloomed into **a pulsing throb**. His toe was swollen. Two **painful red bumps** had appeared on either side of the old surgical spot.

He called Vishwas.

Without hesitation, **Vishwas drove him straight to Dr. Rao**.

Aditya was tense.

Not again, he thought. *Not now.* His exams had just begun. The past year’s grind — *all of it* — depended on these few days.

Inside the hospital room, **Dr. Rao looked at the foot, then burst into song**. Cheerful. Almost celebratory.

Aditya and Vishwas stared at him.

“What’s going on, Doctor?”

Dr. Rao smiled wide.

**“It’s time.”**

“Time for what?” V asked, worried.

Dr. Rao pointed at the bumps. “The wires. They have done their job. Your bone is healed. The joint’s fused. These metal pins are *ready to come out*.”

Vishwas’s face paled.

Aditya was stunned.

Another surgery?

Dr. Rao laughed. “Not surgery. **Just a 5-minute extraction**. A bit painful. But you have handled far worse.”

He looked at Aditya. “Come on now. Jump up on the inspection bed. Let us get this done.”

Aditya lay down. V stood nearby, watching with a father’s worry.

Dr. Rao numbed the area, grabbed the ends of the wires — now **slightly protruding through the skin**, loosened over time.

“Ready?”

Before Aditya could answer, **the doctor pulled — swift and firm.**

A streak of *frictional pain* jolted through him.

Then again. The second wire.

Done.

Just like that.

Dr. Rao cleaned the area, bandaged it, and gave him some NSAIDs and painkillers.

“You’ll be fine by evening,” he said. “No more wires. No more pain. You are free.”

V sighed in relief. Aditya sat up, dazed but smiling.

By evening, the swelling had gone down. The pain receded like a storm tide pulling back from the shore.

Aditya returned to his books, to his exam hall.

**Paper after paper, he fought with clarity and fire.**

And when the results came, they spoke for him.

**Top rank in the division.**

The University granted his request.

The letter came one afternoon, carried by a grinning classmate.

**“Branch transfer approved — Computer Engineering.”**

Sunita cried.

Vishwas hugged him tightly.

SJ wagged his tail furiously, sensing the joy in the air.

And Harish… Harish came by that Sunday evening with a simple line:

**“Well done. You earned this. Remember, this is just the beginning.”**

Aditya stood at the threshold of his real dream now.

The pain, the plaster, the pins — all behind.

Ahead: a new chapter.

**The dream had survived.**

Because he did.

**Chapter 10- Crossroads and Conversations**

The second year of engineering brought with it a **new rhythm**.

Aditya, now wiser and more focused, made a calculated move — he **shifted to the university hostel**, sacrificing comfort for time and mental clarity. No more hours lost to travel. Just **books, the cricket field, and dreams**, now all within walking distance.

He came home only on weekends — **Saturday evenings and Sunday lunches with SJ** and his parents, especially SU’s lovingly made poha, were now a cherished ritual.

Life in the hostel was a world of its own.

Long corridors with shared stories. Steel cots. Common bathrooms. Water shortages. Midnight Maggi runs. Canteen politics. **Gentle ragging turned lifelong friendships.** And a bond that did not care for caste, state, or surname.

Aditya found himself surrounded by **a wonderful mix of minds** — Milind from Vidarbha, Sachin from Pune, Dinesh from Kolhapur, Pradeep from Hyderabad, Ashwin from South Bombay, Umesh from Nagpur, and Suhas from Solapur.

Despite the toe injury and its quiet reminders, Aditya thrived. He became the **top allrounder for the college team**, known for his sharp fielding, aggressive batting, and tactical bowling. For **three years**, he proudly wore the university colours and made headlines in campus tournaments.

By the end of third year, a strange anxiety began to settle in the hostel corridors.

**What after the fourth year?**

One evening, under the yellow halo of the chai tapri’s bulb, Aditya’s gathered — steaming cups in hand, casual but thoughtful.

Milind broke the silence.  
**“I will assume a job. My family needs me now.”**

Sachin shrugged.  
**“I have decided. I will start my own computer retail store.”**

Umesh nodded.  
**“Same. Time to settle down. Get practical.”**

Dinesh agreed.  
**“Four years is enough study. Time to earn.”**

Pradeep smiled.  
**“I am going to Dubai. Uncle’s business is booming.”**

Suhas, as usual, was lost.  
**“No clue. My dad will decide something.”**

Ashwin leaned back, confident.  
**“I am giving GMAT. Going to the US for an MBA.”**

Prasad interjected.  
**“You do not have to go abroad now. GATE is a better route. Do your M. Tech from IIT. Then think about the US. That is smarter.”**

Ashwin smirked.  
**“Yeah if you like studying forever. US gives you instant exposure.”**

**The debate intensified**, but Aditya stayed quiet, listening.

His mind drifted — *M. Tech from IIT… Masters in the US… A future in computing…* The idea held him.

Later that night, as the canteen lights dimmed and Aditya’s walked back under the starlit sky, he caught Prasad alone.

**“Tell me more about GATE,”** he asked.

Prasad smiled. **“It is tough. But you will crack it. You are the best in Maths and Logic in our group. Plus, with a good rank, you can get into IIT. Then the US route opens — on your terms.”**

Aditya nodded slowly.

**A path was forming. Not rushed. Earned. Chosen.**

Prasad added, **“Talk to Surya — our final-year senior. He is appearing this year. He has been preparing seriously. He can guide you on subjects, books, and coaching.”**

Aditya felt a sense of direction.

Not fear. Not pressure.

Just purpose.

That night, lying on his thin hostel mattress, the ceiling fan creaking above him, Aditya stared into the darkness.

He knew what he wanted now.

**He would prepare for GATE. And give it everything.**

**Chapter 11- The Ascent**

May 1989. The air in the engineering college campus carried the dry heat of summer — and the heavy scent of departure.

Final-year exams were done. Hostel corridors echoed with chaotic goodbyes — the slap of palm against palm, the scribble of farewell messages on cracked wooden doors, the whirr of steel trunks being dragged down staircases. Dreams mixed with nostalgia in the humid air. Most students were rushing home — to weddings, to waiting mothers, to job interviews, or simply to rest.

But Aditya stayed.

While others left with laughter and selfies, he stood alone near the gate with his modest hold-all bag — not leaving but watching. Watching the swirl of friendship and freedom spin away. Because he had a different destination. A different fire.

It had all started that evening at the chai tapri months ago, when he, Prasad, and Surya had leaned against a rusted fence, sipping watery cutting chai under a flickering yellow bulb. The GATE — Graduate Aptitude Test in Engineering — came up in conversation. Surya, always calm and low-voiced, had said:

“Top 100 means you walk into any IIT for M. Tech. You build the foundation for a global career.”

That night, back in his dimly lit room, Aditya had stared at his timetable and torn it apart. A new path had opened. A challenge had been issued. And he accepted.

Now, summer lay in front of him like an unmarked highway. His friends were gone, the hostel nearly empty — just a few students staying back for backlog exams or odd lab work. But Aditya had secured special permission — thanks to his academic and cricket achievements — to remain on campus and prepare.

Sunita and Vishwas had been hesitant.

“Summer mein hostel mein akela?” Sunita asked over the phone, concern in every word.

“Mummy… it is just a few months. I will be fine. I need this,” Aditya had replied gently.

And that was it. She did not argue again. Vishwas, too, only said, “Tu kar sakta hai. We believe in you.”

Surya returned briefly to visit professors. He came to meet Aditya one quiet morning in the mess, bringing a folder of meticulously organized notes and question banks.

“These are yours now,” Surya said, sliding them across the table. “Don’t waste even one page.”

Then in late June, a buzz ran through the staff room and student grapevine — Surya had scored 90% in GATE. It was a college record. Even the Principal clapped when the news was announced. Surya became a legend overnight.

But for Aditya, it was not jealousy. It was fuel.

He doubled down. Alongside Prasad — who also stayed back to prepare — Aditya entered a world of unflinching discipline.

Their day began at 6 AM with strong black tea. Study blocks stretched till lunch, then resumed after a short nap. Evenings were spent solving mock papers in the library. Nights often ended with whispered discussions under corridor tube lights.

One such night, as the clock struck 2 AM, Prasad reached into his drawer and pulled out a Bristol cigarette.

“Try this,” he said, lighting it with a crack of the matchstick. “Helps when your brain refuses to function.”

Aditya hesitated. He had always been the one to say no. But that night, in the silence of a sleeping hostel and with equations buzzing in his head, he accepted. Just one puff.

It burned — hot and metallic — but it kept him awake. Alive. Focused.

And soon, it became part of the routine: one cigarette, one steel cup of tapri chai, one more chapter.

**But Aditya never let go of balance.** He still captained the cricket team. He led them to the state-level inter-university quarterfinals that year. He also acted in the annual drama festival — playing a quiet, grieving brother in a Marathi play that moved even the toughest professor to tears.

He barely went home. Just a few short trips to Nagpur. But Sunita never complained. Her letters — written in her neat blue handwriting — arrived every week, filled with warmth, recipes, and love.

**February 1990. GATE Exam Day.**

Aditya walked into the exam hall wearing a light cotton shirt, ballpoint pen in hand, and a calmness in his heart. One full year — every late night, every page, every puff, every lecture — it all condensed into these three hours.

The questions were tough. Application-heavy. Tricky. But he flowed through them, like a batter seeing every ball early.

He walked out, eyes slightly moist, breath heavy — but not from fear. From release.

**May 15, 1990.**

Results came early.

Prasad burst into the library, face flushed.

“Notice board!” he shouted. “It is up! GATE results!”

They sprinted across the courtyard, hearts hammering. A fresh ledger, still warm from the printer, hung under a pin.

They searched.

And there it was.

**Roll No. 5231 | Name: Aditya V. | Score: 98.4% | AIR: 5**

Aditya’s breath caught. The words blurred for a second.

“Check again…” he whispered.

Prasad whooped, grabbing his shoulder. “Brother… you did it! TOP FIVE in India!”

Aditya laughed — a deep, disbelieving laugh. The kind that comes when hard work and destiny shake hands.

The Principal was called. Professors gathered. Even the canteen uncle came to pat his back.

“You’ve made our college proud,” the Principal said, eyes moist. “This… this is history.”

That evening, the boys took over a small dhaba outside the city. The sky was amber. The air, electric. Plates of chicken sukka, jeera rice, and rum-and-coke were passed around.

Aditya took his first real sip of alcohol that night.

It was warm. Fuzzy. Joyful.

They laughed, sang, predicted each other’s futures — who would go abroad, who would get rich, who would marry the most beautiful girl.

One last cigarette. One last group photo. Then they stood in silence under the stars.

“We were something, weren’t we?” Prasad murmured.

Aditya nodded. “We still are.”

**June 1990. Final-Year Results.**

Aditya ranked **3rd** in the entire university.

He received a prestigious internship offer from a German IT company — rare for a student straight out of college. It came with a small stipend, enough to ease pressure on Vishwas and Sunita.

But the bigger victory arrived a week later — a thick envelope from Mumbai University.

**Admission Confirmed — M. Tech, Computer Science.**  
**Monthly Scholarship: ₹2,000.**

He stared at it for a long time. Then folded it gently, as if it were sacred.

He had done it.

He was not the injured boy on the cycle anymore.

He was not just the state-level cricketer or drama actor or hostel topper.

He was Aditya V.  
GATE Ranker. IIT Aspirant. Scholar. Son of Vishwas and Sunita.

**The ascent had begun.**

**Part 3- The Lost Bag, The Lost Boy**

**Chapter 1- The Outsider**

Days were passing quietly in the orderly rhythm of the German company where Aditya had been working as an intern. The experience was nothing short of transformative — the precision, the discipline, the quiet brilliance of the senior engineers. They were not flashy. No loud self-praise, no hierarchy games. Just clean, deep thinking and focused work. Aditya soaked it all in — the architecture of their thoughts, the humility behind their intellect. He respected them, admired them. He wanted to be like them.

But his heart was now pulled toward a different milestone — one he had dreamed of for years. A master’s degree. A new beginning. A chance to delve deeper into the world of algorithms, to sharpen his mind further. He had earned admission into one of Mumbai’s most reputed universities. This was no small achievement for a boy from the modest government-run Engineering College in Pune — famous within its circle, yes, but still looked down upon by the self-contained academic elite of Mumbai.

He had earned his place.

The day finally arrived.

Aditya stepped into the grand building of the university with quiet excitement. The tall arches, the marble floor, the vintage oak furniture — everything reeked of legacy. Generations had passed through this institution’s corridors. There was history in the air. But there was also something else — **unfamiliarity**. A distant coldness. He could feel eyes occasionally drift toward him. Some polite, most indifferent.

Clutching his file with the admission letter, GATE scorecard, identity documents, and passport-sized photographs, he walked toward the administration office.

Behind a large glass-topped desk sat **Mrs. Nair**, the office clerk. Late fifties, greying bun, gold-rimmed glasses, and an expression that could curdle milk. She did not even look up.

Aditya stood silently for a few moments, then cleared his throat gently.

“Excuse me, ma’am. I have come to submit my enrolment documents.”

She did not respond.

He waited. Seconds passed. Her fingers moved lazily over some papers. No acknowledgment. Just a long, deliberate silence.

Just then, the door swung open behind him, and a small group of students strolled in — laughing, chatting, their backpacks slung casually over one shoulder. They exuded ease and familiarity — this was their turf. They were from the undergraduate batch here, freshly graduated, sliding smoothly into their master’s program.

Mrs. Nair looked up instantly.

“Oh, *Rhea beta*, you have come! And you too, *Sachin*, *Priya*! So good to see you again! Hope the holidays were fun?” she beamed, her tone sugary.

Rhea noticed Aditya still standing awkwardly.

“Ma’am... He was here before us. Please take his documents first?”

The smile vanished from Mrs. Nair’s face. Her eyes narrowed at Aditya.

She let out a low, dismissive scoff.

“He is... an *outsider*, no? Some third-rate suburban college fellow. Let him wait,” she muttered, loud enough for everyone to hear.

The group fell silent.

Rhea opened her mouth to protest again, but Aditya gave a small nod, almost begging her not to. He did not want more attention.

Mrs. Nair finally turned toward him with visible disdain.

“Okay, mister. Let us hear it. What was your GATE score?” she barked, like an invigilator catching a cheater.

“Ninety-eight percentiles,” Aditya replied softly, offering his scorecard.

The room froze.

Even the easy-going banter among the students paused.

Mrs. Nair snatched the paper and scanned it. Her face twisted in disbelief.

“This can’t be right,” she murmured.

“*Ajgaonkar!*” she bellowed into the inner office. “Come out and check this. Some fake mark sheet. Look at this nonsense.”

Aditya’s heart clenched.

This was not how he had imagined his first day — being accused of forgery in front of strangers. His mind flashed back to the proud moment his college principal in Pune had handed him a copy of his results, congratulating him on the GATE rank, suggesting he continue there for his postgrad. But Aditya had dreamt bigger. He had chosen to leave comfort behind and compete at the top.

A tall, stooping man with thick glasses and a tired face — **Mr. Ajgaonkar** — emerged from the adjacent room. His eyes were wary and suspicious.

“Name?” he asked, snatching the document.

“Aditya... Aditya Vishwas.”

“College?”

“Government Engineering College, Pune.”

“Hmmph. Address?”

“Khadki area, Pune.”

Ajgaonkar squinted at him, then called the central office line and barked into the receiver. After a minute or two of confirmation, he hung up.

“It’s real,” he muttered reluctantly. “Seems he actually did get 98.”

Then, turning to Mrs. Nair, he added under his breath, “No idea how this outsider cracked it.”

He tossed the scorecard on the desk like it was something mildly offensive.

Mrs. Nair rolled her eyes and began scribbling on a form. “Specialization?”

“Algorithms and Data Structures,” Aditya said.

She let out a dry chuckle. “Aiming for the best faculty, are we? Bold move.”

Without making eye contact, she handed him his ID card.

“Enjoy your Master’s,” she said with a tight smile. “Let’s see how long that 98 helps you survive.”

Aditya picked up his papers with trembling fingers. He did not say a word.

As he turned to leave, a voice called out behind him.

“Hey!” a broad-shouldered boy with an unshaven face approached him. “You’re not from here either, right?”

Aditya blinked. “No. Pune.”

“Ah, me too — outsider, I mean. I am *Amar*. Nashik. Took Database Systems. Did not get Algorithms... it is like bloody lottery here unless you are an ‘internal’.” He laughed.

Something about Amar's defiant tone, his unapologetic nature, felt oddly comforting.

“My dad was hell-bent I should get my degree from Mumbai. Thought it would help with jobs and all that. So. here I am.”

Aditya gave a faint smile. “Same. Thought I would learn something more, something real.”

“Hmm,” Amar said. “We will see. Let us survive this place first.”

Later that afternoon, Aditya climbed a narrow staircase to meet his assigned guide — **Professor R. Shree**, head of Algorithms.

He knocked.

A faint voice called, “Come.”

The office was dim, papers strewn everywhere. Books stacked high on shelves and even on the floor. And there, seated amid the chaos, was the man himself — hair uncombed, shirt collar askew, a tea-stained cup beside a dusty terminal.

One of his eyes was completely white — unseeing. The other, cloudy, and distant.

“Yes?” he asked, distracted.

“Sir... I am Aditya Vishwas. Master’s student. Algorithms track. You are my guide.”

Shree gave him a long look, as if trying to decide whether to remember the name.

“What college?” he asked, finally.

“Pune Government College.”

“Score?”

“GATE... Ninety-eight percentile.”

Shree raised a brow, but did not comment.

“Score doesn’t mean you know everything,” he said flatly. “Algorithms are not about memory or tricks. It is about thinking, proving, solving — repeatedly, until your head hurts. You will have to clear theory papers this year. Next year — project.”

There was no smile. No welcome. No encouragement.

Aditya nodded, thanked him, and stepped out.

The corridor was silent. Afternoon light filtered through long glass panes, casting golden streaks across the empty floor. He stood there for a moment, holding the ID card tightly.

The excitement he had brought with him in the morning had slowly leaked out, drop by drop.

But he told himself — **this is just the beginning**.

He had made it this far.

Now, he would make it count.

**Chapter 2- The Glass Wall**

The Master's course was divided into three semesters — two of rigorous theory and a final semester dedicated to a full-time research project. Aditya had looked forward to this phase of his academic life. This was supposed to be the beginning of something special, a chance to study with the best, to be in an institute full of brilliant minds, ideas, and conversations.

The campus was alive — undergraduates rushing through corridors, postgrads hanging around labs, PhD students buried in their work, professors pacing around with thick journals in hand. There was chatter, debate, and caffeine. It all looked vibrant from a distance. But from inside, Aditya felt like a glass wall separated him from everything.

Only Amar stood with him on this side of the wall.

They would often sit on the stone benches near the canteen, sipping cutting chai and watching students walk past — laughing, debating, planning their lives.

"This college runs like a family business,” Amar once said, lighting a Bristol and passing one to Aditya. “They do not like outsiders. We are just here to fill seats.”

Aditya took the cigarette, inhaled deeply, then exhaled with a heavy sigh. “I thought hard work mattered.”

“Not here, brother. Here, it is who you know and how long you have been in the system.”

Aditya tried to stay focused. His old college friends were proud of him. *You are in one of the best institutes in the country*, they would message him. He did not have the heart to explain what it felt like from inside.

The first semester began with courses like *Advanced Algorithms*, *Data Analytics*, and *Computational Structures*. Most of the topics were familiar to Aditya — thanks to his GATE preparation, he had already studied large parts of the syllabus in depth.

But understanding the subject was one thing. Being seen was another.

**The Calculus Incident**

It was the third week into the semester. The lecture hall was half full as students shuffled into their seats for *Advanced Algorithms*. R. Shree, Aditya’s assigned guide and the professor for the course, entered with his usual dishevelled look — mismatched shirt buttons, old sandals, and a satchel that looked like it had not been washed in years. One of his eyes was white and lifeless — possibly injured — which made it hard to tell whom he was ever looking at.

He opened his tattered notebook, read a few lines, then began scribbling integrals and equations on the board.

“Let’s assume f(x) is continuous and differentiable...” he muttered. Then he turned, “Can anyone simplify this function using the concept of limits and partial derivatives?”

Aditya instantly saw the trick in the question — it was a beautiful application of multivariable calculus. He raised his hand.

Shree looked right through him, then turned to Sayali — the class topper from the institute.

“Sayali?”

She hesitated. “Sir, is it... is it something to do with the chain rule?”

“No. Wrong.” Shree did not react calmly, just turned back and scribbled some more.

Another question. Aditya raised his hand again, more confidently this time. No response. Shree looked over to a boy named Nirav and invited him to answer.

Again, incorrect.

This pattern continued — four questions, all ignored, though Aditya had his hand raised each time. His palm had started to sweat. His shoulder ached from staying raised too long.

His heart sank.

*Why won’t he even acknowledge me?*

**Professor Harshal’s Lecture**

The next day was *Data Analytics* with Dr. Harshal, a younger professor with a reputation for making his lectures fun. He strolled in wearing a crisp shirt, sleeves folded, and a backpack slung across his shoulder.

“Okay folks,” he began cheerfully. “Today we are talking about classification models. Let us see who is awake.”

He fired a series of rapid questions. Aditya knew all of them. He raised his hand enthusiastically each time.

But again, Harshal ignored him.

Instead, he called out random names: “Nirav, Sayali, Ananya…”

All gave shaky, half-right answers.

Then came the final question of the lecture — a detailed one, requiring knowledge of decision trees and information gain.

Aditya raised his hand again.

Harshal glanced at him this time — his smile faded. His tone shifted.

“Alright... Alright, I get it. You got a great GATE score,” he said mockingly, scanning the classroom. “98 percent, right? That is the rumour.”

The room fell silent.

“But just because you cracked an exam does not mean you know everything. How do we even know you did not cheat? Hmm?”

He looked directly at Aditya, expression unreadable.

“Maybe just sit and observe, quietly. Do not try to show off.”

Aditya’s throat dried up. His hand slowly dropped. He looked away, blinking rapidly to stop the tears from forming. Something twisted painfully in his chest. The room blurred for a moment.

That evening, he did not go back to his hostel room immediately. He sat behind the old electronics lab, staring at nothing.

**A Ray of Light: Samrat**

Two days later, the lecture was handled by a PhD student named Samrat. Unlike others, Samrat had a warm voice and an easy manner. He posed a complex systems problem and invited discussion.

For a few minutes, no one answered.

Then Aditya gathered courage.

“Sir, may I?” he asked hesitantly.

Samrat nodded. “Yes, go ahead.”

Aditya stood up. He carefully laid out a multi-phase solution with minimal assumptions and a clear risk strategy. When he finished, the class was unusually quiet — listening.

Samrat smiled. “Excellent! That is a very well-structured approach. Just one suggestion — if you also factor in time complexity here, the model gets tighter.”

Aditya smiled for the first time in days.

After the class, he approached Samrat near the whiteboard.

“Sir… thank you. It means a lot to even be acknowledged.”

Samrat looked at him curiously. “You are Aditya, right? GATE Rank 5?”

He nodded.

“I’ve heard of you,” Samrat said. “You are good. Do not let this place grind you down. Just stay sharp, do your work. Everything else is noise.”

Aditya’s chest lightened.

*This place will not swallow me whole.*

**Descent and Escape**

But loneliness persisted. Most evenings, it was just him and Amar. They would hang around the chai stall or behind the dorms, sharing cigarettes and banter.

“You know,” Amar said one night, pulling a flask from his pocket, “you think too much. Come on. Rum and cola?”

Aditya hesitated.

“You need to let go sometimes,” Amar grinned. “Forget the class. Forget R. Shree. Forget that bloody Harshal. Just be.”

Aditya took a sip. The warmth spread. His limbs relaxed. The walls in his mind started to lower.

Words poured out. About home. About Sunita and Vishwas. About school. His failures. His Gate score. His hopes.

It was messy. It was raw. It felt good.

That night, for the first time, Aditya slept peacefully.

**Chapter 3- The Marks That Did Not Count**

**December came wrapped in a quiet chill**, the kind that makes you think time has slowed down. The Mumbai campus wore a muted shade of winter—peepal trees shedding their leaves in a hush, stray dogs curling beneath bikes for warmth, and students hustling between hostel and library with jackets too thin for comfort.

Aditya had one focus: survive the first semester.

He had buried himself in textbooks, academic journals, borrowed notes, and endless problem sets. Through the loneliness, the noise of unfamiliarity, and the cold glare of a city that did not care who you were, he had kept his head down.

Most nights, he sat cross-legged on his thin hostel mattress, solving probability models under flickering tube lights while Amar lounged nearby, smoking and spinning random tracks on his second-hand speakers.

“You study like you’re saving the planet,” Amar had said once, flipping through a magazine.

“No,” Aditya murmured, eyes fixed on the derivation he was pencilling into the margin. “I study like I’m trying to save myself.”

**The Result Day**

Two weeks after the exams, word spread: *Results are out.*

A crowd had already formed near the old wooden notice board outside the department office. Names. Percentages. Red pen markings. Nervous tension wrapped around conversations. Some laughed in relief. Some cursed under their breath.

Aditya pushed through the cluster of students.

**Sayali – 78%**  
**Nirav – 66%**  
**Ananya – 64%**  
**Amar – 42%**  
**Aditya – 48%**

He blinked.

No… That cannot be right. **48?**

He stared again. His brain tried to flip the digits. 84 maybe? Was it a typo? A printing error?

But it was there, bold, and cold: **48%.**

Something inside him dipped violently. His vision tunnelled. His mouth dried up. The laughter around him felt distant, warped. He clenched the folder in his hand tighter.

He remembered those papers. He remembered the derivations, the neat steps, the references he had written with such clarity. How could this be?

**The Confrontation**

He went straight to the admin office.

Ajgaonkar sat inside, munching roasted chana and flipping files like he was bored of his own job.

“Sir,” Aditya began, forcing calm into his voice, “I… I wanted to request a review. I got 48%, but I expected over 70. I cross-checked—my answers—”

Ajgaonkar barely looked up. “Review? This is not junior college, boy. The answer sheets are sealed, sent to the university. You want to waste your time, go to Kalina, and file a request.”

“But sir, I really—”

Ajgaonkar looked up, now visibly irritated. “You expected 70 and got 48? What do you think this is? Your piddi little hometown college? You kids come here with inflated confidence and GATE ranks and think you own the place.”

Aditya blinked.

Ajgaonkar leaned back; arms crossed. “Frankly, we have all been wondering how someone like you scored so high. Must have copied. *Copymaster*.”

The words struck like open-hand slaps. He could not speak. Could not even breathe for a moment. Something cracked. Something that had kept him together for weeks.

He turned away, numb.

**The Professor’s Verdict**

Next stop: R. Shree’s cabin. He would understand.

Aditya knocked gently. R. Shree did not look up. He was scribbling notes, a glass of half-drunk tea steaming nearby.

“Sir, I… got 48%. I studied hard. I had checked my answers. Can I please request a review?”

R. Shree did not flinch. “You got what you deserved.”

Aditya hesitated. “But—”

Shree looked up, finally. Eyes cold.

“You don’t get it, do you?” he said. “It does not matter how right *you* think your answers are. It matters if your answers match the expectation of the evaluator. Do you think your GATE score gives you some kind of shield? This is not Kota. You are not special.”

Something in Aditya wilted. The knot in his chest tightened. He did not argue. There was no point.

**False Hope: Samrat Again**

One last person. One last hope.

He found Samrat helping a group of juniors debug a code snippet in the corridor. Samrat’s face softened as he saw Aditya approach—pale, eyes red, lips pressed into a thin line.

“Aditya? What happened?”

“I… I got 48%. I thought I had done well. I really did.”

Samrat frowned, exhaled. “I am sorry, yaar. This happens. It is the way things work sometimes. Some evaluators do not read beyond the first mistake. Some just want things *their way*. Do not take it personally.”

“But it feels personal,” Aditya whispered.

Samrat nodded, voice gentler now. “I know. I have been there. But this system does not define your worth. Just… focus on what is next.”

Aditya nodded, but inside, he felt hollow. The words echoed without landing.

**Alone in the Dark**

That weekend, Amar had gone home to Nashik.

Aditya stayed behind. Alone in the hostel. No distractions. No pretense.

That evening, with no one to talk to, he drifted toward the back wall of the campus—past the chai stall, past the broken fencing—until he reached *Hotel Ramesh Garden Family Permit Room*. A dimly lit bar where no student went unless they had nowhere else.

He walked in, head down. Sat on a cracked plastic chair, ordered a quarter Old Monk and a Thums Up.

No questions. No explanations.

The first sip scorched his throat. The next warmed his chest. The third numbed everything.

*They are right,* he thought.  
*Maybe I do not belong here. I never did.*

He smoked two cigarettes. Stared at the peeling walls.

**Routine of Disappearance**

One visit turned into two. Then three. Then every evening.

He became a regular. Same table. Same order. Same numbness.

His allowance ran thin. He skipped dinners. His cheeks hollowed out. Lectures slipped by unnoticed. Mornings blurred into nights.

He told his parents—calling once a week from the hostel landline— “I am working on a group project. Lots of coding, late nights.”

Sunita believed him.  
Vishwas only asked, “Are you eating properly, beta?”

“Yes, Baba,” Aditya would say, pressing his forehead to the wall, whispering the lie into the dark.

But inside, he felt like he was vanishing. One forgotten mark at a time.

**Chapter 4- The Field of Shadows**

The January air in Mumbai bit sharp against his skin, but Aditya felt nothing.

He had been drifting—untethered—since the semester break. The silence of the hostel room had become unbearable, yet the noise of the world outside did not offer comfort either. He would leave each morning with a bag slung over his shoulder, pretending to attend lectures, but most days ended with him wandering aimlessly. Some mornings he found himself sitting at Marine Drive, knees hugged to his chest, eyes fixed on the frothing waves crashing against the rocks. Other times he slipped into shady Irani cafés or corner bars, nursing lukewarm chai or occasionally something stronger, just to feel less invisible.

Calls from Pune had become a routine he avoided. Aai's voice felt like sunlight he did not deserve. Baba’s silence, he imagined, was loaded. He had not responded to the last three letters. They sat unopened in his locker drawer, corners curling like dying leaves.

But today, something shifted.

He found himself walking through the rusted college gates—not with resolve, but with curiosity. A faint spark. Maybe Amar was back from vacation. Maybe cricket season had begun.

And there he was—Amar, lounging on the canteen parapet, sleeves rolled, cigarette flicking between fingers, eyes scanning the courtyard like a king surveying his fading kingdom.

“Hey, you’re alive,” Amar grinned. “Inter-institute sports are on. Cricket matches starting. Samrat’s made a team.”

Aditya’s voice cracked as a smile tried to return. “Cricket?”

“Yup. You in?”

He did not think twice. “Of course.”

His heartbeat louder. For the first time in weeks, there was something to feel—something that resembled joy. Muscle memory stirred. The pitch. The weight of the bat. The crack of leather on willow.

**Match Day**

The sun glared down on the cracked college ground. Dust rose with every footstep, the faint white line boundaries long faded. The postgrad team looked like a bunch of overaged tourists. Samrat, self-declared captain, barked instructions with the urgency of a man late for brunch.

The opposing team—slick 2nd year undergraduates—looked terrifyingly efficient. Their whites were bright. Their eyes gleamed. They won the toss and chose to bat.

“Okay, Sameer, Pasha—you guys’ open bowling. Rotate after two overs,” Samrat ordered, not bothering to look up.

Aditya stepped forward. “Can I bowl second change? I usually take the new ball.”

Samrat barely turned. “Yeah yeah. Later.”

Aditya stepped back; lips pressed tight. He sat on the boundary, fingers itching for the ball, eyes tracking every fumble. Each mis field stung like a splinter under skin. The undergraduates piled on—boundaries flowed. A wiry opener smashed 153\* like it was a casual net session.

By the 28th over, the score read 234/2.

“Aditya, go bowl the 29th,” Samrat finally muttered.

Aditya stood, tightened his laces, took the ball. He kissed it softly—like a ritual—and jogged to his run-up.

No noise in his head now.

Just rhythm.

First ball—fast, skidding in, thudding into pads. The batter turned and raised his eyebrow.

“Nice one, bhai! Pehle kyun nahi diya isko?” he shouted to his mates.

Next five deliveries—tight, bouncing awkwardly, catching edges, beating swings. Samrat, now quiet, actually watched.

Then, final ball of the over.

The batter danced down. Big swing. Crack!

Aditya dived instinctively, mid-air, twisting. His left palm closed around the red blur.

THUD.

He rolled, then rose—ball in hand.

Silence.

The batter stood frozen. Removed his helmet, shook his head, and walked off.

Not a single clap. No pat on the back. No celebration.

Just Dr. Harshal muttering through his wicketkeeper pads, “Cool catch, I guess.”

Aditya’s throat ached—not from shouting, but from everything he wanted to scream.

**The Collapse**

Batting second, the postgrad team disintegrated. Wickets fell like dry leaves. 43/6. Aditya approached Samrat.

“Let me bat next.”

Samrat scoffed. “Who do you think you are? Kapil Dev?”

“I just want a chance.”

No reply.

At 67/8, panic spread.

“Pasha?”  
“My knees are gone.”  
“Sameer?”  
“Twisted ankle.”

Samrat rolled his eyes. “Jaa Kapil Dev. Tera hi din hai.”

Aditya picked up the heaviest bat. Anger gave him balance.

He walked in like a soldier entering a forgotten war.

No drama. No shots in anger. Just grit. He farmed the strike. Shielded the tail. Waited.

Then came the 23rd over.

First ball—SIX.  
Second—SIX.  
Third—another one.

The undergraduates whistled. “Wah bhai!”

He pulled the fourth towards square leg—misjudged the fielder’s angle. Turned too late.

Ran anyway.

Scrambled a single.

His partner, dazed and lost, missed the next ball entirely.

Bails flew.

“Next!” Samrat barked.

No one got up.

“Bro, match over,” Pasha waved, half-laughing.

Samrat tossed his gloves aside. “Okay guys. All done. Thanks for showing up.”

**The Hollow Aftermath**

Aditya walked to the sidelines, panting, chest burning.

He turned to Amar. “What was that? I was not even out! I could have taken it to the end!”

Amar shrugged, already sipping a soft drink. “Arre relax. This is not Ranji. It is just a game, man.”

Aditya blinked. “But I gave everything…”

His voice faded.

No one was listening.

Later that night, the alcohol burned like acid. The hostel bus ride back to the suburbs was long. He sat by the window, cheek against the glass, eyes blank. The streetlights flickered by like a string of chances he was never allowed to take.

The city moved on. He stayed behind.

In a crowd, yet unseen.

**Chapter 5- The Hollow Silence**

Days passed. Mumbai (Bombay) moved on with its noisy rhythm—honking BEST buses, street hawkers calling out with raspy voices, and paan-stained walls basking in the dry April heat.

But for Aditya, everything had stalled.

Then came the second semester results.

**51%.**  
It hit like a slow, blunt hammer. No drama, no sharp sting. Just a silent, sinking weight.  
He stared at the printed result pinned to the notice board. Other students crowded around, some whispering nervously, others laughing in relief. But he did not hear any of it.

No anger. No tears. No reaction. Just a long, empty stare.

He folded the paper neatly and walked away.

He was not surprised anymore. Just… hollow.

At the engineering hostel, his visits became irregular. He made occasional appearances at lectures, submitted a few assignments, but otherwise vanished into the blur of Bombay’s vast anonymity.

Instead, he began staying full-time at **Amar’s flat in Vakola**, just off the bustling Santacruz-Kalina road, behind the cluster of narrow lanes near **Mumbai University’s Kalina Campus**.

It was a crumbling one-room unit in a chawl-style building. Paint peeling off walls. A lone pedestal fan rotating lazily. A mattress on the floor, an old transistor, ashtrays full. It was freedom and ruin in equal measure.

Days melted into nights. Cigarettes into ash. Bottles emptied, then refilled.

Once a week, Aditya would walk to the nearby STD booth and call home from a coin box phone.

“Baba, I am at Amar’s place for group studies… classes are hectic. I will come home once things ease up. Please tell Aai not to worry.”

He spoke quickly. Calmly. Gently. With just enough conviction to be believable.

Sunita clutched the receiver on the other end in Pune, her heart aching. “But beta… it’s been six weeks… at least let us visit you—”

“Not now, Aai… please. Just a little more time.”

Click.

But worry does not vanish with polite reassurances. It only grows roots.

**Vishwas sensed something was off.** His instinct—sharpened over years of raising a large family—kept whispering that Aditya’s silence was not just academic pressure.

One Monday, he took leave from work and caught the **Deccan Queen** to Mumbai (Bombay). He did not inform Aditya. He did not want to give him the chance to deflect.

He reached Dadar by noon, then boarded a local to **Kurla**, the station closest to the institute.

The college campus buzzed with students, dusty banyan trees, and the usual whir of ceiling fans in administrative offices.

At the front office, Vishwas introduced himself.

“I am Aditya’s father. He is in Masters... Can I meet him?”

The clerk looked puzzled. Flipped through a register.

“He has not been signing the hostel register. I think he has been absent for a while. But… wait, yes… his group-mate Amar… stays nearby. Kalina… Vakola side. They are working on the final-year project together, I believe.”

He scribbled an address on a piece of paper.

Vishwas folded it carefully and left without a word.

**Evening. Vakola. Near Mumbai University**

The lanes were tight, dusty, and echoed with the hum of distant traffic. The building was a low-rise chawl with broken staircases and half-open doors where neighbours peeped curiously.

He climbed to the second floor. The flat was open, and inside he saw **Aditya and Amar sprawled on the floor**, playing cards, surrounded by **a half-finished bottle of Old Monk**, a transistor murmuring Rafi songs in the corner.

“**Aditya!**”

The voice thundered through the room like a storm.

Aditya froze. The cigarette slipped from his fingers.

**Vishwas stood in the doorway**, sweat on his brow, fury in his eyes, but a deeper disappointment creasing his face.

“**Baba…** I—” Aditya scrambled to stand up.

“Do not. Just do not.” His voice was cold. “So, this is it? This is your ‘group study’? This is what you have reduced yourself to?”

Amar tried to explain. “Uncle, he’s—he’s been struggling, and we thought a break—”

“Break? This is not a break. This is a breakdown.”

He turned to his son, eyes dark with restrained pain.

“You lied to us. To your mother. You vanished. We sat by the landline every night hoping you would call. And this is where you have been?”

Aditya’s lips parted, but the words did not come. His face was ashen. His throat was dry.

“**Pack your bag. Now. You are coming home.**”

Amar looked down, awkward. Aditya gathered his books, some clothes, the project file, and followed his father into the sultry evening.

The train ride to Pune was silent.

Back home, **Sunita** rushed to the door. When she saw her son, she almost did not recognize him. His eyes were sunken, his cheeks dull, shirt untucked, hair unkempt.

She did not speak. She just hugged him.

Then broke down.

“Why, beta? Why? Were we too harsh? Did we push you too much? Why didn’t you tell us?”

He did not answer. Could not.

Later that night, as the ceiling fan hummed and Aditya sat on the living room swing, **Vishwas brought two cups of tea** and sat beside him.

“Beta…” he said slowly. “Failure is not shameful. Giving up is.”

Aditya looked away, ashamed.

“I just… I do not feel like myself anymore, Baba. I do not know who I am. Everything is out of reach… even air.”

Vishwas put a hand on his shoulder.

“Then do not fight the world right now. Just fight for the next breath. One breath at a time. One day at a time.”

**The third semester began.**

The final-year project was allotted. A half-baked, outdated analog communication study—far from what Aditya had hoped for.

He tried to negotiate. “Sir… this project… it is obsolete. Can I explore something more updated?”

Prof. R. Shree snorted. “Updated? You are lucky I even gave you a topic. With your record? Finish this. Or do not bother asking for a degree.”

The door slammed.

Outside the lab, the sky was dull and grey. He sat alone on the concrete steps.

He wanted to scream.

But he did not.

He whispered to himself.

**“Just finish this. Get the degree. Get out.”**

**Chapter 6- The Lost Bag, The Lost Boy**

*5th October 1992 — A humid Monday afternoon in Mumbai.*

The thick air hung heavy with humidity, clinging to the skin like an unwanted memory. Outside the lecture hall, a faint buzz of students and distant traffic sounds blended with the monotonous hum of a creaking ceiling fan.

Aditya stood frozen in front of Professor R. Shree’s desk, the crumpled thesis draft shaking slightly in his clammy hands. He had not slept properly in weeks. His eyes were rimmed with dark circles, his shirt stained with sweat and the faint smell of Old Monk lingered in his pores. He had not eaten more than a few morsels in days. Happiness—joy—had fled from his life like a thief in the night, leaving only this: the fragile hope of his thesis, held together with frayed nerves and a desperate will.

Professor Shree looked up from a pile of papers, his thick glasses catching the dull light. Adjusting them with a slow, practiced gesture, he studied Aditya with an expression that was neither curious nor kind. Just disinterested.

“Oh, you’ve completed it?” His voice was flat, tinged with something close to boredom.

Aditya nodded. “Yes, sir.” His voice was barely audible.

R. Shree smirked thinly. “Wonderful. Spellcheck kar liya?”

“Yes, sir,” Aditya whispered.

“Fantastic. Get it printed on bond paper. I will sign it.”

No questions. No encouragement. No advice. Just a cold dismissal. The kind that shredded hope quietly, leaving behind a raw wound of isolation.

Aditya shuffled out, the weight of the moment sinking deep into his bones. The draft in his hand felt heavier than the burden on his chest.

In the bustling institute office, the inevitable awaited.

Ajgaonkar, a man who wore sarcasm like a second skin, caught sight of him. “Oho... thesis submit kar diya?” he chuckled, holding the draft like it was a joke, waving it in the air.

He turned to Nair Madam, who smirked and leaned forward. “Madam, dekho! Isne thesis banaya hai!”

Laughter erupted from the group nearby, a cruel ripple of amusement.

Aditya said nothing. He had long since learned not to expect dignity here. He walked silently to the print shop inside the college, paid for fresh bond paper, and printed the thesis carefully. Each sheet felt like a fragile lifeline. Folding it neatly, he slipped the draft back into his battered bag.

He fingered the floppy diskette in his shirt pocket—a tiny, fragile rectangle of magnetic plastic that held the only digital copy. Its presence was a faint reassurance amidst chaos.

Back at R. Shree’s office, the door was locked.

“Sir left,” said the peon, barely glancing up.

No words passed between them.

Aditya stepped out into the early evening air. The sky was a dull orange, and the first hints of night began to settle over Mumbai.

He did not return to his hostel. Instead, he walked to Amar’s flat in Vakola, near Mumbai University. The cramped one-bedroom smelled of stale smoke and unwashed clothes. The fan above creaked unevenly, stirring the heavy air in lazy circles.

That evening passed in a haze of Bristol cigarettes and cheap Old Monk rum. The bottle passed slowly between them, each sip numbing a little more of the relentless ache inside Aditya.

At around 9:30 PM, he stood unsteadily, eyes glassy. “I’m going back to the hostel,” he slurred.

The bus to Powai was crowded and stifling. The scent of sweat, diesel, and rusted metal filled his nostrils as he pushed inside. Finding a corner near the rear, he climbed the steps and deposited his bag on the overhead luggage rack.

His head throbbed fiercely. His limbs felt leaden.

The bus jolted forward, carrying him away from the day’s failures.

His eyes fluttered shut for a moment.

“POWAI! POWAI!” the conductor shouted, his voice sharp and abrupt.

Aditya’s eyes snapped open.

Panic gripped him. His stop was here.

He pushed through the sea of bodies, elbowing past passengers.

He made it to the door just as the bus lurched forward again.

He stumbled out into the darkening street—legs shaking, heart pounding.

Ten steps later, his breath caught in his throat.

The bag.

The thesis.

**Gone.**

He spun around, eyes darting desperately.

The bus’s taillights were already vanishing around the corner.

He ran after it—tripping over the uneven pavement.

Scraped his knee on the rough concrete.

Gritted his teeth and got up.

But the bus was gone.

He collapsed on a bench near the road, hands shaking uncontrollably.

Sweat mixed with tears as the magnitude of loss crashed down.

A year of sleepless nights, endless rejection, bitter anger, drowning lies, drinking—all vanished in an instant.

The sobs came unbidden—raw, loud, uncontrollable.

Then, his hand brushed the shirt pocket.

The diskette.

It was still there.

A flicker of light in a dark, sinking world.

By nearly 3 AM, Aditya slipped quietly into his home, careful not to wake SU or V. He collapsed onto the sofa, hollow and exhausted.

Morning came with a cruel inevitability.

He stole money from V’s wallet for the third time that week.

He reprinted the thesis on fresh bond paper at a local stationery shop.

Back at the institute, Aditya laid the crisp new copy before Professor Shree.

The professor flipped through it slowly, suspicion darkening his gaze.

“Where did you get this bond paper? From the college?”

“No, sir. I lost the previous copy on the bus. I had this reprinted outside.”

“You are a careless idiot. I cannot sign this. Get bond paper from the institute office. Only then.”

Aditya’s breath hitched.

The office.

Ajgaonkar and Nair Madam were waiting.

“Oh, look who’s back,” Nair sneered.

“You lost the thesis?” Ajgaonkar mocked. “Beta, you’ll need university permission for extra paper now.”

Passersby glanced at him, some whispering, some smiling cruelly.

Aditya burned inside.

He walked out; his dignity crushed underfoot.

He went straight to a nearby bar.

Sat alone.

Drank. Smoked. Watched shadows flicker on the walls.

Days later, he dragged himself to the university office.

The dean’s PA barely looked at him. “Come back after three days.”

Three days passed like a slow drip of poison.

He returned, got the official approval.

Rushed to the institute.

Ajgaonkar did not even look up.

“Oh… bad luck. Paper stock is over. Everyone else is printing now. Come back in 3–4 weeks.”

Something inside Aditya broke.

He gave up.

He stopped going.

Went home to Pune.

He lied to Sunita and Vishwas.

“It’s submitted,” he told them. “Sir is reviewing it. Might take some time.”

They believed him.

Or wanted to.

He spent days flicking channels on TV, restless and numb.

Evenings wandering in a drunken haze.

Three months passed.

One night, after midnight, he stumbled in.

Red-eyed. Slurred. Barely standing.

Sunita and Vishwas waited in the living room, lights on.

He froze.

“You’re drunk!” Sunita screamed, tears streaming down her face. “You’ve been lying to us!”

She hit his arm.

“What is happening to you, beta? What are you doing to us?”

He said nothing.

Vishwas sank onto a chair, face buried in his hands.

“This is not you, Aditya. This is not you.”

Sunita broke down, sobbing.

“Tell me why! Why are you doing this—to yourself? To us?”

No answer.

Then Vishwas whispered, “I haven’t seen Sher Jr since afternoon…”

The silence that followed was deafening.

Aditya’s head snapped up.

SJ. His only friend through all the dark days. The dog who waited patiently, who wagged his tail when no one else cared.

Old Sher—limping, struggling to breathe—had disappeared.

Aditya collapsed onto the sofa.

Tears streamed silently down his face.

He curled into himself like a broken child.

His heart heavy, soul raw.

In that moment, the world went dark.

**Chapter 7- The Final Blow**

**The next day.**

SU and V, now suspicious and tired of his evasions, forced Aditya to get up and go to the Institute.

He dragged his feet there—eyes heavy, spirit low.

To his surprise, Ajgaonkar handed him bond papers without mockery.

For a brief moment, Aditya felt lightness in his chest—*finally*.

He got the thesis printed again—pages crisp, carefully arranged—and rushed to R Shree’s cabin.

“Leave it with me,” Shree said without looking up, “Come next week.”

Aditya returned the following week.

“Sir… please review the thesis.”

R Shree, flipping through casually, said, “I have marked a few points in pencil. Correct those. And print it on normal paper—for now.” Aditya made the changes. Returned.

“More corrections,” Shree said. “I have marked a few lines. Rewrite those.”

Week after week, **this cycle continued**. Rewrite. Reprint. Wait. Each time, Aditya’s hope shrank.

His classmates had begun submitting their final theses, getting interview calls, placements.

And he—still stuck in this **loop of edits and indifference**.

**It was late January 1993.**

He was exhausted.

Then, finally, **on 15th January**, R Shree looked at the final version.

“This looks complete now. Come tomorrow—I will sign. I will inform Ajgaonkar to give bond paper.”

Aditya’s hands trembled. *Was this it? Was it really done?*

He nodded silently and walked out, a small flame of peace flickering within.

**Next day.**

Aditya arrived early.

Walked into the department with a strange mix of hope and numbness.

The peon stood by the cabin door, cleaning his nails.

“Sir has gone on leave,” he said casually. “Will return next month.”

Aditya just stood there.

He could not even feel rage anymore.

He just turned around and walked out. Retuned to Pune.

**That evening, he drank. A lot.**

Not with friends.

Not for joy.

Just to disappear.

He stayed home. No institute. No calls. No talking.

For days.

**23rd January, Sunday.**

Vishwas asked during lunch, “How’s your project going?”

Silence.

“Thesis signed?” he probed.

Aditya looked away.

After persistent questioning, Sunita’s voice rising in concern—

Aditya snapped.

“I am not going to that place anymore. I do not care what happens.”

He stormed out.

Did not come home that night.

Or the next.

Sunita and Vishwas were now worried beyond reason.

They pleaded, they waited, they cried.

Still no sign.

On the **third day**, they visited the Institute. Spoke to the Dean.

He listened calmly.

“I have R Shree’s contact. I will speak with him.”

He called. Spoke briefly.

“He is okay to sign the thesis. Aditya must come. R Shree returns on 1st Feb.”

Vishwas and Sunita returned home relieved. They told Aditya.

**But Feb 5th came. And still, he did not go.**

This time, Sunita exploded.

“You are destroying your life! We gave you everything—and you are throwing it away!”

Aditya grabbed some money, picked up his bag, and walked out.

**Two days passed.**

No calls. No return.

Now it was serious.

Vishwas and Sunita, both terrified, were on the verge of reporting him to the police.

They were halfway to the station when a neighbour saw them.

“Oh… is Aditya now working at SS Computers near the railway station?”

They froze.

“What?”

“I saw him there with two other boys. Looked like he is doing something with computers.”

Vishwas and Sunita said nothing.

Just jumped into an auto and rushed to SS Computers.

**Inside the shop.**

Aditya was sitting at a small desk, typing something besides two other boys.

Wearing an old, checked shirt. Unshaven. Pale.

Sunita rushed in like a storm.

“WHAT ARE YOU DOING HERE?! Where were you for so many days?!”

She was shouting. Crying.

Vishwas looked at him—hurt and quiet.

Then came **Suhas**, an old college friend.

“Aunty… uncle… he has been with me. He told me you were away on a religious trip. Said the house was locked.”

They stared at Suhas in disbelief.

Then without another word, they pulled Aditya’s arm and left.

**Back home.**

Sunita and Vishwas bombarded him with questions. Emotions. Tears. Anger.

Aditya did not fight.

He just stood in the middle of the room… then collapsed into a chair.

And began to cry.

Not like a child.

But like a soul that’s finally allowed itself to break.

“I don’t want to go back there,” he whispered.

“That place… it kills me. I cannot breathe there.”

Sunita tried to reach out.

He looked up at her—eyes red, hollow.

“I do not want a Master’s degree. I do not want to be anyone. I just want to live freely… away from that place.”

There was silence.

He took a deep breath.

Then poured it all out.

**Everything.**

The lost bag.

The edits.

The weeks of humiliation.

The drinking.

The loneliness.

The rejection.

The anger.

The fear.

The betrayal.

And Junior Sheroo.

“I lied because I could not face it anymore. I would rather die than go back.”

That night, no one ate dinner.

The TV was on, but no one watched.

No one slept.

Just quietness.

A defeated boy, and two grieving parents, all sitting in the same house—

but **in three different worlds**.

**Chapter 8- The Spark Returns**

It was a soft, quiet Sunday morning in early December. The winter sun filtered gently through the lace curtains, casting golden patterns on the tiled floor of the small apartment. The air was cool, but inside, the house held the warmth of home—of familiar smells, old songs, and shared silences.

Vishwas sat by the window, a steaming cup of tea in his hands. The radio cassette player on the shelf crackled gently before Dev Anand’s voice, smooth and nostalgic, began to flow through the room.

“*Main zindagi ka saath nibhata chala gaya…*”

Vishwas’s fingers tapped the table lightly in rhythm. His eyes—tired, but alert—watched the street below. For the first time in many weeks, a faint, almost imperceptible smile appeared on his face. A weight had lifted, if only a little.

He turned and called out softly, “Aditya… come here. Sunita, you are too.”

The three of them gathered at the dining table. It was a small wooden table, worn at the edges, but it had seen years of stories, arguments, meals, and milestones. Aditya walked in, hair uncombed, wearing an old sweatshirt. Sunita followed, wiping her hands on a towel, her eyes flicking between father and son.

Vishwas leaned forward slightly. “So…” he began, his voice gentle, “what’s your plan now?”

Aditya stirred his tea slowly, his eyes fixed on the little whirlpool forming in the cup. There was a long silence.

Then he looked up and said, not with drama or apology, but with quiet resolve, “I liked working at Suhas’s shop. Those four days… they felt real. I met people. I spoke with them, explained things… helped them understand the products. Retail is a good business. I want to work there. Learn more.”

Sunita looked at Vishwas. Their eyes met—no words spoken, but a shared understanding passed between them.

There was no sadness in Aditya’s tone, no lingering trace of the earlier despair that had clung to him for months. Just clarity. Honesty. And a spark of the Aditya they once knew.

Later, as they washed dishes together, Vishwas whispered to Sunita, “That is what he needs now. No more pushing. Let him find his way. Let him rebuild—on his own terms.”

From the next morning onward, Aditya began going regularly to **SS Computers**, the small retail outlet owned by his old classmate Suhas. It was tucked away inside a modest shopping complex, a glass-walled store with blinking screens and printer boxes stacked to the ceiling.

And Aditya… he was good at it.

He was not flashy or fast-talking, but his sincerity showed. He listened to customers carefully, asked them questions, made them feel heard. His boyish curiosity, his innocence—both shone in this setting. Customers smiled when he spoke. He did not try to "sell"—he simply connected.

Suhas watched quietly from the counter, occasionally smiling when an old client would say, “That boy of yours—he’s smart.”

Months passed. One crisp afternoon, the sun slanting sharply through the glass doors, Suhas had stepped out for a vendor meeting. Aditya was alone, managing the floor.

A woman was asking him about dot matrix printers. He was midway through a demonstration—opening the printer tray, explaining how the ribbon worked—when a sharply dressed man entered the store.

He stood near the doorway, watching.

Tall, broad-shouldered, with salt-flecked hair and a thick, neatly combed mustache. His dark suit was impeccable, and he exuded quiet authority.

After a few minutes, the man approached the counter. Suhas had just returned.

“Who’s that young man?” he asked, nodding toward Aditya.

Suhas smiled. “That is Aditya—my college classmate. He has been helping me for a while.”

The man nodded. “Interesting.”

A few minutes later, he walked over to Aditya, extending a firm hand.

“Hello. I am **Shrikant Kamat**, Regional Head at *Vistara Computer Co.* And you are?”

Aditya blinked, a little startled. “I’m Aditya,” he said, shaking hands.

Kamat looked him over. “You explained that printer well. Confident. Clear.”

Aditya smiled. “Thank you, sir.”

“Well,” Kamat said, pausing, “how would you like to work with us? As a Sales Representative?”

The words hung in the air. Aditya’s heart skipped a beat.

He had begun to love this world—technology, conversation, learning, persuasion. Sales did not feel like work. It felt like motion, like energy.

“I’d love to, sir… if I get the opportunity.”

Kamat pulled out a clean, white business card from his wallet and handed it to him.

“Come to our office tomorrow. 11 AM sharp. I will introduce you to our National Sales Head, Mr. Katariya.”

That evening, Aditya walked home early. There was a bounce in his step, his shoulders lighter than usual. The old light had returned to his eyes.

As he entered the house, Sunita looked up from the kitchen. Vishwas sat reading the paper.

“I need to tell you something,” Aditya said, his voice almost trembling.

They listened.

By the end of it, Sunita had tears in her eyes. Vishwas stood and hugged him.

“See?” he said quietly. “Life finds a way. You just needed time.”

The next morning, Aditya rose early. He ironed his best shirt—blue checks, slightly faded—and combed his hair twice. He borrowed his father’s Lambretta scooter and rode through the chilly morning air to a tall building in the business district.

It was his first time entering a glass-and-chrome office.

The floors gleamed. The reception had a soft floral scent. People moved about briskly in formal clothes, holding laptops and talking into headsets.

At the 6th floor, he was asked to wait.

Then Mr. Kamat arrived.

“Welcome,” he said with a warm smile. “Let’s meet Mr. Katariya.”

They entered a large, tastefully decorated office. The National Sales Head, **Mr. Katariya**, sat behind a sleek desk. He was in his fifties, with kind eyes and salt-and-pepper hair.

“Hello, Aditya. Sit, sit,” he said.

He asked a few standard questions—education, work, interests.

Then suddenly, glancing up from the form, he asked, “Do you ride a bike or scooter?”

Aditya replied, “Yes sir. My father’s old Lambretta.”

“Do you wear a helmet?”

“Yes sir, especially when I’m riding on highways.”

Katariya paused. “Hmm… not very confident about your driving, are you?”

Aditya did not miss a beat. “Sir, I am confident about *my* driving. Just not about the people driving around me.”

There was silence.

Then Katariya and Kamat burst out laughing.

“Smart boy,” Kamat said, patting his shoulder. “He’s got sense.”

Katariya rang a bell. A peon entered.

“Call Mr. Gupte,” he said.

Moments later, a slightly balding, kind-faced man entered the room.

“Yes sir?”

“This is Aditya. We are hiring him as Sales Representative. Please start the paperwork.”

Kamat added, “Starting salary—₹7,500. Plus, uncapped incentives. Some of our reps earn ₹10,000 extra. Travel and daily allowance too.”

Aditya was speechless. It was more than what Vishwas earned after 30 years in a government job.

He stood up, breathless. “Yes sir. I accept. With all my heart.”

Appointment letter in hand, he boarded the 4 PM bus home. The city shimmered in golden light, and the envelope in his hand felt heavier than gold.

But fate was not quite done.

Just as the bus turned near Lalbagh Chowk, a speeding rickshaw swerved into its path. The bus jerked violently and crashed into a roadside tea stall.

Screams. Panic. Metal groaned.

Aditya’s left knee slammed against the iron seat rail. His pants tore. Pain flared. Blood oozed.

But even in that chaos, he clutched the appointment letter with both hands, shielding it from harm.

At home, Sunita and Vishwas rushed to the door.

“Oh my God—what happened?”

“I’m okay,” Aditya winced, limping in. “Just a bruise. But… I got the job.”

Sunita broke into tears. Vishwas hugged him tightly.

After everything. After all the nights of doubt and darkness…

Aditya had returned. Not to where he had once imagined—but to someplace better.

A week later, as his leg healed, Vishwas surprised him with a gift: a **Yamaha RS100**. It gleamed in the morning sun.

Aditya stood beside it, helmet in hand, eyes full of possibility.

He was back.

Not broken. Not defeated.

Reborn—on his own path.

**Chapter 9- The Man in the Mirror**

**5th June 1993.**

A date etched in Aditya’s memory—not because of fanfare or speeches, but because of something quieter, deeper.

He had walked through the sleek glass doors of the Vistara Computer Manufacturing Company not as a hopeful onlooker, not as someone tagging along with Suhas—but as an *employee*.  
His own name—*Aditya Vishwas Rao*—printed boldly on the ID card. Sharp. Fresh. Real.

The receptionist greeted him with a smile that was all protocol and polish.  
She handed him a slim folder—inside, a training schedule, corporate handbook, and the ID badge that seemed to carry the weight of all the years he had doubted himself.

He stared at it a moment longer than needed, fingertips brushing the smooth plastic.  
He was not here by luck. He had *earned* his place.

**July 1993 — The Classroom**

The training room on the fourth floor smelled of new carpet, coffee, and ambition.  
Rows of fresh recruits sat in grey cushioned chairs, paper cups of Nescafé steaming in their hands. The air conditioning hummed low, a constant undercurrent.

The trainers spoke of processors, peripherals, pricing, and pitches. Acronyms flew across the whiteboard—RAM, ROM, HDD, VGA—and most nodded blankly, pretending to follow.

But Aditya?  
He leaned forward. His questions were sharp, not showy. He was not asking to impress—he *wanted* to understand. Not just *what* a component did, but *why* it mattered to the customer. Not just *how* to sell, but *when* to listen.

He stayed back after sessions, clarifying nuances. He took notes with care. And when others checked their watches, he checked his understanding.

One afternoon, as the trainer stepped out, Mr. Gupte passed by the room and paused at the glass window.

Inside, Aditya was in mid-discussion, whiteboard marker in hand, explaining how to tailor a pitch based on the buyer’s profession—*“A teacher, a CA, a factory admin—they all have different tech needs,”* he was saying.

Gupte smiled, impressed.

Later that evening, he turned to Kamat over a cup of cutting chai.

**“This boy… he is something else. Knowledge, patience, clarity—he has it all. A rare mix.”**  
Kamat thumped the table with pride. **“Didn’t I say? Diamond in the dust, that one. Just needed a little rinse.”**

By the end of July, HR had quietly marked his file with a star.  
Not a formality. A future.

**1st August 1993 — First Day on the Field**

Aditya sat in a small Irani café near the railway station—faded blue walls, marble-topped tables, ceiling fans creaking above. He fidgeted with his diary, heart thudding beneath his crisp new shirt.

It was his first day *in the field*.  
This was not a classroom anymore. This was the *real* world—of clients, rejections, numbers, and nerves.

Kamat walked in with his signature swagger, leather folder under one arm, voice cutting through the café buzz.

**“How are you, young man!”**

Aditya stood, smiling. **“Charged up, sir.”**

“Good! Good!” Kamat grinned. “We are waiting for someone. Your reporting manager—Prasad.”

Minutes later, a broad-shouldered man in his early 30s walked in. He had a serious face, skin tanned from sun and travel, and a no-nonsense gait.

**“I’m Prasad,”** he said, voice softer than expected.

Aditya rose and shook hands. **“Sir… are you South Indian by any chance?”**

Prasad’s eyes twinkled just a little. **“Yes, yes… Warangal. Andhra boy.”**

The three men shared tea and a butter bun.  
Kamat outlined the daily rhythm—cold calls, client demos, route planning, daily reporting, forecasting.

Then it was time.  
Aditya rode pillion behind Prasad on a rattling Bajaj Chetak as they zipped through the narrow roads of the old city, visiting two retailers before sundown.

By 6:30 PM, his shirt clung to his back with sweat, his head buzzed with names, specs, prices, follow-ups—but his eyes?  
Alive. Alert. *Awake.*

He had found his rhythm.

**August to December 1993 — The Journey**

What began as reporting quickly became something else.  
Aditya and Prasad—technically mentor and trainee—became road companions, quiet friends.

They rode across towns—Panvel, Karjat, Khopoli, Pune, Satara—helmets dusty with the red earth of rural roads, raincoats flapping like wings during monsoon downpours.

Tea stalls became their conference rooms.  
Old Monk and cola, their occasional celebration.  
Sometimes a cigarette passed between them, more as punctuation to a deep conversation than habit.

They spoke of markets and margins. But also, of life.  
Of family expectations. Of lost chances. Of what it meant to *build something of your own*.

Prasad, though rugged, respected Aditya’s gentleness.  
Aditya, in turn, admired Prasad’s unshakable focus and street-smart wisdom.

**By Year’s End**

Retailers began asking for him by name.

**“Woh ladka… Aditya. Kab aayega?”**  
They trusted him. He was not there to push boxes. He was there to solve problems.

He hit targets. Then broke records.  
When others argued over discounts, he offered trust. That was his real currency.

At the annual company meet in Pune, a surprise occurred.

One of the major wholesalers from Aurangabad stood up during dinner and said:

**“That young boy—Aditya—he listens. He follows up. He *cares.* We need more like him.”**

Katariya turned to Kamat and nodded quietly.  
The boy with torn pants and scraped knees was now in a tie and polished shoes—calm-eyed, purposeful, self-assured.

**Back Home**

Vishwas and Sunita watched from the sidelines.  
They noticed the subtle transformation—less talk, more action.

Aditya now left at sunrise, diary in hand, hair neatly oiled and parted.  
He returned late but content. He shared stories—some funny, some frustrating, all real.

He was no longer weighed down by shame or fear.  
The slump in his shoulders had disappeared.

In its place stood a man.  
One who had earned his place, not just in the company, but in his own eyes.

**That Night**

Aditya stood in front of the mirror in their small bedroom, shirt unbuttoned, tie loose, hair tousled.

He looked at himself—not with pride, not with vanity, but with quiet recognition.

The boy was still there—inside.  
But standing before him was someone else.  
Someone who had fallen, failed, been lost… and found himself again.

He whispered under his breath,  
**“Main zindagi ka saath nibhata chala gaya…”**

And smiled.

**Part 4- The Bounce Back**

**Chapter 1- The Proposal That Walked In**  
*October 1995*

Time had done its quiet work.

Aditya—once a boy with hesitation in his step and doubt in his eyes—now moved with calm certainty. His mornings had a rhythm: crisp shirt, neatly tied knot, polished shoes, and an ID card swaying as he stepped out the door. He walked like someone who had made peace with his past and was now learning to shape his future.

That evening, as the fading sunlight kissed the windows of their modest Pune apartment, Mrs. Sharma arrived—an old friend of SU’s, part distant relative, part social radar.

Over steaming tea and murmurs of old memories, she watched Aditya Walk in. Tired from work but composed. He greeted her with a nod, offered a soft smile, and disappeared into his room.

Mrs. Sharma sipped her tea, then turned to SU with a conspiratorial smile.

**“Madam, aapka beta toh ab bilkul tayyar lagta hai. Smart bhi hai… shaadi ke baare mein socha kya?”**

SU laughed a little embarrassed, a little thoughtful.

But that night, when the house had gone still, and V sat behind a newspaper he was not really reading, SU spoke softly.

**“Vishwas… shaadi ke liye dekhna chahiye kya?”**

He looked up, measured her expression.

**“Main toh abhi taiyaar nahi hoon… kharche, zimmedari… aur pehle ladke se bhi puchhna padega.”**

SU nodded. But a mother always knows when a new season has arrived. A quiet corner of her heart had begun preparing.

**The Unexpected Call**

A few weeks later, the newly installed landline on the living room table rang with sharp insistence.

**Tringg… tringg…**

**“Hello, Mrs. SUnirmala speaking.”**

A warm, restrained voice replied,  
**“Namaste. Main Mrs. Pathak bol rahi hoon… aapki colleague Mrs. Kore ki dost hoon. Socha puchh loon—apne bete ke liye rishta dekh rahi hain?”**

Formal courtesies followed. Mrs. Pathak described her family—three daughters, one son. Two daughters married. The third, Neha, was a teacher. The son, Nirmal, in his final year of medical school.

SU listened, asked her questions. Something in the woman’s voice suggested dignity without show, tradition without rigidity.

They agreed to meet.

**5th December 1995: The First Meeting**

Aditya wore his best sky-blue shirt that day—creased sleeves folded carefully, hair combed, shoes freshly shined. He was not nervous, just… alert. Curious.

The Pathak home felt like a page from a well-kept book—bookshelves neatly aligned, paintings of gods and philosophers, a quiet sense of order. Mr. and Mrs. Pathak were both educators. He, a retired principal; she, still running the school, they had founded together.

After polite introductions, tea, and a few ritual pleasantries, Mr. Pathak smiled gently.

**“Let the two of them speak alone for a bit.”**

**Neha and Aditya**

Neha walked in with the quiet confidence of someone used to standing before 40 children every day. Tall, graceful, with hair curling softly down her back. She looked composed, slightly rehearsed.

Aditya sat up, respectful and calm. They began to talk.

He spoke about his life—how he had left his Master’s halfway, joined a computer company, travelled across towns selling, pitching, building relationships. She listened, nodding, her hands folding and unfolding as she spoke of her school, the children she taught, the way she loved shaping young minds.

No spark. No sudden laughter or dreamy pauses.

But there was an ease. He liked her voice, her clarity, the calm behind her eyes. He noticed how her smile lingered just a second longer than necessary.

She, on the other hand, saw a man who was polite, well-spoken, and clearly kind.

**“He’s… okay,”** she told herself.

They returned to the drawing room. Conversation resumed. Before leaving, Vishwas said with his usual diplomacy,  
**“Hum baat karke aapko batayenge.”**

**The Dilemma at the Pathaks’**

The next morning, Vishwas called Mr. Pathak.  
**“It’s a yes from our side.”**

Mr. Pathak responded graciously. But after hanging up, his brows furrowed.

**“Neha… did you notice something in the way he walks?”** he asked gently.

Neha paused.  
**“Maybe. A slight limp… but it is fine. Let us go ahead.”**

Her tone was firm, but her heart was not in it.

The truth?

Neha had once dreamed of someone else—an officer, an NRI, a man who carried ambition like a flame.

Aditya was not that man.

But the pressure was mounting. Her younger brother, Nirmal, was in love—with Sneha, a spirited girl from his college. Their families were ready, but there was one condition: **“Pehle Neha ki shaadi.”**

Nirmal had pleaded, argued, begged.  
**“You are blocking my way, Didi. Please… just settle down.”**

And so, Neha agreed.

Not with joy. Not with rebellion.

With surrender.

**At Home: The Silence of Old Wounds**

Back in their home, SU sat beside Aditya that night and asked gently,  
**“Tumne unko bataya? Apne baare mein… surgeries ke baare mein?”**

Aditya exhaled, looking away.

**“No. What is the point? It is over. Bas ek halka limp hai. I will say it was a football injury.”**

Vishwas said nothing, just met SU’s eyes.  
**“Jaise iska mann ho.”**

They knew the years it had taken to rebuild his confidence. They would not risk undoing that.

**The Second Meeting**

Neha directly asked this time.

**“I hope you don’t mind… but is there a problem with your leg?”**

Aditya smiled slightly. He was ready.  
**“Football injury. Minor toe surgery. Long back. Nothing serious.”**

She nodded.  
**“Okay.”**

To him, it was acceptance.

To her, it was endurance.

**Two Interpretations**

Aditya read kindness into her silences. Warmth into her gaze. He felt… hopeful. Even excited.

Neha, on the other hand, saw stability. Simplicity. But not the life she had imagined.

There were no family assets. No big house. No car. Just a middle-class boy with sincerity in his eyes.

She said yes because peace is sometimes more important than passion.

**The Dates**

The engagement was fixed for **5th January 1996**.  
The wedding, for **29th May 1996**.

Two families moved ahead, unaware of the quiet compromises stitched into every “yes.”

He dreamt of love.  
She dreamt of freedom.

And so, they walked toward a mandap neither had truly chosen, but both would stand beneath—with hope in their eyes and silence in their hearts.

**Chapter 2- A Quiet Beginning**

After the engagement, something shifted.

**Aditya**, usually quiet and inward, found a new rhythm to his days. He started leaving office a little early when he could. He washed his **Yamaha**, polished it like a prized possession, and waited with a slight nervousness in his chest.

**Neha would hop on**, wearing her sky-blue salwar suit, dupatta fluttering as they rode through the tree-lined roads of the city. There were no phones, no selfies. Just long drives, stolen glances, and the wind whispering promises of new beginnings.

**For him**, it was love. Pure, unfiltered, and overwhelming.

For **Ra**, it was—tolerance wrapped in curiosity.  
But slowly, she softened.

He was not rich. Nor flamboyant.  
But he was **kind** and caring  
**Attentive. Grounded. Safe.**  
She laughed more when she was with him, especially when he listened—really listened—to her endless stories.

Only one thing puzzled her.

**“You are so quiet… How are you in sales?”** she teased once during a drive.

He smiled, eyes on the road.  
**“I listen more than I speak. That works well in sales, too.”**

She shook her head, amused.  
But somewhere deep inside, the contrast lingered.

**Engagement and Wedding**

The **engagement on 26th January 1996** was modest yet graceful. Gold rings exchanged, sweets distributed, small talk among relatives. Aditya looked radiant in his cream shirt and navy trousers. Neha wore a maroon saree with golden borders. Her smile was wide, but her eyes stayed searching.

The **wedding on 9th May 1996** was a similar affair—**intimate, traditional, ritual-heavy** on the Pathak side. Their family, steeped in **orthodox values**, held every ritual sacred.  
In contrast, **Sunita, and Vishwas**, having married young and lived self-made lives, were less ritualistic, more practical. They had no extended family around, no elderly aunts with coconut oil and mantras, no cousins to plan games or jokes.

Sunita had poured herself into **managing everything alone**—clothes, food, logistics, gifts—yet missed the delicate details of **welcoming a bride into the home**.

**The First Night**

On the evening of **9th May**, Neha stepped into her new home, red bangles clinking softly, the faint scent of mehndi still clinging to her hands.

She looked around, expecting a grand bride welcome—**a garland on the door**, a diya maybe, some flowers, rangoli patterns at least. But the home was **quiet**.

No aarti.  
No ‘welcome’ plate.  
No decorated bedroom.  
Not even a single rose on the bed.

Sunita was too drained, too unprepared. There had been **no support system**. No one to guide her through the traditions. She was practical. Neha was ceremonial.

Neha looked at the plain room. Same curtain, same bedcover.  
The same house that had stood for years in its minimal, quiet dignity.

Something inside her sank.

She did not say anything.  
But a whisper began forming in her heart.  
**“Maybe I made a mistake.”**

**Two Cultures, One Home**

She had grown up in a **large, loud, gossip-loving family**. Laughter was always loud, opinions were freely thrown, and everyone knew what everyone was doing. They teased each other, pulled legs, sometimes fought, often forgave—but **they talked**.

Aditya’s home was the opposite.  
Just three people.  
**Sunita, Vishwas, and Aditya.**  
All thinkers. All quiet. All private.

They respected space more than they filled it.

Neha cracked jokes. No one laughed loudly.  
She told stories. No one interrupted with excitement.  
She waited for someone to jump into the conversation. They listened politely instead.

She was **sunshine**.  
They were **early morning fog**.

She had imagined that marriage would feel like a festival.  
Instead, it felt like entering a **library** with no books to read.

**The Thought That Would Not Leave**

That night, as Aditya sat beside her, speaking in his calm, soft voice, Neha tried to smile. He offered her sweets. She took a bite and nodded. He looked into her eyes with quiet affection.

He was sweet.  
He was nice.  
He was not the problem.

But everything around him… felt **wrong**.

She turned away that night and lay staring at the ceiling fan, her bangles catching faint moonlight.

**“Did I settle too soon?”**  
**“What have I done?”**

Aditya, unaware of her turmoil, felt content.  
He looked at her silhouette and thought,  
**“I’m the luckiest man tonight.”**

Two hearts.  
Same bed.  
Different storms.

**Chapter 3- And Then Came Abhijeet**

**August 1996 – A Hill Station in the Western Ghats**

The clouds arrived every morning like old friends—uninvited, familiar, and oddly comforting. They drifted lazily past the small cottage that Aditya had rented with Vishwas’s help—two bedrooms, sloping tiled roof, and a verandah that looked out onto the velvet hills. The house was modest, but it breathed. It had a soul.

Neha stood barefoot on the damp stone of the verandah, arms wrapped around herself, watching as a thin drizzle wove silver threads through the valleys. The scent of eucalyptus, earth soaked with last night’s rain, and freshly brewed filter coffee curled around her like a shawl. This quiet world felt a lifetime away from the chaos of their earlier city life.

Aditya had been promoted—Area Head for Kolhapur and surrounding districts. Five regions. Endless road trips. A 450-kilometre relocation into the heart of mist-laden hills, forts hidden in the clouds, and winding forest roads. But it felt like a dream—like a set from an old black-and-white film they both secretly loved.

Neha had joined him three weeks later. From then on, life had narrowed into something soft and warm—a rhythm of shared silences, steaming food, quiet companionship.

They often drove through jungled roads just for the sake of motion, stopping by roadside stalls for vada pav, sipping spicy misal under tarpaulin shelters while the rain drummed above. They trekked up forgotten forts, stood hand-in-hand on windswept cliffs, and ran through meadows of wildflowers like school kids, their laughter echoing through the green silence.

Aditya, too, was changing. There was a calmness in his eyes now. He was no longer chasing validation. He had arrived at a place of quiet command. His team looked up to him. Clients began to trust his word. His reports were read and remembered. He was becoming the man he had always hoped he could be.

Their closest friends—Nirmal and Sneha, married just a month after them—visited often. Their weekends burst into life with card games, jokes over bhajjis and filter coffee, long conversations stretching into midnight over blankets and tea. Those months were golden. A pocket of sunshine. A chapter without shadows.

But not entirely.

Sometimes, in the spaces between words, Neha would fall quiet. Watching Aditya immersed in his files, his calls, his confident stride—she would feel herself growing faint, like a pencil sketch fading under rain. She did not know what was missing, but something in her ached.

She never said it aloud. She could not name it.

**April 30, 1997 – Midnight**

Neha shook Aditya’s shoulder gently but urgently. Her voice was a whisper edged with panic.

“Aditya… wake up… I feel terrible.”

He turned; alarm sharp in his eyes. “What happened? Are you in pain?”

“My stomach… something is wrong. I feel dizzy… like I cannot breathe…”

Her skin was clammy, her eyes unfocused. Within minutes, Aditya had helped her into the car, the old Ambassador bouncing through the fog-wrapped mountain roads as he drove like a man possessed.

By dawn, they were sitting on a hard bench outside the hospital’s examination room. Aditya had not spoken much, his hands rubbed together so often they looked raw. He stared at the floor as if willing answers to rise from it.

Finally, the doctor emerged, smiling.

“Mr. \_\_\_\_, congratulations. Your wife is pregnant.”

Aditya blinked. “I’m sorry… what?”

“Pregnant. Around six to eight weeks, I would say. Due late December or early January.”

Aditya turned to Neha. She was staring at the doctor, lips parted, disbelief shimmering in her eyes.

“I’m… going to be a mother?” she whispered.

Aditya smiled, voice trembling. “You’re going to be our mother.”

Neha laughed then—half-crying, half-laughing—as she buried her face in his shoulder. The world tilted on its axis. Everything had changed.

**Following Week – Back to Pune**

Sunita and Vishwas reached Kolhapur the next weekend. As soon as she saw Neha, Sunita gathered her into a long embrace, her eyes already misted.

“My baby… you’ve made us so happy,” she whispered, laying both palms on Neha’s stomach. “You are coming home. You will stay with us now. Let me take care of you.”

Neha did not resist. Some part of her—the part that had longed for comfort and certainty—welcomed it.

They returned to Pune. Her mother, Mrs. Pathak, visited every day with warm food, childhood stories, old lullabies. Neha began to glow. Her cheeks rounded. Her smile came easier. The baby books appeared. The evenings filled with neighbours and rituals, prayers, and anklets.

The ache in her heart faded. Now there was only waiting.

**August 1997 – The Call That Changed Everything**

It was past eleven when Aditya’s phone rang. On the other end, a familiar voice.

“Hey young man,” said Mr. Kamat, his tone laced with energy. “You ready to fly to the U.S.?”

Aditya sat up. “Sorry?”

“One of our big clients in Dallas is looking for a Business Development head. Their VP’s a friend of mine. They will sponsor your H1B. You, Neha, the baby—everyone goes. It is a game-changer.”

Aditya’s heart raced. Dreams he had once packed away—graduate school, tech parks, the American skyline—all came flooding back.

“I’ll think about it,” he said, but his voice had already decided.

A week later, from Kamat’s office, he dialled a California number. The voice on the other end was brisk, warm.

“Hello, this is Dave.”

They spoke for forty-five minutes. It clicked instantly. Within days, the offer arrived. Kamat and Dave began guiding him through the paperwork.

The cost? ₹5 lakhs.

Without hesitation, Vishwas nodded. “Take it. This is your moment. Do not look back.”

**January 11, 1998 – The Storm**

The wind howled outside like a wild animal. Just after midnight, Neha clutched Aditya’s arm.

“I… cannot breathe. It hurts—Aditya, it hurts…”

They raced to the hospital, the nurses calm but casual.

“Still time. Let her rest,” one said.

But Neha was writhing. Her hands clutched the sheets like they were the only things anchoring her to earth.

Aditya stayed the whole night. Silent. Steady.

At 7:30 a.m., the doctor rushed in, took one look, and said sharply, “Water is broken. Prep for delivery—now.”

At 8:15, a cry rang out. Sharp. Fierce. Alive.

“It’s a boy,” the nurse announced. “Healthy. 3.8 kilos. Tall.”

Aditya stood frozen as the door swung open and Neha was wheeled out, pale but smiling, her eyes wet with tears.

Wrapped beside her, a small bundle—a red-faced baby with his fists clenched and eyes fluttering.

The nurse handed him over. The baby’s fingers curled tightly around Aditya’s.

He looked down, then up at Neha.

“This… this is everything,” she said, voice barely above a whisper.

**January 22, 1998 – The Name**

The municipal clerk did not look up. Just tapped his pen.

“Name of the child?”

Aditya hesitated. “The naming is on the 25th…”

“No name, no certificate,” the man snapped.

Aditya looked out the window. Across the road, a red signboard: **Abhijeet Electronics**.

Abhijeet. Victorious. A winner.

He turned back.

“Abhijeet. His name is Abhijeet.”

The clerk scribbled it down.

Later, when he told Sunita and Neha, both were stunned.

“We had a list!” Sunita protested. “You spoiled the ritual!”

But Neha looked down at her sleeping son. Smiled.

“Abhijeet,” she murmured. “It fits.”

“He’s tall like his father,” Sunita said grudgingly. “But that grip… that intensity… pure Aditya.”

**Epilogue – A Beginning**

That night, Aditya sat alone in the corner room, Abhijeet asleep in his lap. The baby stirred, cooed, then settled again.

Aditya watched his tiny chest rise and fall.

Outside, the fog lay thick over Pune. Inside, a warmth wrapped itself around him.

This was not just fatherhood. This was something greater—an inheritance of dreams, of love, of legacy.

The future waited: visas, flights, foreign lands.

But tonight, here, in this quiet hour, it was just the two of them.

Aditya kissed his son’s forehead.

“We’ve begun,” he whispered.

**Chapter 4- The Departure — June 22, 1998**

The air inside Mumbai International Airport buzzed with announcements, the rumble of suitcase wheels, and a thousand silent goodbyes.

Aditya stood surrounded by his world—Neha holding little Abhijeet close, her dupatta fluttering from the AC vents, Sunita clutching her purse like it held her strength, and Vishwas gently rocking the baby, whispering soft lullabies to distract him from the growing unease.

**Sunita** (voice cracking, eyes glassy): “Khud ka khayal rakhna, beta… Eat something proper. Do not forget to call—daily, if possible.”

**Vishwas** (placing a firm hand on Aditya’s shoulder): “We are here for them. You do what you must. We will manage till they join you.”

Aditya knelt, kissed Abhijeet’s warm forehead. The baby blinked, then giggled, reaching out not for his father—but for Vishwas again. Aditya froze for half a second. It hurt.

**Aditya** (to Neha, forcing a smile): “Don’t let him forget me… okay?”

Neha’s lips trembled; her smile fragile but brave.

**Neha** (softly): “He will not. He has your eyes. Every time I look at him… I see you.”

Aditya exhaled, nodded, and turned toward the glass doors. A final wave. One last glance. Then, just like that, he disappeared into the gates.

**First Flight, First World**

The moment he stepped inside the airport, something shifted. Aditya—the hesitant small-town boy—seemed to morph. He moved with intent now, scanning flight displays, navigating immigration, mimicking travellers ahead of him. The air smelled different—metallic, conditioned, full of movement.

Boarding the aircraft, he stared at the seats, the neat trays, the strangers flipping through glossy magazines. As the plane climbed, he pressed his forehead against the cold window.

**Aditya** (to himself, in awe): “So this is what the sky looks like from above…”

The world below shrank into clouds and memory.

**Arrival — A Quieter Sky**

Dallas, Texas. Cool air. Blue sky. Streets that stretched out like stories. Glass buildings gleamed. Everything was orderly, silent, surreal.

At the airport, he found an ATM glowing like a portal. V had handed him a forex card, something he still barely understood.

**Aditya** (squinting at instructions): “Okay… insert here… enter PIN…”

The machine whirred, spat out fresh, unfamiliar bills. He chuckled in disbelief.

**Aditya** (murmuring): “So this is how the world moves…”

**New Life Begins**

Mr. Dave had arranged a modest studio apartment—white walls, plastic blinds that danced with the AC draft, and silence so thick it echoed at night. The absence of human chatter was louder than any traffic.

The first two days dissolved in a blur of jet lag and strange cereal boxes. He called home, figured out how to operate the stove, burned his first omelette, and stared for ten minutes at the washer-dryer wondering if he was supposed to add soap *here* or *there*.

**Aditya** (on the phone to Neha): “I am okay… It’s so quiet here, so clean. I saw a fire truck today—bright red, huge! Abhijeet would have screamed with joy.”

That Monday, he started work. The office was sleek, people spoke in clipped tones and smiled without touching. They handed him a company car. A driving test followed—left-hand steering, alien signs. But he learned.

Within weeks, he became part of the system.

**Aditya** (on a call with Kamat): “Boss, this feels like a dream. No honking, no potholes. I drive through empty highways, work till sunset, then come home to... silence.”

Weekdays were clockwork. Weekends—lonelier. He wandered through malls, bought groceries, folded laundry to old Lata songs, and occasionally ordered pizza, eating on the floor with the TV playing in the background.

**A Father’s Long Wait**

Back in India, Abhijeet was growing—first crawl, first words, first birthday. All captured in grainy, slow-loading video clips on email.

Aditya watched them at night, repeatedly. Pixelated frames. A tiny hand. A toothless smile.

**Aditya** (to himself, late night): “How do you measure love... in buffering seconds and time zones?”

He missed *everything*. But he stayed focused. Every dollar counted. He skipped outings, cooked at home, and slowly turned a foreign apartment into a future.

Eight months later, on February 2, 1999, the wait ended. Neha and Abhijeet boarded their flight to Dallas.

**Reunited — Almost**

At DFW Airport, Aditya waited—heart pounding, a small bouquet trembling in his hand, a bag with sweets, and toys wrapped in newspaper.

The arrival doors slid open—and there they were.

Neha, a little thinner, a lot stronger. Abhijeet, no longer a baby—walking now, babbling in his own language.

Aditya rushed forward, arms out. But Abhijeet recoiled—eyes wide, unsure. He whimpered, clung tightly to Neha.

**Neha** (softly, apologetic): “He does not recognize you… He is scared.”

Aditya paused; his smile slowly breaking.

**Aditya** (quietly): “I’m a stranger to my own son…”

And then came the final blow.

**Abhijeet** (burying his face, tearful): “Maa… take me to Vishwa…”

Aditya’s chest tightened. He had imagined this reunion a thousand times—Abhijeet running into his arms, shouting *Baba!* But instead… he stood invisible.

He tried everything—peekaboo, toys, silly dances. Nothing worked. Abhijeet clung to Neha like she was all the safety he knew.

**A Family Rebuilt**

But time, like love, has its own rhythm.

Each day brought slight changes. Abhijeet began watching Aditya from a distance—eyes curious, expressions puzzled.

Then, one dusky evening, as they strolled down their quiet Richardson Lane, the boy suddenly reached out.

**Neha** (tears glistening): “He remembers now…”

Aditya picked him up, holding him close, afraid to even breathe.

**Aditya** (whispering into his hair): “Baba is here now. And he is never letting go.”

**A Life of Their Own**

Their apartment, once quiet, now echoed with giggles, toy crashes, pressure cooker whistles, and lullabies.

Neha adapted with grace. She took Abhijeet out in his stroller, sang English rhymes, marvelled at drive-throughs and dishwashers.

They found a small tribe—desi neighbours, office friends, weekend potlucks, backyard BBQs.

**Neha** (one starry night): “Remember our hill house? We thought *that* was the dream.”

**Aditya** (smiling, watching Abhijeet chase fireflies): “It was. And this... this is another kind.”

**Chapter 5- The Reunion and the Forgotten Father**

**February 2, 1999 – Dallas, Texas**

Back in India, little Abijeet was growing quickly — a curious bundle of energy, obsessed with airplanes, ceiling fans, and anything that moved. He was a chatterbox, especially with Vishwas, and hung on Sunita’s every word. Every afternoon, he would point to the sky and squeal, “Airplane! Papa airplane!”

But for Aditya — Abhijeet’s father — life was a different rhythm entirely. Alone in Dallas, he was working tirelessly — stretching every dollar, skipping birthday calls to pick up overtime, and avoiding every unnecessary expense. He had missed Abhijeet’s **first birthday** — not because he did not want to be there, but because he needed to save. **Rent deposits, furniture, flight tickets, emergency backup — every penny counted.**

It took eight **long months** of calculated sacrifice before he could finally afford to bring his world — **Neha and Abhijeet** — to him.

**The Airport Farewell – Mumbai**

On the morning of **February 2, 1999**, Ra held Aj close at the airport. The boy’s parents, **Sunita and Vishwas**, stood nearby — Vishwas gently brushing Abhijeet’s hair, Sunita adjusting Neha’s scarf.

“Take care of him,” Sunita whispered, her voice cracking as she kissed Abhijeet’s soft cheek. “And take care of *yourself*, Neha. Over there, you are all he’s got.”

Neha nodded, eyes misty, one hand gripping her passport, the other stroking Abhijeet’s back.

Abhijeet, in contrast, was beaming. His eyes sparkled at the massive airport lights, the people, the machines. “Wow! Airplane!” he squealed, bouncing on Neha’s hip.

It was a bittersweet moment. A chapter was closing, another opening.

**The Arrival – Dallas Fort Worth Airport**

After what felt like an eternity of turbulence, cramped seats, and fussing toddler cries, the plane finally landed. Aditya waited near the arrival gate, pacing nervously. He had bought a small bouquet of flowers for Neha, and in his other hand, he clutched a soft stuffed monkey for Abhijeet. His heart thudded louder with each beep of the sliding door.

And then — there they were.

Neha, tired but glowing. Abhijeet, half-asleep in her arms.

Aditya ran forward, trying to mask the months of longing with a smile.

“Neha…” he breathed, touching her shoulder.

She smiled, blinking back tears. “We’re here,” she whispered.

She turned to Abhijeet. “Look who it is! It is Papa!” She said, holding out the stuffed monkey.

Abhijeet looked at him.

Blink. Blank.

Then — a wail.

“Naahin! Naahin! Vishwas... Vishwas!” Abhijeet twisted in Neha’s arms, crying harder. “Take me to Vishwas!”

Aditya’s heart stopped.

**A Stranger in His Son’s Eyes**

That night, in their small but cozy apartment in Richardson, Texas, the air felt heavier than usual. Aditya had set up a small bed for Abhijeet next to theirs, filled it with toys, books, and stuffed animals he had carefully chosen. But the child would not come near him.

Neha sat on the couch, gently rocking Abhijeet, whispering, “It’s okay… this is Papa… remember the photo?”

Abhijeet turned his face away, tears streaking down his cheeks. “No Papa. Want Vishwas…”

Aditya stood by the kitchen counter, his hands trembling as he opened a tin of sweets he had bought especially for this day. He brought them over to Abhijeet with a hopeful smile.

“Look, laddoo! Your favourite, champ!”

Abhijeet clung tighter to Neha. “No! No!”

Neha looked up; eyes filled with helplessness. “He… he was just so little when you left. He does not remember.”

Aditya nodded slowly, retreating to the kitchen. But inside, he was unravelling.

“What kind of father does not even get a smile on the day his son arrives? Am I already forgotten?”

That night, Abhijeet would not sleep unless Neha held him. He lay on the edge of the bed, his back to them, staring into the dark.

**Two Weeks Later – A Flicker of Light**

The days that followed were a mix of hope and ache. Aditya tried everything. He would whistle tunes, play peekaboo, buy new toys, mimic Abhijeet’s favourite cartoon voices — but Abhijeet remained distant.

It was Neha who kept the balance — never letting the guilt consume Aditya, always reminding him: *“It is just time. He will come around.”*

One morning, as Neha was folding laundry, she noticed a strange silence. She turned — and gasped.

Abhijeet had crawled into the Aditya’s lap.  
Just like that. No warning. No crying.

Aditya had been sitting on the floor, exhausted, half-asleep. Abijeet was patting his face gently, whispering, “Papa… fan… fan…”

The boy opened his eyes. For a moment, he could not breathe.

“Say that again?” he whispered.

Abhijeet giggled. “Papa…”

The boy pulled him into his chest, holding him like he would never let go. His shoulders shook — silent tears falling freely.

Neha watched from the doorway; her heart full.

The spell had broken.

**Life as Three – Home in a New Land**

The apartment was small — just a single bedroom, a modest living room, and a tiny kitchen. But it was theirs. Neha kept it spotless, filling the space with colour — little plants on the windowsill, bright cushions, Abhijeet’s drawings on the fridge.

Each evening, she would bundle Abhijeet into his stroller and take long walks around the neighbourhood. Sometimes she would stop by the local park where Abhijeet would squeal at the ducks, point at the moon, or babble at squirrels.

On weekends, they would all pile into their second-hand Toyota Corolla and drive around — to the grocery store, to malls, to the nearby lake. Abhijeet would sit in the back humming nursery rhymes or giggling at the moving clouds.

Neha was living her dream. America, the land she had only seen in movies and magazines, was now her home. She found joy in every little thing — vending machines, scented candles, even the drive-thru coffee shops.

“Everything’s so organized here,” she would say, grinning. “Even the chaos is neat.”

Aditya would laugh. “Only you could be excited about supermarket aisles.”

**Friends, Food, and New Belonging**

Slowly, life expanded beyond just the three of them. The boy’s colleagues from work invited them over. The neighbourhood welcomed them — kind people from India, Pakistan, Bangladesh, and Mexico.

Soon, they were part of a circle — weekend BBQs, birthday parties, potlucks with spicy biryanis and smoky grilled chicken.

Abhijeet ran around with the other toddlers, his laughter echoing in the shared backyard. Neha chatted with the other women — exchanging recipes, stories of childhood, parenting tips.

Aditya often stood in the background, soaking it all in.

*This is what we fought for,* he thought. *Not just survival. But joy. Connection. Belonging.*

**A Final Realization**

One evening, after a long day, Neha placed her head on the boy’s shoulder.

“Remember that first night?” she whispered. “When Abhijeet wouldn’t even look at you?”

He nodded. “I was scared. I thought I had lost him.”

She smiled, eyes half-closed. “You did not. He was just… waiting for you to return in his world.”

Abhijeet stirred in his sleep nearby, clutching the stuffed monkey the boy had once offered.

And in that still, warm room, with moonlight spilling onto their floor and love wrapping around them like a quilt, the boy finally understood:

Family is not just who stays.  
It is also about who returns — and rebuilds, brick by brick, smile by smile.

**Chapter 6- A Storm Beneath the Silence**

**April 2000 – Dallas, Texas**

It was a quiet Tuesday morning in the second week of **March 2000**. The sun filtered through the blinds in soft slants, gently illuminating the kitchen counter where **Neha** stood slicing apples for **Abhijeet**, her two-year-old son who was busy lining up toy animals on the living room carpet. Her hand unconsciously rested on her lower abdomen. She was **four months pregnant** now, and the pregnancy had begun to feel real—calming, grounding.

The phone rang.

She wiped her hands and picked up. “Hello?”

A familiar, effervescent voice burst through the line.  
“**Nehaaa!** How are you, little sister?”

Her heart lifted. “**Didi!** Oh my God, it has been so long!”

“I have news! Mahendra has finally got his **H-1B visa**! We are coming—me, Mahendra, and Ana. All three of us! We land in **Dallas on the 2nd of April!** Isn’t that amazing?!”

Neha stood there stunned for a second, the knife still in her hand.

“That’s… wow! That is huge news, Didi,” she said, managing a cheerful tone.

Disha was still bubbling with energy. “Mahendra pulled a lot of strings and spent a good chunk of money—but he made it happen! Can you believe it?”

Neha laughed softly. “Of course he did. He always finds a way.”

But once the call ended, and silence returned to the apartment, a complex storm brewed within her.

She was **genuinely happy** for her sister. Of course she was. In a foreign land, family meant comfort, familiarity, and support. And Disha’s presence during her pregnancy would be helpful—especially with Mahendra earning well and Ana being a good companion for Abhijeet.

But beneath that joy, something in her **tightened**.

She had just begun to feel **settled**, really settled. The quiet domestic rhythm of her small family—their meals, their evening walks, Abhijeet’s bedtime giggles—was her sanctuary. Free from judgment, free from pressure, free from comparisons.

Now, **everything would change**.

**2nd April 2000 – Dallas Fort Worth Airport**

The arrival terminal was abuzz with movement, voices, and the wheels of luggage carts clacking against the tiled floors. Neha clutched Aditya’s hand, the other hand resting over her baby bump as they waited, Abhijeet clinging to her knee with sleepy eyes.

Then they appeared.

Disha waved energetically from behind the glass door, her dupatta fluttering as she dragged a suitcase. Mahendra followed in his usual sharp style—designer sunglasses, confident gait—and Ana squealed upon spotting Abhijeet.

“**Nehaaa!**” Disha shrieked, wrapping her sister in a tight hug. She pulled back and glanced at Neha’s belly, eyes widening. “Are you showing already?! You did not tell me!”

Neha smiled. “We were waiting till after the fourth month…”

Mahendra gave Aditya a firm handshake. “Good to see you, man. We are finally here!”

“Welcome,” Aditya replied softly.

They made their way to the car, Mahendra talking loudly about the immigration line, his plans, and how he had already lined up meetings. Disha was busy pointing out things to Ana.

In the back seat, Neha sat quietly beside Aditya, watching her sister’s family with a strange mixture of warmth… and unease.

**The First Few Weeks**

They stayed with Aditya and Neha at their modest two-bedroom apartment. It was cramped, yes, but lively. Abhijeet and Ana became fast friends, chasing each other around the living room while the adults cooked, cleaned, and exchanged stories of their life journeys so far.

Disha helped Neha with chores and her pregnancy needs. She even insisted on preparing special Ayurvedic teas in the morning. It was comforting—like old times.

But **Mahendra was everywhere**—boisterous, assertive, unstoppable.

Within **ten days**, he had already lined up interviews and secured a high-paying role at a major tech firm. His charisma, his connections, his relentless drive—it all worked in his favour. And he made sure everyone knew it.

“I already met a bunch of top-tier Indians here,” he boasted one evening over dinner. “All folks in tech leadership. We are planning to get together next weekend. You should come, Aditya.”

Aditya smiled politely. “Maybe. Not really my scene.”

“Come on, yaar,” Mahendra insisted. “These are the people that matter.”

Aditya just nodded, unwilling to argue.

**A Bigger Apartment, A Deeper Rift**

Given the growing needs of both families, they decided to rent a **larger three-bedroom apartment** together. Neha was unsure at first—she liked her privacy—but Disha’s support during pregnancy felt essential.

Aditya hesitated too but eventually agreed. Out of love for Neha. Out of respect for her family.

The new apartment was bigger, yes, but the **air felt different**.

Mahendra brought with him not just furniture, but an invisible storm of ambition, comparisons, and quiet superiority. He entertained frequently, filling the house with loud laughter and elite Indian professionals sipping wine and discussing stocks and Silicon Valley trends.

Aditya preferred solitude. A quiet corner. A late-night game of ludo with Neha. A bedtime story for Abhijeet.

He had his friends—simple, honest, grounded people. But none from Mahendra’s circle.

And **that became a problem**.

**The Seed of Comparison**

It began with innocent remarks.

“Aditya is very simple,” Disha told Neha one evening. “Too simple, sometimes. Mahendra is already building connections—look how fast things are moving.”

Neha smiled tightly.

Then came more pointed comments.  
“You have been here before us, right? But we have already got a better apartment, Mahendra’s job is paying almost double… and our circle? Top-notch people. No offense, but you need to aim higher.”

Neha felt a sting she had not expected.

That night, while folding laundry, she turned to Aditya.

“Can’t you… just try? Look for something better?”

He looked up, puzzled. “Better?”

“Mahendra just got here. And already he is… ahead.”

Aditya exhaled deeply. “I know my path, Neha. I am not in a race.”

“But aren’t we stuck? Same job, same apartment, same old friends.”

He said nothing, carefully folding a small onesie for the baby to come.

Neha sighed, more irritated by his silence than she wanted to admit.

**The Storm Gathers**

Day by day, the comparisons intensified. Disha whispered. Mahendra boasted. Neha absorbed it all—unconsciously, then consciously.

“You’re too content,” she told Aditya during a walk. “You never push.”

“I push in my own way,” he replied calmly.

“It’s not enough.”

He did not respond.

Even when Neha raised her voice, he never argued. Never retaliated. He just looked at her with tired, kind eyes. Eyes that had seen enough of life to understand that **not all victories are loud**.

She began to feel lost between two worlds—her heart aching for peace, but her mind clouded by **expectation and comparison**.

**Quiet Strength**

One night, she found Aditya standing in the kitchen, staring out the window, a glass of water in his hand.

She approached him quietly.

“You never get angry,” she said.

He turned slowly. “What would that solve?”

“Don’t you ever feel… frustrated? Compared? Belittled?”

A pause.

“I feel everything, Neha,” he said softly. “But I will not let it define me. You, Abhijeet, and our baby… you are the only success I need.”

Tears welled in her eyes.

In that moment, she saw him—not the provider, not the quiet man living in Mahendra’s shadow—but the **anchor** of her life.

Strong. Steady. Unmoving.

She wrapped her arms around him and rested her head on his chest. “I’m sorry,” she whispered.

He kissed her forehead. “We will be okay. Let them run their race. We will walk our path.”

And for the first time in weeks, Neha felt a strange kind of peace—a fragile peace that only comes when truth begins to outshine noise.

**Chapter 7- Cracks Beneath the Surface**

It was early April 2000, and the air in Dallas carried the subtle scent of spring—but for Aditya, things were beginning to feel stifling.

Mahendra and Disha had been living with them for a few weeks now. The initial excitement of family arriving from India had quickly given way to an unsettling reality. The small apartment buzzed not with warmth, but with tension.

Mahendra’s personality was unmistakable—loud, ambitious, and unrelentingly controlling. Every evening, like clockwork, the walls echoed with Disha and Mahendra’s arguments. At first, it was over seemingly trivial things—how cucumbers were sliced for a sandwich, or whether tomatoes should be cooked or added raw to the curry.

“Who cuts tomatoes like this, Disha? It is not a salad, it is curry!” Mahendra bellowed one evening, throwing down the chopping knife with a loud *thunk*.

Disha snapped, “If you care so much, why don’t *you* cook then? I have been standing here for an hour!”

“Well, maybe if you had some basic common sense, I wouldn’t have to!” Mahendra shot back, his voice rising to an alarming pitch.

Their daughter Ana, barely five, would quietly slip into a corner of the living room during these storms. She would clutch her doll tightly, eyes wide, her small frame trembling.

Aditya, sitting in the adjacent room with a book in hand, would freeze. He was not used to such scenes. Raised in a quiet, composed household, the daily shouting matches made him anxious and confused. The cacophony grated on his nerves, and he began retreating into silence.

Only little Abhijeet seemed oblivious, chasing Ana around with a toy airplane, giggling loudly, as if their laughter might drown the thunder.

One evening, while Aditya was cleaning up after dinner, Disha turned to Neha and said sharply, “You are four months pregnant now. Why isn’t Sunita coming here? Isn’t it her *duty* as a mother-in-law to help?”

Neha looked up, her eyes flickering with doubt. “She said she’d come after the delivery…”

“*After*? Why? What is she doing back there? Just waiting for the baby and gifts?” Disha smirked. “She just wants a grandchild for free. No effort, no help. Pathetic, really.”

Those words took root in Neha’s mind like poison. Influenced by Disha since childhood, she now found herself swimming in a sea of comparisons—between Mahendra and Aditya, between Disha and herself, between what they had achieved and what they had not.

That night, as Aditya folded laundry in the bedroom, Neha began, “Why can’t you look for a better job, Aditya? Mahendra’s already found one. He has such a good network… and you, you barely talk to anyone.”

Aditya did not respond. He pressed the shirt flat, his face still. He had heard this before—every night now.

“Can’t you be more ambitious? You are such a weak speaker. Always keeping quiet, never making connections. How will you ever move ahead?”

Aditya felt something cave in inside him. But he did not say a word. He simply nodded faintly and continued folding clothes. Silence had become his armour. He did not want a fight—not in front of Abhijeet, not in this already broken environment.

His normal spark was gone. The confident, thoughtful boy Neha once admired was now just a shadow of himself—dull-eyed, soft-voiced, slowly retreating into a shell.

In mid-September, the bombshell dropped.

That evening, as Neha rested her back against the couch, Disha grinned and said, “Guess what? We bought a house!”

Neha blinked in surprise. “What? Already? You saved up the down payment so quickly?”

“No, no!” Disha laughed. “Mahendra worked out a deal with another Indian family. Got the mortgage without any deposit!”

Aditya, who had just returned from work, paused at the doorway. “Without a deposit? How does that even work?”

“It is done. That is what matters,” Disha replied smugly. “We’re moving in three weeks.”

The room fell silent.

Aditya’s mind raced. *That means… we will have to move out. We cannot afford this place on our own.*

Neha sat up. “Wait… you already gave notice to the landlord?”

“Yes,” Disha said matter-of-factly. “It is all arranged. You have three weeks to find your own place.”

Aditya felt his throat tighten. Neha said nothing—just looked down at her belly, now in her ninth month.

For the next four days, Aditya took leave from work and searched relentlessly. Morning to night he ran around Dallas, trying to find a modest place that would not blow their budget. He could not share this pressure with Neha—she was too far along and already juggling Abhijeet.

Finally, on September 24th, exhausted but determined, he returned to the apartment. “We got it. The keys are here,” he told Disha.

She merely nodded. Mahendra, standing in the balcony, pretended to be busy on his phone.

Aditya felt it again—the same sting he had felt years ago during his master’s. That feeling of being invisible. Dismissed. Unimportant.

But there was no time to dwell on feelings.

It was a rainy Sunday. With no movers available, Aditya did everything himself. He loaded the car and a small, towed trolley with beds, the old couch, their kitchenware, television, and clothes—making trip after trip.

Back and forth in the drizzle, his shirt sticking to his back, his arms aching. He did not stop.

Neha stayed back with Abhijeet, who was laughing and playing, unaware that their entire life was being packed into boxes.

By late evening, the new one-bedroom apartment was set up. Simple, but theirs.

Aditya dropped off the trolley at the petrol station, picked up Neha and Abhijeet, and drove them to the new home. Neha looked around the apartment. “It’s… nice,” she said softly, guilt flickering in her eyes.

Aditya forced a smile and nodded.

That night, after putting Abhijeet to bed, he sat quietly on the lone couch, staring at the ceiling fan.

He was numb—his hands blistered, his body aching. But it was not the physical strain that wore him down. It was the loneliness. The injustice. The silent sacrifices.

He had endured humiliation, isolation, pressure, and manipulation—and yet, he had not broken.

But he was tired.

And though he did not say it aloud, a quiet question gnawed at him in the dark: *How much more could he take before something inside him shattered?*

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“*After*? Why? What is she doing back there? Just waiting for the baby and gifts?” Disha smirked. “She just wants a grandchild for free. No effort, no help. Pathetic, really.”

Those words took root in Neha’s mind like poison. Influenced by Disha since childhood, she now found herself swimming in a sea of comparisons—between Mahendra and Aditya, between Disha and herself, between what they had achieved and what they had not.

That night, as Aditya folded laundry in the bedroom, Neha began, “Why can’t you look for a better job, Aditya? Mahendra’s already found one. He has such a good network… and you, you barely talk to anyone.”

Aditya did not respond. He pressed the shirt flat, his face still. He had heard this before—every night now.

“Can’t you be more ambitious? You are such a weak speaker. Always keeping quiet, never making connections. How will you ever move ahead?”

Aditya felt something cave in inside him. But he did not say a word. He simply nodded faintly and continued folding clothes. Silence had become his armour. He did not want a fight—not in front of Abhijeet, not in this already broken environment.

His normal spark was gone. The confident, thoughtful boy Neha once admired was now just a shadow of himself—dull-eyed, soft-voiced, slowly retreating into a shell.

In mid-September, the bombshell dropped.

That evening, as Neha rested her back against the couch, Disha grinned and said, “Guess what? We bought a house!”

Neha blinked in surprise. “What? Already? You saved up the down payment so quickly?”

“No, no!” Disha laughed. “Mahendra worked out a deal with another Indian family. Got the mortgage without any deposit!”

Aditya, who had just returned from work, paused at the doorway. “Without a deposit? How does that even work?”

“It is done. That is what matters,” Disha replied smugly. “We’re moving in three weeks.”

The room fell silent.

Aditya’s mind raced. *That means… we will have to move out. We cannot afford this place on our own.*

Neha sat up. “Wait… you already gave notice to the landlord?”

“Yes,” Disha said matter-of-factly. “It is all arranged. You have three weeks to find your own place.”

Aditya felt his throat tighten. Neha said nothing—just looked down at her belly, now in her ninth month.

For the next four days, Aditya took leave from work and searched relentlessly. Morning to night he ran around Dallas, trying to find a modest place that would not blow their budget. He could not share this pressure with Neha—she was too far along and already juggling Abhijeet.

Finally, on September 24th, exhausted but determined, he returned to the apartment. “We got it. The keys are here,” he told Disha.

She merely nodded. Mahendra, standing in the balcony, pretended to be busy on his phone.

Aditya felt it again—the same sting he had felt years ago during his master’s. That feeling of being invisible. Dismissed. Unimportant.

But there was no time to dwell on feelings.

It was a rainy Sunday. With no movers available, Aditya did everything himself. He loaded the car and a small, towed trolley with beds, the old couch, their kitchenware, television, and clothes—making trip after trip.

Back and forth in the drizzle, his shirt sticking to his back, his arms aching. He did not stop.

Neha stayed back with Abhijeet, who was laughing and playing, unaware that their entire life was being packed into boxes.

By late evening, the new one-bedroom apartment was set up. Simple, but theirs.

Aditya dropped off the trolley at the petrol station, picked up Neha and Abhijeet, and drove them to the new home. Neha looked around the apartment. “It’s… nice,” she said softly, guilt flickering in her eyes.

Aditya forced a smile and nodded.

That night, after putting Abhijeet to bed, he sat quietly on the lone couch, staring at the ceiling fan.

He was numb—his hands blistered, his body aching. But it was not the physical strain that wore him down. It was the loneliness. The injustice. The silent sacrifices.

He had endured humiliation, isolation, pressure, and manipulation—and yet, he had not broken.

But he was tired.

And though he did not say it aloud, a quiet question gnawed at him in the dark: *How much more could he take before something inside him shattered?*

They named him **SURYANSH**—a name Neha had chosen long ago; one she had whispered into her father’s ears even before ABHIJEET was born. “SURYANSH,” she repeated, cradling him. “It means light. And peace.”

But unlike ABHIJEET’s birth, there were no grandparents flying in, no rituals, no tears of joy from elders. No Sunita, no fatherly warmth from Neha's side. Just them. A small nuclear bubble, floating quietly in a big American city.

Aditya had taken two weeks of maternity leave. He threw himself into making their little apartment a cocoon of comfort. He assembled the baby cot with ABHIJEET's help, smiling at how Aditya kept handing him tiny screws with the seriousness of a mechanic.

“Papa, this cot strong enough? SURYANSH will be a kicker like me,” ABHIJEET said proudly.

Aditya laughed. “Stronger than you ever were.”

They bought baby clothes, installed a stroller basket, rearranged the bedroom to make space for late-night diaper changes. Neha, still recovering, would sit on the couch, watching them with a gentle pride in her eyes.

Within a week, she was back to her usual routine. Her recovery had been swift—Neha was always strong that way. She started cleaning, cooking small meals, organizing ABHIJEET's school bag, folding SURYANSH’s tiny onesies. Life had returned to a steady rhythm.

ABHIJEET adored his little brother. Every evening, he would sit beside the baby cot, lining up his whole collection of miniature cars around it. He would point to each one and say, “SURYANSH, this one is a Ferrari… this is Lightning McQueen. I will give you this when you are older.”

SURYANSH would coo in return, blinking at the colourful toys, mesmerized by his brother’s voice. Neha often stood at the door, watching them with a soft smile, her hand resting on her stomach instinctively. Her eyes would well up at times—not with sadness, but with that deep, complicated joy only a mother feels.

But outside the bubble, winds of the past kept blowing in.

Disha and Mahendra had moved an hour away into the house they had managed to secure with clever financial manoeuvring. Though physically distant, **Disha’s presence loomed heavily over their home**—like a daily radio signal tuned into Neha’s mind.

Each evening, without fail, Neha would be on the phone with Disha. The conversations were long, emotional, and full of lament.

“She just doesn’t listen, you know,” Neha would say, walking circles around the kitchen as SURYANSH napped and ABHIJEET doodled at the table.

“Hmm,” Aditya would respond from behind his laptop, trying to focus on an urgent project, his brows furrowed.

“She says Mahendra does not understand her. He just wants things his way... and Ana hides during their fights now. Every day it is something.”

He did not reply. His hands continued tapping on the keyboard.

But what stung more than the words was **Neha’s complete absorption** in her sister’s chaos. Aditya longed for evenings where he could return from work and laugh with the kids, share a simple meal, watch a movie. But all he got were monologues about Mahendra’s anger or Disha’s crying spells.

Then one day, he finally spoke.

“Neha… why are you wasting every evening talking about *them*? We have our own life. Look at our boys… do not you think we should focus more on *them*, on *us*?”

Neha snapped her head toward him, eyes narrowed. “They are *my* family. I cannot ignore their pain. You may have moved on, but I have not. I will not stand by if my sister is Suffering.”

“But you have *so much* here,” he said, barely containing his frustration. “You have two beautiful sons. A life we built from scratch. Why keep Nagging their baggage into this home?”

Neha did not answer.

That night, the dinner was silent.

The next day was the same. The phone calls continued. The emotional handholding over long-distance arguments. And each call drained Neha a little more—and in turn, take away from the peace Aditya longed to preserve at home.

He started to feel like a ghost in his own house. Present, but unseen. Functional, but unnoticed. And the most painful part—he had no one to talk to about it.

He tried his own ways to bring joy back. Weekend trips to nearby lakes. A Surprise bouquet. A new dress for Neha from the mall. A golden anklet ABHIJEET picked. A family movie night with popcorn.

She smiled through them all. But by 8 PM, the phone would ring. And the spiral would repeat.

Inside, Aditya was **quietly burning**. He had buried so many storms before—his master's years, the tournament rejections, the loneliness of starting life anew in America. And now, this emotional rejection from his own wife, who could not see the flame fading inside him.

He never raised his voice. Never slammed a door. Never spoke unkind words.

But he started staying up later, working more. And on weekends, he poured himself an extra drink or two during house parties—not for the buzz, but to dull the ache of emotional neglect.

He had no words to match Neha’s fury. No sisterhood from which to draw strength. Just two little boys, a demanding job, and a wife who could not disconnect from her sister’s storm.

As days turned into months, his smiles faded from the eyes. His laughter became reserved for ABHIJEET alone. Aditya who once cracked jokes, dreamed aloud, and spoke with passion… had turned into a man of quiet sighs and suppressed hurt.

The embers beneath his silence glowed hot. But still, he said nothing.

Because if he started, he feared he would not stop.

**Part 5**

**Chapter 1-The Cracks in the Silence**

**January 2001.**

Outside, the trees were bare, the sky a washed-out grey, and a gentle wind moved like memory across the Dallas streets. Inside the house, Aditya looked at Abhijeet in his school uniform. His first day of primary school.

Abhijeet stood tall, his backpack almost bigger than him, beaming with pride.

"How do I look, Papa?" he asked, twirling around.

Aditya smiled, ruffling his hair. “Like a scholar already. But remember—scholars listen to their teachers.”

Abhijeet giggled. “And scholars eat cookies after school!”

Aditya chuckled. “Only if they come home with a smile.”

Nearby, Suryansh, now a one-and-a-half-year-old whirlwind of energy, Nehan around in circles, babbling incoherently, clutching a half-eaten teething biscuit. His laughter echoed off the walls, full of the wild joy that only a toddler knows.

But Aditya—he had learned to smile through a storm. He had grown used to **smiling on the outside while slowly drowning inside**.

Every evening, he came home later than before, sometimes by design. He knew what waited for him—**the same familiar scene**: Neha hunched on the couch, cordless phone in hand, speaking softly, urgently—always to Disha.

It was a routine now.

He walked in, placed his laptop bag in its corner, kissed Abhijeet, and Suryansh on the head, and quietly made himself a cup of tea. No eye contact with Neha. No warm “How was your day?” Just that emotional vacuum that kept stretching…widening.

He had almost stopped hoping she would change. But a small ember still flickered. A stubborn ember that whispered: *Today she will see… today she will come back to me.*

But nothing changed. And with each passing day, the ember dimmed.

**Back in India**, V had retired. It was a grand send-off—colleagues praised his honesty, his commitment, his discipline. Sunita had taken voluntary retirement soon after. With solid savings, a pension, and their son settled well abroad, they felt it was the right time to slow down.

On a quiet February morning, the phone rang.

“Beta,” Sunita’s warm voice came through, “we have retired now… Vishwas and I were thinking… if it is okay with you, we would love to come and stay for a while. Spend time with the Neha & kids. We do not know how many more chances we will get like this.”

Aditya’s heart fluttered. His eyes welled up. “Amma… please do. Stay for at least six months. Aditya’s will be so happy.”

He started arrangements for the visas that very evening. There was a new lightness in his step. This was what they all needed—a reset. A family, whole again. A healing.

**March, end of the month.**

The airport buzzed with bodies and announcements, but Aditya's eyes scanned only one direction—the arrival gate.

Then he saw them. Vishwas and Sunita, walking toward them slowly, tired but glowing. Sunita’s eyes instantly found Abhijeet, who shrieked, “mmmmaaaaaaaa!” and dashed forward.

He jumped into her arms. Vishwas bent down and picked up Suryansh. The little one, momentarily stunned, stared at the stranger’s kind face. Then, in a flash, he giggled and smacked Vishwas’s cheek playfully.

“Oi!” Vishwas laughed, holding the toddler close. “This one is already a boxer!”

Everyone laughed. Even Neha smiled, faintly. The following weeks were full of joy.

Vishwas and Sunita settled into a quiet routine of morning walks, storytelling, and doting care. At night, they sat with boys and told them stories from the Ramayana & Mahabharata. Hanuman became an instant hero. Abhijeet insisted every night: “Tell me how Hanuman jumped to Lanka again!”

Suryansh listened wide-eyed, repeating “Hanu-hanu!” with excitement.

Neha finally had time to breathe. She began preparing for her primary school teaching certification. Aditya worked hard during the weekdays and cherished his weekends—taking the whole family for picnics, long drives, and Indian dinners at Patel Brothers.

For a brief window, everything felt good. But poison, even when slow, finds a way.

Each evening, Neha’s chats with Disha resumed. What once sounded like concern began to sound like accusation.

"They’re here to enjoy, not to help,” Disha sneered through the phone. “They did not come when you needed them. You were all alone after delivery. Now that the kids are cute and growing up, they have flown in for their *holiday*.”

Neha sat silently. Something flickered in her eyes.

“You must cook their special meals, adjust your schedule, pay higher bills. Why should you? They are not helping, they are burdening.”

Neha sighed. “Yes, it is more work. They do not eat the food we make—always Indian vegetables. Grocery bills are going up. Electricity, water, gas…”

Aditya overheard it all, night after night. He said nothing.

But every word pierced his silence like a shard.

**Two months later**, Disha invited the entire family for dinner.

Her home was expansive—stylishly furnished, polished, filled with scents of candles and new leather. Mahendra greeted them in his usual overbearing style, already half-drunk on his own authority.

Ana barely spoke. She looked smaller, withdrawn.

In the kitchen, Neha and Disha chatted.

“So… what did your in-laws get for boys?” Disha asked, eyes narrowed.

“Nothing… yet” Neha murmured.

“You’re a fool,” Disha hissed. “They have come here to enjoy on your dime. Look at your mute husband—he will not even speak up for you. They treat you like an unpaid maid.”

Neha said nothing. But something inside her tilted further into darkness.

In the lounge, Aditya, Vishwas, and Sunita sat ignored while Disha and Mahendra hovered over a couple—Arun and Gayatri—from their elite circle. Aditya watched it all. No introductions, no warmth, no regard.

When they left, Mahendra waved a lazy hand. Disha did not even glance up.

In the car, silence festered. Then Aditya exploded.

“Did they call us here just to *Insult* us?! At least teach your sister how to treat people!”

Neha said nothing.

Later that night, Aditya lay facing away from her. He expected a word, a whisper—anything. Instead, Neha’s voice, cold and flat:

“They never did anything for me. Never appreciated me. Not during pregnancy, not now. No sarees, no jewellery, no words of praise… only ever spoke highly of other daughters-in-law. I married you and lost my identity.”

He clenched his fists under the blanket.

He could not understand. His parents were not flashy people. But they loved deeply. He had never doubted that. Why couldn’t she see?

**By May’s end**, Sunita and Vishwas quietly announced they would return to India.

“We’ve had a lovely time,” Sunita smiled softly. “But there are things to finish back home.”

Aditya was Surprised. “So soon? Please stay a bit longer… Abhijeet and Suryansh will miss you terribly.”

Neha sat on the sofa, flipping through her coursebook, pretending not to hear.

Then Vishwas looked at him. “Buy a house here. Settle down properly. I will give you $10,000. Add your savings to it. Buy a future for your kids!

Aditya was speechless. “Baba. Thank you. This means so much…”

That night, he shared the news with Neha. “See? They are giving us 10k. Isn’t that a beautiful gift—for the kids, for us?”

Neha did not even look up. Her voice was distant. “So what? It is their duty. They are doing it for *you*, not for me. Never appreciated me. Never celebrated me.”

Tears slid down her cheeks. “You don’t know what it feels like to marry into a family that makes you feel invisible.”

Aditya could not speak.

The next morning, Sunita and Vishwas left quietly. The hugs were long but Subdued. The silence that followed them out the door stayed behind, settling into every corner of the home.

**Summer crept in.**

Aditya enrolled in an executive MBA course, hoping to fill the void with something purposeful. The only peace he found was on weekends—with his boys. Fairs. Cricket matches. Car rides. Ice cream.

Neha completed her bridging course and joined as a part-time teacher. Suryansh was dropped off at a crèche. Abhijeet stayed in after-school care. Aditya picked them both up each evening. Their squeals of “Papa!” were the only music he craved.

The calls from Disha never stopped.

Aditya never spoke of his wounds.

But inside him, the silence had turned to ash.

**Chapter 2- A Distant Silence – July 2003 to June 2005**

Time had a way of softening the chaos, masking emotional wounds under layers of routine. Aditya had settled into a rhythm now — a fragile, mechanical routine that dulled the ache but never quite healed it.

By mid-2003, life in Dallas had taken on a predictable shape. Aditya was juggling his demanding job and an executive MBA program, often returning late, exhausted but determined. Neha had joined a local primary school as a part-time teacher after completing her bridging course. The kids, Abhijeet, and Suryansh, were thriving in their own ways — Abhijeet, already a natural athlete, was making a name for himself in school cricket, mirroring his father’s passion and flair. Suryansh, just four but sharp as a tack, would sit quietly beside his elder brother, watching and listening intently as Neha helped ABHIJEET with his homework. His curious eyes sparkled, absorbing fractions and planets, verbs, and rhymes with surprising ease.

Though life looked functional from the outside, a quiet storm brewed beneath. The mental distance between Neha and Aditya had grown steadily. The warmth of early years, their shared dreams and laughter, had faded into cold formality and routine coordination. Neha, still under the heavy influence of Disha’s daily calls, had buried herself deeper in regret. In her heart, a bitter seed had sprouted: the belief that she had made a mistake marrying Aditya. She told herself — and allowed herself to be told — that everything she had now was hollow because it came without admiration, without pampering, without sparkle. Even though her life reflected every dream she once spoke of — a home in the US, healthy children, a career, a good husband — something within her remained unfulfilled.

Yet, Neha was an exceptional mother. No matter how clouded her thoughts about Aditya, her love for the children was pure and consistent. She was gentle with Suryansh, firm but fair with Abhijeet, and their little arms reaching for her brought real joy to her weary heart.

Aditya, despite the widening gap with Neha, found peace in his children. They were his world, his reason. Weekends were sacred — cricket matches with Abhijeet, giggles and chattering questions from Suryansh, spontaneous drives, ice-cream outings, and storytelling marathons about Hanuman and the magical world of the Ramayana. The children clung to their father’s presence with joy and trust. Their innocence kept his heart from falling apart.

**July 15, 2003**  
Aditya called Neha from work.

“Hey, I am picking you up. I found a house. Let us go see it.”

“A house?” Neha asked, Surprised, but curious.  
“Yes. Within budget. I think it is good.”

They drove across town to a quiet neighbourhood. The house was modest — not fancy, but warm and welcoming. It had a small courtyard, three bedrooms, and the kind of charm that made you believe it could be *home*. Neha smiled slightly as she walked through the rooms, Visualizing Boys running around.

The deal was negotiated quickly. By early August, they moved in. Abhijeet and Suryansh squealed with excitement at their new room, decorated with SpongeBob bedsheets, Spiderman curtains, and stars stuck on the ceiling that glowed at night. A Hanuman poster watched over them like a protector. It was a rare happy moment — full of hope.

Even Neha seemed cheerful for a few weeks. She helped arrange the kitchen, hung up curtains with care, and even laughed at something Aditya said one evening. Aditya’s heart Surged. Things were changing. This new beginning could heal old wounds.

But it lasted only a while. Soon, the old patterns returned. The phone calls from Disha continued. So did the slow drip of resentment — unspoken, but loud in its silence. Aditya noticed Neha’s flickering expressions, the passive comments, the cold distance. He tried to make her laugh. He helped with the kids. He praised her teaching. But nothing seemed enough.

He often lay awake at night, Neha sleeping with her back turned, wondering, “Does she even like me anymore? Or is it all just obligation now?” The walls between them had become thick, invisible, and cruel.

For Neha, the disconnect was emotional. Somewhere in her, a narrative had been fed and nurtured — one where she was unacknowledged, unrewarded, unloved. The occasional gesture, the 10,000 dollars from Vishwas, the house — they all fell short because they were not wrapped in the words she longed to hear. She wanted appreciation, celebration — the sparkle she saw in Disha’s Instagram-perfect world, not the quiet loyalty and late-night sacrifices of Aditya.

And Aditya? He had nothing left but his children.

**Chapter 3-The Call That Changed Everything**

**June 10, 2005**

The call came on a still, humid summer afternoon.

Aditya was at work, nursing a bitter, lukewarm coffee, eyes glazed over a budget spreadsheet that refused to balance. The ring of his cell phone sliced through the silence—an unknown Indian number flashing on the screen.

He picked it up, half-distracted.  
“Hello?”

A pause. Then a voice, gravelly with emotion.  
“Aditya... it’s Harish.”

His heart skipped.  
“H... Dr. Saheb! After so long... how are you?” he asked, smiling instinctively.

But Harish’s voice was heavy. No smile came back.

“I wish this call were different. Vishwas... your father... had a massive heart attack last night. He is in ICU. Sunita’s with me. She is... shattered.”  
A pause. Then, a quiet plea.  
“Can you come?”

Aditya’s body tensed. A chill spread through his limbs.  
“What? When? How...?” His voice cracked.

“Late last night. It was sudden. We did not expect it. Honestly… we do not know if he will make it through the next 48 hours.”

Aditya’s chest tightened. Words choked in his throat.  
“I’ll catch the first flight,” he whispered. “Tell her... I am coming.”

He hung up. His fingers trembled as he dialled Neha on the drive home.

“Come home. Now. Please.”

She arrived within the hour, breathless.  
“What happened?” she asked, pulling her cardigan tighter.

Aditya looked up; eyes raw.  
“Baba’ had a heart attack. ICU. I must go.”

She stood still. No shock, no warmth.  
“You go,” she said flatly. “I do not want to disrupt the kids’ routine. And they might fall sick in India.”

His heart sank.  
“Okay,” he said softly, defeated.

That night, he sat beside his sleeping sons. Abhijeet lay sprawled across the bed like a little warrior; Suryansh, curled beside him, breathing softly. Aditya brushed their foreheads with trembling lips.

In the living room, Neha was curled up with a book.  
“They love you, you know,” he said quietly.

She did not look up.

He turned away. The night felt endless. But a longer one waited for him—at a hospital bed, a continent away.

He landed in India after seven long years.

The air that hit him outside the terminal was thick—hot, sticky, and full of emotions he had buried deep. Harish stood near the exit, older, thinner, but still grounding. They hugged—an embrace heavy with silence.

“I’m glad you’re here,” Harish said. “He is stable. But it was close.”

Aditya’s throat tightened. “Let’s go,” he murmured, dragging his suitcase behind him.

“Home first,” Harish said, gently. “Freshen up. I have arranged everything. Then we will go.”

Aditya wanted to resist. But his body felt like lead.

As the cab wound through the city, he stared out the window. Skyscrapers, neon boards, honking chaos—this was not the Pune he’d left behind.  
“Seven years,” he whispered. “It doesn’t feel like mine anymore.”

Harish nodded. “The city’s changed. But Sunita... has not stopped crying since last night.”

Aditya clenched his fists.

At the hospital, Sunita sat alone in a corner of the waiting room, her sari crushed, her eyes red beyond tears. The moment she saw him, she stood and rushed into his arms.

“My son... my son is here,” she sobbed.

He held her tightly, steadying her. “I am here, Ma. He will be alright. I promise. I will take care of everything.”

They walked into the doctor’s chamber. The cardiologist, calm but serious, did not waste words.

“The attack was severe. A few minutes’ delay, and...”  
He trailed off.

Aditya felt the blood drain from his face.

“We did an emergency angioplasty. He is stable, but weak. He will need monitoring and rest for several weeks.”

“Thank you,” Aditya said, his voice breaking. “Thank you for saving him.”

That night, Aditya sat by his father’s bed. The ICU light hummed. The ECG beeped rhythmically. Vishwas stirred.

When his eyes fluttered open, they landed on his son.

“You came...” he whispered, his lips dry.

Aditya gripped his hand gently. “Of course. I came the moment I heard.”

Vishwas stared at the ceiling.  
“You remember this hospital? You were seven. High fever... they thought it was dengue. I carried you in. You would not let go of my neck.”

Aditya’s eyes welled up.  
“I remember. You stayed by my side all night.”

His father gave a faint smile.  
“And now you’re here... just like I was.”

Days blurred.

Aditya became a shadow of himself—buying medicines, paying bills, feeding Sunita, dealing with nurses and endless paperwork. At night, he slept in a chair, waking to every beep.

He did not complain.

This was not sacrifice. It was responsibility.

When Vishwas came home weeks later, thinner, and slower, Aditya had already set up a cot, filled the medicine box, made dietary charts. He spoke to the kids over choppy calls. Abhijeet missed his bedtime stories. Suryansh asked if Baba was still sick.

But not once did Neha ask how Vishwas was.

Only when he passed her the phone did she say, in a cold, automatic voice, “Hope you’re better now.”

No warmth. No concern.

One evening, over chai, Aditya spoke.  
“It has been over a month. I will need to go back. Work’s waiting.”

Vishwas nodded.  
“You have done more than we ever asked for. We are grateful.”

Sunita wiped her eyes.  
“Take care of the boys. They need you.”

He had spent every rupee of their savings. Covered the hospital bills. Bought groceries. Paid off electricity dues. When they offered to repay him, he shook his head.

“This is not a loan. This is my duty.”

Back in Dallas, the air felt colder.

Bills awaited him like unspoken accusations—mortgage, daycare, fuel, food. Savings were gone. He resumed life with a tired heart.

A week later, Neha emerged from the kitchen, wiping her hands.

“I want to go to India. Disha is going too. It has been years since I saw my parents. I deserve this.”

He looked up, fatigued.  
“Can we plan for later? After a few months? Your job is not permanent, and it’ll be unpaid leave...”

She cut him off.  
“Oh, so you could spend our savings on your parents but not for mine?”

He sighed. “That is not fair. You know the situation.”

Her voice rose.  
“I gave birth to your sons—your legacy! And still, no one appreciates me. Not even your mother.”

He closed the laptop slowly.  
“Okay. Go. I will arrange it.”

She left for India.

A week later, she called, excited.  
“One of our relatives is building flats. Disha and Ve are booking theirs. I told him we will take one too—second floor. Just ₹6 lakhs. You will send it, right?”

He froze.  
“Neha... I just returned. We are already repaying loans... I do not know if—”

“Don’t back out now,” she snapped. “I have already given my word. If you care for me, you will find a way.”

She hung up.

That night, Aditya stared at his spreadsheet. Every cell bled red. Credit cards maxed. Car loan due. School fees pending.

He did not want to say yes.

But saying no felt... like betrayal.

He called two friends. Took a home loan top-up. Pulled every string he could.

Neha never asked how.

When she returned, she was cheerful—until she visited his parents.

“They gave me ₹5,000. That is, it!” she fumed. “My mother gives gold chains to our kids. Yours? Nothing! Not even a ‘thank you’!”

Aditya said nothing.

He knew. Knew how much they had tried. Knew the toll it had taken on him. Knew how much he had swallowed, silently.

He stood at the window, staring at the dark street outside.

Seven years ago, he came home after a long absence.

Now, home felt farther than ever.

**Chapter 4- The Breaking Point – March 2008**

The March sun filtered through the tall, smudged glass windows of the office, casting long amber streaks on the grey carpet tiles. The HVAC hummed steadily above, indifferent to the humans below. Aditya sat frozen in his cubicle, shoulders hunched, neck stiff, fingers hovering motionless over the keyboard. His laptop screen glowed with half-finished spreadsheets, the blinking cursor pulsing like a quiet alarm.

But he was not there.

His mind had slipped into a fog. Not confusion—no. It was a deeper haze, made of weariness, pressure, and the dull ache of repetition. He could not remember if it was Tuesday or Thursday anymore. They all looked the same now—one long, featureless stretch of obligation.

Every day began in darkness. Alarm at 5:30 AM. Pack the kids' lunches, check homework, tie their shoelaces, zip up jackets, hustle them to the car. Neha stood by the sink, often silent or hurried, sipping chai while she updated her calendar or yelled upstairs for Abhijeet to come down. Then the mad scramble to the school drop offline. Neha was dropped at the park-and-Ride bus station next—her bag always overstuffed; her face drawn but determined.

And then the highway. A relentless, grey stretch of concrete, peppered with brake lights and NPR voices. By 8:45 AM, Aditya was at his desk. From then on, it was war.

Meetings. Project escalations. Client calls across time zones. Status decks. Review decks. Metrics. Metrics. Metrics.

And then at 5:45 PM—every single day—the same panic: beat the traffic and reach the daycare before 6:15 or pay a penalty. His heart raced every time he hit a red light. He had become a clock, ticking for everyone but himself.

He was a provider. A performer. A husband. A father. A dependable employee.

But not a person.

That morning, the discontent was louder than usual. His fingers moved, but his soul did not. Something deep within was protesting. It was not a scream—yet—but it was getting there.

The office walls were dull grey. The cubicle felt like a cardboard coffin. His eyes drifted to the photos pinned to the wall: the boys playing soccer, Neha in a sari, the family trip to Yellowstone. Smiling faces. Happy illusions.

His phone buzzed. An internal meeting reminder. He dismissed it.

Suddenly, Neha’s voice from the previous evening echoed in his mind, sharp and cold:

“Look at Prit pal’s house—it is three floors, Adi. They bought a place in Frisco. And Arun—did you see his new Audi? And Varsha, my god—her diamond necklace at the Holi party? Meanwhile, we are stuck in this suffocating matchbox apartment... second-grade school district... and you keep saying *'We’re doing okay.'* Are we?”

He had stared at her then, silent. No words came. Not then. Not now.

Aditya picked up his half-empty coffee mug, took a sip. Bitter. Cold. Just like the rest of his life. There was a dull, persistent throb behind his left eye—another headache brewing.

He had given everything. And still, it was not enough.

Neha wanted more. The kids needed more. And work… work had changed too. Mr. Dave, his mentor, his guiding light, had retired six months ago. The new management had no history with him. No loyalty. His name did not carry weight anymore. Promotions kept slipping through the cracks. He had become invisible.

And more than anything else—there was the invisible truth of being *an outsider*.

“So where are you *really* from, Aditya?”

“You speak really good English.”

“Oh, your accent’s not bad.”

He smiled politely every time. And died a little inside.

He closed his eyes. Breathed.

Then, by muscle memory, he picked up the phone. His fingers dialled a number he had not used in months.

It rang once. Twice.

“Hello?” came a familiar voice, bright with surprise.

“Hey… Dinesh. It is me.”

“Adi! Man, long time! How are things in the States?”

They exchanged easy laughter, old college jokes. For a few minutes, the years melted.

Then the conversation turned.

“You know,” Dinesh said, “IT is insane here since 2003. Packages are skyrocketing. Remember Milind? That idiot from college? He is a VP now. Makes 50 lakhs!”

Aditya went silent.

Fifty lakhs.

That was not just money—it was *freedom*. A life. A do-over.

And lower living costs. Help at home. Familiar food. Festivals. Grandparents. Neha would not need to work. The boys would not need to run every morning like soldiers. They would have a garden. A terrace. A real life.

Something shifted inside him. The fog lifted.

He stood up.

Walked steadily down the corridor to Jeyapalan’s cabin.

“Adi,” Jeyabalan said, looking up from his laptop. “Everything okay?”

Aditya took a breath. “I’d like to request a transfer to the India office.”

Jeyabalan blinked. “Wait—what?”

“I have thought about it. I want to go back. My parents need me. And honestly… I need a change.”

Jeyabalan leaned back, concern furrowing his brow. “Are you sure? You are a core part of the team here.”

“I appreciate that. But I have made my decision. I will go, with or without an internal transfer.”

“Okay…” he said slowly. “Give me two days. I will speak to HQ.”

Two days later, the email came.

*We can offer thirty lakhs CTC. That is the max our India operations can afford.*

Aditya read it three times.

It was a 40% pay cut. But it was *enough*.

He typed slowly: *I accept. I can join May 1st.*

Then he hit **send**.

And exhaled—fully—for the first time in years.

That evening, Neha was in the kitchen, chopping onions. The sound of the knife hitting the cutting board was rhythmic, tense.

He walked in quietly.

“I need to tell you something,” he said.

She did not turn. “What now?”

“I have been transferred. To India. We are moving.”

The knife froze mid-air.

“What are you talking about?”

“I spoke to Jeyabalan. I am joining the India office. May 1st. We fly out in two weeks.”

She turned, stunned. “Two weeks?! Aditya, what about the kids’ school? The house? The furniture? What the hell are you thinking? You did not even ask me!”

He looked at her, eyes tired. “Neha… I have been suffocating. I cannot keep doing this. We will rent the house. Furnished. The rent covers the mortgage. We will sell the car. The kids will adjust. And we have the green card. If it does not work out—we come back.”

She stared at him. A thousand emotions flashing through her eyes—anger, confusion, fear, disbelief.

“But you did not even tell me. You just… decided?”

“I had to. I am breaking inside.”

The silence that followed was loud. Crushing.

After a long moment, he added softly, “Your parents are getting older too. You will be closer to them.”

Her eyes welled up. She looked away.

For four days, the house felt like a battlefield after war. Quiet, heavy, wounded. Neha said little. The children sensed the tension, tiptoeing around it.

Then on Saturday morning, she picked up the phone.

“Disha? We are moving back to India. Next Friday.”

A long pause.

“Wow…” Disha said. “I wish I could. You are lucky. I am stuck here.”

Aditya began making calls.

Friends in Dallas. Colleagues.

“You are moving? So sudden? Are you sure?”

He nodded. “Yeah. I am sure.”

He called Sunita and Vishwas.

There was a pause.

Sunita asked gently, “Is this… good for your career?”

Vishwas added, “Beta… you have your own family now. Think about Neha and the boys.”

Their voices were polite. Cautious. Not excited.

Aditya hung up quietly.

Later that evening, Neha looked at him bitterly.

“See? Even your parents are not jumping with joy. They do not want the burden.”

He said nothing. Just looked out of the window at the dusk settling in.

Inside, something raged. But he did not fight it.

He had made his decision.

And there was no turning back now.

***Chapter 5- The Collision***

The family landed in India under the blistering May sun. The air was thick with dust and sound—honking horns, shouting vendors, and the ceaseless churn of a million lives in motion. At first, Abhijeet and Suryansh were overwhelmed. The noise, the grime, the chaos—it all felt alien. But children, with their gift of acceptance, adapted swiftly. Within days, they were barefoot in the courtyard, chasing cousins, licking mangoes off sticky fingers, and soaking in the affectionate fuss of doting grandparents. It was raw, unfiltered, and chaotic—but it had soul. Unlike the sterilized silence of suburban America, this place pulsed with noisy love.

Aditya moved quickly. His new office was in a nearby city, just a few hours away. Within a week, he secured a swanky 2BHK apartment for ₹50,000 a month in a high-rise society. The complex had everything—swimming pool, manicured gardens, security guards, and even an amphitheatre. Five international schools were within a five-kilometre radius. Abhijeet and Suryansh were admitted to 6th and 3rd grades respectively, but with the academic year starting in June, they were handed an extended summer.

Neha was in her element. She arranged the flat, bought modern furniture, and was delighted to find full-time maids for cooking and cleaning. In just weeks, she had made friends among her neighbours—mostly affluent NRIs or expats like themselves. There were society events, kitty parties, weekend picnics. She glowed again. Her smile had depth now, her laughter lingered longer.

“I missed this,” she confessed one balmy evening on the balcony. “Back in the US, everything was so isolated. So… sterile.”

Aditya seemed to settle too. His office was small, the pace slow. His team was lethargic, their daily rhythm built around phone games and long tea breaks. There were no deadlines, no urgent calls, no pressure. Monthly reporting to the HQ in Europe was a formality.

At first, this new life felt like a reward. After years of hustling in the US, he could finally breathe. No late-night PowerPoint decks. No endless meetings. Just peace.

But slowly, a strange emptiness began to settle in.

He grew lethargic. The fire that once fuelled him began to flicker. He would arrive at work late, leave before lunch. His afternoons were spent at a neighbourhood bar. Cold beer and spicy kebabs became his ritual. By evening, he would nap in the office or head back to the bar—switching to Old Monk and cola.

When Neha asked about his day, he lied smoothly.

“Lot of government red tape, Neha. Meetings happen at bars and dinners. That is how things work here. Trust me—it will pick up soon.”

One hazy afternoon at the bar, he met Raju Mhatre, a slick local builder in a gold chain and linen shirt. They bonded over drinks. Raju was building two apartment towers nearby.

“Tell your friends,” Raju grinned. “Special price for you.”

Aditya, tipsy and flush with false confidence, leaned in. “I will buy one. What is the rate?”

“1000 square feet. ₹4500 per sq. ft, but for you—₹4000. Just ₹6 lakhs upfront. Receipt today.”

Aditya did not blink. He pulled out his chequebook. “Done.”

They drank deep into the night, then drove to the muddy construction site. Concrete pillars jutted from the earth like broken bones.

“That one,” Raju pointed proudly. “Fifth floor. East-facing. Yours.”

Aditya, swaying in the dim moonlight, laughed. “I am back. I am building again!”

Back home, Neha remained wrapped in her new world. Her life was full—friends, festivals, routines. She did not see the cracks forming beneath the surface.

Aditya’s drinking worsened. Mornings blurred. By 10:30 a.m., he was at the bar. He told himself he was enjoying the freedom he never had in America. But in truth, he was drifting. Spiralling.

Eight months passed.

Then came the call.

“Your tenant’s vacating,” said the real estate agent from Dallas. “We’ll try to get someone new.”

Weeks went by. No new tenant. The mortgage loomed—still in dollars. Aditya’s Indian salary barely covered their living expenses. He started using credit cards. Old friends from the US sent lesser amounts to help, but he knew it was a temporary fix. He was drowning.

Neha remained unaware. He hid the growing debt, the unpaid bills, the bank notices, the bar tabs.

Then came the message: **“Your property has been listed for auction.”**

Aditya stared at the screen. Numb. That house in Dallas—their first home, their dream, their pride—was gone. Silently, he buried it in himself. He said nothing.

One evening, Neha’s brother Nirmal and his wife Sneha came over. Over drinks, Nirmal mentioned, “Sneha’s sister is selling her Maruti 800. It is old, but in mint condition. Want it? ₹50,000.”

Aditya lit up. A rush of boyish excitement filled him. “Done.”

The Maruti 800 became his new companion. Compact, rugged, perfect for weaving through Indian traffic. It gave him mobility—and freedom. He would drive from bar to bar, music blaring, bottle under the seat.

“No breathalysers here,” he chuckled. “India has its charm.”

Occasionally, they visited Sunita and Vishwas. But Neha kept her emotional loyalties tied to her parents and siblings—Nirmal, Vimla. The kids followed her lead.

**7 November 2009**

Aditya had a client meeting in Goa. He loaded the Maruti’s back seat with a black duffel—stocked with Old Monk, beer, and cola. The drive through the Western Ghats was exhilarating. He drank, sang to old Hindi songs, laughed with himself.

“This is living,” he thought.

But on the way back, around 4:45 p.m., just 200 km from Mumbai, it happened.

He tried overtaking a tractor hauling rice bundles. At that exact moment, a Mahindra Xylo came hurtling towards him.

Instincts kicked in. He swerved.

The Xylo smashed into the driver’s side. The Maruti spun violently and flew off the road, landing in a muddy sugarcane field.

Silence.

He opened his eyes to a surreal stillness. Voices swirled around him, faint, urgent.

“Bhai! Bhai! Are you okay?”

A young man tugged the door open. “Saab… you are lucky. When we saw your car fly, we thought—finished.”

Aditya staggered out. His shoulder throbbed; neck scraped from the seatbelt. But no blood. No broken bones.

The Xylo’s passengers were safe. The police arrived. The bottles were empty. No smell. No evidence.

It was recorded as a regular accident.

At the local hospital, his test came clean. By then, the alcohol had faded from his blood.

That night, he called Nirmal. His voice was dull, almost lifeless. “Nirmal… I crashed the car. I am okay. But…”

“Stay at the station,” Nirmal instructed calmly. “I’ll be there in the morning.”

Locals began to circle. Demanding compensation. Threatening. The police intervened.

“Stay inside,” the PSI warned. “We will file the case. Claim insurance later. Do not wander around.”

Nirmal and Sneha arrived at dawn. They managed the chaos. Spoke to the PSI. Negotiated calm.

By evening, they reached home.

Aditya entered the apartment like a ghost. Eyes hollow. Shoulders slumped.

Neha rushed to him. The boys clung to him.

“What happened?! Are you hurt?!”

He nodded weakly. “Bad accident. But just scratches.”

Neha hugged him fiercely. The children held his arms.

But inside, Aditya felt something crack.

This was not just a car crash.

It was a collision with himself.  
With the life he pretended to live.  
With the lies he thought he had buried.

And now, the real fallout was only beginning.

**Part 6**

***Chapter 1- The Fall***

It took Aditya a few days to recover from the accident—physically, at least. The bruises faded, the scrapes healed, but inside, the shock clung to his nerves like damp fog on winter mornings. He moved through life like a man underwater, each step sluggish, muffled. The Maruti was a write-off, a crumpled memory now parked in some police yard. The insurance payout came through, a small relief. The local villagers had filed a complaint, but it did not go far. Just another smudge on an already stained page of his life story.

He resumed his routine—if it could still be called that. He never told Neha the whole truth. Every time he looked into her eyes, the guilt burned through his chest like hot coal. He wanted to speak. Confess. But each time he opened his mouth, something stronger than pride stopped him—fear, shame, weakness. He lied instead. Smiled like nothing had changed.

Then came the New Year—5th January 2010.

That afternoon, Aditya sat alone in his cabin, fingers idle on the keyboard, his eyes lost in the blankness of the monitor. Outside, the world moved on—phones rang, keyboards clicked—but inside him, everything was still. Stagnant.

Then—*ding*.

An email blinked into his inbox.  
**Subject:** *Conference Call at 5:30 PM – All to attend.*

He frowned. Unusual. Headquarters never scheduled sudden calls. Across the small office, others noticed too. The air grew tense, like static before a thunderstorm.

At exactly 5:30, the speaker crackled to life. The Managing Director's voice rang out, smooth and practiced.

“Hello everyone. I hope you are all doing well.”

He rambled on for ten minutes about global performance, realignments, strategies. Then—

“Now, our HR Head, Andrew, will share some updates.”

A pause. Then Andrew's voice, flat and efficient.

“In light of our global restructuring and future roadmap, the company has decided to shut down non-performing branches in India, Vietnam, and Taiwan. Effective immediately. You will receive two months’ severance as per your contracts. We thank you for your contributions.”

Silence. For a second, the room stood frozen.

Then came the chaos.

“What?! What does that mean?”  
“Shutting down? Just like that?”  
“Who do we contact? What about dues?”

But Aditya could not move. His limbs felt like stone. He stared at the phone as though it had punched him. His heart thudded. Sweat broke across his brow. His career had just collapsed over a conference call.

That night, he drank until 1:30 AM.

**The Slide**

The severance money vanished quickly.

School fees. Groceries. Credit card payments. Neha’s salon visits, weekend dinners, clothes. His bottles of rum and cola.

He called old friends, fumbling conversations about job leads. Most said they would “keep an eye out.” None called back. He had not made a resume in ten years. He did not even know where to start.

So, he lied to Neha.

“Office is getting renovated. I am working from home for a few weeks.”

She did not ask too many questions. She was wrapped in her world—kids, friends, society meetings, cousin get-togethers. Her life was finally comfortable again.

Aditya started sneaking out in the evenings. The bar was now too expensive, so he shifted to wine shops. He would buy a quarter of Old Monk, pour out half the cola from a soft drink bottle, and refill it with rum. A drink on the go. Fast. Cheap. Numbing.

The guilt gnawed at him like termites in the foundation of his soul. But instead of facing it, he drowned it—glass after glass.

He started appearing drunk at job interviews. Slurring. Unshaven. Sometimes forgetting what he was applying for. No one hired him. And the one place that did—a small tech distributor—fired him in two months. Non-performance. Drinking. Unreliable.

Raju Mhatre had vanished too. The apartment deal was a fraud. He had fled the city after duping dozens. That dream—another loss.

He tried to get a loan against Neha’s apartment. No job, no income—rejected. He forged bank statements, created fake employment letters. Nothing worked.

Eventually, he called Sunita and Vishwas. He begged. Half-truths, vague stories of investment gone wrong. The old couple, confused and worried, gave him some money. But even that trickled away like sand through fingers.

**Chapter 2- Collapse**

**13 July 2011.** Rent unpaid for three months. Credit card bills over ₹8 lakhs.  
Threatening calls, legal notices, angry landlords.

Neha began to sense the storm.

“You have not paid the school fees yet. Abhijeet needs new cricket shoes. What is happening?”  
“And the electricity bill—it is still due. Again.”

Aditya barely responded. His eyes were dull. His shoulders drooped. His once athletic frame now sagged. Bloated. Sickly. His breath smelled of alcohol, even in the mornings.

Then one morning, he woke with a strange pain twisting in his belly. He rushed to the bathroom.

Red vomit. Blood. A violent gush.

His vision blurred. His whole-body shook. He held the sink, gasping.

He wiped his mouth. An ulcer. Just stress. He rinsed. Popped a mint. Then reached for his hidden bottle. A long gulp. Steadying.

Just then—Nirmal walked in.

“Thought I’d drop in for some poha and tea!” he smiled.

Neha beamed. “My favourite brother! I just made some!”

Aditya emerged, trying to look normal. “Nirmal, my man! Surprise of the year!”

But Nirmal’s eyes scanned him—his pale skin, trembling hands, hollow cheeks.

They chatted. Laughed. Nirmal soon left—but as soon as he stepped out, he called Neha.

“Get his bloodwork done. Something is very wrong.”

That evening, Neha confronted Aditya.

“Nirmal’s worried. I think… you should get a CBC done.”

He agreed. It gave him an excuse to go out. He bought his quarter. Drank. Then walked into a pathology lab.

That night, the reports came in:  
**Haemoglobin: 8.5. Platelets: 150,000.**

Neha sent the report to Nirmal. Aditya, out of habit, shared it with Harish.

Harish called within minutes.

“Go to Sai Hospital. Ask for Dr. Mirchandani—radiologist. Tell him I sent you.”

Harish and Nirmal also called Sunita and Vishwas. “He is not well. Come immediately. Please.”

The elderly couple panicked. They hired a cab and rushed to the city. Terrified.

**Diagnosis**

At Sai Hospital, Aditya could barely walk. Neha held him tightly in the auto, trying to keep him upright. His body was cold, his lips dry.

Dr. Mirchandani did not say a word when they entered. He slapped the gel on Aditya’s abdomen, moved the probe slowly across the liver.

His eyes never left the screen. Minutes passed in silence. Neha gripped her fingers tight. Waiting.

Then he turned. Sharp. Angry.

“His liver is severely damaged. There are oesophageal varices—holes. Classic signs of cirrhosis. He has been abusing alcohol heavily.”

Neha’s mouth opened. But no sound came.

The doctor continued, bluntly. “He has five or six months. Tops.”

She froze. Tears welled, but did not fall. She just stared ahead, unable to process.

“I am handing the case to Dr. Sandeep. Room 401. Move him now.”

He thrust the report into a nurse’s hands and walked out.

Neha stood still. Pale. Hollow.

Just then, Sunita and Vishwas arrived. They saw her face. Read the unspoken truth.

Their son—Aditya—was dying.

Not from illness.  
But from the life he had chosen.  
The bottle had claimed him long before the doctors did.

And this—this was only the beginning of the reckoning.

**The Breaking Point and the Beginning**

Room 401 of the hospital pulsed with quiet urgency. Nurses moved briskly in and out, trays clinked, monitors beeped in rhythm with fragile life, and the sterile air reeked faintly of antiseptic... and fear.

Aditya lay still, half-conscious. His face was gaunt, his skin pale and sunken. A 2D echo machine hummed at his bedside, ECG leads dotted his chest, and blood samples were being drawn swiftly.

It was around 8:30 PM when Dr. Sandeep finally entered. Tall, bespectacled, and composed, he carried a stack of reports and the weight of unpleasant truths.

Neha, Sunita, and Vishwas sat tensely by the window, their eyes glued to Aditya, their faces pale and anxious.

Dr. Sandeep scanned the file briefly, then spoke in a low, grave voice.  
“He’s suffering from advanced liver cirrhosis… there’s significant ascites and oesophageal varices.”

Neha blinked, dazed. “Cirrhosis?” she echoed, her voice barely a whisper.

“Yes. He has been drinking heavily… likely for over a decade,” the doctor said, looking up. “Did any of you know?”

The question froze the room.

Neha looked helplessly at Sunita and Vishwas. Their silence said it all—they were blindsided.

“I know this is difficult,” Dr. Sandeep continued gently, “but I must be honest. The prognosis in such cases is not good. Six months to a year. We will do all we can, but... this is serious.”

Sunita staggered, almost collapsing into Vishwas’s arms.

“We’ll begin by draining the fluid from his abdomen,” Dr. Sandeep explained. “Start him on lactulose to flush out toxins. Tomorrow, we will do variceal banding to prevent internal bleeding. His kidneys and heart are surprisingly stable… but the liver is critical.”

Neha’s eyes welled up; her voice trembled. “Will he survive... more than a year?”

Dr. Sandeep hesitated. Then spoke with unflinching honesty.  
“If—and only if—he never drinks again. One relapse, even a single drink, and those varices could rupture. And then... it is over.”

Treatment began at once. A nurse administered lactulose. Moments later, Aditya slipped into sleep—or unconsciousness. No one could tell which.

By morning, the medicine had begun its grim work. Aditya was repeatedly taken to the bathroom as his body released the ammonia it had hoarded. The fog in his mind began to lift. The bleeding had stopped.

That afternoon, Nirmal and Harish arrived. The room was heavy with silence.

Sunita sat by his side, gently running her fingers through his hair. “Please,” she whispered. “Tell us the truth. We will not scold you. But we need to know.”

Aditya stared blankly at the ceiling. His chest rose and fell with deep, burdened breaths. Then, in a cracked voice, he said, “Give me a diary and a pen. I will write everything down.”

Nirmal, ever prepared, took a small notebook from his bag, and handed it to him along with a pen.

Propped up by pillows, Aditya began to write—his hands trembling, his shame pouring out with every word.

Page after page.

**Dallas house auction... house deposit to Raju Mhatre... builder disappeared with everyone’s money... job loss... mounting credit card debt... no savings... despair... guilt... silence... shame... the drink... the drink... more drink... fear of coming back... fear of what everyone would say...**

When he finished, he handed the diary to Harish, utterly spent.

Neha remained beside him. The others stepped into the corridor and opened the diary. The hallway grew silent as they read.

Nirmal snapped the diary shut. “He’s destroyed my sister’s life,” he said coldly. “You all deal with this now.” And he walked off.

Harish stood still, staring at the diary. “Did he never say anything to you?” he asked Sunita and Vishwas. “You are getting a pension. You have savings. How did it come to this?”

They looked at each other—eyes full of guilt and helplessness.

“We can still do something,” Sunita murmured. “It’s not too late.”

Harish shook his head. “It *is* too late.” Then he sighed. “But… we still have to act.”

Just then, Neha emerged, her face pale, her steps robotic. Sunita held her and helped her sit.

Vishwas reached into his bag and pulled out a cheque book. “Here. Pay off those credit card bills today. Take this ATM card too. Withdraw the maximum—₹20,000. Keep it for emergencies.”

Neha nodded numbly, took the items, and walked away like a ghost.

That afternoon, the banding procedure was done. Blood and plasma transfusions followed. Aditya’s frail body responded. Slowly, signs of life returned.

**July 16th. Morning.**

Outside, it rained heavily. The city was drenched in monsoon melancholy.

Inside the hospital room, Aditya stirred and opened his eyes. Something had changed.

The pressure was gone. The bloating, the pain, the heaviness—all had receded. What remained was weakness... and clarity.

Neha sat beside him, staring silently out the window.

“Neha…” he whispered.

She turned, startled.

“Remember our house near the Western Ghats?” he said faintly. “It used to rain like this there…”

Neha’s lips curled into a faint smile. She did not reply, but something softened.

“I’m... really hungry,” he added, shyly. “Can I get something to eat... and some tea?”

She rose quietly and left to arrange food. The diet was strict—low oil, saltless, no spices. But she got it.

Aditya ate slowly, quietly. He sipped the tea like it was the first warmth he had tasted in years.

That evening, Dr. Sandeep returned.

“How’s our young man today?”

“He’s constantly hungry,” Neha replied.

The doctor beamed. “That is an excellent sign! Means the toxins are clearing. But remember, Aditya…”

Aditya nodded solemnly. “One drink and I’m dead.”

“Exactly. Burn that into your mind. No exceptions.”

**Three days later, Aditya was discharged.**

He returned home with Neha, Sunita, and Vishwas. His sons, Abhijeet, and Suryansh, rushed to hug him. The hospital bill—₹3 lakhs—was paid by Vishwas silently, without complaint.

The next day, relatives arrived—Nirmal, Vimla, her husband Ravi. Predictably, Vimla lashed out.

“Look at Neha’s clothes! Look at her face! He drank away everything. He has ruined her!”

Sunita and Vishwas remained silent.

Then, suddenly, Abhijeet burst into tears. He ran to the centre of the room and pointed at Vimla.

“Don’t say anything about my daddy!” he shouted. “Stop it! Please stop it!”

Neha pulled him back, sobbing.

Aditya, lying on the bed, whispered hoarsely, “This was my tough time. But my good time will come. I will show you all…”

But Vimla was not done. She turned sharply to Sunita and Vishwas. “If this continues, the only solution is separation.”

Abhijeet clung to Neha, crying. “No! Do not take my daddy away!”

Vishwas, finally speaking, said softly, “We will consult the elders. But… He deserves one last chance.”

Nirmal nodded reluctantly. Vimla muttered under her breath, but for now, the storm passed.

The next day, Nirmal and Sneha arranged a modest 1BHK apartment for Neha and the kids. They helped move the family, sold extra furniture, paid rent, covered school fees, stocked groceries, and left some cash.

Aditya remained with Vishwas and Sunita for his recovery.

Time crawled. Aditya’s body ached, but Sunita cared for him meticulously simple meals, timely medicines. She placed books on spirituality—Swami Samarth, Gurudev Dutt—by his bed. He read every word.

Dr. Sandeep’s words haunted him: *Six months to a year.*

But something inside had shifted. He had faced the abyss. He had confessed. He had nothing more to hide. Now... the only way was up.

Two months later, his liver reports came. Enzyme levels had improved.

A small ray of light pierced the dark.

Aditya’s eyes had a spark again. He began sitting up. Then walking. Then writing.

He revised his resume. Polished it line by line.

And one morning, he picked up the phone… and began cold calling companies.

One by one. Door by door.

**The long road back had begun.**

**Chapter 3- From Darkness to Dawn**

One evening, while aimlessly browsing job portals and company websites, Aditya stumbled upon a minimalistic site of a local firm called *Akash Software and Solutions*. The home page had just a single line that caught his attention:  
*“We are looking for experts to Support our business growth. If you have software expertise, contact us.”*  
There was a phone number, and an email ID listed.

Without hesitation, almost instinctively, he picked up his phone and dialled the number. A gruff but curious voice answered, “Hello, Prithvi Jain here.”

“Hello sir, is this Akash Software and Solutions?”

“Yes, it is. I am Jain—the owner. Who is this?”

Aditya paused for a moment. The conversation did not feel like he was speaking to a company—it felt more like a local shop. But something told him to keep going.

“Sir, I read on your website that you are looking for expert Consultancy. I have experience in systems and software and thought I would reach out.”

Jain did not waste time. okay. What is your area of expertise?”

Aditya shared his background—his experience in sales, his tech knowledge, his US Exposure, and his most recent challenges.

Jain sounded intrigued. “Come meet me tomorrow at 10 AM at our office. The address is the same as on the website.”

After hanging up, Aditya was not Sure what to make of it. Something about it felt too informal. *“Doesn’t sound like a professional company,”* he thought. *“But what do I have to lose?”*

**First Impressions**

The next morning, Aditya rode his old Yamaha to the office address. The place looked like a converted parking space on the ground floor—barely furnished with a few desks, a conference room, and a small cabin at the back with a nameplate: **Mr. Prithvi Jain**.

Inside the cabin, Jain, a man in his late 50s with a bald head and thick-rimmed glasses, sat behind a cluttered table. Piles of papers and files were everywhere, and a large 40-inch monitor awkwardly perched on one edge of his desk. He looked up, gestured Aditya to come in, and sipped his tea.

“So, tell me about yourself,” Jain said without any formalities.

Aditya walked him through his journey—his education, his roles in US and India, his achievements, and the long, painful joblessness he was enduring now. He handed over his CV.

Jain scanned it slowly, then looked up. “Seriously? You have not found a job for almost two years?”

Aditya nodded, his voice quiet, “Yes sir.”

“I am Surprised. You have a strong profile. Right now, I need someone to train my sales team on tech and product understanding. Can you do that?”

“I’ve never formally trained teams, sir, but I have led many. Sales is my core. I can definitely try.”

Jain thought for a moment. “I think you can. My instinct says you will manage. I will offer you 75,000 rupees per month. It will be for six months temporary. Then we will see.”

Aditya was conflicted. *It is not permanent… the pay is low… but I have nothing else… it will buy me time.* He drifted into thought.

Jain interrupted. “Look, that is the best I can do. Take it or leave it. You start next Monday if you are interested. And I pay in cash—no paperwork.”

Aditya hesitated only a second more, then said softly, “Okay sir. I will take it.”

**A Fragile Restart**

Monday, October 20, 2011. Aditya stepped into his new role. It was not grand, but it was something.

That evening, he called Neha.

“I have a temporary job. I will send you ₹70,000 every month for the house expenses.”

Neha, still recovering from emotional and financial trauma, responded quietly, “Okay.” She was exhausted—physically, mentally, and spiritually.

Over the past months, it was V who had kept the family afloat paying for the children's needs, groceries, even Aditya’s medical treatments and petrol for his job-hunt travel. Aditya knew this, and it weighed heavily on him.

Time passed. Aditya slowly stabilized. True to his word, he sent Neha ₹70,000 every month. She managed the house, paid off debts to Nirmal and Sneha, and ensured the kids never felt the weight of their reality. School, food, clothes, swimming, sports—she protected it all.

By March 2012, Jain called Aditya into his cabin.

“You’ll be completing six months this month,” he said. “I have been watching your work. Feedback from staff is good. Business is improving. You have done well.”

Aditya waited, hoping the next sentence would offer permanence.

“But” Jain continued, “we cannot continue your services. I do have one client in Nagpur who needs Support. Three months max. You will need to travel—at your own expense. I will still pay ₹75,000 per month. Okay?”

It was not a choice. Aditya nodded.

That night, he broke the news to Neha. She was shaken again. “Three months? Then what?” she asked, fear rising in her voice. “How long will we keep depending on others?”

**The Unexpected Call**

April 8, 2012. Aditya travelled overnight to Nagpur by a rickety bus. He could not afford flights. At dawn, tired and in abdominal pain, he checked into a guesthouse, freshened up, and went to the client site.

By evening, after resolving Issues, he boarded another night bus back to Pune. Cramped, sleepless, and aching, he reached the Pune bus station the next morning. As he got into an auto, his phone rang.

Unknown number.

He picked up. A commanding voice boomed, “Is this Mr. [Aditya]?”

“Yes, sir.”

“I am Ranganathan, Business Head at Sri Sri Technologies. Can we talk for a few minutes?”

“Yes, sir,” he said, confused but respectful.

“We are looking for a Business Development Head. We are part of the Muthu Group, one of South India’s largest business conglomerates. I got your CV from my PA. Tell me about yourself.”

Aditya, stunned, dry-throated, gathered his courage and spoke. Ranganathan was listening carefully.

“Where are you based?”

“Pune.”

“I will be in Pune this Thursday. I may want to meet. Can I call you?”

“Yes sir, absolutely.”

That night, Aditya could not sleep. He tried looking up Sisir Technologies online but found little. The name sounded grand, but the digital footprint was tiny.

Still, he had a glimmer of hope.

**The Car Ride & Dinner**

Thursday, October 12, 2012. No call until evening. Aditya began to lose hope.

At 6:35 PM, the phone finally rang.

“Ranganathan here. Sorry, I was caught in meetings all day. I am flying to Chennai tonight. Can we meet at the airport? Where do you live?”

“Kothrud.”

He turned to his driver, “Can we go via Kothrud to the airport?”

“Yes sir.”

“Okay, I will pick you up. Tell me a landmark.”

“Near Kinara Hotel, Paud Road.”

Fifteen minutes later, a grey Innova pulled up. Aditya ran across traffic and hopped in. Ranganathan—bald, fair, wearing glasses—greeted him warmly.

The conversation flowed in the car. Ranganathan did not ask typical interview questions. He wanted to know about Aditya’s life, his family, his decisions—especially why he returned to India.

“You’re a risk-taker,” Ranganathan said. “I like that. Not many would leave the US.”

At 7:45, he glanced at his watch. “Still time for my flight. Let us have dinner.”

They stopped at Mainland China. Over scotch for Ranganathan and veg noodles for Aditya, they talked more. Ranganathan was fast paced, always thinking ahead, jumping topics rapidly.

“You do not drink? In sales for 15 years?” he joked.

Aditya smiled. “I used to. But not anymore.”

“I respect that.”

At 8:45 PM, they headed to the airport. Ranganathan made a couple of quick calls in Tamil, then turned to Aditya as he got out.

“Our HR will contact you. Good luck.”

**The Breakthrough**

The next day, while having lunch, Aditya’s phone rang.

“Hello, I am Geetha from Sri Sri Tech. I have emailed your travel tickets for a meeting at our Chennai office on Monday, October 16th.”

He dropped his plate, Nehan to his laptop, opened Gmail—and there it was. A formal invite, tickets attached, and cab driver details. His hands trembled.

*“This could be it,”* he whispered.

He spent the next two days preparing: answers, company research, tech trends—anything he could anticipate.

**The Breakthrough**

Next afternoon, as Aditya sat down to lunch, his phone rang.

“Hello, this is Geetha from Sri Sri Tech. We have emailed you tickets for a meeting at our Chennai office. Monday, October 16th.”

His hands trembled as he opened the email.

Tickets. Schedule. A driver’s name.

This was real.

He spent the weekend preparing. Every question. Every stat. Every prayer.

**The Final Test – Chennai**

Monday, October 16. Flight to Chennai. The air was thick, sticky. But Aditya’s mind was clear.

At 11 a.m., he reached **Sisir Technologies** in R.A. Puram. The logo gleamed against the sunlit glass façade.

A young woman greeted him warmly.

“I am Geetha. This way, please.”

Up on the 11th floor, he was led to a sleek conference room. A tall, confident man in a grey suit walked in.

“I am Sathya—HR Head. Tea? Coffee?”

“Tea, please,” Aditya said.

The conversation that followed was fluid. Leadership, vision, market trends, decision-making.

Finally, Sathya asked:

“What are your salary expectations?”

Aditya took a breath.

“₹45 lakhs per annum. It is fair for the scope and responsibility.”

Sathya nodded. “Sounds reasonable. Geetha, let us start the paperwork.”

Aditya blinked.

It was done.

He was in.

**The Appointment Letter**

After two hours of formalities, Geetha handed him a sleek black folder.

“Congratulations,” she smiled. “Here’s your appointment letter.”

Aditya opened it, read the words, and felt something release inside him.

Not a victory scream. Just… peace.

**Coming Home**

That night, he reached home at 9 PM. Sunita opened the door, her eyes scanning his face.

He did not speak. Just handed her the folder.

She opened it. Her eyes widened. Then welled up.

She looked up at her son.

“You did it.”

She bowed before Lord Ganesha, her voice silent but soul loud.

Viswas read the letter next. Placed his palm gently on Aditya’s back.

“Proud of you.”

**Neha’s Surprise**

Next morning, Aditya went to Mumbai.

“I got the job,” he said to Neha, handing her the letter.

She read it slowly.

“Chennai?”

“Yes. I will go alone. It is worth it.”

She smiled. Then reached for her purse.

“I have news too,” she said.

She told him how she had gone to the school to check on the kids. The principal had offered her a job.

“₹35,000 a month. Plus, half the school fees waived.”

Aditya beamed. He stood up and hugged her.

“That’s incredible.”

She held him back, her voice stronger than it had been in years.

“Yes, Aditya. We are back.”

**Chapter 4- Baptism by Fire – Chennai, Nov 2012**

November 1st, 2012.  
The air in Chennai was sticky, even at 8 in the morning. Aditya stepped into the headquarters of Sri Sri Technologies; a modest three-floor building tucked away in a silent industrial lane. A guard, indifferent and half-asleep, waved him in.

Ranganathan was waiting.

“Welcome,” he said briskly, walking Aditya into the open-plan office. “You will be taking over from Kuldeep. Come, I will introduce you.”

They weaved past cubicles to a cluttered desk near the glass cabin.

“This is Kuldeep,” said Ranganathan. “You are replacing him. He is retiring.”

Aditya extended his hand. Kuldeep stood up slowly.

Short. Bulky. Dark complexion. A stiff smile playing at the corners of his lips—like he knew something nobody else ever would. He shook hands loosely, avoiding eye contact.

Ranganathan laughed under his breath. “He knows all the secrets. You have to pull it out of him before he vanishes in two weeks. I have tried. In vain.” He patted Aditya on the shoulder. “Best of luck. You will need it.”

And he walked away.

**The Battle of Silence**

The next two weeks were a blur. Aditya sat next to Kuldeep for hours each day, trying to glean as much as he could.

“Kuldeep, can you share the customer list?”  
“Sure I’ll mail it.”

“What about revenue region-wise?”  
“It is there. I will forward.”

“Any notes on key accounts? Contacts?”  
“I have it somewhere. I will dig it out.”

Each time, the same response. The same eerie smile. The same glassy-eyed silence.

And yet—no mails came.

By the 10th day, panic started to rise in Aditya’s chest. Three days to go before Kuldeep disappeared. He had no real data—no revenue trail, no pipeline, no client segmentation, nothing to begin with.

That night, he called Kuldeep from his small, rented flat in Anna Nagar.

“Kuldeepji… please. I have asked multiple times. I need the files. It is getting extremely hard for me.”

The voice on the other end slurred.

“Yes yes. I will send.”

*Click.* The call disconnected.

Aditya stared at his phone. Disheartened, he returned to his half-eaten dinner.

And then—it began.

**Ding.**  
**Ding. Ding. Ding.**  
His inbox exploded.

One mail. Then another. Then another. 32 in total.

Each Subject line read simply: *“FYI & A”*  
Attachments: Spreadsheets. PDFs. CSVs. Documents without context.

He stared at the screen, stunned.

**The Abyss of Analysis**

The next 8 to 10 days, Aditya was buried—day and night—trying to make sense of the labyrinth Kuldeep had left behind.

Multiple versions of the same files. Sheets with cryptic abbreviations. No column headers. No structure.

He built his own versions painstakingly—customer revenue trends, segmentation, region splits, service-level histories. It was tedious and frustrating. But he was determined.

*A pattern was slowly emerging.*

**Judgement Day**

A week later, Ranganathan walked over to his desk.

“You got the data from Kuldeep?”

“Yes, sir.”

“Good. Let us sit down. I want to see what you have got.”

They walked into the meeting room. Aditya plugged in his laptop. Heart pounding. Sweat beading on his forehead.

First, he opened Kuldeep’s original files.

Then, one by one, his own sheets—structured, color-coded, tabulated neatly.

Ranganathan scrolled. Quietly. No expression.

Sheet three. Then four.

Suddenly—

**Snap.**

“Hey!” Ranganathan’s voice cut through the room. “What is this nonsense you’re blabbering?”

Aditya froze.

“Do you think I am a fool? Do not try to make me one.”

Aditya’s mouth went dry.

“I gave you an opportunity because I believed you were sharp,” Ranganathan said, his voice rising. “Do not prove me wrong. I form opinions fast—keep that in mind. You got this job quickly. You could lose it even faster.”

He pushed the chair back with a loud scrape.

“Do not work like a courier Aditya—just forwarding files and showing tables. *Understand* what you are doing. Connect the dots. Add value.”

He did not wait for a reply. He just turned and walked out.

The room was silent again. Except for Aditya’s heartbeat.

**The Collapse**

He sat there for several minutes, motionless. His hands were trembling. Sweat soaked the back of his shirt.

*What did I do wrong?*  
*Was my analysis flawed? Was it too Surface level? Too textbook?*  
*Had I Misunderstood the expectations?*  
*Was it over already?*

Self-doubt came crashing in.

The fog settled in his mind like thick smoke.

For the next three to four days, he could not think clearly. He went through the motions—opening his laptop, staring at the sheets, pretending to work. But nothing made sense. No clarity. Just guilt. Fear. Shame.

**Finding His Feet – November to January 2013**

After that crushing meeting-room dressing-down, Aditya could barely sleep for nights. But life has a strange way of offering second chances—quietly, unexpectedly.

Ranganathan left on a 10-day client tour.

And the fog in Aditya’s mind finally began to clear.

**The Redemption Begins**

Alone in the Chennai office, Aditya sat at his desk late into the nights. No distractions. No judgements. Just focus.

He opened the spreadsheets again—line by line, column by column. He spotted errors. Assumptions he had made too fast. Areas where he had just reorganised instead of understanding.

He corrected them. Cleaned the data. Cross-checked sources. Added insightful comments. Built sleek dashboards with Visual. Created a professional, crisp PPT deck from scratch—this time with clarity, purpose, and confidence.

It was not just a file anymore—it was *his work*.

**The Circle of Energy**

The team around him—five young Business Development Managers—were always buzzing with activity. They cracked jokes, discussed new leads, fought over chai, stayed late if needed.

Among them, Aditya gravitates toward one: Rajendran. Smart. Restless energy. A sparkle in his eye that told stories of quiet victories. He welcomed Aditya warmly.

“Don’t worry about Ranganathan too much,”

Rajendran said casually one day. “Do your work right. Let your numbers talk.”

He guided Aditya on internal systems, CRM shortcuts, client handling, and—most importantly—the *pulse* of the company.

“He’s a legend with clients,” whispered another BDM once. “Does not Suck up to anyone. Delivers. That is his protection.”

Aditya began to feel something he had not felt in months: *belonging*.

**The KL Surprise**

Two weeks later, Ranganathan returned.

Not with fanfare—but with force.  
He stormed into the Chennai office like a cyclone wrapped in cotton—silent, swift, and utterly focused. His laptop bag thudded onto his desk, bursting at the seams with files, notes, and secrets.

No greetings. No small talk.  
Just a sharp pivot toward Aditya.

“Hey! We are going to Kuala Lumpur. Day after tomorrow. Pack your bags. Call admin for tickets.”

Aditya looked up, startled. “Sir… I do not have a visa.”

“Doesn’t matter,” Ranganathan waved him off, already moving. “Visa on arrival. Five days for Indian nationals. Just be ready.”

He was gone before Aditya could even process it.

That night, Aditya called Neha. His voice trembled—not with fear, but with something he had not felt in a long time: hope.

**Kuala Lumpur – Where the Tide Turned**

The Kuala Lumpur trip was meant to be a routine sales reconnaissance. But to Aditya—it became a crucible.

They met two major pharmaceutical clients—global giants sniffing around Southeast Asia for their next expansion wave.

Ranganathan introduced him with a casual, “He is working on the BD roadmap. Let us see what he has got.”

And Aditya rose to the moment.

He delivered crisp presentations. Sketched out potential partnerships. Dared to suggest bundled offerings tailored for multi-country launches. He even threw in local competitor comparisons—data he had obsessively researched the night before the meeting.

They cold-called at a few locations too—just the two of them. Unscheduled. Uninvited. Ranganathan did not say much. But Aditya noticed the way his boss’s silence had shifted.

It was not dismissive anymore. It was... measured.  
Watching. Absorbing.

During one particularly animated discussion, Ranganathan gave a small, approving nod. It was not a cheer. But to Aditya—it was thunderous applause.

**The Report That Changed Everything**

Back in Chennai, the memories of KL were not enough. Aditya needed to *consolidate* them. *Package* them.

So, he did what came naturally—he wrote.

Not just a travel summary.  
He prepared a comprehensive business intelligence document—20 pages of insights, next steps, potential revenue streams, SWOTs of the prospects, and even competitor mapping.

By the time he hit ‘Send,’ his palms were damp. He had no idea what Ranganathan would think.

No reply came.

**The Whisper in the Canteen**

Three days later, Aditya was laughing in the canteen with Rajendran, decoding some obscure Chennai slang. His lunch tray had barely landed when a man with a salt-and-pepper moustache and thick glasses approached.

“You’re Aditya, right?”

“Yes, sir?”

“I am C. S. Seshachar. I head the Auto Vertical.”

Aditya sat up straight.

“Just wanted to say—excellent report. Ranganathan forwarded it to us. Said *this* is how reporting should be done. We have circulated it to all vertical heads.”

Aditya froze mid-bite. Spoon in mid-air.

Rajendran raised his eyebrows and gave a subtle nod.  
*Told you,* his expression said.

**January 3rd, 2013 – The Boardroom Moment**

The following Monday, Ranganathan strolled over, unusually relaxed.

“There is a board meeting on the third. Half-yearly review. You are presenting for our division. Be ready.”

Aditya blinked. “Sir… me?”

“Yes, you. And remember—it is a ₹52,000 crore board. No flab. Just facts. Bring your A-game.”

Aditya’s chest tightened.  
Not with fear—but with the fire of someone who finally had a stage.

He did not sleep much that week.

He dissected revenue graphs. Built projection models. Rehearsed scenarios. Rajendran chipped in, fine-tuning the slides. Even Kuldeep’s old spaghetti-data had now transformed into sleek dashboards and clean metrics.

**The Room with Eleven Eyes**

The boardroom sat high above Chennai, its glass walls reflecting sharp suits, sharper minds.

Eleven members. Each with a gaze that could cut steel.

Aditya walked in, laptop in hand. Ranganathan sat beside him, calm and unreadable.

Slide after slide. Metric after metric.

Questions flew like arrows.  
And Aditya blocked each one—not with bravado, but with clarity.

Growth levers. New clients. Competitive advantage. Product innovation. Market risk.

He did not fumble.  
His voice did not shake.

Ranganathan interjected twice—just to support. Not to rescue. Mostly, he just let Aditya *speak.*

**From Fog to Fire**

As they exited the boardroom, Ranganathan said nothing for a moment.

Then, as they waited for the elevator, he turned.  
A rare smile curled his lips.

“You’ve got your act together now,” he said, almost to himself.

Aditya nodded, heart pounding—not with nerves this time, but with pride.

**Epilogue – The Spark That Lit the Path**

In less than sixty days, Aditya had gone from a confused analyst buried under spreadsheets to a man who could hold his own in billion-dollar boardrooms.

And it had not taken magic.

Just one trip.  
One report.  
One mentor who chose to *look again.*

The fog had lifted. And in its place… fire.

**Chapter 6- Blood and Fire – May 2013**

It was early May. A Sultry Chennai morning.

Aditya woke up with a twisted pain in his abdomen—sharp, writhing. Familiar. Terrifying.

He staggered to the bathroom. His vision blurred. He vomited.

There was redness. Not fully blood—but unmistakably tainted.

His stomach churned again. He slumped on the bathroom floor, forehead resting on the cold tile.

A bitter metallic taste lingered in his mouth. He pulled himself up… somehow. Wiped his face. Got dressed. Went to work.

**“You’re looking pale.”**

Ranganathan saw him within moments of entering the office.

“Are you okay?” he asked, slowing down for the first time in years. “You’re looking... *very* pale.”

Aditya gave a weak smile. “Tummy upset. Nothing major.”

Ranganathan narrowed his eyes. “Go home. Take a few weeks off. Do not argue. Book your ticket. Go *now*.”

It was not a Suggestion. It was an order.

**Flight to Fear**

Aditya booked a flight to Mumbai that evening.

As he moved through Chennai airport, sat in the aircraft, and landed in Mumbai—everything felt like a dream. A half-conscious fog. His body trembled. His legs were wobbly. His heartbeat like a distant drum.

The words of **Dr. Sandip** echoed constantly in his head:

*"Six months... maybe a year, max."*

He was terrified. And alone.

He reached home like a ghost.

Neha took one look at him—and froze.

He collapsed into her arms.

**Emergency**

Neha wasted no time. She called Sai Hospital. Dr. Sandip saw him immediately.

Blood tests. Ultrasound. Urgent scans.

His haemoglobin had dropped to **7.0**.

“How did you even travel in this condition?” the doctor asked, eyes wide. “You could’ve slipped into a coma mid-air.”

Neha gripped Aditya’s hand tightly, as he lay almost unconscious on the stretcher. The doctor’s voice floated over them—like from another room.

“Severe internal bleeding... iron deficiency... near systemic collapse...”

Aditya was rushed for IV transfusion. Blood bottles. Iron infusions. Monitor beeping.

That night, Neha sat beside him, weeping silently. Her hand never left his.

**Darkness and Doubt**

By the next day, his haemoglobin rose to **10.5**. “He’s in the safe zone now,” said Dr. Sandip. “But it’s critical we monitor weekly for the next few months.”

He handed over a file. “Keep this with you. If anything happens in Chennai—or anywhere—you will need this data.”

Neha nodded. But her face was blank.

Back at home, Aditya lay in bed, recovering.

His mind wandered through waves of regret, anger, hopelessness.

He read medical magazines. Pages blurred with medical jargon. Cirrhosis. End-stage liver disease. Permanent damage.

His chest tightened.

He had read enough to understand there was *no* cure.

Neha broke down one night, holding him close.

“Why did you do this to yourself?” she whispered through tears. “You never thought about *us*. About Abhijeet… Suryansh… What will we do?”

He could not answer.

He just stared at the ceiling, ashamed, helpless, lost.

**A Ray of Hope**

Two weeks later, still weak but restless, Aditya returned to Chennai.

He told Neha, “I cannot sit idle. I will work till my last breath.”

Neha did not stop him. But her heart stayed shattered in Mumbai.

One night, alone in his flat, Aditya was browsing YouTube. Sleep evaded him. Shadows of fear still clung to his chest.

Then—he stumbled upon a **podcast**.

A serene-looking Ayurvedic doctor, calm and articulate, spoke in Hindi-English blend.

“Cirrhosis—whether alcohol-related or not—is not a death sentence,” he said. “Liver is the only organ that can Regenerate. Even if 10% remains healthy, it *can* grow back. But you need discipline. You need to remove toxins. And yes—*you must believe*.”

Aditya sat up straight. Watched it again. And again.

He noted the address. The medicines. The diet.

He placed an order.

**The Return of Strength**

What followed was a transformation.

Strict plant-based diet. No spices. No processed foods. Early mornings. Regular walks. Yoga. Meditation.

The Ayurvedic meds were bitter, but he never skipped a dose.

Within four weeks—his energy returned. The dull ache in his abdomen eased. He could breathe better. Think clearer.

In two months, he felt lighter. Alive. Hope flickered again.

**On the Road Again**

Ranganathan Summoned him.

“I need to focus on product development,” he said. “You oversee sales and BD now. Do not give me any negatives. Only results.”

Aditya nodded. Quiet. Ready.

He was back on the road—**India, Singapore, Malaysia, Germany, France, US, Australia.**

His routine became clockwork:

* **Three weeks touring.**
* **Two weeks in Chennai.**
* **A few days in Mumbai between flights—time with Neha, Abhijeet, and Suryansh.**

He would return from Europe or the US with his bag stuffed—Swiss chocolates, sour gummies, American cookies for the kids. Fancy jackets and scarves for Neha.

Tour allowances covered these joys.

Every visit home was a celebration. Hugs. Laughter. Bittersweet silences.

They also visited SUNITA and Vishwas regularly. Family felt more precious now.

**Excellence, Earned**

His work was shining.

By the end of 2013–14, he won the **Group Award for Excellence in Marketing & Sales**.

His presentations were sought-after. His forecasts became models for others. Juniors came to him for guidance. Seniors started inviting him to closed-door meetings.

He had become a **valued pillar of mid-management**. Respected. Resolute.

And yet, he never told anyone the whole truth.

He carried a quiet burden. A bottle of Ayurvedic meds in every Suitcase. A small, laminated sheet with his prescription tucked in every travel wallet.

The fire that almost ended him had now become the fire that **drove** him.

**Chapter 7- The Warrior’s Calm**

By early 2014, Aditya was no longer the man he used to be.

He was forged in quiet furnaces—some called them hardships. But for Aditya, they were proving grounds. Illnesses that drained his energy. Layoffs that bruised his ego. Relocations that ripped roots from the ground just as they had started to settle. Self-doubt that whispered venom into his soul during the long, silent hours of the night.

But through all of it, something unshakable remained.

Not pride. Not anger. But a strange, quiet resilience.

He had come to know himself not as a victim of life’s unpredictability but as a builder. A craftsman of second chances. A quiet warrior who carried not swords but resolve.

His strengths were no longer vague buzzwords on a resume. They were muscle Fibers in his soul: resilience like stone, a vision sharpened by pain, and a faith in the future that did not flicker even in the darkest storm.

But Aditya was also honest about his flaws.  
He trusted too quickly.  
He smiled even when thunder rolled inside.  
He leapt at opportunities with instinct, not always with calculation. Sometimes that cost him.  
But it also gave him fire. A raw hunger no corporate training module could replicate.

**Home, At Last**

By late 2016, things had begun to feel... steady.

Neha, with her soft-spoken but relentless discipline, became the anchor to his restlessness. While Aditya chased targets and turned clients into allies, Neha meticulously saved bonus after bonus, desire after desire, dream after dream.

It was not glamorous. But it was theirs.

And in **November 2016**, they bought their first home.

A modest 2BHK flat in Pune—not flashy, not central, but warm.

“It’s close to Sunita and Vishwas,” Aditya had murmured, fingers trembling as he signed the final papers.

Neha had smiled gently, already a step ahead. “We’re not moving though, right?”

“No,” he had replied. “Mumbai’s still home. The boys’ school comes first.”

They rented the flat out. Aditya bought a new Skoda Octavia soon after—sleek, silver, and quietly proud. On weekends, the family would pile in and head out on long drives again. Lonavala. Nashik. Even those half-day monsoon trips to Karjat.

Laughter returned.

**Quiet Seasons**

2017 and early 2018 unfolded like a long exhale.

No crashes. No spikes. Just rhythm.

Abhijeet cracked JEE Mains and secured a spot at NIIT for B.Tech. He was tall now—shoulders wide, voice deeper, his father’s fire tempered by his mother’s patience.

Suryansh, now in Class 10, was more reserved—observant, introspective. The kind of boy who listened more than he spoke but never missed a thing.

Neha, too, was blossoming. She had become a respected teacher at a nearby school. Organized, beloved by students, trusted by parents. Her confidence was quiet—but it filled the room.

And Aditya watched them all with a full heart.

Every morning, he brewed tea and sat silently by the window, letting one thought settle in:

**We are okay. We are okay.**

**The Break That Never Was**

By **April 2018**, Aditya felt it—his family needed a break.

Not a rushed weekend to Alibaug. A real pause.

He booked a **9-day holiday to a quiet Himalayan resort near Shimla**, May 12 to 20.

Pine forests. Misty trails. Tea on balconies. No meetings. No deadlines. No inbox.

“Can I pack the speakers?” Abhijeet had grinned.  
“Only if you’re playing Kishore Kumar,” Aditya replied with mock sternness.  
Suryansh had already made a list of birds he wanted to spot in the forest. Neha was planning shawls and thermos flasks.

The laughter was already starting—before they had even left.

**The Storm Returns**

Then, on **May 3rd**, a message blinked on Aditya’s phone.

**Sathya – HR**  
Need you to come to Chennai urgently. May 5. In-person. Important.

The language was too crisp. Too distant.

Aditya’s chest tightened. He knew that tone.

He did not tell Neha. Not yet. He simply said, “I need to visit HQ in Chennai on Monday. Just for a day.”

She nodded. “Everything okay?”

He gave her a half-smile. “I’ll know soon.”

**May 5th – Chennai**

Sathya did not make him wait.

The HR conference room was cold, white, clinical. No water bottles. No pleasantries.

“Global restructuring,” Sathya said gently. “35% workforce affected. Not performance related. Leadership realignment…”

Aditya did not wait for the rest. He already knew.

He sat silently, nodded once. Then stood.

“Thanks, Sathya. No hard feelings.”

Sathya looked startled. “Aditya... are you okay?”

Aditya smiled. “I have been through worse. I will be fine.”

He walked out slowly. Past the tall glass walls. Down the wide, impersonal lobby. Into the humid Chennai air.

In the backseat of his cab, he did not weep. He did not curse.

Instead, he opened his phone.

**Phil – Need to talk. Urgent. Can you call?**

Within minutes:  
**Phil:** “Anytime, mate.”

**May 6 – The Call That Opened Doors**

“Phil,” Aditya said, walking along Marine Drive the next morning. “Laid off. Company-wide cuts. If there is anything—anywhere—I would be grateful.”

Phil did not miss a beat.  
“You kidding? You are one of the sharpest guys I have worked with. Give me a day. I will shake the tree.”

That evening, as Aditya helped Suryansh with math revision, the phone buzzed again.

**Phil:** “Call Steve. Our India Ops head. British guy. Bit rigid but fair. He is expecting you.”

**May 7 – The Strategy Call**

Steve’s voice was clipped. British-precise.

“Yes, Aditya. Phil briefed me. Let us talk.”

The next **45 minutes** felt like a chess game.

Aditya answered every question with crisp clarity—revenue figures, team management, customer wins, failures owned. Steve listened, took notes, poked where needed.

Finally, Steve said:

“One of our Board Directors—Simon—is visiting Bengaluru. American. Energetic. You will like him. Can you meet him on the eighth?”

Aditya did not hesitate. “I’ll be there.”

**May 8 – Fire and Flight**

The Bengaluru office gleamed.

Ulsoor Lake shimmered outside floor-to-ceiling glass panels.

Steve was in full form—facts, performance, org charts. Simon, in contrast, leaned back in his chair, eyes scanning Aditya like a recruiter spotting raw talent.

“I like your spark, mate,” Simon said finally. “You have hunger. We need that.”

By the time Aditya reached the airport, the subject line on his phone read:

**Offer Letter – CP Softech**  
Role: *Senior Director – Global Sales*  
CTC: *35% hike*  
Joining: *June 1*

Aditya sat by the terminal window, watching the sun dip below the horizon.

He smiled.

**May 12 – Shimla**

Morning mist curled around the cedar trees. Neha sat wrapped in a shawl, eyes closed, a soft smile on her lips.

Suryansh lay on a hammock, humming quietly. Abhijeet was mimicking a Himachali accent, making everyone laugh.

Aditya sipped his tea, warmth spreading through his chest.

“Neha,” he said quietly.

She turned. “Hmm?”

“I need to tell you something.”

She opened her eyes. “What’s wrong?”

“My company let go of 40% staff last week. I was one of them.”

Her mug trembled. “You lost your job?”

He nodded.

A long pause. The wind rustled the pines.

“And…?”

He smiled. “I start a new one June 1. Better role. Better pay. I did not want to ruin this trip with the news.”

Neha blinked. Then laughed—a half-sob, half-laugh of disbelief and pride.

“You mad man,” she whispered. “You absolute mad man.”

Abhijeet whooped. “Baba! That is insane!”  
Suryansh grinned. “You scared us for nothing.”

Laughter echoed through the hills.

Aditya leaned back, arms behind his head, eyes toward the sky.

No fear. No burden. Just calm.

He had not just survived the fire.  
He had walked through it—and found peace on the other side.

**He was still the warrior. But now, he was a peaceful one.**  
**A builder. A father. A man who had finally come home to himself.**