

A Journey Into The Dawn of The Tea Empire of India

Phalap

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AUTHOR'S NOTE

The desire to write a novel based on the history of Assam's tea industry had been in my mind for a long time. After my first novel, *Dig Boy Dig*, based on the history of crude oil exploration in Assam, was well-received both in serialized form in *Prantik* magazine and later as a book, I began to seriously consider tea as my next subject. However, professional commitments and the extensive research required for such a historically enriched narrative delayed the project. I had even started writing the story twice before but could not complete it.

A few years ago, I came across *Cha Garam*, an English book on the history of tea by the renowned author Arup Kumar Dutta, published by Amazon. It provided me with a wide-ranging historical perspective. Later, I read *Asomat Chah Khetir Itibritta* (*The Details of Tea Plantation in Assam*), a book in Assamese by Dandeshwar Saikia. These two books became my primary sources for the historical content presented in this novel. Additionally, I consulted *A History of Assam* by Edward Gait and *The History of the Indian Tea* by Griffiths. I also gathered material from various internet sources and drew upon my travels to Singpho villages and tea gardens in Upper Assam. I extend my heartfelt gratitude to the authors of these valuable resources and hope that this novel will help popularize the rich history of Assam's tea plantations.

The term *Phalap* itself carries historical significance. It was after tasting *Phalap*, the traditional tea of the Singpho people, that the British discovered Assam's indigenous tea plants. In the Singpho language, *fa* means tender and *lap* means leaf—thus *Phalap* signifies “tender leaves.” While some authors mention alternative terms like *Fanap* or *Finap*, *Phalap* remains the widely used term. Given its deep-rooted connection to the discovery of tea in Assam, it seemed only fitting to name this novel *Phalap*.

Several characters from my earlier novel, *Dig Boy Dig*, return in *Phalap*. In fact, *Phalap* can be seen as a sequel to *Dig Boy Dig*. The characters Kevin, Anupama,

Prashant, and Clara had resonated deeply with readers, and continuing the story through them felt natural. Their familiar presence allowed the narrative to unfold smoothly and ultimately culminate in the form of this novel.

It is important to note that *Phalap* is not a purely historical novel. Rather, it is a story that attempts to revisit the history of Assam's tea industry through a realistic portrayal of human relationships and the triumphs and tribulations of life. For narrative purposes, some historical characters have been fictionalized, although I have strived to present factual details as accurately as possible. I request my kind readers to forgive any unintentional errors that may remain.

While writing the story, I posted serialized portions almost daily on the popular Facebook literary group *Grantha Subas (Assamese)* under the title *Seujiya Prithivi (The Green Earth)*. Encouraged by the interest and enthusiasm shown by readers, I was motivated to keep writing consistently.

Writing a novel demands a great deal of time. Often, one must withdraw from family and sit alone for hours in a quiet room. I am deeply grateful to my wife, Pranita, for her unwavering support throughout this journey. She has always been the first reader of my work. As *Phalap* tells the story of young tea leaves, I dedicate this novel to our youngest child Kuhi, the tender leaf of our life.

I hope that *Phalap* will be received by readers with the same affection as my earlier novels, *Dig Boy Dig* and *The Divine Code*. If this novel succeeds in creating greater awareness and appreciation of Assam's fascinating tea industry among readers, that will be my true reward as an author.

Sincerely,

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CHAPTER 1

6 December 2019

Patkai Villa, London

In a quiet suburban corner of London, there stood an old and charming house. Many years ago, an elderly woman named Nancy had lived there.

Now, her grandson Kevin—an executive in a multinational company—lives in that same house along with his wife Anupama and their only daughter, also named Nancy.

A wooden plaque at the front of the house bears its name:

Patkai Villa.

There seems to be a bond spanning generations between the residents of this house and the Patkai Hills of Assam. Perhaps that connection is what led Anupama—a girl from Digboi—to become the daughter-in-law of this very home.

Snow blanketed the ground outside Patkai Villa. After several days of bad weather and heavy snowfall, the sky had finally cleared this morning, and the sun had made an appearance. A few birds hopped about in the warmth, basking under the rare winter sun. Young Nancy held a packet of bird feed in her hands and gently scattered it for them.

Today was Nancy's sixteenth birthday. She wasn't going to school. Her mother Anupama sat in a chair on the veranda, watching her.

Her little girl had grown up so fast.

Nancy had been named after her great-grandmother. A thought crept into Anupama's mind—if only the elder Nancy were alive today, how happy she would have been to see this day.

Kevin had left early in the morning for the gym. Usually, Anupama accompanied him, but not today. She didn't feel like going out at all. In fact, she had even taken the day off from work. Nancy had insisted long ago that both her parents must take leave on her sixteenth birthday. Kevin couldn't manage it—he had an important project to finish before Christmas. Anupama, too, had work, but she didn't want to disappoint her only daughter. She had called Andrew, her boss and told him firmly: he could deduct her salary if he must, but she wouldn't come to the office on her daughter's birthday.

Nancy had a habit of waking up early and feeding the birds. Anupama once had the same habit. It was on one such morning, while she was out for a walk in the lush greens of Oxford, that she had met Kevin. Had she skipped that walk, she might never have met the man who became her husband.

As Anupama sat watching Nancy from the veranda, her thoughts drifted back to her own childhood. Those days had been so beautiful. Her home back in Digboi, Assam, was nestled atop a hill. Birds constantly chirped and filled the air with music. Just like Nancy, she too had fed the birds in their backyard. And her mother had sat on the veranda watching her, just as she was doing now.

Anupama sighed deeply. There was a lot to do—decorate the house, prepare for the evening party—but the most important task was to bake a beautiful cake for Nancy. And yet, she couldn't bring herself to move from her chair.

Kevin returned from the gym. The moment he saw Nancy, he smiled and gently cupped her face, saying,

“My birthday girl!” and pulled her into a hug.

Nancy squirmed. “Don't disturb me! Can't you see I'm feeding the birds?”

Laughing, Kevin let her go and came up to sit beside Anupama. “Sweetheart, tell me today's plans. Has everyone been invited for the party? Did you call Prashant and Clara?” he asked, wrapping an arm around her shoulder.

Prashant and Clara were more than just friends—they were family. Prashant, an Assamese man from Duliajan, and Clara, a British woman, had built a life together

in London, hand in hand. Their bond with Kevin and Anupama was a special one—different from any other friendship.

“Now you’re worried?” Anupama replied, raising an eyebrow. “I called everyone yesterday. Of course I called Prashant and Clara. I even spoke to Clara. But something felt off. She didn’t sound as cheerful as she usually does. I tried calling Prashant too, but he didn’t pick up. Maybe something’s wrong?”

A furrow formed on Kevin’s brow. “Something is wrong. I called Prashant a few days ago for some work. He didn’t sound like himself—almost like he didn’t want to talk. Let’s ask them to stay back after the party. We’ll sit down and talk. If there’s a problem, we have to help.”

That was something Anupama loved about Kevin—whenever he saw a problem, he immediately began thinking of solutions. He was right. No one understood Prashant and Clara better than they did. If something was wrong, they had to help.

CHAPTER 2

By evening, guests had started arriving at Kevin and Anupama's home. Nancy was the star of the day, twirling around in a beautiful frock, taking photos with her friends, laughter lighting up her face. Kevin and Anupama were busy greeting guests, managing the party with warm smiles and gracious hospitality.

Though Anupama had asked them to come early, Prashant and Clara arrived quite late. By the time they walked in, nearly half the guests had already left. Their delay had made Anupama worry—she had begun to wonder if they would come at all.

After the party wound down, Kevin and Anupama sat with Prashant and Clara in the living room. Outside, snow had started falling again. Anupama lit a fire in the fireplace to warm the room. Nancy, delighted with her gifts, was busy unwrapping them one by one.

Kevin poured a glass of beer and handed it to Prashant.

"Cheers, man. What's going on with you? You seem a little off tonight."

Prashant smiled faintly and took a sip from the glass.

Clara, holding her own glass, looked at Prashant and then turned to Kevin.

"Kevin, maybe you can talk some sense into him. He says he wants to go back to India. Says there's nothing for him here—no good work, no future. He's just disappointed, and honestly, I don't know what to do anymore. It's not like good jobs grow on trees!"

Kevin chuckled, trying to lighten the mood.

"What kind of amazing job do you expect to get in India? Just hang in there. Everyone has rough patches. Today may be hard, but tomorrow might bring something better."

Prashant remained quiet, sipping his beer, his gaze fixed on the flickering flames.

“Did something happen between you two?” Anupama asked gently. “Don’t mind me asking, but fights happen in every marriage. I’ve told Kevin so many times—if you keep arguing with me like this, I’ll just take Nancy and move back to India. But where would I go, really?” She laughed softly, trying to ease the tension.

“Poma, I keep telling him,” Clara interjected. “Hard times come to everyone. Look at me—I made good money when I did that film *Dig Boy Dig*. But nothing substantial has come my way since. I’ve been doing some small indie projects, mostly self-funded. It doesn’t pay well. I’m still waiting for that one big opportunity. Just because work isn’t coming easily doesn’t mean we pack our bags and run.”

Prashant finally lifted his head and looked at Clara.

“I left a good job with an oil company in India because you encouraged me. You made me dream, told me I had magic in my hands. You said there were few editors like me, that my talent was rare. And for a while, it worked. I got a few great gigs initially. But now? It’s all changed. What I used to do with creativity is now being done by software. My kind of talent doesn’t hold value anymore. No one wants to hire me. How long can I keep doing odd jobs and survive here?”

Kevin gently placed a hand on Prashant’s shoulder.

“We understand, Prashant. We really do. We’re here for you. But you can’t make such decisions alone. You’re not single anymore. You have to think about Clara too.”

“He doesn’t care about me,” Clara shot back. “He thinks I’m just some useless girl. I brought him here hoping things would get better. And back then, yes—truly talented editors like him were in demand. But things have changed. You need to learn new skills, adapt with the times. You can’t just sit on your talent and expect the world to pay for it!”

“Hey, both of you... you’re overthinking,” Kevin said with a calming voice. “Every dark tunnel ends in light. Maybe the universe is preparing a bigger opportunity for you. When one door closes, another always opens. Maybe your door is just waiting to be unlocked.”

“I’m not leaving just like that,” Prashant finally confessed. “I applied for a job with a tea company. Got selected in the online interview. It’s a position as an assistant manager at a tea estate near Dibrugarh. Honestly, I think it’ll be better than burning out here in this pressure-cooker of a city.”

His eyes lit up for the first time that evening.

“So that’s it,” Kevin said, understanding dawning in his eyes. “You’re looking for peace and stability. But you’re not young anymore, Prashant. You came here because the routine life bored you. Now you want to go back to it? Will you really be happy?”

“What I need right now is peace and security. You both may not understand because you’re doing well financially. You don’t know what it’s like to live with uncertainty every day. We’ve had nights where we slept hungry. We can’t even think of starting a family because we don’t feel secure enough,” Prashant said. Clara silently wiped away a tear.

Clara added softly, “Our financial condition is bad. We have almost no savings. If we don’t find work soon, we may even lose this house.”

“Why didn’t you two tell us any of this?” Anupama asked, her voice thick with emotion. “We could have helped—my NGO might have stepped in too. It’s our fault too, for assuming you were doing fine.”

“We didn’t want to burden anyone,” Clara replied. “I still believe—if God has shown us such tough times, he must also have a good plan ahead. That’s why we’re still trying. I honestly think there are more opportunities in London. I was the one who convinced Prashant to move here, and now I can’t support his going back. If he takes the job in the tea estate, what will I even do there?”

Kevin smiled.

“You’ll make another brilliant film. Don’t forget, your film on Assam’s oil industry was a hit.”

Clara’s eyes sparkled. “That’s true. And I wouldn’t have been able to make that film without the support of you and Anupama.”

“Then this time,” Kevin said, “you make a film on Assam’s tea industry. Its history is just as fascinating as oil. Since Prashant is joining a tea estate, you’ll have lots of content. I’ll even help you with research.”

Clara’s face lit up as she raised her glass.

“Yes! Why didn’t I think of that? With your support, I *can* make another hit film. This time, it’ll be about the tea industry. After *Dig Boy Dig*, now it’s time for tea! I bet no one has made films on both Assam’s core industries—oil and tea. I will. After all, I *am* the daughter-in-law of Assam!”

Her laughter filled the room, warm and free.

The gloomy atmosphere lightened in an instant. Anupama joined in the laughter, saying,

“If you’re Assam’s daughter-in-law, you *should* love going back! And here’s something even more interesting—both the oil and tea industries in Assam were started by the British. So as a British woman making documentaries on both, it’s your duty to tell that story!”

Clara’s chest swelled with pride.

“Yes! I feel inspired now. I don’t think even most Britons know what we’ve done in Assam. I will tell that story!”

Prashant smiled, placing a hand on Clara’s shoulder.

“Then get ready to go to Assam.”

“But you two are coming with us,” Clara said, turning to Kevin and Anupama. “Kevin will do the research and give me the material. Poma will write the script. I’ll shoot it. And Prashant will edit it. Just like old times—our killer combination! That’s how we’ll get the best result.”

Anupama laughed. “Clara, you’re so clever. Kevin gives you the idea, and you rope us all in!”

Moments later, Clara held Anupama’s hands and said with a choked voice, “Tell me, who do I have besides you both? Who else would support me this much? Poma, you haven’t visited Assam in years. Your dad lives alone in Dibrugarh after

retirement. Nancy will be so happy to see her grandfather again. Let's all go. We'll have so much fun, like the old days."

Kevin nodded. "But before we go, we need a solid plan. Otherwise, we'll spend all our time there planning instead of executing."

"So you *are* coming with us!" Clara beamed, hugging Kevin. "Thank you so much!"

"You didn't even ask me!" Anupama teased. "But I'd love to go. I haven't seen Dad in so long."

Kevin turned to Prashant. "When do you have to join the new job?"

"Just over two months from now. I have to join by April 1st."

"Perfect," Anupama said. "We'll go before that—maybe come back right after Bohag Bihu."

Prashant's heart felt lighter. Coming to Kevin's house had resolved something heavy in his mind. Clara had agreed to join him. And now, the road ahead looked brighter than it had in months.

CHAPTER 3

6 December 2019

Patkai Villa, London

After Clara and Prashant left, Kevin and Anupama retired to their bedroom. Nancy had already gone to sleep in her room.

Kevin settled on the bed and picked up a book. Anupama slid in beside him and rested her head on his shoulder.

“You really said yes to going to India just like that?” she began, her tone gentle but firm. “No planning, nothing? What about Nancy’s school? What about my job, your leave? You didn’t think of any of that before agreeing to Clara’s idea. Let them go first, let them settle down a bit—and then, maybe later, we can visit India when it’s convenient. Wouldn’t that make more sense?”

Kevin put down his book and looked at her. “They’re both mentally exhausted. Prashant getting a job in Assam is a good thing—sure. But Clara doesn’t want to leave London. If Prashant goes alone, it might ruin their marriage. That’s why I encouraged Clara with the tea industry documentary idea. You know she won’t be able to make a good film without our support. So I thought—if we go with them, it might really help stabilize them.”

“But Nancy’s school will be affected. She doesn’t have any break in March or April,” Anupama said, clearly concerned.

Kevin reached out and gently pulled her closer. “It’s just about a month and a half. It’s fine. She can catch up—her final exams are only in July. We have plenty of time. Don’t stress about her studies. As for you, can you get a break from your NGO? If not, maybe you can find something to do in India while we’re there—some work and some travel.”

Anupama gave him a sideways look. “You can never say no to Clara, can you? You’ve always had a soft corner for her. You lived together for years before I came into your life. I’ve seen how you agree to everything she says.”

Kevin smiled.

“Oh, come on. I’m not the kind of man who keeps emotional attachments outside his family. But Clara and Prashant—they’re *family* to me. Don’t you remember? If Clara hadn’t intervened, we might never have gotten married. You never told me how you felt—I wouldn’t have known if it weren’t for her. We owe her something.”

Anupama looked up into his eyes.

“So you mean she sacrificed her love for my sake? Is that it? You and Clara had such a perfect live-in relationship. Then I came along and ruined everything, right? Tell me honestly, Kevin—did you love her more than you love me?”

Kevin ran his hand gently over her hair.

“Why are you digging up the past? Clara is just that—*the past*. You and Nancy—you’re my *now*. My family. It doesn’t matter how much I loved her back then. She’s married to Prashant now, and we have to do everything we can to help them hold their life together.”

“Promise me you’ll always love me, Kevin,” she said, nestling closer. “If ever you have to move somewhere for work, you’ll take me with you. Clara is doing the right thing, going with Prashant to Assam. I don’t understand why she was even considering staying back here in London.”

“Clara’s emotionally complex,” Kevin replied. “Her moods shift like the London weather. That’s why I gave her something emotionally compelling to latch onto—a dream. Now that she’s thinking about making a film even better than *Dig Boy Dig*, she has a purpose again. That dream will take her to Assam. And who knows? After a few days in the calm of a tea estate bungalow, she might even like staying there.”

Anupama chuckled.

“Then you better start researching the tea industry of Assam. She’s already assigned that job to you! You dug out the history of oil for her earlier, now it’s time to do the same for tea.”

“I actually enjoy doing that kind of work,” Kevin grinned. “It adds to my knowledge. But you grew up near tea estates, didn’t you? What do you know about the history of tea in Assam?”

“I’m not a bookworm like you!” Anupama laughed. “But I do know this—wild tea plants grew naturally in Assam. People knew how to use the leaves too. A Singpho king once offered a British man a cup of tea made using their traditional method. That’s when he realized Assam had native tea bushes.”

“Impressive! You know quite a bit, Anupama,” Kevin said with admiration. “Do you happen to know what the name of that tea was?”

“Tea has a name?” she asked, surprised.

“Phalap,” Kevin replied with a smile.

“Phalap? Is that a Singpho word?” Anupama asked, intrigued.

“Yes,” Kevin nodded. “The Singpho, Khamti, and Tai Phake communities in Assam had identified and used tea leaves for generations. They mixed them with sesame oil or garlic to prepare dishes called *miyang* and *letpet*. In 1815, a British officer named Colonel Latter wrote about their use of tea in food. He was the first European to encounter wild tea in Assam, although he couldn’t recognize its value. The Singphos dried the leaves in bamboo tubes using steam and hot air, then brewed a beverage they called *Phalap*.”

“Wow, you know all this without even researching!” Anupama stared at him wide-eyed. “How do you retain so much?”

“I read the biography of Charles Alexander Bruce—often called the father of Assam tea. It opened up a whole world of knowledge about the tea industry.”

“I’ve never heard of him,” Anupama admitted.

“That’s the tragedy,” Kevin said. “Just like the people of Assam have forgotten Mr. Goodenough—the man who drilled the first successful oil well—they’ve also

forgotten Charles Alexander Bruce, the man who put Assam tea on the world map. He learned Assamese, became almost like a local, and never returned to England. He died in Assam. His grave is still in Tezpur.”

Hearing that, a wave of emotion swept through Anupama. It had been years since she’d thought of Mr. Goodenough—the thrill of reading about his daring oil explorations had kept her awake many nights as a student. Now, here was another forgotten figure of history—Charles Alexander Bruce. The name intrigued her deeply.

“Tell me more about him, Kevin,” she said, eyes now wide with curiosity. “I really want to know.”

“Remember you said a Singpho king gave tea to a British man? That man was Robert Bruce. He had come to study the trade potential in Assam. When he drank that tea, he realized it was the same as the one the British imported from China. He informed the British government, and that’s how the world came to know of Assam tea. His younger brother, Charles Alexander Bruce, later took the initiative to establish the tea industry there.”

“That’s amazing,” Anupama said, stunned. “Both brothers played a role. It feels like destiny sent them to Assam just to discover tea!”

Kevin smiled. “Time to sleep now. It’s already late, and I’ve had too much beer. Let’s talk more this weekend when we visit Clara and Prashant. We’ll plan everything properly then.”

He turned off the light and pulled Anupama gently into his arms as they drifted toward sleep.

CHAPTER 4

11 December 2019

Wembley, London

It was a Saturday afternoon when Kevin's family visited Prashant and Clara at their rented flat in Wembley. The area, known for its significant Indian—especially Gujarati—population, was a convenient neighborhood, if not overly glamorous. Most essentials, especially those preferred by Indians—pickles, papads, spices—were available in the nearby stores.

Anupama had already spoken with Clara the night before and offered to bring along homemade chicken biryani. Clara had initially suggested they go out for lunch, but Anupama firmly declined—she wasn't a fan of venturing into the cold December winds of London. Moreover, Nancy hadn't been feeling her best.

As soon as they arrived, Clara took Nancy to the guest bedroom, handed her some chocolates, and set up a video game for her. Clara adored Nancy. Sometimes she found herself daydreaming—what if she and Prashant had a daughter like Nancy?

Clara had arranged a simple but warm spread—finger chips, chicken wings, and red wine. The four adults sat in a circle in the living room, pulling their chairs close. Clara filled glasses with wine and placed the snacks neatly on the center table.

"Do you remember, Poma," Clara laughed, raising her glass toward Anupama, "how hard you resisted wine the first time? That tiny room in your Oxford hostel—the three of us had our first party there. You took one sip and made a face like you'd swallowed poison! And look at you now, such a connoisseur!"

"Well," Anupama smiled, "I've lived here long enough to absorb some of the culture. A little wine during London's bitter winter doesn't hurt. And yes, I remember those days. We had so much fun. I still see Grandma Nancy in my dreams sometimes—watching over us, watching over little Nancy."

For a moment, she closed her eyes. A quiet hush passed between them.

“I think we should definitely visit her grave when we go to Assam this time,” Clara said, her voice soft. “It breaks my heart thinking we returned, but she never could. She’s still there.”

“But you brought Prashant with you,” Kevin offered, smiling. “And that’s a good thing.”

“I feel like I made a late entry into your lives,” Prashant said, his voice distant. “You guys seemed to have it all figured out before I arrived. Maybe I was the disturbance. I’ve heard things... from Clara.”

“Why do you say that?” Anupama leaned forward. “Everything is still on track. We’re just... a bit older now. But we’ll bounce back, all four of us. We’re not too old for new beginnings.”

“The project we’re planning in Assam will be more challenging than *Dig Boy Dig*,” Kevin said, taking a sip of his wine. “Which means we’ll need to work with the enthusiasm of our younger days.”

Clara brightened. “That’s good! When you take up a task, I know you’ll do it with perfection. With a friend like you, I’ve got nothing to worry about.”

“So tell us, Kevin,” Anupama said, “what makes this project more challenging than the last?”

“Well,” Kevin leaned back, “last time, we focused mainly on historical narratives. This time, Clara’s film will need to cover the entire environment of Assam’s tea estates—the social and economic conditions of the workers, the beauty and hardships of the plantations. History will only be one layer of it. In today’s world, audiences expect more than just a documentary on the past.”

“Oh great,” Clara groaned. “Now you’ve scared me. I have no idea how I’ll cover all that in such a short time. I’ve seen tea gardens only from a distance—through the car window!”

“You’re stressing too much,” Prashant reassured her. “Kevin will handle the entire research. You just follow his lead—like last time. Remember how much he helped with *Dig Boy Dig*?”

“That was different, Prashant,” Clara said. “Back then, I was also researching the history of Assam’s oil exploration. And Anupama being from Digboi helped a lot. This time, the topic is new to all of us. We’ll need to work harder to gather material.”

“Poma, I’m sure Kevin will collect all the necessary data,” Clara continued. “But the real work is yours. I’ll need you to write the script. Only then can I plan the shooting. After that, Prashant and I will handle the post-production. But I’ll need both of you deeply involved in the beginning.”

“That’s why we’re here,” Kevin said, setting his glass down and pulling out a notebook. “I’ve done some preliminary research this week. Let’s get into it.”

“Great. But before we begin, let me refill the glasses!” Clara said cheerfully. She topped up everyone’s wine and replenished the snack plates. She also peeked in to check on Nancy.

Clara returned and sat beside Kevin, eager. “Okay, so tell us—how did humans first discover tea? Where did it grow originally?”

Kevin looked around with a teasing smile. “Alright, quiz time. We call it ‘tea’ in English, and ‘chai’ or ‘cha’ in India. Both words actually come from the same country. Can anyone guess which language they originated from?”

“China?” Prashant offered hesitantly. “I believe tea was first cultivated there.”

“Spot on,” Kevin nodded. “In the Cantonese dialect, it’s called *chah*, and in Amoy—a coastal region of China—it’s *tay*, which evolved into ‘tea’ in European languages. The oldest known treatise on tea is *Cha Ching*, written by the renowned Chinese tea scholar Lu Yu.”

“What was written in that book?” Prashant asked curiously.

“Detailed instructions on tea cultivation,” Kevin explained. “And also about its medicinal properties—it soothes the mind, sharpens discipline, helps relieve

headaches, eye strain, body aches... even outlined when and how to pluck the leaves. The Chinese had mastered it.”

“How did they know so much about tea?” Anupama wondered aloud.

“There’s a legend,” Kevin smiled, “that tea drinking in China began as far back as 2737 BCE. Emperor Shen Nong always boiled his drinking water. One day, while resting during a hunt, some leaves accidentally fell into his boiling pot. He drank the infusion and felt a sudden boost of energy and clarity. Intrigued, he ordered his men to find the source of those leaves—and discovered the tea plant.”

Anupama’s eyes sparkled. “Clara, you should open your film with that scene. I can already visualize it!”

“There are more legends,” Kevin added. “During the Ts’in dynasty, an old woman used to walk the streets each morning with a cup of tea. She offered it to strangers, and the tea never seemed to run out. People felt energized after drinking it. But one day, some wicked men stole her cup and jailed her. The story goes that she escaped through the prison window and vanished with the cup. China is full of such myths.”

“Do other countries have similar tea tales?” Prashant asked.

“Japan does,” Kevin said. “There’s a story about a monk who, feeling ashamed of falling asleep during meditation, cut off his own eyelids. Where they fell, two tea plants sprouted. From that day on, Japanese monks drank tea as a sacred ritual to remain alert.”

“Incredible,” Anupama whispered. “But tea must have spread to other countries eventually, right?”

“Yes. Initially, only China knew how to cultivate tea. As it spread, other nations couldn’t grow it, so China exported it—and earned handsomely. Tea became one of China’s major exports.”

“But what about Europe?” Clara leaned forward eagerly. “When did tea reach there?”

Kevin smiled. “Much later. The Dutch East India Company brought tea from China to Europe around 1610, through India. They promoted it as a magical drink that could cure everything—depression, digestive issues, even arthritis. Their marketing worked—tea’s popularity exploded.”

“And England?” Clara asked, her eyes gleaming with anticipation.

“England began drinking tea around 1664,” Kevin replied. “The Dutch East India Company gifted a box of tea leaves to the British King. Within a few years, tea became immensely popular in England—more than in any other European country.”

“That’s so true,” Clara said. “We Brits *love* our tea. My mum was thrilled when I told her I’m making a film on tea. Turns out, a distant relative of ours helped set up the first tea gardens in Assam. He loved it there so much, he never returned to England!”

Kevin’s eyes widened. “Wait... Are you talking about Charles Alexander Bruce?”

“Oh my God!” Clara exclaimed. “Yes! That’s the name! Mum told me about him. You *know* him? Tell me everything—quickly!”

Kevin grinned.

“Then Clara, he should be the hero of your film. Without him, the tea industry in Assam might’ve been delayed by decades. His life alone can cover the history of Assam’s tea, the socio-economic conditions of workers, the struggles faced while establishing plantations—everything.”

Clara turned to Prashant with a twinkle in her eye. “See? Our family helped bring tea to Assam. We’re part of the history!”

Prashant chuckled. “Your country drinks it, but can’t grow it. Ours grows it—no choice!”

“Exactly,” Kevin said. “Tea entered England late, but the obsession was so intense, the British even tried growing it locally. But the climate wasn’t right. That’s when they looked to their colonies. And so—tea plantations began in Assam.”

“But why Assam, specifically?” Anupama asked.

“When the British first took control of Assam, they knew little about it,” Kevin said. “Administering it from Calcutta wasn’t easy. But once they discovered its mineral and forest wealth—and especially wild tea plants—they saw potential. Interestingly, it wasn’t the British government that made the first move, but a citizen.”

“Really? Who?” Clara asked, intrigued.

“A man named John Walker,” Kevin explained. “In 1828, he petitioned Lord William Bentinck, urging the British to start tea cultivation in India. He argued that China’s tea supply was becoming unreliable, and tea had become a daily need in Britain.”

“Why was China becoming unreliable?” Prashant asked.

“Because the British were paying for Chinese tea with opium,” Kevin said.

“Opium? The same substance used to make heroin?” Anupama gasped.

“Yes. The British grew opium in India and exported it to China. It was a strategic move—to addict the population and weaken China. They believed opium was the perfect weapon.”

“Now I see why the British Empire was so powerful,” Prashant said. “They infiltrated nations with trade—and poison.”

“But the Chinese government caught on,” Kevin continued. “They refused to trade tea for opium anymore and demanded gold and silver instead.”

“And I bet the British didn’t like that,” Clara said.

“Not at all,” Kevin nodded. “They didn’t want to spend precious metals on tea. So when China refused, Britain began searching for places to grow tea themselves—and that’s how Assam came into the picture.”

Anupama stood up, glancing at the clock. “That was a long session! But fascinating. Now let’s eat—Nancy must be starving.”

CHAPTER 5

11 December 2019

Wembley, London

Clara stepped into the kitchen to reheat the food Anupama had lovingly brought. Anupama followed to help, and the two friends busied themselves arranging the dishes and tidying up.

While stirring the biryani, Anupama glanced at Clara and asked softly, “It feels nice to be going back to Assam after so many years, doesn’t it? I was just remembering our first trip together.”

Clara smiled faintly.

“I do love traveling. But to tell you the truth... I’m worried. I fear that once Prashant goes back to Assam, he may never return to London.”

Anupama turned to look her in the eyes.

“Why wouldn’t you stay with him? If he’s moving for work, shouldn’t you be there with him?”

Clara hesitated before replying, her voice laced with frustration. “According to Prashant, there’s barely any work in the film industry in Assam. I can maybe make one good documentary on tea. But then what? I can’t spend the rest of my life doing nothing, sitting in some house in the middle of a tea estate. I’d go insane.”

Her words reflected genuine fear—the fear of being trapped, of losing her identity.

“But Clara,” Anupama said, trying to reason, “you both have been struggling financially here. Even Prashant has admitted how difficult it’s been to find work. I think for now, settling in Assam makes sense—at least financially. As far as I know, jobs in the tea industry come with good salaries and decent facilities.”

"I know that," Clara sighed. "But what if I end up doing absolutely nothing in such a quiet, remote place? My mom isn't too thrilled about it either. She even joked, 'Let him go. We'll get you married to someone else!'" Clara laughed sarcastically.

"Come on, Clara," Anupama smiled. "Just because your mom says that, doesn't mean you should take it seriously. You and Prashant need to decide this together. And personally, I think staying together is always better. Besides, if you really want to work, there's a lot to do in Assam."

"Like what?" Clara asked, curious.

"Well," Anupama said, "the workers in the tea gardens live in very poor conditions. They struggle to get proper food, have little access to education, and no job security. Through the NGO I work with, we've been planning a few welfare projects there. You could get involved too."

Clara's eyes lit up.

"I hadn't even considered that I could do something other than film. Social work for the workers in the tea gardens... that actually sounds interesting."

Anupama nodded.

"You see? Talking it out always helps. Most of our fears exist only in our minds. We hesitate to start something new, or to move somewhere unfamiliar. But when you really look at it from all sides, you realize there's nothing to be afraid of. I truly believe you'll find peace and purpose in Assam."

Clara smiled, but her expression changed again, her face turning solemn. "But I'll miss London. I'll miss you and Kevin. I'll miss this home, my friends, my city. What if I never come back? What if I never see you again?"

"Oh, you silly woman," Anupama chuckled. "Look at me! Didn't I leave my home, my friends, my family to live here in faraway London? And these days, what does distance even mean? Just a click, and you can be on a video call. I talk to my dad in Dibrugarh every other day."

"I get that, Poma," Clara said. "But I'm still scared. What if I go there and end up feeling completely alone? Here, if I'm upset, I go out, wander around the malls,

drop by a friend's place unannounced. But there... what will I do? What if Prashant ignores me? What if his family doesn't accept me? What if I get humiliated? What would I do, all alone, in a place that doesn't feel like mine?"

Her voice cracked slightly. The weight of her uncertainty was now fully out in the open.

Anupama fell silent.

She felt the weight of Clara's fears. A woman leaves behind her entire world—her family, friends, her country—to hold one person's hand, trusting him to build a new life together. But what if that very person lets go of her hand? What if the safety she imagined disappears? Could she ever recover what she left behind?

Anupama didn't have an answer. She wasn't sure anyone truly did. Maybe every woman faces this question at some point in her life—the quiet, unspoken fear of what happens if the bond of trust breaks.

Gently, Anupama placed her hand on Clara's arm.

"We'll talk more about this later, okay? For now, let's eat lunch. Let's enjoy this meal together."

She moved to the dining table and began arranging the plates.

Clara followed, her heart still heavy, but her steps lighter—buoyed by the presence of a friend who understood, even without saying much.

CHAPTER 6

Wembley, London

11 December 2019

Everyone was full and satisfied after enjoying Anupama's delicious homemade chicken biryani. Nancy had already gone to bed, slipping into a peaceful sleep. The adults settled back into the living room, wine glasses still on the side table, the warm glow of the lamps making the winter evening feel cozy.

Clara looked over at Kevin and smirked.

"So... do you still have that post-meal cigarette habit?"

Kevin laughed sheepishly. "I do. But not like before—cut down a lot."

"I've cut back too," Clara said. "Prashant can't even stand the smell now. But I'm really craving one today after that lunch. Kevin, shall we step out for a quick smoke?"

Kevin glanced at Anupama for her reaction.

"Go," she said, feigning a sulk. "Don't look at me like that. I've told you to stop smoking, and you think I'm the villain. Today, you've met your old flame, so go ahead—sneak in one indulgence."

"Just one, I swear. Only because Clara asked," Kevin chuckled as he followed Clara out to the glass-covered balcony. Before stepping out, he shut the door behind them to keep the cold out.

Anupama moved closer to where Prashant was sitting.

"You've been quiet lately," she said softly. "Something's bothering you—I can tell. Want to talk?"

Prashant forced a smile. "What? No, no... I've been laughing and chatting the whole time."

“You can pretend with words, but not with eyes, Prashant. I can sense your mind is heavy. That day too, during our talk, I realized you’ve been under a lot of stress. Financial troubles... is that all, or is there more?”

Prashant exhaled deeply.

“You already know everything, Anupama. I left a good-paying, stable job in an oil company for a dream. Clara gave me courage, and without overthinking, I stepped into an uncertain future. Now I feel like I should’ve listened to my parents. My father had warned me that surviving on filmmaking and editing alone would be hard. Turns out, he was right. This industry—especially here in London—is merciless. Opportunities are drying up.”

Anupama nodded, listening patiently.

“But has Clara understood how you feel?” she asked. “Back when she convinced you to come here, she promised to help you build a career. And she did, didn’t she? Introduced you to people, got you work. Now it’s your turn, Prashant. If you’re going to Assam, give her the assurance that she’ll never feel alone there.”

Prashant looked at her with helpless eyes.

“Clara is... wild-spirited. She doesn’t do well in constraints. I’m not even sure how long I can keep her tied to me.”

“Why do you say that?” Anupama said gently. “You two have been together for years. I’ve spoken to Clara. She has her fears, yes—but she’s not going anywhere. She’s afraid *you* might be the one to let go.”

Prashant gave a hollow laugh. “There are things you don’t know, Anupama. Things I’ve never told anyone. But they weigh on me. Do you know how it feels when people whisper behind your back—saying I’ve only survived in this industry because of my wife? That I have no worth of my own?”

Anupama’s brows furrowed.

“What are you saying, Prashant? Who says that? Tell me clearly.”

Prashant looked away.

“They don’t say it directly. But in this field... you know the saying: ‘All’s fair in love and war.’ I don’t blame Clara. She’s done everything out of love for me. But people say horrible things. That she’s offered herself to directors, producers... just to get me work.”

He closed his eyes.

Anupama’s voice rose with indignation.

“Prashant! Do you even realize what you’re implying? You’re doubting her character. Do you have any proof?”

“I’m not calling her names,” Prashant said quickly. “It’s just... everyone knows Clara will go to any extent to get something done. And to her, getting work—keeping this family afloat—is more important than how she gets it. I’m not saying she’s a bad woman. But she plays the game differently. To her, being someone’s bedfellow is a price she’s willing to pay.”

Anupama stared at him in disbelief.

“Have you ever asked her about these rumors?”

“No,” he admitted. “Because deep down, I know she’s doing it all for us. Maybe she had to. I’m not talented enough to survive in this cut-throat industry. The few jobs I got—were all because of her. She’s done two short films, earned some money. But she doesn’t think long-term. She blows whatever she earns. Me... I can’t live like that. And because I hold back, maybe she feels she can’t live her life freely either. Sometimes I feel... maybe if I left, she’d be happier without me.”

Anupama was silent for a while. Then she spoke with calm resolve.

“Whatever happened in the past, it’s done. There’s no point overthinking it now. What matters is what you do next. Clara is excited about this tea documentary. Kevin has already started researching. She *wants* to go to Assam—but she’s not emotionally ready to stay there permanently. You need to be her anchor. Assure her she won’t be alone. She’s done a lot for you. Maybe now it’s your turn to support her dreams. If she makes a good film, her confidence will return.”

Prashant nodded. A smile crept across his face.

“You remember, Anupama? My parents actually wanted *you* as their daughter-in-law. I think your dad liked that idea too.”

Anupama laughed. “Prashant, why are you bringing up old stories now? I never thought I’d end up marrying Kevin either. But sometimes, life writes stories we never imagined. I believe it all happened for a reason. You and Clara loved each other. Kevin and I had a connection too. If we had married differently, none of us might’ve been happy.”

Prashant looked down.

“But I feel sad that my parents never accepted Clara. And Clara... she never embraced them either. She needs me—but not my home, not my family. And as their only son, I *do* have responsibilities. My father is overjoyed that I’ve accepted the tea garden job. He can’t wait for me to come home.”

“Well, of course he’s happy,” Anupama said with a smile. “A son returning home is always a blessing. If you settle in Assam, things will work out. Slowly, your parents will accept Clara. She too will adapt. Maybe this is God’s way of giving you all a second chance—to rebuild, to reconnect.”

“There’s one more thing...” Prashant said, his voice softening. “My parents are sad that we don’t have a child. Clara wants one too. But I never felt financially secure enough to plan for it. Maybe... if we settle now, maybe we *can* think about becoming parents.”

There was a flicker of hope in his voice—a fragile, beautiful possibility blooming in the winter of their uncertainty.

CHAPTER 7

Wembley, London

11 December 2019 (Evening)

Clara stepped out to the balcony, pulled a cigarette from the packet, and handed one to Kevin. Lighting hers first, she passed the lighter to him with a mischievous smile.

“I know you don’t miss *me*,” she teased, “but do you miss cigarettes? Remember those nights when we’d smoke endlessly, one after another? God, those days...”

Kevin let out a quiet laugh. “You were wild, Clara. Being with you made my life reckless. I barely think of cigarettes anymore. Just occasionally, in good company... like now.”

Clara inhaled deeply, letting the smoke swirl into the cold evening air. “Reckless, yes—but thrilling. There was something intoxicating about that life. We did as we pleased. You expected nothing from me, I expected nothing from you. We laughed, we fought, we made love when we felt like it, and went days without speaking when we didn’t. It was messy... but beautiful.”

Kevin stared into the distance, his breath fogging in the air. After a moment, he turned to her and asked, “Are you not happy with Prashant, Clara?”

“I don’t know,” Clara said quietly. “Once, I believed he was the only man who truly understood me. That’s why I fell for him. And I still love him. But he’s changed, Kevin. Or maybe I have. I feel like he’s not happy with me anymore. And I... I’ve tried everything to build a good life with him.”

Kevin nodded slowly. “You know why most of us are unhappy? Because we never learn to be content with what we have. You left me for Prashant because he understood you better, cared more. You saw something in him that you didn’t

find in me. Now that you have him, try to value what you've got. If you keep reaching for more... you might lose even what you already have."

Clara turned to him, her eyes soft. "I never wanted to end things with you, Kevin. But when I realized the emotional pull between you and Anupama... and when Nancy's grandmother hoped you two would be together... I felt like an intruder. Around that time, I met Prashant. He was drawn to me. We got physically close. And I thought... maybe he loved me more. Maybe he understood me better. If you had held onto me... if you had fought for me, maybe I wouldn't have walked away. But you didn't. So I told myself I was doing the right thing—letting go, and trying to build something new."

Kevin exhaled, the cold air mixing with the smoke from his lips. "Maybe it was Nancy's grandmother's blessing. She wanted me and Anupama to be together. We understood it... even if we didn't admit it. I guess you were the only one who said it out loud. If you hadn't, maybe her last wish would've gone unfulfilled. But there's no point going back, Clara. What's done is done. Let's talk about the film—the tea garden documentary."

"You're right, Kevin. For the first time in years, I feel like I have purpose again. A chance to prove myself. With your and Anupama's help, I know we can make it happen. But personally... I don't know if I'll come out of this stronger or more broken. I'm scared."

Kevin looked at her. "Scared of what? We're all going to Assam together. What is there to be afraid of?"

A gust of cold wind swept past them, wrapping the moment in stillness. Clara pulled up the hood of her jacket.

"Can I tell you a secret, Kevin?" she whispered. "But you have to promise... not a word to anyone."

"You can trust me," he said gently. "You always could."

"If I go to Assam and disappear from this life, Michael won't let me go," Clara said, her voice trembling. "No matter where I hide, he'll come looking."

Kevin's face stiffened.

“Michael? Do I know him?”

“I don’t know if you’ve met. But anyone in the film circuit knows him. He’s a powerful businessman and a major film producer. I’ve known him for years. Thanks to his influence, I got Prashant several projects.”

Kevin frowned. “Then why would he chase you? What does he want?”

Clara’s voice dropped.

“Not revenge. Love. He’s obsessed. He’s told me to leave Prashant and live with him. Says he’ll divorce his wife for me. And even if he can’t, he’ll keep me as his mistress. If I say yes, he’ll make me his business partner, give me everything.”

Kevin’s voice grew quiet.

“Do you love him, Clara?”

“No,” she said quickly. “I only approached him for Prashant’s sake. But nothing in this world comes for free, Kevin. He expected something in return. I tried pretending to be in love with him—just to keep the offers flowing. Eventually, I ended up sleeping with him. I told myself, once Prashant’s career was set, I’d cut off all ties. But Michael started blackmailing me. If I didn’t continue... he said he’d tell Prashant everything. And worse—he said he’d have Prashant killed.”

Her voice cracked into a sob.

Kevin put a firm hand on her shoulder. “Clara, you need to get out of this. He can’t control your life like this. Tell Prashant. Be honest with him.”

“I can’t,” she said, barely above a whisper. “If Prashant finds out, he’ll leave me. And if that happens... I’ll have nowhere to go. I’d rather die than live as Michael’s kept woman.”

“You’re not alone, Clara,” Kevin said, steady and resolute. “Anupama and I—we’re with you. We’ll help you. We won’t let you fall. Whatever happens, we’ll face it together.”

Tears welled in Clara’s eyes. She placed her hand on Kevin’s. “You’re the only one I could tell this to, Kevin. Not even Anupama. Thank you...”

really. Just saying it out loud gave me some peace. I think tonight I might finally sleep.”

At that moment, the balcony door opened. Anupama stepped out, wrapping herself in a shawl.

“If you two are done chain-smoking out here, come inside. You’ll catch a cold in this weather. I’m making tea. Assam tea, of course! How can we make a film on Assam’s tea without drinking it first?”

Clara wiped her eyes and grinned. “I’d love a cup. I want to feel the magic that once intoxicated all of England.”

Kevin laughed. “Only the English would get that. You grew up drinking Assam tea, Anupama. For us, it’s exotic.”

Anupama raised an eyebrow playfully. “For us, it’s childhood.”

“Let me help you make it,” Clara said softly, and the two women walked into the kitchen together—leaving the night cold behind them and carrying the warmth of something healing.

CHAPTER 8

Wembley, London

Anupama and Clara went into the kitchen to prepare tea and snacks.

“You alright, Clara? You seem a bit preoccupied,” Anupama asked, noticing Clara’s unusual silence.

Clara suddenly grasped Anupama’s right hand and said, her voice low but intense, “Whatever you may hear about me, however bad things might sound, will you still stand by me, Anupama?”

“What’s this, Clara? What kind of question is that? Of course we’re always with you,” Anupama replied, surprised.

“I feel relieved just knowing that you both are here. It’s only because of you and Kevin that I’ve dared to dream of making a film on Assam’s tea industry. I’m ready to put in all my remaining savings into this film, without expecting any backing. It’s not easy to get a financier for such a project,” Clara said with quiet determination.

“But you’ve been in the film industry for years. Can’t you manage to find a financier for this one?” Anupama asked, as she dropped tea bags into four cups and poured hot water.

“If I really tried, maybe I could. But this time, I want to do it without anyone’s favour—just like our first project *Dig Boy Dig*. I funded that one entirely from my own pocket, and I’ll do the same again. Let’s see what happens,” Clara replied, placing the tea tray carefully.

She brought the tray to the coffee table in the living room. Anupama followed with a plate of biscuits and snacks. Nancy, having finished her rest, came out of her room and joined them.

Everyone took a cup of tea in their hands.

“What have you all been discussing all day without me? Tell me too!” Nancy asked as she sat beside her father.

“We’re talking about Assam Tea today, dear Nancy,” Kevin said, smiling.

“Assam Tea? I remember seeing tea gardens when we visited Assam last time,” Nancy said, sipping her tea.

“Yes, and the very tea we’re drinking today—Assam Tea—is now available in nearly every country of the world. Assam’s tea leaves have a unique aroma and vitality that make them stand out. Who knew that the wild tea bushes Major Robert Bruce saw in 1824 along the Dihing River would one day become world-famous,” Kevin said, taking a long sip.

Clara took out a small notebook, ready to jot down key points. “Tell us the whole story, Kevin. Is it something like Captain Wilcox’s discovery of oil along the Dihing too?”

“Actually, yes. The two discoveries happened in similar circumstances and during a similar time frame. Around 1824, the Burmese had invaded the Ahom kingdom in Assam. Before that, the Ahom king had fled to Calcutta seeking British protection. At first, the British were hesitant. They knew little about the region’s geography or resources, so they began sending expeditions to understand the land. One such expedition was by Captain Wilcox who found traces of oil; Robert Bruce, following the same route, discovered tea,” Kevin explained.

“Who was Robert Bruce, Daddy?” Nancy asked.

“He was a Scotsman. Though formerly a naval officer, he was actually exploring Assam for opium farming and trade opportunities. In 1823, he navigated up the Brahmaputra and entered the Singpho territory via the Dihing River,” Kevin said.

“Singpho territory? Wasn’t that part of Assam?” Nancy asked curiously.

“Back then, the Assam we know today didn’t exist in the same form. It was a patchwork of kingdoms—Ahom, Kachari, and Singpho. The Singphos were a fierce and warlike tribe. When they first encountered Bruce, they captured him and presented him before their chief, known as the *Bichagam*,” Kevin replied.

“Was *Bichagam* his name?” Nancy asked.

“No, ‘Bichagam’ is actually a title used by the Singphos for their king. Fortunately, this Bichagam turned out to be a kind and hospitable man. Though Bruce was a foreigner, the chief treated him as an honoured guest. As a token of welcome, he offered Bruce a sacred drink they called *Phalap*. Drinking it made Bruce feel rejuvenated, all his fatigue vanished, and he felt an electrifying energy flow through him,” Kevin narrated.

“What was Phalap? Sounds intriguing,” Clara asked, leaning forward.

“That very drink turned out to be tea. Bruce was trained in botany, and the moment he sipped it, he sensed it was tea—just not the Chinese variety he was used to. He then learned from the king that the drink was made from a leaf grown on local bushes,” Kevin said.

“What did Bruce do next, after realizing it was tea?” Nancy asked again.

“He requested to see the plants. Initially, the chief refused—these tea plants were sacred to the Singphos. But Bruce was clever. He presented the Bichagam with a musical instrument as a gift. The chief was delighted and finally agreed to show Bruce the wild tea plants in the forest,” Kevin continued.

“But how did Bruce know the king wasn’t fooling him with some other plant?” Prashant interjected.

“Fair question. Bruce didn’t actually recognize the plant with full certainty at the time. Wild tea trees can grow up to 30-40 feet high, and he had never seen anything like that. Still, he was sure it was tea. At the time, only the Chinese had mastered the cultivation of tea and guarded its secrets fiercely. Bruce made a deal with the Singpho chief—he would provide the Singphos with modern weapons in exchange for tea seeds and saplings, which he planned to send to the Calcutta Botanical Garden for verification,” Kevin said.

“Daddy, one question—Bruce was Scottish. How did he communicate with the Singpho king?” Nancy asked innocently, making everyone laugh.

Prashant joined in, “They probably spoke in signs at first. But from what I’ve read, Bruce had first stopped in Rangpur, the capital of the Ahom kingdom, and met

Maniram Dewan. It was Maniram who told Bruce about the *Phalap* drink made by the Singphos. Bruce might've learned some basic Singpho words from him before setting out."

"Who was Maniram Dewan?" Kevin asked.

With a proud smile, Prashant said, "His real name was Maniram Dutta Baruah. He was a nobleman under the Ahom King Purandar Singha and later worked for the Assam Tea Company as a Dewan—hence the name Maniram Dewan. During the Burmese invasions, his family fled to Bengal. A brilliant man, Maniram guided the British forces in their campaigns and also helped them navigate Assam. That's how he came in contact with Bruce and told him about the mysterious drink Phalap."

"But I remember watching a film on Maniram Dewan when I was a kid. Didn't the British hang him?" Anupama asked.

"Yes. Though he initially supported the British, he resigned and started his own tea gardens in Sibsagar and Jorhat. The British planters didn't like the idea of an Assamese growing tea and began to sabotage his efforts. Later, during the Sepoy Mutiny, he wrote to the puppet Ahom king in Assam urging a rebellion. That letter fell into British hands and he was charged with sedition. He was hanged in 1858," Prashant explained.

"So tragic. A man who helped the British so much—hanged for a single letter," Anupama remarked.

"Actually, the hanging was political. The British tea planters wanted him out of the way, and this was the perfect excuse," Prashant said.

Clara was moved by Prashant's knowledge. "You know so much, Prashant! Are those tea gardens of Maniram Dewan still around? We could maybe include them in the film?"

"Definitely. Many people still visit those gardens," Prashant replied.

Clara's mind was now racing with possibilities. "Is the Singpho royal residence still there? Can we shoot there too?"

“Yes, it is. Near Margherita, along the Tirap River, there’s a village called Bichagaon. The royal residence of the Singpho king still stands. The current king, also called Bichagam, lives there with his family. We can definitely shoot there,” Prashant assured her.

Clara was lost in imagination. “That will be such a beautiful sequence! Bruce being captured and brought before the king, offered the sacred Phalap... feeling its magic... asking for the secret... and the king finally revealing it after receiving a gift. We’ll have to shoot it just right.”

“You should write that sequence yourself—it doesn’t need many dialogues,” Anupama teased.

“No way! Don’t you dare hand that over to me. Writing is your department. No one writes like you,” Clara said, smiling at Anupama.

Nancy was still curious. “What happened then, Daddy? Did Bruce get the seeds?”

“He couldn’t return to the Singphos. He died in 1824 before he could make good on his promise. But before his death, he told his brother Charles Bruce about the deal. Charles, then serving in Sadiya, sent word to the Singpho chief about Robert’s death. Moved by the loss, the chief kept his promise and sent the tea seeds and saplings to Charles,” Kevin narrated.

“What a touching story of friendship and honour,” Clara said, her eyes glistening.

“Charles sent some to David Scott, the Agent of the Governor-General, and some to the Botanical Gardens in Calcutta. But only the ones he planted in Sadiya survived. The ones in Calcutta died—maybe due to different climate—and the Garden authorities wrongly declared the Assamese tea inferior to Chinese tea,” Kevin said.

“That’s so unfair—just like Mr. Goodenough and the oil wells! Both Bruce and Goodenough were unsung heroes,” Anupama said, visibly moved.

“And why are you all still talking about tea? I’m getting bored now,” Nancy pouted.

“We’re making a film on Assam Tea, remember? And you’ll be part of it too!” Anupama said.

“Hmph! You couldn’t find any other topic? I can give you more fun topics,” Nancy grumbled.

“Alright, we’ll make the tea film first, then the next one on your topic,” Clara said, hugging Nancy close.

“But only if I get to be the director!” Nancy declared, making everyone laugh.

As the evening wore on, Anupama said, “We’ve talked enough for today. Let’s head back now—Nancy needs to study.”

Kevin stood up and looked at Clara. “Start planning how to show everything we discussed. If done right, this will be an amazing film.”

Clara nodded, her face glowing with hope and resolve. “This one has to be perfect. If not, maybe I’ll never make another film again.”

CHAPTER 9

London, Office Call

Kevin called Clara from the office.

“Where are you? Can we talk for two minutes?”

“Why only two minutes? If you wish, I can talk to you for two hours,” Clara laughed cheerfully.

“No need for two hours,” Kevin smiled. “I’m calling just to ask—have you told Prashant everything yet?”

“No,” Clara replied, her tone dropping. “I haven’t had the courage. I’ve been meaning to for days now. Kevin, could you come over someday? If you’re with me, I might have the strength to say it.”

“You have to tell Prashant all this by yourself, Clara. No one else should be there when you do. Don’t worry about how he’ll react. If you know deep down that you did what you did for the good of your family, then why be scared? I believe Prashant will try to understand. If he truly loves you, he’ll support you even after knowing the truth.”

Clara remained silent for a while, her thoughts whirling. Then she said softly, “I don’t want to hurt Prashant, Kevin. He’s already under a lot of stress these days. He doesn’t sleep at night. Sometimes he drinks and loses control. I’m afraid that if he finds out, he’ll slip into depression. I’ve already lost so much in life, Kevin... I can’t bear to lose him too.”

Kevin let out a long sigh. “But if you don’t tell him, Clara, you’ll have to deal with Michael all on your own. And in that case, Prashant may not be there to help you.”

“You’re there, aren’t you?” Clara asked, her voice soft. “Whenever I’ve been in trouble, you’ve always helped me. I know you’re worried about me. I’ve been trying to avoid Michael, and he knows it. But he’s so twisted, Kevin. He says he

wants a price for leaving me alone. That everything he did for Prashant—helping him get work, giving us money in bad times—has to be repaid. Only then will he back off.”

Kevin’s voice hardened. “You mean you also took financial help from him?”

“I won’t lie to you, Kevin,” Clara said, her voice trembling. “There were times when we had nothing. We couldn’t even pay rent. I borrowed ten thousand pounds from him. Later, when Mom was seriously ill, the hospital bill came to twenty-five thousand. Michael paid it. I told him I would repay him, but I haven’t had the money. Now that I’ve said I won’t be with him anymore, he’s demanding his money back. Tell me, where will I get it?”

“Did you sign any written agreement when you took the money?”

“No. But I feel like I’ve already repaid him with everything he wanted. I thought he was a good man, a true friend. I trusted him. But over time, I realized he was grooming me to become his sex slave. Whenever he called, I had to go to him, undress for him. I feel disgusted now. I want out, Kevin. I want to escape him, but I can’t. I’m terrified. If I leave, he’ll take revenge. He’s said before that if I don’t do what he says, he’ll kill Prashant.”

Kevin paused, thinking hard. Then he said firmly, “My advice is—go to India with Prashant. Cut off all contact with Michael. I don’t think he’ll come after you there. If he has no access, he’ll have no power over you. But before that, you must tell Prashant everything. If he supports you, there’s nothing left to fear.”

“I’ll try to tell him when he’s a little more emotionally stable. But Kevin, I’ll need your help. If he decides to divorce me after hearing everything, will you and Poma help me rebuild my life? Will you stand by me?”

“Of course, Clara. We’ll be with you no matter what. But until then, avoid Michael as much as you can and start preparing for the move to India,” Kevin said, his voice resolute.

CHAPTER 10

The day of departure for India was fast approaching. Prashant had begun gathering the necessary items for the journey.

Clara still had some work left on the documentary she was making about the British royal family. As a result, she frequently had to visit the Beaconsfield Film Studio located near Buckinghamshire.

She had stopped answering Michael's calls. As Kevin had advised, she was trying to stay away from him as much as possible. But one day, Michael tracked her down and appeared on the studio set.

Clara had just finished a shot and was sitting on a chair. Michael stormed in, grabbed her arm, and yanked her up from the chair. His eyes were red with anger.

"Why haven't you been answering my calls? Where did you get the courage to ignore me?" he hissed harshly into her ear.

"Let go of my arm, Michael. I'm in the middle of work. Don't create a scene here. You have no right to be here. I'm telling you politely, leave now. If you don't, I'll call security and have you thrown out," Clara replied firmly, looking him straight in the eye.

Michael sneered. "Security will throw me out? Ha! Ha! Ha! Who in London has the guts to throw me out? But I can have you ruined any time I want."

Clara's nostrils flared. "What's left for you to ruin? You pretended to help me and made me your plaything. I never imagined you could be such a vile person. I'm begging you—leave me alone. Let me live my life on my own terms." Her breath quickened.

"You want to leave me? Fine. But first, return the money you owe me. I've done the math. It's £110,000. I'm giving you a discount of £10,000. Just pay me £100,000

and I'll walk away from your life forever. I'll never bother you again," Michael said, finally letting go of her arm.

"What are you saying? I only borrowed about £40,000 from you. How did it become £100,000? Don't talk nonsense," Clara snapped, her anger rising.

"The rest is interest. Don't you know loans accrue interest? That's the total with interest. And the longer you delay, the more you'll owe. Every extra day will cost you," Michael said, staring at her sharply.

"Where am I going to get that much money? Even if I sell everything I own and become a beggar, I won't have £100,000. And what about the time you enjoyed my body? Isn't that worth anything?" Clara's face turned red.

"That's why I say stop thinking about leaving me. I've brought an expensive bottle of Scotch. Let's enjoy ourselves tonight," Michael said, grabbing her arm again.

Michael knew about Clara's weakness for Scotch. The mention of it made her mouth water, but she quickly closed her eyes, gathered her strength, and said, "You can't weaken me today, Michael. Please leave. I'm working. Don't bother me. I'll try to repay the money I owe you, but stop harassing me."

Seeing Clara's determined face, Michael paused for a moment. He had never seen her so resolute before.

"You think I'll leave so easily? I've made plans to spend this evening with you. I want to spend the night at the most expensive hotel in Buckinghamshire," he insisted with a crooked smile.

"Forgive me, Michael. Surely there's no shortage of other women for you. Spend the night with someone else. I can't go with you tonight," Clara said seriously.

"So all this time you were just pretending to love me? Now that you don't need my help, you're ignoring me. I've never seen anyone as selfish as you," Michael fumed.

"Listen, Michael. You're right. I never came to you because of love. I needed your help. And in exchange, I fulfilled all your demands. But now, I no longer need your charity. I'm trying to stand on my own feet. My husband Prashant is also

trying. We'll manage together. Don't be offended, but I've always loved my husband, Prashant. I never loved you," Clara said calmly.

Her words pierced Michael like a dagger. His eyes turned red with rage.

"I don't care about any of that. I'm not listening to anything tonight, Clara. You *will* come with me. Tonight, I want you in my bed," he ordered.

Without replying, Clara walked toward the camera crew. "Everyone, let's gather. Let's complete the next scene's shooting," she called out.

The cast and crew assembled. Clara took out the script.

Michael stormed over again. "Clara, I'm asking you for the last time. Are you coming with me or not?" he shouted.

"This man has been harassing me for a while now. Where's security? Remove him from here," Clara shouted back.

At once, two young men in security uniforms approached Michael. "Sir, we request you to leave," one of them said politely.

Michael felt deeply humiliated. He looked at Clara in such a way that it seemed he wanted to slap her right then and there. As he left with the two security guards, he glanced back at Clara with a threatening look. "You think you can escape me? I'll deal with you later."

Seeing Michael's expression, Clara felt a chill in her heart. She moved aside and called Prashant. The phone rang out without an answer. He wasn't picking up.

She then called Kevin. Before he could say anything, Clara said, "Kevin, Michael just showed up at the Beaconsfield Film Studio looking for me. But I didn't give in. I had him thrown out by security. The way he looked at me as he left... I'm really scared. I don't know what he might do next. Can you pick me up from the studio in about an hour? Prashant isn't answering his phone. That's why I'm asking you. I don't feel safe going alone."

CHAPTER 11

As soon as Clara saw Kevin, she clung to him.

"I don't even know how to thank you. Until you arrived, it felt like Michael could show up at any moment and drive a sharp knife into my back."

"I had a spy follow Michael after your call. Don't worry—he's currently drinking at a pub. If there's any threat, I'll be informed immediately," Kevin reassured her.

"You care so much about me, Kevin. And look at Prashant—when I was in danger and called him, he didn't even answer or call me back," Clara said, a note of hurt in her voice.

"Come on, let's get you home. And don't worry, I'll have a word with Prashant too—for not taking proper care of you," Kevin said, opening the car door for her.

As Clara settled into the car, she muttered to herself, "I don't know what I'm doing or where I'm heading. Now that I've broken ties with Michael, staying in this film world has become difficult. But how much longer can I tolerate him? Just because I took a bit of help from him doesn't mean he can use me whenever he pleases. That's not right. I wasn't sold to him for a few pounds. Now I'm planning to go to India to make a film, but how will I work if my mind remains entangled in all this nonsense? He's tried to threaten me, but today, for the first time, I stood up to him—and I feel so relieved."

Kevin drove silently, nodding in agreement.

"Kevin, I'm glad you're not my husband. If you were, I might not have been able to tell you everything so openly. Just stay my friend—that's more than enough for me," Clara said with a smile.

Kevin smiled too. "Sometimes, being a good friend is harder than being a good husband."

Clara thought for a moment. "What should I do now? Give me some advice, Kevin. Whatever you suggest, I'll follow."

Her eyes reflected complete trust in him.

"In my opinion, you should start wrapping up your work here in London. We have less than a month before we leave for India. We haven't even finalized the details of the film yet. I had asked you to research Charles Bruce online. Did you manage to read up on him?" Kevin smoothly changed the subject.

That was the habit Clara found frustrating about Kevin. Whenever she wanted to discuss something personal, he would shift to a serious topic and ruin the mood. It had led to many arguments when they used to be together. But things were different now. Kevin was no longer her partner; he was someone else's husband. So she couldn't get angry at him as she used to.

"I've read a bit about Charles Bruce online, Kevin. He was quite an extraordinary man. He roamed through Assam's dense jungles searching for tea plants. I even found a letter from 1834 written by the Secretary of the Tea Committee to the Secretary of the Governor General of India. It mentions how Mr. Bruce, despite various physical hardships, rain, and floods, explored tribal villages along the banks of the Burhidihing River south of the Brahmaputra. Apparently, Charles Bruce had an exceptional talent for establishing good relations with people. He could win over anyone with his words."

Kevin smiled broadly. "I'm so pleased that you've studied all this. If you approach the film with this level of seriousness, you'll definitely make a great film. Charles Bruce's character must be a central figure in the movie. No one else worked as hard as he did to start tea cultivation in Assam. In fact, if Charles Bruce's brother, Robert Bruce, hadn't tasted 'phalap', the discovery of tea in Assam might have been delayed by years."

Kevin kept driving as he spoke.

"How did Charles Bruce travel while searching for tea plants? There probably weren't any motorable roads in Assam back then," Clara asked.

"The best mode of transportation at that time was boats. Charles Bruce traveled in Singpho boats along the Burhidihing River, searching for regions where tea plants grew. To do that, he established friendly relations with the Singpho people. He even learned to speak Singpho and Assamese fluently. The Singphos usually didn't befriend outsiders. Initially, King Bishagam and other village chiefs viewed Charles Bruce's activities with suspicion. But Bruce understood their weaknesses. He would attend their village councils, sitting cross-legged on the floor, smoking a Singpho pipe, addressing the chief as 'uncle' and offering small gifts. He also promised that anyone helping him would receive gifts from the commissioner. Moreover, he promised a gun to anyone who assisted him directly. Through these strategies, Bruce managed to collect nearly all varieties of naturally growing tea saplings and seeds from villages along the Burhidihing River," Kevin explained without taking his eyes off the road.

"I see—Charles was a brilliant salesman. He could persuade people with sweet words to get what he needed. I can now imagine how some of the scenes should look. I'll need to discuss these story ideas with Poma. Only then can she write a beautiful script," Clara said thoughtfully.

A little while later, they arrived at the parking area of Clara and Prashant's apartment. As Kevin parked the car, he said, "I'll head off now, Clara. I dropped everything and rushed over when you called, fearing for your safety."

"You can't just leave like that. Prashant might be home. If he sees you leaving from the gate, he'll feel terrible. Tonight, I'll make 'phalap' for both of you. I learned to prepare it from Anupama," Clara said proudly.

"Phalap? That's what tea prepared in the Singpho style is called," Kevin corrected her.

"No. We'll just call it phalap. After all, it was the taste of phalap that led Robert Bruce to discover Assam's tea leaves. So what's the harm in calling tea 'phalap'?" Clara said with a laugh.

Kevin nodded in agreement.

CHAPTER 12

After ringing the apartment doorbell several times, Prashant finally opened the door. The moment Clara and Kevin saw him, they realized he was drunk and completely out of sorts.

"You've been drinking so much already today? You didn't even answer my calls. What's wrong with you?" Clara asked, holding his arm.

Prashant shook off Clara's hand and, staggering, replied, "Why have you come here? Who am I to you? Go stay with your lovers."

"What are you saying? What nonsense are you talking about in front of Kevin? What lovers?" Clara's voice rose in shock.

Kevin gently grabbed Prashant's arms and helped him to the sofa. Sitting beside him, he asked softly, "Prashant, are you alright?"

"No, Kevin. I'm not alright," Prashant said, wiping tears from his eyes. "Tell me honestly—if someone called you and said Anupama was having an illicit affair, and that you must pay them £100,000 to end it, how would you feel?"

Clara and Kevin immediately understood—this was Michael's doing. He must have called Prashant and filled his ears with lies.

Clara held Prashant's arm and said, "You've misunderstood me, Prashant. I've realized Michael called you. That man was never my lover—never. I only took a bit of help from him."

"Help? What help did you need? What kind of help did you take from him without telling me?" Prashant asked angrily.

"Some of your work contracts were secured through Michael's contacts. A couple of times, I also borrowed a few thousand pounds from him. But because of our financial situation, I couldn't repay the debt. Now he's taking advantage of that to blackmail me. I'm sure he's already told you everything. Out of desperation, I even

had to sleep with him. But it wasn't for love—it was for the good of our family. Now, following Kevin's advice, I've stopped giving in to his demands. That's why he's acting like a mad dog," Clara said firmly.

"So Kevin knew about this all along? And I was the only one left in the dark," Prashant lowered his head and said quietly.

"I only told Kevin recently. He's been asking me from the very beginning to tell you everything. But I didn't have the courage. Now that Michael has already told you himself, perhaps it's for the best. I should have told you sooner," Clara admitted.

"I had heard bits and pieces—rumors that you were having an affair with Michael. But I thought, in the film industry, such rumors are common. You've always been straightforward. I believed that if you had anything serious going on, you'd tell me yourself," Prashant said, looking at Clara with a pained expression.

Clara hugged Prashant tightly and began to weep. "Believe me, Prashant. This was never a serious relationship. Because of our financial troubles, I had no other option and had to rely on Michael. But now, I'm trying to free myself from him. I even told him I'd return the money somehow. But he's so cruel—he's added his own made-up interest to the original loan and is now demanding £100,000."

"But where will we get that much money?" Prashant looked helplessly at Kevin.

"I don't think we should pay that scoundrel a single penny. He has already taken advantage of Clara in exchange for the money. There was never a formal agreement to repay the loan, so he can't even take you to court. At most, he can hire thugs and try to scare you. That's why I have a suggestion. Until you leave for India, both of you should come stay at our place—Patkai Villa. If we all stay together, Michael won't dare try anything," Kevin proposed.

"That's the best idea, Kevin. We'll pack up and move to your place tomorrow. Right, Prashant?" Clara asked, looking at him.

Prashant nodded. He thought to himself, *It's becoming difficult to get through these days without any work or peace of mind. It would be good to stay with Kevin and Anupama for a while.*

CHAPTER 13

Nancy was thrilled that Prashant and Clara had come to stay. In this country, it was unusual for guests to stay over. But Anupama had firmly reminded her that even with guests at home, she must follow her study schedule diligently.

Nancy quickly became friends with Clara, treating her almost like a playmate. She brought out different board games to play with her. Clara's youthful spirit made it easy for her to blend in with Nancy's world, which Nancy enjoyed immensely. Her mother, Anupama, could never be as playful as Clara.

Nancy taught Clara how to play Chinese Checkers. The two would often chat and spend hours engrossed in the game.

One day, Nancy asked, "In the film you're making, who's going to be the hero?"

"Do you know any handsome young man who could fit the role? If you do, the hero's spot is still open," Clara replied with a wink.

Nancy glanced around, then leaned in and whispered near Clara's ear, "I have a good friend named David. He loves acting. When I mentioned your film, he said he'd love a role in it—even if it's not the hero. Can you give him some part?"

Clara smiled mischievously. "If he's your boyfriend, then I must help him. But if he's just a friend, then I'll have to think about it."

Nancy blushed a little. "He proposed to me this Valentine's Day, but I haven't completely said yes yet. He's four years older than me. We first met at a concert last year. He's been pursuing me since then. I'm not that into him, but I haven't said no either since I don't have another boyfriend. But please don't tell Mom or Dad about this."

"Oh, our little girl has grown up! You're now looking for your prince charming. Don't worry, I won't tell your mom or dad. But if Mom finds an Indian boy for you when we go to India, don't be upset," Clara laughed playfully.

"I don't think Mom would do that. She always tells me, 'Stand on your own feet before finding a boyfriend. You'll have plenty of time later for relationships, but the time for studying never comes back.'"

"But have you done anything with David?" Clara teased, winking.

Nancy blushed deeper. "On the day he proposed, he kissed me on the cheek. He tried for a lip kiss too, but I didn't let him. That stuff scares me. I know what can happen afterward."

"You're such a sensible young woman. Take my advice—don't let anyone touch your body until you're sure. When your body goes out of your control, it can cause a lot of emotional pain," Clara sighed.

"Can I ask you something? When did you have your first sex?" Nancy asked shyly.

Clara paused for a moment, taken aback. Then she said, "I was probably your age. I didn't even fully understand what sex was. One of my father's acquaintances forced himself on me. I was terrified. I bled heavily. He left bite and nail marks all over my body. Even now, remembering it makes me shiver."

"You mean... someone you knew sexually abused you? Oh my God! Did you tell your parents?" Nancy was horrified.

"I did. But my father scolded me for making a fuss. My mother tried to calm me down, saying that girls have to tolerate such things. She gave me some medicine to prevent pregnancy. But not all parents are like mine. If anything ever happens to you, tell Mom and Dad first," Clara advised.

Nancy closed her eyes. She could almost see the picture Clara painted of the assault. She felt a wave of sadness.

After a while, Nancy broke the silence.

"Will you give David a role in your film?"

"There might be a role for him. But most of our shooting will be in India. Will David be able to travel that far for acting? Still, you should introduce him to me someday. I'd like to see how well he can act," Clara replied.

Nancy showed Clara a photo of David from her phone. He was nearly six feet tall, well-built, and had the look of someone who could act in a film. Clara also took his number from Nancy.

Just then, Anupama entered the room carrying a large bowl of popcorn.

"What are you two whispering about in here? Let me in on the secret too!" she joked, placing the bowl between them.

"Mom, can you give us some privacy? Why do you just barge into my room without knocking? I'm not a little girl anymore," Nancy protested.

"Oh, did I interrupt something? I brought popcorn because I thought you might be hungry. Am I not allowed to hear your secrets now?" Anupama teased.

"Poma, this is just between Nancy and me. You and Kevin will know everything in due time," Clara supported Nancy.

"Alright, we won't listen. But Clara, Kevin asked me to discuss the script with you. He said it would be easier to start filming in India if we had the first couple of scenes ready," Anupama said.

"This Kevin never lets me relax!" Clara complained playfully. Then, regaining composure, she said, "Of course, he's right. There's not much time left before our journey begins. If we don't start now, then when?"

"Let's talk about *Phalap* then," Anupama smiled, sitting beside Clara.

"If you're going to talk about *Phalap* again, I'll go watch TV," Nancy said and left for her parents' bedroom.

Clara leaned in close to Anupama and said excitedly, "I've been thinking, Poma. We should name the film *Phalap*. The word will spark curiosity. People will want to watch the film just to learn what *Phalap* means."

"I was thinking the same thing! We've already gotten used to calling tea *Phalap*. Naming the film *Phalap* would be perfect because the discovery of Assam tea began with *Phalap*," Anupama agreed.

"Let's also ask Kevin for his opinion," Clara added.

"Call him when he's home. Kevin and Prashant went out a little while ago. They didn't say where. I think they're up to something," Anupama said.

"Where could they be? Probably at some bar drinking. Or at a nightclub watching naked girls dance. They still think they're bachelors," Clara joked.

"Men never change—even after marriage. Their attraction to women and liquor always remains," Anupama laughed.

"Let them do what they want. One day, you and I will go out too. A girls' night out. We'll go to a ladies-only nightclub and watch drunken men dance half-naked. Women should enjoy life on their own terms too," Clara said, trying to tempt Anupama.

"I don't enjoy those things. Neither does Nancy. I'd rather stay home peacefully than party at bars or nightclubs," Anupama replied.

"You grew up in Assam, surrounded by peace and calm. I, on the other hand, grew up amid chaos. Maybe that's why I enjoy the noise and excitement," Clara said.

"Sometimes I feel like going back to Digboi, renting a small house, and living there. I really dislike the hustle and bustle of big cities—the traffic, the pollution, the accidents. You've seen for yourself how peaceful it is there," Anupama mused, almost lost in thoughts of her hometown.

"I can see you don't like going out much. But are we going to spend the whole evening like this? The men are probably out partying, and we'll just sit here talking about *Phalap*? Kevin's cupboard probably has whiskey. Let's have a little fun ourselves," Clara suggested.

Anupama agreed. In this country, offering whiskey to guests was part of the culture. She brought out a bottle of whiskey, two crystal glasses, an icebox, a bottle of water, and a packet of namkeen snacks.

"Wow, Chivas Regal—my favorite whiskey! Kevin never used to drink such expensive liquor before," Clara commented upon seeing the bottle.

Anupama poured some whiskey over ice in both glasses, knowing Clara liked it "on the rocks."

Clara drank quickly. While Anupama was still nursing her first glass, Clara had already downed two pegs. As a soft pink flush crept over her face, she started talking without restraint.

"Poma, I've said this before—you are too good. I've never met a better woman than you. I've tried so hard, but I could never become a good woman myself. Why is my life always so complicated?" she sighed.

"How did you get trapped by Michael?" Anupama asked, bringing up the subject Kevin had told her about.

"It's all because of that stupid Prashant. Bringing him to London was a big mistake. He always complains that he ruined his comfortable job in the oil company because of me. He expects me to find him work here. He's too proud to ask anyone for a job himself—he says it would hurt his dignity. That's why I had to get involved with Michael to get Prashant contracts," Clara explained bitterly, finishing another peg.

"I understand, Clara. Our countrymen don't have the same mindset as people here. In this country, people are ready to do any job to earn a few pounds. But back home, people hesitate to take up just any work. Prashant probably couldn't adapt to the situation," Anupama reflected.

"It's also my bad luck. I try to make everyone happy, but I always fail. I don't think Prashant even loves me anymore. Do you know, even though we're married, sometimes we go months without any physical intimacy?" Clara revealed, frustrated.

Anupama was surprised. "Why? Maybe you two need counseling. How can a marriage survive if both of you are unhappy?"

"I'm flesh and blood too. I have weaknesses. Just like my body craves alcohol if I don't drink for a while, it also craves physical intimacy if too long passes without it. It's a problem with my body—what can I do? That's why alcohol and sex are my two greatest weaknesses. And if the man at home shows no interest, naturally my mind will start wandering. I'm not lying—if it weren't for these two

weaknesses, Michael wouldn't have been able to manipulate me," Clara said, closing her eyes and leaning back on the chair.

"Maybe that's why God is giving you two another chance. Prashant has found a good-paying job now. His tension and anxiety will probably decrease. And the serene environment of Assam will revive the love that was fading between you two. Don't worry. Prepare to leave for Assam soon. I have a feeling everything will be alright amidst the beautiful tea gardens," Anupama reassured her.

Clara broke down in tears. "I know, Anupama. This is my last chance to save my marriage. I can't imagine finding someone new at my age. If my marriage with Prashant doesn't work out, I don't think I'll survive."

Anupama hugged her tightly.

"Hope is life, Clara. Never lose hope in any situation. Keep hope and faith in God. Everything will be alright."

Clara clung to Anupama's chest and wept.

CHAPTER 14

Just as Clara had suspected, Kevin really had taken Prashant to a nightclub. From their conversations, Kevin had sensed that Prashant was emotionally fragile. Even though he hadn't openly reacted, after learning all the details about Clara's involvement with Michael, Prashant felt deeply wounded inside. He blamed himself, believing that it was his own incompetence that had driven Clara down such a path.

To lift him out of this negative mindset, Kevin took him to *Metropolis*, a prominent nightclub located in the heart of the city, a little distance from where they lived.

The five-floor nightclub was one of London's prime attractions for nightlife. Decorated with glamorous, multi-colored lights glittering from every corner, the club dazzled as they entered and sat at a corner table. The tables were arranged around a rotating stage. On that stage, scantily clad, beautiful young women danced in rhythm to the music, their breasts exposed.

A waitress dressed in revealing clothing came to take their order. Kevin ordered two strong beers and a plate of chicken wings. "Cheers, man! Forget what has happened. The past is gone and will never return. We can't see the future. So, don't think about the past or the future. Just enjoy this moment," Kevin encouraged Prashant, trying to lighten his mood.

Pointing toward one of the dancers, Prashant remarked,

"She's so beautiful. But just for a few pounds, she's had to remove her clothes and dance. I wonder if her parents even know she's performing like this."

Kevin replied, "It's not like what you're imagining, Prashant. In this country, this is also considered a profession. Dancing in a nightclub doesn't mean she'll be shunned by society. In fact, many earn well through such performances and may even enjoy high social standing. Her parents likely know about her work. Some

families even send their daughters to training for this. These women choose this profession willingly. No one forces them.”

As they talked, an attractive young woman with heavy makeup approached Kevin and whispered in his ear, “Would you like a private dance?”

Kevin smiled and declined. The woman then turned to Prashant, leaned in so her breasts were prominently displayed, and said in a sweet voice, “Hi, handsome! You seem troubled tonight. I can cheer you up. I think you’d really enjoy my private dance.”

Prashant looked at Kevin. He had never been in a strip dance nightclub before. In the past, he had gone to dance clubs with Clara, but she had never introduced him to a place like this. Kevin shrugged with a look that said, *Do whatever you feel like*.

Prashant began sweating. Taking a sip from his beer, he asked the dancer, “How much would a private dance cost?”

“Just twenty pounds,” she replied with a seductive gesture.

Prashant seemed to calculate something mentally and then said, “I’m not in the mood right now. Maybe later.”

The woman scowled slightly, implying he had wasted her time, and swayed her hips as she moved toward another customer.

“Kevin, what exactly is a private dance? She asked for twenty pounds,” Prashant whispered.

“Just watch the other tables around us, and you’ll figure it out,” Kevin replied with a mischievous grin.

Prashant observed as the same woman started dancing at another table. She began removing her clothes step by step in rhythm with the music, leaving only a small piece of fabric covering her intimate areas. She drew close to the seated man, bringing her lips and exposed chest near his face without actually allowing him to touch her. As the music continued, she slowly redressed.

As Prashant stared, Kevin nudged him, “Don’t keep watching someone else’s private dance like that. And don’t even try to touch the dancer. No customer is

allowed to touch them here. If anyone does, and the dancer complains, the bouncers will throw him out immediately.”

Prashant noticed a large, muscular man—clearly a bouncer—watching him from nearby.

“You’re going to India soon, and who knows when you’ll return to London. That’s why I brought you here tonight to give you a taste of London’s nightlife,” Kevin said, nibbling on a piece of chicken.

“I’ve lived in London for so long, but I never experienced this because I was always struggling to make ends meet. Someone worried about every pound can’t afford to spend twenty pounds just to watch a private dance. I spent all these years without such luxuries. I couldn’t even give Clara a good life,” Prashant reflected.

“Relax, Prashant. Sometimes, we have to leave things to fate. For all of us, the One above has some plan or another. That’s why we shouldn’t despair. Whatever God does, He does for the best. If we can approach every situation with that belief, we’ll succeed in life,” Kevin tried to reassure him.

“But why did Clara betray me, Kevin? I never even looked at another woman. I gave up my high-paying job, my family, and friends in India to come to London for her. When Clara left you and came into my life, I thought I was the luckiest man in the world. Having such a beautiful woman as my life partner was my greatest pride. And yet, now that same woman has secretly given herself to another man,” Prashant became emotional.

“I understand your feelings, Prashant. But let me assure you, Clara still loves you very much. Whatever she did, she did for you. She had no choice. Even though she gave her body to Michael, she never loved him. She has always loved you and always will,” Kevin said, holding Prashant’s hands between his own.

“I can’t convince myself, Kevin. Why did this happen to me? What mistake did I make? Why did Clara do this? I lie awake at night thinking about these questions. Worry consumes me constantly,” Prashant said sorrowfully.

“Look, Prashant. Everyone experiences good and bad times in life. You might be going through a bad phase now, but soon things will improve. After every night

comes the day. Even the darkest tunnels end in light. Perhaps that's why God is showing you a different path. Let go of everything and prepare for a new life. Once you are at peace with yourself, everything else will fall into place," Kevin said, placing a reassuring hand on Prashant's shoulder.

Prashant nodded. He wanted the storm in his heart to calm down soon. He focused on finishing his beer.

Suddenly, a man pulled up a chair and sat next to Prashant. Turning around, Prashant recognized him as the same man who had just enjoyed a private dance. The man extended his hand and said, "If I'm not mistaken, you must be Clara's husband, Prashant."

"Yes, I'm Prashant. But who are you?" Prashant asked.

"I thought so. I've seen your photo on Clara's mobile. Didn't she ever tell you about me? I'm Michael," the man said, grasping Prashant's hand.

It felt like electricity shot through Prashant's hand. He immediately pulled away, his breathing heavy.

"Michael, why have you come to us? Go back and enjoy the dance. There are plenty of beautiful girls ready to perform," Kevin said, eyeing him sternly.

"You must be Kevin—the one who used to live with Clara before she married this idiot," Michael sneered.

"Mind your language, Michael. Why are you behaving so rudely?" Prashant roared.

Kevin grabbed Michael's arm.

"We came here to relax, not to start a fight. Leave now, Michael."

"I will leave. But first, Clara must return the pounds she stole from me. She's been running from me, blocking my calls. But I never let go of interest. She must return my money," Michael said aggressively.

"You won't get a single penny. Do whatever you want," Prashant shouted.

“Maybe you can make your wife dance here. She’ll earn thousands of pounds every month. And if she sells her body during the day, you can repay my debt even faster,” Michael said with cruel sarcasm.

Prashant couldn’t bear the insult.

“If you say one more word about my wife, I’ll kill you,” he roared, and punched Michael’s face with full force. Michael stumbled back and collapsed to the floor.

A commotion erupted instantly. Two bouncers rushed in and grabbed Prashant. Michael yelled from the floor, “This Indian thug assaulted me! Call the police!”

Prashant, consumed by rage, shouted, “This man called my wife a prostitute. Why wouldn’t I hit him? I’ll kill him if I have to.”

Kevin somehow calmed the bouncers and apologized on Prashant’s behalf, managing to de-escalate the situation and get Prashant out of the club. As they reached the car, Kevin kept urging him to stay calm. But Prashant kept shouting,

“I will never forgive anyone who speaks ill of my wife. I’ll kill them.”

Kevin seated him in the car and began driving home. He realized how deeply Prashant loved Clara.

“I’m glad that your affection and sense of responsibility toward Clara remain as strong as they were in the early days. I remember back when you were in Assam’s drilling rig and once nearly hit someone who spoke ill of Clara. That same pride and respect still live within you. If you both continue to understand each other, no force on Earth can harm your relationship,” Kevin said.

CHAPTER 15

One day, Nancy told Clara quietly, “You wanted to meet David, right? I mentioned it to him. He’s asked to meet me today at Walmart and has invited you to come along too.”

Clara smiled and said, “I’d actually like that. But if I tag along, it might inconvenience you both.”

“What are you saying? He’s not even officially my boyfriend yet. Why would it be awkward if you came along? Just don’t tell Mom and Dad about this meeting—that’s all I ask,” Nancy said, winking at Clara.

Clara played along. She told Anupama, “Today, Nancy and I will go out for a while. She’s grown up now. She doesn’t enjoy going out only with her mom and dad anymore. But I’m sure she’ll enjoy going out with a young and dashing friend like me.”

Anupama laughed, “Spending these last few days with Nancy, it seems like you’ve become younger by a few years yourself, Clara. Be careful or the boys Nancy’s age might start flirting with you too.”

“That wouldn’t be a bad thing. I could use it to tease Prashant. I’d tell him, ‘See, young boys are still crazy about me,’” Clara laughed cheerfully.

Clara and Nancy took Anupama’s car. Nancy had wanted to drive, but Clara didn’t allow her—she still didn’t have a license.

They met David at a corner of the huge parking lot outside Walmart. The three of them headed to a nearby McDonald’s.

Clara looked at David and asked, “Have you ever done any acting before?”

“I acted in some small school plays. But that was stage acting. I’ve never performed in front of a camera,” David replied.

“I’d like to see your acting talent. Here’s what we’ll do. See that woman sitting alone over there? Go over and tell her she looks beautiful today. Your goal is to engage her and get her interested in your conversation. That will be your audition,” Clara said, pointing toward a rather stout, middle-aged African-American woman sitting alone at another table.

At first, David looked nervous. Seeing his reaction, Nancy giggled softly.

Clara encouraged him, “Come on, young man. If you can’t handle this simple task, how will you act in a film? Don’t be afraid.”

After pausing for a moment, David stood up and walked over to the woman, sitting opposite her. She looked at him with a questioning glance.

“Hi, my name is David. May I sit here?” he asked politely.

“I don’t mind. But why would you want to sit with me? There are plenty of empty seats around,” she replied.

“Actually, I’ve been observing you for a while. You seemed a little lonely. So, I thought I’d strike up a conversation. I hope I’m not bothering you,” he said kindly.

“Well, you’re right. I do feel quite lonely. It’s nice that you came over to chat. Why would I mind?” the woman said.

“What’s your name? Where do you live? What do you do?”

“I’m Rosie. I live about ten miles from here in a small house. My husband left me years ago. I work as a cleaner at Walmart. I have some children, but they’re busy with their own lives. I live alone, without a companion,” she sighed.

David smiled, “Living alone isn’t so bad, is it? You have the freedom to live life your way. Your children must be doing well financially. What more does one need to live?”

“To truly live, one needs people. A companion. A friend to share one’s thoughts with,” Rosie replied.

“I understand how you feel. Don’t you have any friends?”

“I used to. But not all friends are good. Some would speak sweetly to my face but stab me in the back. That’s why I’ve stopped trusting people. I don’t take on new friends anymore,” Rosie said with a faint smile.

“Rosie, just because someone betrayed you doesn’t mean everyone is bad. I’m sure you’ll find a good friend someday,” David said.

“Honestly, I’m looking for a good friend. Someone I can talk to about everything. Someone I can trust deeply. Someone whose shoulder I can lean on when I’m feeling low. Someone who will love me unconditionally. But do such friends really exist?” Rosie asked.

“Every person meets someone special at some point—someone who can change their life. If that person is a good soul, they can become a true friend and make your life beautiful too,” David said.

“You’ve spoken so kindly to me. Even though you’re much younger than me, I really like you. Would you be my friend?” Rosie asked, looking into David’s eyes.

David was a bit taken aback by the sudden proposal. He smiled and said, “I just met you today, Rosie. I don’t know much about you. To form a friendship, it’s important to get to know each other well. It might be better if you made friends with someone closer to your own age.”

“So, you’re saying I’m too old even to make new friends now?” Rosie said sadly.

“I didn’t mean that, Rosie. It’s just easier to understand each other when friends are of a similar age. If you can connect with people and be kind, I’m sure you’ll find many friends your age. Once you have a good friend, you won’t feel lonely anymore.”

Clara and Nancy watched the entire conversation unfold. Nancy was impressed by David’s mature responses.

Rosie gave a soft smile and said, “You’re right. Befriending someone as young as you wouldn’t be appropriate. You might even be younger than my own son. But you seem like a wise young man. I’m glad I met you and had this conversation. It made me feel better.”

“I hope you have a great day,” David said.

“It’s time for my shift. I’m glad we met. Hopefully, we’ll meet again someday,” Rosie said, offering her right hand.

They shook hands, and Rosie walked off toward Walmart.

“You’ve passed my test with flying colors, David. You acted really well,” Clara said, patting him on the back.

“I wasn’t acting at all. I just said what came to my mind,” David replied.

“To be a good actor, it’s even more important to be a good person. You’ve proven that to me today. That’s why I believe you can become a great actor,” Clara said.

“What should I do now? Do I need to go to India?” David asked.

“Would you be able to travel to India? We’re leaving in the first week of March. Tickets and visas are already arranged,” Clara said.

David calculated quickly. Getting tickets and a visa in such a short time wouldn’t be easy. Still, he said,

“A friend’s father works at the UK Embassy in New Delhi. I’ll try to arrange something with his help. If I can, I’ll definitely go.”

“If it’s too much trouble, don’t worry about it, David. Most roles in my film are quite small. If needed, we can shoot a few scenes later in a studio here. You may still be required then,” Clara reassured him.

“I’ll try my best, Miss Clara. I’ve always wanted to see India’s tea gardens. I believe one of my great-great-grandfathers was a manager at a tea garden in Assam,” David said.

“Wow, that’s wonderful! Find out more about him. That could be very useful for my project,” Clara said.

Nancy whispered to Clara, “If David goes to India, can he stay with us?”

“He can. I’ll arrange that. Don’t worry,” Clara assured her.

The burgers Clara had ordered were ready. Nancy picked them up along with some Cokes.

Nancy said, "If you come to India, David, it'll be great. At least I'll have a companion to wander through the tea gardens with."

CHAPTER 16

February 23, 2022

The day of their journey to India was approaching fast. On the Sunday before their departure, everyone gathered in Anupama's drawing room to review the remaining tasks for the film.

After all the recent discussions about the history of tea in India, and seeing David's growing enthusiasm for tea plantations, Nancy, too, had developed a keen interest. She actively joined the conversation now.

"Daddy, tell me something," Nancy asked, "why did the British decide to start growing tea in India?"

Kevin replied, "Initially, the British weren't that eager to start tea plantations in India. They could easily import tea from China at very low prices. But certain circumstances eventually compelled them to grow tea in India."

"One reason, you once told me," Clara added, flipping through her notebook, "was that China refused to accept opium as payment for tea. Instead, they demanded payment in gold and silver, which made the British consider starting tea cultivation in India."

"You've got the main reason right," Kevin agreed. "But there were other reasons too. The Chinese government and people treated British traders very badly—sometimes even beating them. British merchants often had to flee for their lives from Chinese pirates. And sometimes, the Chinese government would arbitrarily halt tea exports or produce very little, making Britain's tea supply completely unreliable. William Robinson mentions these difficulties in his book *Descriptive Accounts of Assam*."

"Did the Chinese really treat the merchants so badly?" Clara asked. "Usually, no trader treats their customers poorly."

“Many authors have recorded how badly the Chinese treated the English. In *A History of the Assam Company*, author Entwistle wrote that the Chinese would often insult British traders, calling them ‘barbarian Englishmen,’ and frequently ordered them to leave the country without any valid reason. William Uker, in another book, described how the Chinese boiled tea seeds before selling them so that they could never be planted to grow new plants. A man named Jacobson, who tried to find skilled tea growers in China, was misled and trapped by Chinese spies. After six perilous years, he barely managed to return alive. Even his Chinese-speaking interpreter was arrested and jailed. The Chinese simply didn’t want the British to gain any knowledge about tea cultivation that could threaten their monopoly,” Kevin explained.

Anupama came around handing everyone a cup of tea.

“Let’s continue this fascinating discussion while enjoying some Phalap,” she smiled.

Holding his teacup, Prashant asked, “But how did the Chinese learn about tea cultivation in the first place? How did they know to prune tea plants and manage them?”

“The Chinese didn’t initially know about pruning either,” Kevin said. “When tea plants grew too tall for people to pluck the leaves by hand, they used to train monkeys. They’d drive troops of monkeys up into the tall trees and throw stones to make them angry. In a rage, the monkeys would break off the branches and drop them down. That’s how the Chinese harvested tea leaves in the old days.”

“That would make an amusing scene in our film,” Clara said thoughtfully. “But we’d need trained monkeys. Where would we find them?”

“Getting trained monkeys will be difficult,” Anupama offered, “but in Assam, there are plenty of wild monkeys that ruin crops. Maybe we could encourage a troop of them to climb a tree and throw stones from below to replicate the scene.”

“You’d have to arrange that, Poma. Remember, last time you managed to get an elephant for us. The scene where oil was applied to the elephant’s feet in *Dig Boy Dig* came out beautifully,” Clara said.

“That was also the time when your romance with Prashant began,” Anupama teased.

“I was so scared riding that elephant! I held onto Prashant so tightly,” Clara recalled, gripping Prashant’s shoulder in the same way she had that day.

“Ugh, let’s not dwell on the past. That was long ago. Now it’s monkeys we have to think about,” Prashant joked.

Clara pouted and moved to sit beside Anupama. “Some people don’t even flinch when you touch them anymore,” she said sulkily.

“Enough with the memories. Let’s focus on what we need to do next,” Prashant advised.

“Let’s move on from China,” Kevin said. “Because tea was so cheap to import from China, the East India Company initially wasn’t interested in cultivating it in India. In 1788, the famous botanist Sir Joseph Banks, director of the Royal Botanic Gardens at Kew, advised the East India Company to start planting tea in Bihar, Rangpur, and Cooch Behar. He didn’t mention Assam because it wasn’t under British control at the time. But the company ignored his advice.”

“When did the East India Company change its stance on tea cultivation?” Prashant asked.

“It wasn’t until 1820, when Lord William Bentinck became Governor-General of India, that their attitude shifted. Around that time, an Englishman named John Walker wrote to Bentinck saying that Chinese hostility and unreliable tea supply jeopardized British trade. Walker argued that Britain must end Chinese dominance in the tea market by growing its own supply in India. Lord Bentinck took his advice seriously,” Kevin continued.

“So Bentinck took steps to start tea cultivation in India?” Nancy asked.

“Yes. In 1834, he formed the Tea Committee and tasked it with identifying suitable locations for tea cultivation. There were ten English and two Indian members. But none of them knew anything about tea,” Kevin said.

“How could people with no knowledge find suitable sites for tea?” Nancy asked again.

“They quickly realized they couldn’t proceed without help from the Chinese. They searched for someone who could speak Chinese and found Dr. Lukuma, a Chinese physician practicing in Calcutta. After adding him, the committee had thirteen members. They believed they needed seeds and experts from China, so they sent Secretary Gordon to procure them.”

“Was Gordon successful in bringing them back?” Clara asked.

“Not entirely. He brought back some seeds and soil samples from China, but they failed to grow. The committee finally realized that cultivating tea with Chinese seeds wasn’t going to work in India. So on March 3, 1834, they sent a circular to commissioners across British India instructing them to search for suitable tea-growing regions. Along with the circular, Dr. Nathaniel Wallich, who had replaced Gordon as secretary, included detailed notes on climate, soil, and other conditions needed for tea cultivation.”

“By that time, wasn’t Charles Bruce already searching for tea plants in Assam? Hadn’t he sent samples to Calcutta for testing?” Clara checked her notebook.

“You’re right, Clara. While the British government was just starting to search for tea-growing sites, Charles Bruce had already been exploring Assam’s forests and had found wild tea plants. He even carried Chinese seeds to compare. He learned local languages to communicate with tribal people. But there was a problem—the tribal chiefs had ordered their people not to reveal the locations of tea plants to white men. To overcome this, Charles carried packets of opium. He would befriend the villagers, give them opium, and sweet-talk his way into the forests, especially the Singpho areas, in search of wild tea,” Kevin said.

“The opium made the villagers relaxed and talkative, I guess,” Anupama joked.

“But all of Charles’s hard work came to nothing. Long before the Tea Committee was even formed, he had sent samples of Assam tea to the Calcutta Botanical Gardens. Dr. Nathaniel Wallich himself, then superintendent of the garden,

declared they weren't true tea plants. How he failed to identify them remains a mystery."

Prashant chimed in, "Maybe there was more to it. At the time, Britain had good trade relations with China, mostly based on importing tea in exchange for exporting opium. If Assam's tea had been recognized, it might have upset that trade. So perhaps, following government advice, the Calcutta Botanical Gardens rejected the samples."

"That's likely," Kevin agreed. "That's why Charles Bruce never got credit as Assam's discoverer of tea."

"Then who did?" Clara asked.

"A copy of the committee's circular reached Francis Jenkins, the Commissioner of Assam. Under him was Andrew Charlton, a lieutenant stationed in Sadiya. Charlton had already been studying Assam's wild tea and had collected some seeds and plants. Unlike Bruce, he hadn't ventured deep into tribal territories. He sent a sample to Jenkins, who forwarded it to the Tea Committee. They confirmed it as true tea and credited Charlton as the discoverer. Jenkins received a medal, and Charlton got the title of Assam's tea discoverer. Ironically, Dr. Wallich, who had earlier dismissed Bruce's samples, was now the committee's secretary," Kevin explained.

"So poor Charles Bruce did all the hard work, but Charlton got the glory," Prashant said. "Did Bruce at least receive any recognition later?"

"Later, the English Society of Arts awarded him a medal for his efforts, and the Horticulture and Agriculture Society of Bengal gave him another for tea discovery. Eventually, the government appointed him as a guide to the Tea Committee's exploratory team in Assam. But he never received full recognition. Worse, when the Assam Company's profits declined, they suspended him. He later joined the church and dedicated himself to missionary work and serving people in Assam until the end of his days."

"He never sought personal fame. Even after being denied the credit he deserved, he kept working selflessly," Kevin concluded.

“He must have been terribly disheartened,” Clara said sadly. “His brother, Robert Bruce, was the first to find tea in the Singpho region. Yet neither Bruce brother got the recognition they deserved.”

“That’s why, Clara, in your film, we’ll focus heavily on Charles Bruce’s life and contributions,” Kevin assured.

“Then tell me more about Charles Bruce. What else did he do for Assam’s tea industry?” Clara asked eagerly.

“His contributions are so vast that it would take a whole day to discuss. We’ll set aside a separate session just to talk about him. But for now, let’s refresh ourselves with some Phalap,” Kevin said.

Anupama poured more hot tea into everyone’s cups.

CHAPTER 17

February 27, 2020

Patkai Villa, London

According to the plan, on March 4, they would all depart from Heathrow to Dibrugarh, via Delhi. Upon arrival in Dibrugarh on March 5, they would first go to the house at Amola Patty where Anupama's father had settled after retirement. They would stay there for the night, and the next day proceed to Duliajan to meet Prashant's parents. After spending two days in Duliajan, they would return to Dibrugarh, and that same day, Prashant would assume his new role as Assistant Manager at Nirjuri Tea Estate, located a short distance from the city. Once Prashant received his estate bungalow, they would all move there and begin the preparations for Clara's film shoot. Kevin and Prashant had finalized the itinerary together.

Upon reviewing the schedule, Anupama spoke up, "We also need to visit Grandma's grave. This time, I think we should fence the area properly and beautify it. We can hire a caretaker and create a flower garden around it. Let's keep a few days aside for that."

"You're right," Kevin agreed. "It feels like we've almost forgotten that Grandma Nancy is resting in Dibrugarh. Yes, let's create a beautiful garden around her resting place."

Clara felt conflicted. No matter what, she wasn't emotionally ready to leave London forever. Yet, she couldn't keep Prashant tied down in London either. Still, it seemed to her that if she didn't go with him now, she might lose him forever.

Prashant had already vacated their rented house and was preparing to sell off most of their belongings. He explained to Clara, "There's no point keeping the house when we won't be returning soon. Selling off our things will give us some extra pounds to invest in your film."

As their belongings—TV, fridge, washing machine, bed, cupboards, each item gathered with such care over the years—were auctioned off, Clara burst into tears. She felt as if along with the household items, a piece of her own identity was being taken away.

Anupama comforted her, “Don’t get too attached to these things, Clara. Once you’re in India, you can collect new ones again. Prashant will have a furnished accommodation, so most of these things would be redundant anyway. Just be patient. Your good days will surely come.”

“I’ve been patient for so long, Poma. But it feels like happiness will never return to my life. Why is God being so cruel to me?”

“Maybe God is testing you, Clara. Trust me, your time will change. After hardship always comes ease. Prashant will earn a good salary in his new job, and your financial troubles will soon be over.”

Whenever Clara seemed sad, Nancy couldn’t bear it. She called Clara into her room and tried to change the subject.

“I have some good news! David’s visa has been approved. He’ll be arriving in Dibrugarh about a week after we do. Should we tell Mom and Dad?” Nancy’s cheerful news instantly lifted Clara’s mood.

Smiling, Clara teased, “Sounds like you should officially make David your boyfriend now. I’ll tell Poma today itself that her daughter has grown up and it’s time to start thinking about her wedding!”

“What are you saying?” Nancy blushed. “I don’t even like David *that* much yet. Just tell Mom that David is helping you with the film and will be acting in it too.”

“Shouldn’t we mention that he proposed to you?” Clara asked. “If Mom asks who David is and how we know him, what should I say?”

“Just tell her he’s my senior from school and a good friend. No need to mention the proposal yet,” Nancy whispered shyly.

“Alright, don’t worry. I’ll handle everything. But now that David’s definitely coming to India, I bet you’re thrilled, aren’t you? Your heart must be dancing at the thought of seeing him again.”

Nancy blushed even more. “I am happy, of course. But I’m also nervous. It seems like he’s not coming just for the acting, but mostly for me. What if he tries something inappropriate once we’re there? That would be so embarrassing for Mom and Dad.”

“Don’t worry. I’m your protector, remember? If he misbehaves even once, just tell me. I know very well how to handle such boys,” Clara said confidently.

Just then, Anupama knocked on the door. “Clara, a young man is here asking for you,” she called out from the hallway.

Clara and Nancy came out to find David sitting on the sofa in the living room. Kevin and Prashant were also there.

“Clara, he’s come looking for you. He’s interested in acting in your film,” Kevin explained.

“Oh, David! I’m glad you came. We were just talking about you,” Clara said enthusiastically.

“Do you already know him?” Kevin asked.

“Yes. When I asked Nancy if she knew any good young actors, she mentioned him. We met once at Walmart. That day itself, I realized David had great acting potential.”

“That’s great. But most of our shooting will be in India,” Kevin reminded them.

“No worries. David has already made arrangements to come to India. We’ll just need to arrange accommodation for him once he’s there,” Clara assured.

Kevin glanced at Prashant, who understood what Kevin was implying.

“No need to worry about his stay. We’ll take care of everything,” Prashant confirmed.

Anupama came out of the kitchen. She had been listening to the entire conversation.

“But we haven’t even finalized the script yet. Isn’t it a bit premature for David to come all the way to India? If needed, we could invite him later,” she said cautiously.

“I believe we’ll definitely need a European-looking young man for the film. So, if David can manage, he’s welcome to come. We’ll compensate him for his acting work later,” Kevin replied.

“Besides, the coronavirus outbreak is spreading fast in many countries. The infection rate is rising in England too. Though it’s low in India now, it could increase soon. If flights shut down later, David might not be able to travel even if he wants to,” Prashant added.

Hearing this, Clara grew anxious. “Oh God! What if we go to India and can’t return? What if we get stuck there because of the virus?”

“You’ve already given up your house and sold your belongings. We’ve taken a bold decision to go to India. Who would have imagined this virus, starting from China, would spread worldwide? We don’t know how many months flights might be suspended,” Anupama expressed her worry.

“If the infection gets worse, there could even be lockdowns. Wuhan and several cities in China are already under lockdown. But we have no choice—we must go to India. Otherwise, Prashant will lose his new job,” Prashant said.

“I think we shouldn’t be so fearful,” Kevin advised. “The infection rate in India is still low. Our tickets are booked. Let’s not rethink everything now. We’ll face whatever comes.”

David added, “I agree. We shouldn’t let fear change our lives. As long as we follow safety protocols like wearing masks and using sanitizers, we should be fine.”

“Flights are still operating, so people are traveling. Why should we cancel our plans out of fear? Even if we end up staying in Assam longer than expected, it’s not the end of the world,” Anupama said.

Kevin concluded firmly, “This will be a new experience for all of us. People must face challenges to learn resilience. So, there’s no confusion. We won’t cancel our plans. We’ll depart for India next week as scheduled.”

“But what about the film? If we reach India and everything shuts down, how will I shoot the film? If we can’t make the film after going there, I’ll be terribly disappointed,” Clara worried.

“It might take a bit longer than planned to make the film. Shooting an entire film in a month at a new location is never easy. But first, we need to finalize the script. Then we can plan properly,” Kevin said.

Clara looked at Anupama. “Poma, let’s discuss how much of the script you’ve written so far. We have to base the film on Charles Bruce’s life, right?”

Anupama nodded and fetched the copy of the script she had been working on. As she flipped through the pages, everyone mentally traveled back to Charles Bruce’s era.

CHAPTER 18

August 29, 1835

Calcutta, Office of the Tea Committee

Botanist Dr. Nathaniel Wallich, geologist McClelland, and another botanist Dr. Griffith were discussing their upcoming expedition. As members of the Tea Committee formed by the Governor-General Lord Bentinck, they had been assigned to survey Assam and neighboring Dibrugarh territories—recently annexed into the British Empire—to investigate the existence of indigenous tea plants.

All three were excited. For the first time, they would be journeying to Assam to observe tea plants firsthand. Especially after Commissioner Jenkins had sent saplings from Assam that had been confirmed as matching Chinese tea varieties, there was widespread enthusiasm across the British Empire about Assam's tea potential.

Dr. Nathaniel Wallich, the newly appointed Secretary of the Tea Committee, was also the team leader. Before embarking on their long journey by river, he met with the other two members to discuss their plan of action.

"My and Dr. Griffith's main duties will be to identify tea plants, assess the climate and soil conditions suitable for tea cultivation, while McClelland's task will be to test soil suitability and determine which regions have soils conducive to tea cultivation. Additionally, we will survey what other minerals and forest resources exist in Assam," Dr. Wallich outlined their roles as the team leader.

McClelland added, "To assess soil suitability, we must take samples of soil collected from China. Only then can we accurately determine the fitness of the soil for tea planting."

“You certainly know more about this than I do since you are a geologist. We will carry the soil samples that G.J. Gordon collected from China. You can take responsibility for that,” Dr. Wallich agreed.

After a brief pause, McClelland asked, “Where will our journey begin and where will it end?”

Dr. Wallich replied, “We will depart from Calcutta by river to Cachar first. After spending a few days there, we’ll proceed to Shillong and Cherrapunji. From there, we’ll head to Sadiya via Guwahati by boat. In Sadiya, we will meet a special individual who will serve as our guide for the rest of the expedition.”

“Who is this special individual?” Dr. Griffith inquired.

“His name is Charles Alexander Bruce. He previously served as a commander in the British Navy stationed at Sadiya. The government has now appointed him Superintendent of Tea Forests in Assam. He has been collecting wild tea saplings and seeds from the Singpho and Matak kingdoms and has begun tea cultivation in Sadiya. He will accompany us on our travels through the Singpho and Matak regions and show us the wild tea plants,” Dr. Wallich explained.

“I’ve heard of Charles Bruce before. Didn’t he once send tea saplings to the Botanical Gardens? You were the one who examined those saplings and declared they were not true tea plants,” Dr. Griffith remarked with a sly smile at Dr. Wallich.

“They did resemble tea plants, but compared to the tea saplings brought from China, they were inferior. Besides, at that time, there was no urgency for us to cultivate tea. That’s why I didn’t perform a thorough examination and simply declared they were not tea plants. But let’s not discuss this with others,” Dr. Wallich admitted in a confidential tone.

“Are we only surveying the Singpho and Matak kingdoms?” Dr. Griffith asked.

“No. After that, you will proceed to Biswanath. McClelland and I will travel toward the Abor region in Burma to investigate whether tea plants exist there. From Burma, we will return to Calcutta by ship,” Dr. Wallich replied.

“It sounds like this expedition will be quite difficult and arduous,” McClelland observed.

“Yes. This journey will not be comfortable. We all must be prepared to endure hardship. I’ve learned that Charles Bruce endured bodily suffering, challenging conditions, relentless rain, and even life-threatening dangers while searching for wild tea plants in the remote areas of the Singpho kingdom. So we must be ready to face similar challenges,” Dr. Wallich said.

“I don’t understand—if Charles Bruce has already identified wild tea plants in the Singpho region, why is he still tirelessly searching for more? What else does he need?” Dr. Griffith asked.

“About ten years ago, when Charles first sent tea saplings to the Botanical Gardens, we rejected them, declaring they were not true tea plants. Perhaps at that time, he made a vow that he would search every corner of Assam’s jungles for any and all tea-related plants. Rather than admitting defeat, he has continued his search for tea plants quietly and diligently—not for reward or recognition, but because he is committed to the mission of discovering genuine tea plants,” Dr. Wallich replied.

Everyone became eager to meet this indomitable, courageous, and hardworking man named Charles Bruce. A message was sent to Charles from Calcutta, requesting that he accompany the team and assist as their guide.

CHAPTER 19

6 August, 1837

Sadiya, Assam

The journey through the Singpho and Matak kingdoms had been arduous. The Tea Committee members had not anticipated how difficult the rain-soaked, muddy terrain would be. They could hardly believe how underdeveloped the area was. Charles Bruce enthusiastically showed them the wild tea plants he had already discovered.

After touring the Singpho and Matak kingdoms, the Tea Committee members spent a few days as guests of Charles Bruce in Sadiya. Their bodies and spirits, weary from the expedition, were rejuvenated. The tranquil beauty of the mighty Brahmaputra River enchanted them.

To honor the Tea Committee members, Charles organized a small party that evening. Through a friend serving in the military, he even procured some expensive imported liquor for the occasion.

After so long, the Committee members were overjoyed to finally relax and enjoy themselves. The evening passed in lively conversation.

Sensing the right moment, Charles asked Dr. Wallich, "After personally observing the wild tea plants in the Singpho and Matak kingdoms, what report will you send to the Governor-General?"

Slightly tipsy, Dr. Wallich looked at Charles and replied, "Our report will focus largely on you. The government must know how much hardship you endured traveling through these remote areas searching for tea plants. We will certainly detail your daring expeditions into the Singpho territory, where you ventured with only an assistant and two aides."

Dr. Griffith turned to Charles and said, “Your assistant mentioned an amusing incident that occurred while you were searching for tea plants along the banks of the Dibru River. Would you tell us about it?”

Charles blushed and laughed shyly. “It’s not really worth mentioning, but... we heard reports of wild tea plants along the Dibru River and went to a village called Kuji by the riverside. I asked the village elder about tea plants, but he was a rather shrewd man and immediately denied that any such plants existed. So I gave him a small quantity of opium and promised to supply him regularly if he helped us. Still, he refused. I then befriended him with kind words. He finally said he would inquire and left. The next morning, he returned saying he had seen the kind of tea plants we were looking for in the jungle and demanded another packet of opium in exchange for showing us.”

Dr. McClelland chuckled and asked, “And what happened in the Matak kingdom?”

“We went to the Matak capital, Rongagarh, and met the Matak king and his general. I explained that we wanted to survey valuable plants in the forests and requested an elephant and some men to assist us. Initially, they were reluctant, but after much persuasion, the king agreed to provide an elephant and some handlers. The forests in Matak territory were so dense that it was impossible to enter without an elephant. Even after agreeing, the king seemed to have second thoughts. He told us it was his mealtime and that he would send the elephant once he had finished bathing. Realizing his hesitation, I did not waste time. I traveled to a place called Tingrai and entered the jungle myself to search for tea plants. Many locals gathered around us. I gave them some opium and spoke kindly, explaining that the government wanted to cultivate tea for the people’s benefit. I told them that if tea cultivation succeeded, they could also grow tea and sell the leaves to tea companies, becoming prosperous. After conversing late into the night, we slept on beds of rice straw. The next morning, the villagers showed us the tea plants,” Charles recounted.

Charles Bruce’s unforgettable experiences and his relentless passion for tea moved everyone. His perseverance—facing any circumstance, any challenge while searching for tea plants throughout Upper Assam—was unparalleled. Dr. Wallich

felt a pang of guilt for having once denied Charles the honor of being recognized as Assam's tea pioneer.

Dr. Wallich said, "Your stories will inspire people for generations. In Calcutta, many people don't even know how devotedly you've been working to establish tea cultivation in Assam. Even we, the Tea Committee members, did not fully understand. Tell us about your early life."

Charles replied, "I was born on January 11, 1793, in England, where I completed my school education. I always wanted to travel and work abroad. So in 1809, at the age of 16, I joined a ship bound for India as a trainee sailor. Twice, our ship was attacked by French naval pirates. We fought back but were overpowered, stabbed with bayonets, and taken to an island where we were held captive. Later, British forces captured the island, and we were freed. However, I lost all my belongings in that ordeal. I then joined the British Navy and was sent to Java to fight. After securing victory in Java, I heard about the war between the British and Burma in Assam. I desired to take part, so I wrote to David Scott, the Agent to the Governor-General in Assam, requesting permission to join the conflict. Impressed by my eagerness, Scott arranged for me to be appointed as Commander of a patrol boat unit stationed at Sadiya. During the war against the Burmese, our navy successfully drove back the Burmese raiders along the frontier."

Everyone listened in rapt attention. This tall, strong man, seasoned by many battles, had fallen in love with tea plants—that thought amazed and impressed them.

Dr. Wallich took Charles' right hand in his and said gratefully, "You've done more for tea cultivation than any of us—despite our university degrees and positions as botanists. We owe you a lasting debt of gratitude."

Charles, deeply moved, replied, "Dr. Wallich, I too will never forget your support. The respected position I hold today has been made possible because of you."

Dr. Griffith asked, "What support did Dr. Wallich provide you? Please tell us."

Charles explained, "I am Assam's Forest Superintendent today because of his favor. You know I became a sailor at sixteen, so my formal education is limited. When

the government sought a qualified candidate for the Forest Superintendent post, my name was proposed. But some Tea Committee members objected, saying I was merely a soldier who had wandered Assam's jungles and lacked the qualifications for such a prestigious role. Dr. Wallich argued that my experience, enthusiasm, courage, and strong physical constitution made me suitable despite my lack of formal education. Without his support, I would never have attained this honored position."

"I know I made the right decision," said Dr. Wallich. "After traveling the jungles of Assam these past days, I've realized that only someone brave and energetic like you can serve effectively as Forest Superintendent. Moreover, your fluency in Assamese and Singpho allows you to easily communicate with the local people. I made no mistake in endorsing your appointment."

The Tea Committee members had already been impressed by the tea plantations Charles had established in Sadiya and surrounding areas. As the conversation continued, Mr. McClelland asked, "Mr. Bruce, how did you learn to cultivate tea? As far as I know, no one else in India has systematically grown tea through personal initiative."

"That was thanks to the former Secretary of the Tea Committee, Mr. G.J. Gordon. Although I tried cultivating tea on my own, my lack of proper techniques meant the results were poor. One day, I learned that Mr. Gordon had returned from China with several Chinese tea growers. I requested the Assam Commissioner to send some of them to me. Fortunately, they approved my request and sent five Chinese growers to Sadiya. From them, we learned the proper methods of tea cultivation."

Dr. Wallich asked, "Didn't you also send some processed tea leaves from your garden to Calcutta?"

Charles smiled wryly. "Yes, that was my folly. Due to bad weather, the tea production process did not go as planned, and the packing was poor. Still, in my enthusiasm, I sent a box of tea leaves to Calcutta through Commissioner Jenkins. Unfortunately, by the time it arrived, the tea had deteriorated badly. Perhaps the

Commissioner was displeased with me. If I had been able to store it in dry weather for six months, I could have sent a much higher-quality tea.”

Dr. Griffith inquired, “The freshly plucked tea leaves must undergo a long process before they become suitable for consumption. How did you manage that?”

“You may not know, but there are two factories at Tingrai and Khowang for processing tea leaves. Following the Commissioner’s orders, Andrew Charlton established these factories in 1834 and produced the first processed tea. Tea leaves collected from various areas are brought there and processed using different methods to make them suitable for consumption. Those factories are still operational,” Charles explained.

“What are your future plans? Will you send more tea leaves to Calcutta?” Dr. Wallich asked.

“Yes. I plan to pluck tea leaves from the gardens at Chabua, Dinjoy, and Tingrai. Under the supervision of the Chinese growers, we’ll process them and send them to the Governor-General by December this year. This time, the packing will be improved to ensure the tea leaves remain in good condition. I hope that once the tea successfully reaches Calcutta, it can also be sent to London,” Charles replied.

As they spoke, the liquor’s effects made the gathering grow drowsy. Dr. Wallich said, “I hope Assam’s tea soon reaches London and that the Singpho tea—Phalap—wins everyone’s hearts. I will always remember this delightful evening. Thank you very much, Mr. Bruce, for your generous hospitality.”

CHAPTER 20

27 February, 2020

Patkai Villa, London

The two scenes from Anupama's script mesmerized everyone for a while. Kevin praised her work, "The extraordinary contribution of Charles Bruce to tea cultivation in Assam is beautifully reflected in your script. If we can depict these two events well, the audience will surely appreciate the film."

Clara thoughtfully added, "We'll also need to show what happened afterward. Was Charles able to safely send the tea leaves to Calcutta? Did the tea eventually reach London? The audience will want to know."

"I do know that part," Kevin replied. "In December 1837, as Charles mentioned, he sent twelve sturdy tin boxes of packed tea to the Governor-General in Calcutta. Each box contained thirty-seven pounds of tea. The boxes were lined with lead inside to keep out moisture. The shipment arrived in Calcutta on 31 January 1838. There, Dr. Wallich, along with a tea inspector, assessed the quality. The excellent quality tea prompted the Governor-General to recommend it be sent to London without delay."

"Did the tea actually reach London?" Clara asked.

"After repacking in Calcutta, the tea was shipped to London. To preserve its quality and aroma, the boxes were kept elevated over burning coals during the voyage. However, due to improper packing—since they lacked experience with ocean transport—some of the tea was spoiled. After a six-month sea journey, the tea arrived in London in November 1838. The portion that remained in good condition created quite a sensation. The East India Company distributed four of the boxes among prominent London merchants for quality testing. Although there were minor packing flaws, the merchants declared that the tea was competitive with Chinese tea. On 10 January 1839, eight boxes of Bruce's tea were

auctioned in the London market. A Liverpool merchant was so impressed that he expressed interest in buying 500 to 1,000 boxes,” Kevin explained.

“Wonderful! Assam tea finally entered the international market and became world-famous. Thanks to tea, the world came to know about the obscure eastern Indian region called Assam,” Prashant remarked.

“You’re absolutely right,” Kevin agreed. “Even today, Assam tea is renowned worldwide for its strength and flavor. You’ll find Assam tea in every corner of the globe. Truly, tea put Assam on the world map.”

“I haven’t heard the full story yet, but one question comes to mind,” David interjected. “Charles Bruce took help from Chinese tea growers—did he also learn Chinese? I’ve heard it’s a very difficult language.”

“You’re asking the right question,” Kevin said. “Communicating with the Chinese workers was a major challenge for Charles. He mostly spoke to them through gestures. Using signs, he learned from them how to prepare the harvested green leaves into the dried tea that people consume. He even documented the process for making black tea and sent it to Commissioner Jenkins in Assam.”

“So the knowledge of turning freshly plucked green tea leaves into the powdered tea we drink today—that’s what Charles learned from the Chinese workers?” Clara asked. “I’m really curious to know how the process works.”

“Don’t worry, Clara,” Anupama assured her. “Once we’re in Assam, we’ll visit tea factories and see the entire process firsthand—from plucking to the packaged tea. You can even depict the whole process in your film.”

Thanks to Kevin and Anupama’s efforts, the early work on the film was progressing steadily, which lifted Clara’s spirits. She exclaimed joyfully, “Now that we’ve made this much progress, I feel confident that *Phalap* will turn out to be a great film. We should celebrate this moment. Besides, we’re leaving for India next week—some fun before we go would be good.”

“There’s not much to celebrate yet, Clara,” Kevin replied. “So far, we’ve only gathered historical facts about Assam’s tea. There’s still a long way to go with the film. Once we actually make the film, we’ll celebrate for sure.”

“You’ve all gotten old,” Clara teased. “It seems none of you have the spirit to enjoy a little fun anymore. I, however, will always stay young and celebrate every small joy of life. You never know what tomorrow will bring.”

Just then, Clara’s phone rang. It was from an unknown number. Prashant had told her not to answer such calls. Clara handed the phone to him. He declined the call, but the same number rang again. Kevin signaled that he should answer. Prashant picked up and immediately heard Michael’s voice.

“Give the phone to Clara. She can’t run from me forever. She won’t escape me.”

Prashant put the call on speaker and said angrily, “Whatever you have to say, say it to me. Clara has nothing more to discuss with you, Michael.”

“Listen, stay out of this. This is between me and Clara. She has betrayed me. She toyed with my emotions. She must answer for the injustice she’s done to me.”

“Shut up, Michael! I have ample evidence that you took advantage of a married woman’s financial hardship to pressure and manipulate her. Do you have any proof that she borrowed money from you? There was no agreement for repayment between you two. This is blackmail, and I’m going to the police now.”

“You uncivilized beggar,” Michael retorted. “You can’t even provide for your wife, and now you want to drag me to court? You’ll probably have to borrow money again just to file a case. Don’t threaten me. Send Clara back to me. That’s your best option.”

Prashant’s anger boiled over. “Who do you think you are? If I hear you say one more word about Clara, things will get ugly.”

Kevin grabbed the phone and warned, “Michael, this is your final warning. Stop harassing Prashant and Clara. We’ve recorded all your calls and threatening messages. If we file a case, you’ll be in serious trouble. If Clara has done anything wrong, take it to court. But calling and sending threatening messages is a criminal offense. If you continue, I’ll personally make sure you end up in jail.”

Michael, hearing Kevin’s stern warning, hung up. Kevin and Anupama sat down beside Prashant, while Clara stood close to him.

David, unable to grasp what was going on, quietly asked Nancy, “What’s happening? Who’s blackmailing whom?”

Nancy leaned in and whispered, “I don’t know the full details, but I think Clara had an affair with someone. Now that she ended it, the man is blackmailing her. Everyone knows about it now. Even though Prashant knows, he’s still supporting Clara because he loves her so much.”

David nodded thoughtfully. “Human relationships are truly strange. Sometimes people hate others without knowing the facts, and sometimes, even knowing the truth, they choose to forgive. Forgiving someone despite betrayal requires a deep, profound love.”

“You’re right, David,” Nancy said softly. “Forgiveness comes only when there’s deep love. Without that depth, people struggle. I believe Prashant truly loves Clara with all his heart.”

CHAPTER 21

4 March, 2020

Heathrow Airport, London

The fear of COVID-19 was slowly tightening its grip on London. By now, hundreds of people were being infected daily in Iran, France, and Spain. Although the infection rate in England remained low, British Prime Minister Boris Johnson had urged anyone showing symptoms of cough or fever to self-isolate at home. Wearing masks in public places had become mandatory, but hotels, restaurants, flights, and trains were still operating normally.

Upon reaching the airport, Anupama called her father. Jogendra Baruah, her father, was delighted that his daughter and son-in-law were arriving, but at the same time, he was concerned about them traveling internationally amid the spread of the coronavirus. He firmly instructed her to make sure everyone wore their masks properly and used sanitizers frequently.

At Heathrow Airport, thermal screening was being carried out for all passengers to identify anyone who might be unwell. Sick travelers were not being allowed to fly. Moreover, no one was permitted to enter the airport without a mask. A sense of fear was visible on everyone's faces.

Clara found it quite uncomfortable to keep her mask on continuously. She kept trying to remove it, but each time she did, Prashant nudged her to fix it back in place.

"Wearing this mask all the time makes me feel like I can't breathe. And how am I supposed to eat when I'm hungry? If I have to remove the mask to eat anyway, what's the point of keeping it on all the time?" Clara complained in frustration.

"Listen, Clara," Kevin said in a reassuring tone, "we have to follow government guidelines. Since there's no antiviral treatment for this new virus yet, we have no

choice but to wear masks. It might feel uncomfortable for a while, but you'll get used to it gradually."

In addition to thermal screening, large sprayers were dispersing sanitizer mist into the air to disinfect people and their belongings frequently. As a result, movement inside Heathrow Airport was slow and the crowd had increased to an unusual level. Although they had left home at 10 a.m. and reached the airport at 11 a.m. for their 1:30 p.m. Air India flight to Delhi, the delays caused by the crowd meant they only reached the boarding gate just after 1 p.m.

From all the running around, Nancy started to breathe heavily. Anupama seated her in a chair and offered water from her bottle. Kevin approached with a smile and said, "If you're getting exhausted from just this bit of running, how will you manage in India? We'll be walking around the tea gardens a lot."

Soon after, the boarding for the flight began. Once they boarded the plane and settled into their seats, everyone finally breathed a sigh of relief.

Nancy turned to Kevin and asked, "Dad, what time will we reach India?"

Kevin replied, "Our flight is eight hours long. But we'll arrive in India after midnight."

CHAPTER 22

5 March, 2020

Indira Gandhi International Airport, Delhi

After a comfortable journey, the plane landed at Delhi Airport at 3:15 a.m. Once they disembarked and completed the immigration formalities, all passengers were taken to a designated area where many other travelers had already gathered. Everyone underwent thermal screening again. Any passengers found to be unwell were taken to a separate area. It was learned that these passengers would be quarantined for seven days. Fortunately, no one from Kevin and Anupama's group of five showed any signs of illness.

They had to wait about four hours for their connecting flight to Dibrugarh. As Anupama sat waiting, her mind drifted back to the first time she had traveled to Dibrugarh with Kevin and Clara. That trip had also included Kevin's grandmother, Nancy. Anupama remembered how, despite the challenges, she had insisted on taking the 90-year-old grandmother back to her birthplace in Assam. She recalled how she had taken care of her grandmother at the Delhi Airport, helping her with her diapers and ensuring she was comfortable. Anupama felt a pang of sadness remembering how she couldn't bring her grandmother back to London—she had been laid to rest in the land where she was born.

Prashant and Nancy dozed off in the lounge chairs. Anupama watched the people passing by. Meanwhile, Clara and Kevin went to the smoking zone for a cigarette.

As they smoked, Clara said, exhaling a plume of smoke, "Kevin, I have a feeling I might never return to London. I think I'll be staying in India."

"I think that's the right decision," Kevin replied encouragingly. "Prashant has found a good job. You'll live comfortably in Assam's tea gardens. You and Prashant can always visit London for vacations now and then."

Clara sighed deeply. “If I don’t return, please keep in touch with my mother. There’s no one else to check on her now.”

Kevin knew all too well about Clara’s difficult life. Her father had been a violent alcoholic who abused her mother. After drinking himself to death due to liver damage, Clara’s mother had worked as a waitress at a pub. Now elderly, she had lost that job too and worked as a babysitter to survive.

“Don’t worry, Clara. Give your mother my phone number. If she ever needs anything, I’ll be there for her. You can also keep in touch through video calls,” Kevin assured her.

Clara looked at him gratefully. “Kevin, you truly are an exceptional person. Sometimes I feel jealous of Anupama—like she took you away from me. When I was with you, I always felt protected. I always felt safe. That’s what I miss the most now. I know Prashant loves me, but I don’t feel that same sense of security with him.”

“Prashant is a good man, Clara. Even after everything that’s happened, he’s still standing by you. That’s no small thing. Maybe he doesn’t express his feelings the way you’d like, but he loves you so much that he’s never left your side. I think you shouldn’t do anything that would hurt him. You both need to support each other now,” Kevin advised.

Clara took a few deep puffs and exhaled. “I know, Kevin. Prashant left his permanent job, his parents, his family, and even his friends to come to London because of me. And I’ve left everything to follow him back to Assam. But still, I’m afraid. What if he starts to hate me? What if he leaves me? What would I do then?”

“We shouldn’t ruin the present by worrying about the future, Clara. What you fear might never happen. Just support him in every way you can and deal with whatever comes later,” Kevin reassured her.

“If anything ever happens to me, I’ll tell you first, Kevin. I couldn’t be your life partner, but you’ve always been my best friend. You’re the only one I can talk to. If I ever need help, you’ll come for me, won’t you?” Clara asked, her voice filled with emotion.

“Why do you think I wouldn’t help you if you were in trouble? If anything happens, Anupama and I will both be there for you,” Kevin promised as he blew out another cloud of smoke.

“I’m not sure about Anupama,” Clara said softly. “But you’ll be there for me, won’t you, Kevin?”

Just then, Kevin’s phone rang. It was Anupama. As soon as he answered, she said, “Where are you? Security check starts soon.”

“We’re at the smoking zone. We’ll be there right away,” Kevin replied.

They stubbed out their cigarettes and joined Anupama.

“What were you two talking about for so long while smoking?” Anupama asked teasingly.

“I was telling Kevin that if I don’t return to London, you guys might need to check on my mother sometimes. There’s no one else left to look after her,” Clara said.

“Don’t worry about that, Clara. If necessary, she can even stay with us,” Anupama replied.

Clara hugged Anupama. “If you both leave me and go back to London, I’ll miss you so much. But who knows what fate has written for us.”

Soon, the monitor flashed the announcement for the security check for the Dibrugarh flight. Kevin woke up Prashant and Nancy. As Nancy headed to the restroom, Anupama accompanied her. After freshening up, they all had breakfast at a nearby restaurant.

When the boarding for the Dibrugarh flight was announced, they headed to the designated gate.

Suddenly, Clara looked at her phone and became restless. She showed a message to Prashant. Reading it, he immediately understood who it was from. He passed the phone to Kevin, who read the message and said, “Don’t reply. He’s just trying to create tension between you two. Ignore it.”

“But he’s threatening me! He says if I don’t repay £100,000 within ten days, he’ll leak my nude photos. What should we do now?” Clara said, distressed.

Prashant slumped into a chair and buried his face in his hands. “Oh God, how much more can I bear? If he really does this, who knows where those photos will end up? How will I face my family back home?”

Understanding the gravity of the situation, Anupama said, “There’s no use panicking now. Our flight is ready for takeoff. We’ll figure this out once we land in Dibrugarh. We’ll find a solution.”

Seeing the storm brewing in Prashant’s mind, Clara grabbed his hand. “I’ve caused you so much trouble, Prashant. I never imagined that man could stoop so low. I did a topless photo shoot for some extra pounds. That must be what he’s talking about. Please don’t be angry with me.”

“But why didn’t you tell me about this before? Why did you keep it from me?” Prashant asked wearily.

“I thought it was better not to say anything. I was afraid you’d be hurt. Please try to understand,” Clara pleaded.

Kevin took Prashant’s hand. “If we all stick together, no one can harm us. We’ve faced many dangers before and found solutions together. If necessary, we’ll take legal action. Threatening someone like this is a serious crime in any country. If he leaks any photos without Clara’s consent, we can easily file a cybercrime complaint. It’s that Michael who will end up in trouble.”

Hearing Kevin’s reassuring words, Clara’s eyes filled with tears. She said gratefully, “With you by our side, Kevin, no harm can come to us. You’re like a god to us.”

“Come on now, I’m no god,” Kevin replied with a smile. “I’m just an ordinary man who always wishes the best for you.”

Prashant thanked Kevin and picked up his backpack, joining the boarding line for the plane. Clara followed. Anupama and Nancy were already in line.

CHAPTER 23

5 March 2020

Dibrugarh

Anupama's father, Jogen Baruah, and his assistant Hari Kai had been waiting near the arrival gate of Dibrugarh Airport for over an hour. Hari Kai's wife, Ruby, also wanted to come to welcome Anupama and her family, but Jogen Baruah told her, "You don't need to come. Stay home and clean up the house a bit. You know our madam won't like it if the house looks untidy."

As soon as the plane landed, Hari Kai grew restless. He had helped raise Anupama and was deeply fond of her. Now, even little Nancy had grown up quite a bit. Excited to see both Anupama and Nancy after so long, he kept stretching his neck, eyes fixed on the exit door where passengers were coming out.

Anupama and Nancy were the first to emerge. Spotting her father and Hari Kai waiting, Anupama grabbed Nancy's hand and hurried over to them. Kevin, Clara, and Prashant followed closely behind.

"Glad you arrived safely, my dear," Jogen Baruah said warmly, embracing Anupama and patting Nancy's head. Nancy grinned, "Hi Kaka! How are you?" and hugged him. Kevin, Clara, and Prashant also greeted him respectfully. Anupama looked at Hari Kai and said, "Your health doesn't seem very good. Are you not eating well?"

Hari Kai chuckled. "Well, madam, age has caught up with me. My health isn't what it used to be. Plus, I have diabetes now, so I have to be careful with my diet. That's why I've lost a bit of weight." Kevin, Clara, and Prashant also greeted Hari Kai warmly.

Jogen Baruah had brought his own car along with a rented Scorpio to carry the luggage and passengers. Anupama scolded her father for driving at his age. Hari

Kai took the front seat of Jogen Baruah's car, with Anupama and Nancy in the back. The others rode in the Scorpio.

At their house in Amolapatty, Ruby was waiting by the gate. As the vehicles arrived, she came forward to help unload the luggage.

Anupama embraced Ruby. She noticed Ruby had become sturdier over the years. "Hari Kai seems frail, but you've become stronger," Anupama remarked. Ruby blushed and patted Nancy's head. "The little miss has grown up so much," she said.

It had been three years since Anupama and Nancy last visited Assam. In that time, Nancy had indeed grown considerably taller.

Hari Kai and Ruby carried the luggage into the rooms.

Once everyone had freshened up and gathered in the drawing room, Ruby brought tea and snacks for everyone. Baruah turned to Clara and said, "I've heard you're making a film about tea. I'm very pleased. It's fitting that your journey in Assam begins with tea."

As they all took tea and snacks, Clara asked Baruah, "Uncle, you must know a lot about the tea gardens of Assam. We even saw some tea estates on the way here. When and by whom were these tea gardens established?"

"The tea estates you saw are now owned by various companies," Baruah replied. "In Assam, there are big names like Assam Tea Company, Williamson Magor, Tata Tea, and many smaller firms. Altogether, there are probably more than 800 tea estates in Assam. But the first company to establish tea plantations here was the Assam Company."

"But why name it just 'Assam Company'? Wouldn't 'Assam Tea Company' have been a better name?" Clara asked.

"I believe," Kevin interjected, "that back in February 1839, several companies met at Winchester Street in London to discuss forming a tea company focusing on Assam. They decided to create a company with 10,000 shares priced at fifty pounds each. At that time, there were also rumors in London that Assam had coal, underground oil, and gold in its rivers. To cover all potential ventures—not just tea—they named it simply the Assam Company."

“Is it true that gold can actually be found in Assam’s rivers?” Clara asked with surprise.

“There’s a river called the Subansiri—meaning ‘gold river.’ People used to find gold by sifting the sand it carried downstream. There may even be gold mines somewhere along its course, but none have been officially discovered yet,” Prashant explained.

“It’s also worth noting that when the Assam Company was formed, it became the largest commodity-producing company in India,” Baruah added. “Its assets were spread across the various districts of Upper Assam.”

“We’ve been talking only about tea since we arrived,” Anupama laughed. “If we keep this up, we’ll all develop ‘tea mania.’”

“Speaking of tea mania,” Kevin said, “it’s true that from around 1861, Assam experienced a sort of tea mania. News of the Assam Company’s profitable tea estates spread, and many people left other businesses to start tea gardens. Rumors claimed that planting just a few tea bushes could make one very wealthy. Greedy businessmen bought land at ten times its value and started planting tea, often without any knowledge or proper surveys. Some even bought land without measuring it and later received much less land than they paid for. Many Europeans scrambled to buy shares in tea companies. This frenzy was later dubbed the ‘Tea Mania’ of Assam.”

“I read about that in Edward Gait’s *A History of Assam*,” Baruah added. “The craze was so intense that not just ordinary people but even three district commissioners, four assistant commissioners, and several police officers left their government jobs to start tea plantations.”

“But did any of these people actually profit from it?” Anupama asked.

“Most of them didn’t,” Kevin replied. “In fact, many suffered losses. The biggest failure was in tea cultivation itself. Without the necessary knowledge, people established plantations, but poor cultivation methods led to a decline in tea quality. Without skilled labor and proper care, many estates became overgrown and abandoned. Within seven or eight years, this frenzy faded, and professional

companies began cultivating tea scientifically. That's when Assam's tea industry truly began to thrive."

"Are we going to keep talking, or are we going to eat?" Anupama asked with a smile. "Ruby has already prepared lunch for us. Let's eat and rest a bit. We'll have plenty of time to discuss tea later."

Clara, who had been taking notes, looked up. "There's so much to cover about Assam's tea history. I'm already wondering how I'll fit everything into my film. Poma, we need to sit down and plan the script."

"Of course we will," Anupama agreed. "But first, let's eat. Nancy must be hungry too. All of you go sit at the dining table. I'll help Ruby and Hari Kai serve the food."

As Anupama headed toward the kitchen, Nancy pulled Clara aside and whispered, "David messaged me. He says that due to COVID-19, international flights from London may soon be suspended. His parents have forbidden him from traveling to India under these circumstances. He's asking whether he should still come. What should I tell him?"

Clara's face fell. After thinking for a moment, she replied, "If he comes and then can't return, it'll be a big problem. Tell him not to come."

Nancy's face darkened. She texted David and then looked at Clara. "How long might the international flights be suspended? What if we can't go back either? What about my school?"

"I read somewhere that schools might close early because children can spread the virus quickly. Schools are preparing for online classes. You can probably continue from here if the internet speed is good."

"We shouldn't have come at all at a time like this," Nancy grumbled.

"If everything gets locked down, how will I shoot the film?" Clara added. "After all this research and planning, it'll be terrible if we can't even make the film."

"So far, the situation isn't too bad," Kevin reassured her. "But if infections increase, who knows what will happen. Let's just keep working for now. We'll deal with any problems as they come."

Clara glanced at Kevin. “You told me experiences like these are valuable. Now it seems we’ve come here just to experience being locked up. I can’t stay cooped up for long. If I have to wear a mask all the time, I’ll suffocate.”

“We won’t be here for long. Once Prashant joins his job, we’ll move to the tea garden bungalow. We’ll have more freedom there. Don’t worry,” Kevin assured her.

“I’ll check at the estate office tomorrow to see if I can join a bit earlier. If possible, I’ll start right away so we can move into the bungalow as soon as we can,” Prashant added.

CHAPTER 24

8 March 2020

Nirajuli Tea Estate

Prashant found out that the person previously working in the position he was to join had already resigned and moved to another job. So, there was no problem with him joining early. He was also given a beautifully furnished, two-storey assistant manager's bungalow. The day after receiving the keys, Prashant, along with Kevin and their families, moved into the bungalow.

Clara was awestruck by the amenities of the tea garden bungalow. She had never imagined she would live in such a grand house, where even simple tasks would have a team of ten helpers and attendants. Both Kevin and Clara were amazed at the level of respect the tea garden workers showed towards the *Sahab* (manager) and *Mem-Sahab* (manager's wife). Several forest guards, clerks, and staff came to greet Prashant, bowing to him as if offering prayers. Many had also come hoping to meet the young *Mem-Sahab* they had heard about.

Prashant felt immensely pleased to be living amidst nature again. He took out his expensive digital camera and captured photos of the trees, flower gardens, butterflies, and birds around the bungalow. He felt like he had finally found the environment he had been searching for.

On their first day, Kevin and Anupama took Nancy for a walk among the tea bushes. Seeing the tall Englishman Kevin, the tea pluckers stopped their work and stared. Nancy clicked photos of the tea bushes and the workers on her phone. A rumor quickly spread that an English *Sahab* had returned to the estate. It reminded the older workers of a time when all the managers had been British.

That evening, the estate manager, Shankar Lal Mehta, invited Prashant, Clara, and their guests to dinner. Though Mehta was from Gujarat, he had been living in Assam for nearly twenty years. After joining the tea industry, he had married

an Assamese woman and made Assam his permanent home. Their only son studied at Assam Valley Boarding School in Tezpur. The Mehta couple were known for their hospitality, especially when guests came to their home.

Though the dinner invitation was for seven in the evening, Mehta called at six and said, “Come early so we can chat and have a little party.”

Prashant dressed formally in a suit and tie. Clara protested, “You’re dressed so formally. I don’t have any formal clothes. The dresses I have would probably get me turned away at the door.”

Anupama suggested, “Why not wear a traditional Indian outfit? I’ll dress you in one of my sarees. I think my blouse will fit you perfectly.”

Clara smiled. “Poma, when you’re around, I don’t have to worry about anything. If I’m going to stay in India, I must learn to wear sarees. But if you’re not there, who’ll help me?”

“I’ll teach you myself. And if you forget, there are plenty of tutorials on YouTube these days,” Anupama replied.

“Prashant keeps telling me to learn from YouTube, but why should I, when I have you to teach me? I think if I wear a saree or *mekhela chador* when I meet Prashant’s parents, they’ll like me more, don’t you think, Poma?” Clara asked.

Anupama reflected for a moment. Though they had been in Assam for several days, they had yet to visit Prashant’s parents in Duliajan. Even Prashant hadn’t mentioned it. “Yes, Clara. We must visit Duliajan soon. I’m sure Prashant’s parents are waiting to meet you both.”

“Prashant has been so busy joining early, we haven’t had time. He’s planning to visit tomorrow or the day after. I’ll definitely wear a *mekhela chador* when we go, right, Poma?” Clara said.

“Of course. I’ll dress you up like a proper Assamese daughter-in-law. Don’t worry,” Anupama reassured her.

Clara hugged Anupama excitedly.

By seven, dressed in their finest, they arrived at the Mehta residence in Prashant's official jeep. Mr. and Mrs. Mehta were already waiting in the front portico. As they arrived, both came forward to welcome them warmly. Mrs. Mehta handed everyone masks and sanitizer before leading them inside.

Mr. Mehta had also invited another assistant manager, Rajiv Phukan, and his wife. After introductions, everyone gathered in a beautifully decorated drawing room with vintage British-era furniture and decorations—including a pair of mounted deer antlers, an old gramophone player, a built-in fireplace, and a wooden bookshelf lined with classic books.

"This bungalow was built during British times. Many British *Sahabs* have lived here. Some of their belongings are still here," Mr. Mehta explained.

Kevin said, "The tall ceilings and architectural style clearly show British influence. In London, we have houses like this too. Back then, high ceilings helped regulate the temperature in the absence of air conditioning. And of course, there's the fireplace for cold weather."

Mr. Mehta laughed. "That's why living here feels like being back in London. There used to be another bungalow like this in the garden, but it burned down years ago."

"Oh, you mean the haunted bungalow," Mrs. Mehta added.

"Haunted? You mean a haunted house? There's a haunted house here?" Prashant asked, surprised.

Laughing, Mr. Mehta said, "In tea gardens, ghost stories are quite common. People say that when that bungalow burned down, the wife of a British *Sahab* was trapped inside and died. It's believed her spirit still haunts the ruins."

Clara's face paled. "Do ghosts really exist nowadays? Or is it just people's imagination?"

Anupama shared an old story her father had told her about encountering a ghostly European man asking for a lift on his scooter late at night. When he calculated the man's age, it should have been at least 150 years. Later, he realized the man

was the spirit of an old mechanic named Nicholas who had worked in the tea gardens.

Clara clung to Prashant. "You shouldn't work in such a haunted place. Let's just go back to London."

Mr. Mehta chuckled. "There's no reason to be so frightened. In all my years here, no ghost has ever harmed anyone."

Kevin, intrigued, asked, "Hasn't anyone investigated the haunted bungalow?"

"No. The laborers believe that anyone who goes there never returns. They think if anyone disturbs the spirit, she'll attack everyone," Mr. Mehta explained.

Prashant said, "I'm curious to find out what's in that bungalow. Maybe we should investigate."

"I won't let you go near that place," Clara exclaimed anxiously.

Rajiv Phukan chimed in, "If you do investigate, count me in!"

At that moment, the servants brought hot cups of tea and fresh pakoras. Kevin remarked, "Because of their low education levels, tea garden workers tend to believe in superstitions. Sometimes people are even accused of witchcraft and attacked."

Anupama added, "Is that still happening? In today's age of science and progress?"

Mr. Mehta nodded gravely and explained how diseases were often attributed to evil spirits, leading to accusations and violence.

Clara asked, "Don't people go to the police?"

"They're usually too afraid. Only when journalists or activists intervene does the truth come out," Mehta replied.

The conversation shifted to the history of tea laborers in Assam. Kevin learned that many laborers had originally come from Bengal, Odisha, and Bihar. Local Assamese people hadn't taken up tea work due to cultural and practical reasons. Mehta described how Charles Bruce and other planters had tried recruiting local

tribes and even brought laborers from China and Bengal—but faced numerous challenges.

Clara was impressed by Mehta's knowledge and noted that this historical insight would enrich her film.

As the evening progressed, Mrs. Mehta invited the women to another room where she served wine and fruit juice. Clara was pleased to hear Mrs. Mehta express interest in appearing in the film.

Meanwhile, in the drawing room, Mr. Mehta served whisky and proposed a dance. Everyone joined in. Clara felt awkward when Mr. Mehta, while dancing, whispered inappropriate comments and suggested he could invest in her film in exchange for “some company.”

Clara politely extricated herself and went to dance with Prashant instead. She later told Anupama about the incident. Anupama, already suspicious after noticing Mrs. Mehta flirting with Kevin, advised Clara to stay cautious.

Mr. Mehta's behavior was disappointing, especially given his age and social standing.

Soon after, Kevin and Prashant suggested they wrap up for the night. Mrs. Mehta, still in a festive mood, reluctantly agreed to have dinner served.

CHAPTER 25

8 March 2020

Duliajan

When Clara, dressed in the *mekhela chador* Anupama had draped on her, bent down to touch Prashant's mother's feet in greeting, the older woman lovingly embraced her.

"Now you truly look like our daughter-in-law," Prashant's father added, smiling at Clara.

Kevin and Anupama, along with their daughter Nancy, were warmly received. Seeing Nancy for the first time, Prashant's parents were delighted.

"I can't tell you how happy I am that you've taken the job at the tea estate," Prashant's father told him, placing a hand on his shoulder. "At least now we'll get to see both of you. I had begun to fear I might close my eyes for the last time before seeing you again."

Prashant gently held his father's arm. "Don't worry anymore. We'll be staying here now," he said emotionally.

Prashant's parents warmly greeted Kevin and Anupama. Meeting Nancy brought them special joy.

Everyone gathered in the front sitting room. When Prashant's father, Prabir Dutta, learned that Clara was making a film about the tea industry, he was thrilled. Having spent his entire working life surrounded by tea gardens, Dutta had many experiences to share.

During the conversation, Maniram Dewan's name came up. Prashant asked, "Wasn't Maniram Dewan the first Assamese tea planter, Father? I've heard he was the first Assamese to start a tea plantation near Jorhat."

Prabir Dutta smiled. “Though Maniram Dewan is widely called the first Assamese tea planter, he actually wasn’t the first.”

“Then who was the first tea planter of Assam?” Clara asked with great interest.

“The first tea planter in what the British called Assam was a Singpho man named Ningrula Singpho. He cultivated tea entirely through his own efforts on his own land. In 1840, when Charles Bruce sent his first consignment of tea boxes to Calcutta, 35 of those boxes were filled with tea produced from Ningrula’s garden,” Dutta explained.

“But I haven’t come across much information about Ningrula anywhere,” Kevin added.

“Ningrula Singpho is another figure lost in the pages of history. He was a hardworking man deeply interested in tea. After Charles Bruce discovered the tea plant, Ningrula adopted Chinese methods of tea cultivation in the Singpho region. While other Singpho people, known for their fiercely independent nature, did not initially support the idea, Ningrula stepped forward, learned the techniques from Bruce, and started cultivating tea. His private garden was likely the first privately owned tea estate in India. Without any government patronage or investment, his tea garden marked the first attempt by a local to cultivate tea commercially. Later, Bruce collected tea leaves from Ningrula’s garden and included them in the consignment sent for auction in Calcutta,” Dutta elaborated.

“I can see now that while Maniram Dewan played an important role in Assam’s tea history, Ningrula Singpho’s contributions were equally significant,” Prashant remarked.

“Later, when the Assam Company was formed and Charles Bruce joined it—a private venture—the British government lost access to Bruce’s services. The responsibility for managing government-run tea estates fell to Captain Vetch, the political representative in Assam. Having lost Bruce’s wise leadership, Vetch turned to Ningrula, who by then had gained considerable fame for his independently cultivated tea,” Dutta explained further.

“Do the Singpho people still cultivate tea on their own like Ningrula did?” Anupama asked.

“They do. In the Ledo and Margherita regions, Singpho families often have small tea gardens attached to their homes. They refer to it as *Phalap Numfak*, meaning the young, tender leaves of the tea plant. They pluck the tender leaves, sun-dry them, crush them, and store them in bamboo tubes kept near the fireplace. This method preserves the tea for up to six or seven years without losing its flavor. Even today, the Singphos produce tea in this traditional way for household use,” Prashant’s father explained.

Prashant’s mother called everyone for tea and snacks. Anupama helped Clara serve the refreshments.

“You all came together—that’s so nice,” Prashant’s mother told Anupama. “Your father often calls, and he always talks about Nancy. We were eager to see her.”

“We’re happy too. The last time we came, it was a short, rushed trip. And the time before that, Nancy had a fever, so we left her in Dad’s care and couldn’t come here,” Anupama replied, blending Assamese and English for Clara’s understanding.

“But you didn’t really want to come this time either. If I hadn’t insisted, I don’t think you would have,” Clara teased with a smile.

Prashant’s mother had picked up some basic English to converse with her English daughter-in-law. She told Clara in halting English, “You come to Assam, we are very happy. Now we are old. London going not possible.”

Clara and Anupama chuckled at her effort.

Nancy was initially hesitant to eat the homemade Assamese snacks like *laru pitha*, *doi*, and soft rice cakes, but after some encouragement from Anupama, she tried them and enjoyed them. Kevin and Clara also appreciated the traditional flavors. Prashant had specially asked his mother to prepare Assamese delicacies for them.

Kevin especially liked the tea served with the snacks. “Assam tea tastes completely different. We buy Assam tea in London, but it never tastes like this.”

Prashant explained, “That’s because you probably never had orthodox tea before. Usually, the tea we get in the market is CTC tea—Cut, Tear, Curl. It’s produced in large quantities using machines to process leaves quickly. Orthodox tea, on the other hand, is prepared by carefully drying the leaves by hand or with minimal machine use, preserving the flavor and qualities of the tea. It’s often called the ‘champagne of teas.’ Orthodox tea is produced in small quantities and can fetch thousands of rupees per kilogram at auctions.”

“That’s something new I’ve learned today. So, the *phalap* tea traditionally made by the Singphos was also orthodox tea, right?” Kevin asked while sipping his tea.

“Well, the Singphos would pluck tender leaves and dry them over the fireplace, storing them in bamboo tubes. They then steeped the dried leaves in water to prepare *phalap*. While similar to orthodox tea, it didn’t quite match the quality of today’s scientifically prepared orthodox tea. Most orthodox tea produced in Assam today is exported,” Prashant’s father replied.

“Wow, the journey from *phalap* to orthodox tea is truly fascinating. I’d love to see the entire process—from green tea leaves to the packaged tea we buy in the market,” Clara said excitedly.

“You’ll see the whole process when you visit your tea estate’s factory. Nowadays, almost all factories process the tea with machines, but in earlier times, tea was prepared entirely by hand before the first factories were established in Assam,” Prashant’s father explained.

“But how exactly was it done back then?” Prashant asked.

“Charles Bruce initially prepared tea using a manual process. Workers would carefully pluck the youngest, softest leaves by hand. When plucking larger amounts, they would snap off the tips with just four young leaves using their thumb and forefinger. These leaves were collected in large bamboo baskets, which had wide-mouthed openings. The leaves were then spread out evenly and placed on bamboo trays set up in sheds without roofs to allow plenty of sunlight. Long bamboo sticks were used to gently turn the leaves. Depending on the intensity of the sun, the drying time varied.

“Once the leaves were dry, they were rubbed between the palms to curl and soften them, after which they were placed in another bamboo basket. After a final round of sun-drying, the leaves were roasted in large iron pans by continuously stirring them until they curled into tight balls. These could then be brewed into tea,” Prashant’s father explained in detail.

“Prashant, you’ll have to show me this process in the factory. We should record it all for the film so that viewers can understand how tea is made,” Clara said enthusiastically.

CHAPTER 26

8 March 2020

COVID Situation Worsens

The spread of COVID was increasing rapidly. In India's major cities, many people were becoming infected. Across Europe—including England—many COVID patients were succumbing to the illness. All travelers arriving in India from abroad were now being quarantined for fifteen days.

Nancy was receiving updates from David about the situation in England. David's father had also contracted COVID and was admitted to a hospital. The government had warned people not to leave their homes without masks. In short, a fearful atmosphere prevailed across England.

Confined to the vast bungalow of the tea estate, Nancy was feeling bored. From time to time, she messaged David to pass the time.

One day, she wrote, "David, it would have been so nice if you were here. Everyone—Mom, Dad, Clara—is busy discussing tea plantations and tea leaves. It's like they've forgotten I even exist. I feel like running away, but how can I? International flights from India are now closed."

David replied, "Things aren't good here in London either. The situation in Italy and France is even worse. Honestly, I think you're safer where you are. Infection rates in India are still relatively low."

Nancy teased, "I guess you must be happy that I'm not in London, right? Do you still care about me? Or have you found a new girlfriend already?"

She added a few emojis to suggest she was suspicious.

David replied with a laughing emoji, "You suspect me? Does that mean you actually care about me? You've never told me you liked me."

“Do I need to say everything? Didn’t I insist you come to India? I planned everything so that you could come here, but COVID ruined it all. If you had come, we would’ve wandered together among the lush green tea gardens,” Nancy wrote, adding a red heart emoji.

David responded, “Are you serious or just teasing me?”

“I’m not the kind of girl to joke about such things, David. When you proposed to me, I was happy. But I wasn’t mentally ready to accept at that time. I wanted to spend more time with you first and understand you better. That’s why I encouraged you to come to India. But you couldn’t. Since I’ve come here, I’ve missed you terribly. If missing someone this much is love, then maybe I really have fallen for you,” Nancy replied, adding a shy emoji.

“Wow, how lucky am I? Right now, I feel like hugging you and kissing you,” David wrote, adding several kiss emojis.

“Have patience, David. Once I return to London, I’ll definitely meet you. But I’m worried—if the lockdown happens, who knows when we’ll be able to see each other again. I’m also worried about how much my school will be disrupted,” Nancy wrote.

David reassured her, “Don’t worry about that. All schools and colleges in London are already closed. Online classes will start soon. You can attend from India itself. If you need any help from a teacher, just call me. I’ll arrange it.”

“There’s just one problem. Internet speed here is very low. It’ll be difficult to attend classes. Dad has talked to Prashant uncle about it. They’re planning to get a broadband connection installed in the next couple of days. Once that’s set up, we can also do video calls regularly,” Nancy informed him.

“That’s great. We’ll be able to see each other through video calls. Even if we can’t meet in person, it’ll feel like we’re close,” David replied.

“Please try to come somehow, David. I really want to see you. If you do come, I’ll tell Mom myself that you’re my boyfriend,” Nancy added with an emotional emoji.

“I would’ve definitely come if I could. But COVID has closed all routes. If only you had told me earlier that you loved me, I would’ve made it to India before air travel was shut down. How is Miss Clara’s film shooting going?” David asked.

“Not much progress so far. Everyone just sits around talking about the history of tea gardens. It’s so boring. Nobody even pays attention to me. I shouldn’t have come here at all,” Nancy replied with a sulking emoji.

“If you were really alone there, Nancy, I’d have come to be with you. We could’ve spent such a romantic time together. Just imagining it makes me happy,” David messaged, adding an emoji with red hearts in the eyes.

“You’re making me emotional, David. I miss you so much,” Nancy wrote, her eyes brimming with tears.

Just then, Clara walked into the room, calling for Nancy. Hearing her approach, Nancy quickly typed “bye” and ended the chat with David.

“Hey Nancy, what are you doing all alone? Online dating?” Clara teased with a laugh.

“What else can I do? I’m so bored, Clara. You all are busy talking about the film. Dad’s busy with research, Mom’s writing the script. Who knows how long we’ll be stuck here if a lockdown is declared. So, yes, I’ll have to resort to online dating,” Nancy replied, pouting.

“What to do, Nancy? We came at the wrong time. Now there are no actors or technicians willing to work on my film because of COVID. Everyone’s scared. I realize now that making a film about the history of tea plantations won’t be possible on a small budget. If COVID hadn’t struck, we could’ve approached some local producers for funding. But in this situation, no one’s willing to invest. My head is spinning. I don’t know what to do,” Clara sighed.

“If the film can’t be made, why are you all still discussing it so much? Why are Dad and Mom so busy all the time?” Nancy asked with irritation.

“Kevin says we have to keep working. Something will work out. He didn’t expect things to deteriorate so quickly either. Since nothing else can move forward right

now, he's gathering data and Mom is preparing a script. That's all we've managed so far," Clara explained.

"Now we can't even go back. It's a good thing David didn't come. I shouldn't have come either," Nancy said glumly.

"Now I understand who you were 'online dating' with earlier," Clara teased, laughing. Nancy blushed.

Clara thought for a moment and said, "Nancy, I've met David. He seems like a good guy. It's rare to meet genuinely good people in life. So if you really like David, you should embrace that. But before you commit, think carefully—will you truly be happy spending your whole life with him?"

"Since coming here, I've been thinking about him constantly. Chatting with him these past few days has shown me he misses me too. I think I'm beginning to really like him. But how can I know if he truly loves me or if we'll be happy together?" Nancy asked thoughtfully.

"Understanding someone isn't easy, Nancy. But you can do one thing. Tell him about a problem you're facing. See how sincerely he responds and what steps he takes to help. That will give you an idea of how deep his feelings really are."

"But what problem do I have? He's already offered to help with notes and online classes if the lockdown happens. Once the Wi-Fi is set up, we can also do video calls," Nancy said.

"At your age, it's natural to be attracted to the opposite gender. I went through this phase too, so I understand. Many make mistakes at this age. I made plenty myself. But I want you to avoid any problems," Clara advised.

"Don't worry. Mom and Dad have taught me well. I won't be easily misled by anyone's sweet words. I'll always stay strong," Nancy assured her firmly.

"Give me David's phone number. I'll get updates from him about London. I'm curious about what my old boyfriends are up to," Clara joked with a wink.

"I'll give you his number. Talk to him and see what kind of person he really is. I know he's attracted to me, but I haven't made any final decision yet," Nancy said.

"Don't worry. Once I talk to him, I'll figure it all out," Clara promised confidently.

CHAPTER 27

Once the Wi-Fi was installed, Nancy was able to attend her online classes smoothly. But she also used the high-speed internet frequently to make video calls with David. Clara, too, occasionally spoke with him.

One day, David suddenly told Nancy without much preamble, “Something terrible has happened. I don’t know how to tell Clara.”

“What happened, David? Tell me everything,” Nancy asked, alarmed.

“Some of Clara’s photos have gone viral on social media. All of them... nude photos,” David said, taking a deep breath.

“Oh my God, how horrible! But we have to tell Clara. This is cyber flashing. Isn’t that a cybercrime?” Nancy exclaimed.

“It is a cybercrime. Clara must immediately report it to the social media platform,” David advised.

Nancy immediately informed Clara. David also spoke directly to Clara and sent her the link to the social media site where the photos had been posted. Clara hurried to Prashant.

“Look, Prashant. That scoundrel did exactly what he had threatened. He’s leaked my photos online. Now, tell me, what should I do?” Clara said, visibly distressed, showing him the photos on her mobile.

Prashant looked at the photos for a while, then calmly asked, “Are these actually your photos, or has he morphed your face onto someone else’s body?”

“They are my real photos. Michael had paid me a good amount of money for those photos,” Clara admitted.

“Why didn’t you ever tell me about this, Clara? Did I ever tell you to strip for money? Ugh, just thinking about it disgusts me,” Prashant said angrily.

“I didn’t tell you because I did it only for money. Don’t you remember when you had pneumonia and we didn’t even have money for treatment? At that time, I had no choice but to undress in front of Michael,” Clara said clearly.

“Why did you do this, Clara? Why did you deceive me?” Prashant asked bitterly.

“I did it for both of our welfare. I’ve told you the whole truth now. If you think I’m no longer needed in your life because of this, if you want to cast me aside for this, I will accept it. If you think I’ve deceived you, I have no defense left,” Clara said, wiping her tears.

Just then, Prashant received a message on his mobile. It was from an unknown London number. The message read: “Enjoyed your wife’s nude photos, didn’t you? If you don’t repay my money within a week, I’ll release her nude video next. One thousand bitcoins must be deposited into my account within a week.”

Prashant sat silently for a while. There was no doubt about who had sent the message. He calculated—one thousand bitcoins amounted to over forty lakh pounds. He couldn’t even dream of repaying such an amount.

“Now, the only option left is to seek legal help. We should also consult Kevin and Anupama. But during this COVID situation, I doubt any court will take up this case quickly,” he said, putting his hand to his forehead.

“Do you know any good lawyer? At least we can get some advice,” Clara suggested.

“Yes, I have a childhood friend who’s a lawyer in Dibrugarh. Her name is Ragini Gogoi. I’ll talk to her,” Prashant replied.

“Let’s not talk over the phone. Let’s go meet her in person. It’ll be better to discuss face to face,” Clara said, feeling restless.

Without informing Kevin and Anupama, Prashant drove straight to Ragini’s house. She was the only daughter of the late advocate Sarbananda Gogoi from Amolapatty, Dibrugarh. After her father’s death, Ragini had continued his legal practice.

When they arrived, Ragini was in her office at home. True to her name, she was quite beautiful.

“Oh Prashant! It’s been so long since I last saw you. I was surprised when I got your call. I never thought we’d meet like this,” Ragini greeted them warmly.

Clara said “Hi” and extended her hand for a handshake.

“You must be Clara. Welcome to my office, both of you,” Ragini said, offering them seats.

“It’s been ages, Ragini. If not for Facebook, maybe we’d never have reconnected. You haven’t changed at all. You look just the same as when we were in college at Kanoi,” Prashant said.

“What are you saying, Prashant? Back then, you were so shy. You barely spoke to any girls. Who would’ve thought that one day that same shy Prashant would be married to a glamorous foreign lady like Clara?” Ragini teased, looking at Clara. “You’re truly very beautiful, Clara.”

Clara smiled. “You’re beautiful too. I’m jealous that Prashant had such a pretty classmate. But since you said he was shy back then, I don’t have to worry.” Everyone laughed.

“Your Facebook status says single. Didn’t you get married?” Prashant asked Ragini.

“I did. But the marriage didn’t work out. After three years together, we realized it was better to separate than to keep fighting. We got a mutual divorce. I’ve been single since. After Dad passed away, I stayed with Mom,” Ragini sighed. “But tell me, what brings you here so suddenly today?”

“We need your help, Ragini,” Prashant said, and explained everything. Clara also recounted her history with Michael. Finally, Prashant looked at Ragini with hope and asked, “Please tell us what we should do now.”

“From what I understand, this Michael is blackmailing Clara by leaking her nude photos on social media. That’s definitely a crime,” Ragini said after listening carefully.

“That’s exactly it. That’s why we’ve come to you. Please advise us,” Prashant pleaded.

“What Michael is doing is illegal. Sharing any woman’s obscene photos online is a crime both in India and in England. Moreover, he’s given you threatening messages, which can serve as evidence. Don’t respond to any of his messages. Let him keep sending them. We’ll submit all of them to the police as evidence,” Ragini advised.

“But I’m really scared. Michael has a criminal mindset. He could do anything. We need to take action quickly,” Clara said fearfully.

“Look, Clara, legal procedures will take time. Since this is an international case, we might even need Interpol’s help. You’ll need to file an FIR at the police station nearest to your tea estate. Based on that, the police will initiate an inquiry and coordinate with the London police to question Michael. He’ll also likely hire a lawyer to challenge the case. With all these procedures, it might take over a year to get a verdict,” Ragini explained.

“But do we have to endure his mental torture all that time? Oh, what should we do?” Clara said, burying her face in her hands.

Ragini and Prashant stepped outside the office. Ragini spoke in a low voice, “This case could also be expensive for you. Instead of fighting it out in court, why not negotiate with Michael? He just wants money. Maybe you can settle the matter by paying him a smaller amount. Otherwise, he might reveal even more embarrassing things about Clara.”

“To be honest, my financial situation is very bad, Ragini. Even fifty thousand pounds would be impossible for us right now, let alone a hundred thousand. Maybe after working at this job for a while, we could save some money. But for now, we can’t pay him anything,” Prashant said helplessly.

Ragini thought for a moment. “Can I ask something, Prashant? Does Clara have any similar records from before? If there’s evidence that she’s been involved in such things before, the case will get very complicated.”

“I don’t know, Ragini. Honestly, marrying her was a big mistake. If I’d known her character earlier, I would never have taken this step,” Prashant said bitterly.

Ragini placed her hand on his shoulder. “Don’t lose heart, my friend. What’s done is done. There’s no use dwelling on it. But I feel like... you two might not be a happy couple.”

Prashant nodded. “You’re right. Since marrying her, my peace and happiness have vanished. I didn’t listen to my parents and left my oil company job to follow her to London. Since then, it’s been nothing but struggles. If she’s done this too, how can I go on?” Tears welled up in his eyes.

Ragini felt sorry for him. She stroked his cheek gently and said, “Why do you think like that, Prashant? Maybe all this is happening for a reason. Who knows, maybe destiny brought you to me through all these troubles.”

Prashant looked into her eyes. They were filled with compassion. He felt an unfamiliar shiver pass through his body—something he hadn’t felt in a long time.

Taking both her hands in his, he said, “Ragini, please save me from this mess. I’ll do whatever you advise.”

“As long as I’m here, don’t worry. But you might have to make a difficult decision if you want to save yourself,” she said.

“What kind of difficult decision, Ragini?”

“I won’t tell you everything today. But if you trust me, I’ll get you out of this situation. No matter what, we’ve been friends since college.”

At that moment, Clara walked out. “What are you two whispering about without me? Are you planning how to kill me?” she joked, laughing.

“Why would you say that, Clara? We were just reminiscing about our college days. I still miss those times,” Ragini replied casually.

“I feel like back then, many girls must have had crushes on Prashant. Shy, well-mannered, studious boys always drive girls crazy. Ragini, did you have a crush on him too?” Clara asked playfully.

“You’re right. Many girls had crushes on him. But he was so serious that no girl dared express her feelings. That’s how you ended up with him. Otherwise, one of our classmates would’ve snagged him long ago,” Ragini laughed.

“But what should we do now, Ragini? If we don’t act, that scoundrel will continue to exploit us and create more problems,” Clara said seriously.

“As I said, first file a written FIR at the nearest police station. Then, I’ll speak to the police myself and urge them to act quickly. I won’t discuss everything over the phone. Prashant will need to visit occasionally for consultations. Don’t worry—I’ll handle the rest,” Ragini assured them.

Prashant held Ragini’s hand and said, “Your reassurance has lifted a huge burden from my shoulders. I hope you’ll support us fully.”

“Now, go back to your estate and submit the FIR soon. Leave the rest to me,” Ragini said.

Clara felt immense relief. She kissed Ragini on the cheek and said, “This is what true friendship means. A real friend is someone who stands by you in tough times.”

As they were driving back, Clara rested her head on Prashant’s arm. “Were you two really just talking about college memories, or were you hiding something from me? I tried to listen, but since you spoke in Assamese, I couldn’t understand. You both seemed very emotional. Are you hiding anything from me, Prashant?” she asked sweetly.

“There was nothing emotional. I simply pleaded with her to help us in this crisis. That’s all,” Prashant replied, deep in thought.

Clara rode the rest of the way home leaning on his shoulder.

CHAPTER 28

Prashant and Clara shared the entire situation with Kevin and Anupama. Prashant also relayed what Ragini had advised. Kevin, after understanding everything, became concerned as well. He even spoke with a lawyer he knew in London. Kevin advised both Prashant and Clara to be patient and not panic.

That night, Prashant visited Manager Mehta's residence. However, he felt uneasy disclosing everything to Mehta. He was careful not to let the manager develop a negative opinion about him or Clara. He told Mehta that someone had edited Clara's photos and spread them online, and therefore, they were planning to lodge a police complaint the next morning.

Since Mehta already had a soft corner for Clara, he seized the opportunity to remark,

"One can tell at a glance that Clara is quite a restless, attention-seeking woman. With her behavior, it's no surprise that some crooked man mistook her for a woman of bad character. You need to keep her in check, or one day she'll land herself in serious trouble."

"Regardless, sir, Clara is my wife. In this time of trouble, it's my duty to support her. I can't just sit back while someone spreads obscene photos of her. That's why we've decided to seek police help," Prashant replied.

At first, Manager Mehta advised them against going to the police. He told Prashant,

"The media is always looking for opportunities to defame tea estate managers and assistant managers. Nowadays, some nosy reporters loiter near police stations. If anyone files an FIR, they turn it into breaking news for television. So don't rush to the police. The Officer-in-Charge (OC), Ajit Pegu, is someone I know well. I'll ask him to visit your bungalow to speak with you."

“That won’t be necessary, sir. The OC might not appreciate being called to my bungalow,” Prashant hesitated.

“Nonsense. We provide so many donations and favors to the police. The officers often visit the estates anyway. Besides, Ajit Pegu is a literary and cultural enthusiast. If he hears you’re making a film about tea estates, he’ll be quite pleased,” Mehta insisted.

“I’ve never met him before. I’d prefer not to invite him to my bungalow just to submit an FIR. Also, the local reporters don’t really know me yet, so visiting the police station shouldn’t create much trouble,” Prashant replied.

“Do what you think is best. But remember, no matter what, avoid tarnishing the reputation of our estate,” Mehta cautioned.

The next morning, Prashant and Clara went to the nearby police station. Richard Ekka, the welfare officer of the estate, had already phoned the OC in advance. Richard, being a young man raised locally on the estate, had good connections with the police.

OC Ajit Pegu read Clara’s written complaint carefully. He listened to both of them explain the situation. After hearing everything, he said he would forward the case to the Assam Police Cyber Cell. Through the Cyber Cell, they would try to identify the person responsible for spreading the photos and take appropriate action.

“Sir, if possible, it would be good to warn this person soon. Otherwise, he might try to pull something else,” Prashant added hesitantly.

“For us, every case is urgent. But now, with COVID controls, even we are being deployed by the government. I’ve heard lockdowns will be announced soon. Once that happens, we’ll have to beat people who venture outside unnecessarily and distribute food to households. So, you’ll need to be patient. Things will take time,” OC Pegu explained.

“Sir, the man we’re dealing with is dangerous. That’s why we’re scared,” Clara said softly.

“I understand. But we can’t proceed recklessly. Manager Mehta already phoned me about this. He doesn’t want too much noise around the incident. I also know you’ve come here to work on a film about tea estates. Don’t pursue that now. Shooting a film during a pandemic will lead to trouble,” Ajit Pegu warned firmly.

Hearing this, Clara’s spirits sank. She lowered her gaze.

Prashant tried one last effort. “Sir, within the limits of the law, please do whatever you can. We have nowhere else to turn but the police. We trust you’ll act promptly.”

“Ever since the advent of the internet, people have enjoyed both benefits and dangers. Cyber criminals can operate from anywhere in the world. Identifying and punishing them is no easy task. Be cautious. If the man calls again, record the call and save every message. But under no circumstances should you engage with him directly,” OC Pegu advised. Both nodded and promised to follow his instructions.

“Also, keep this FIR confidential. Journalists shouldn’t get wind of it. They might twist the story to defame the estate management,” Prashant added.

“Don’t worry. Manager Mehta has already spoken to me about that,” Pegu assured.

After saluting the officer, they left the station. With COVID spreading rapidly, people had started greeting each other with folded hands instead of shaking hands.

As they stepped out, two reporters approached them immediately.

“Why have you come to the police station?”

“Is something wrong at Nirjuri estate?”

“Who is this foreign lady? Why has she come to the police station?”

The barrage of questions overwhelmed them.

Prashant folded his hands and said, “We recently moved to Nirjuri estate and came here to introduce ourselves to the OC. There’s nothing else.”

On the drive back, Clara said, “I’m getting really frustrated, Prashant. On one hand, this wretched Michael is causing us mental torture, and on the other, because of

COVID, my dream of making the film seems impossible. I feel completely useless. I can't stay like this much longer."

"Be patient, Clara. Who knew the COVID situation would get this bad? Even Europe is in crisis. In Italy, hospitals have no room. There's not even enough space to bury the dead. We'll have to wait until things improve. I'll also talk to Ragini about what further actions we can take against Michael. What else can we do?" Prashant tried to reassure her.

"Right now, no one even cares about these things. Everyone's worried about how to stay alive during the pandemic. Who will bother about my photos?" Clara said helplessly.

"I'm with you. Kevin and Anupama are with us too. Don't lose hope, Clara," Prashant consoled her.

"I'm feeling very down today. I can't sleep unless I drink. Let's go buy some good liquor from town. Maybe a little alcohol will cheer me up," Clara said, resting her head on the seat, eyes closed.

Prashant understood that whenever Clara was upset, she needed a drink. He turned the car toward Dibrugarh town. He, too, felt that a little alcohol might provide some temporary relief from all the mental stress.

CHAPTER 29

That night, Kevin and Anupama joined Clara and Prashant for drinks. Meanwhile, taking advantage of the newly installed Wi-Fi, Nancy stayed busy video conferencing with her old friends.

After finishing her first peg, Clara sighed and said, "Lately, I feel as if God doesn't love me at all. Whatever I desire, He never grants me. Why is God so cruel to me?"

Kevin responded, "What hasn't God given you, Clara? No human being gets everything they wish for. If people got all their desires fulfilled, wouldn't they practically become gods themselves?"

"No, no, Kevin. I despise myself. My whole life has passed in tension. Sometimes worrying about money, sometimes about my career, and sometimes about my personal life. I think my entire life will end like this," Clara said, taking a long sip from her glass.

"We understand, Clara. Problems have come. Everyone has problems. But just because troubles arise doesn't mean we should lose hope. If we fight together, no problem remains insurmountable," Anupama reassured her.

The maid, Minizoni, arrived with two plates of chicken fry. Picking up a piece, Kevin looked at Prashant and asked, "Did you talk to Ragini? What did she say?"

"She's called me to her chamber tomorrow. Let's see what solution she offers. But I'm only worried about COVID. The news says lockdown might be announced any day now. Once that happens, everything will come to a halt. Neither the police nor the lawyers will be able to proceed," Prashant replied pensively.

"Oh, it's said lockdown will soon be enforced everywhere in the world. All activities will cease for a while. We should stock up on food. When the lockdown begins, even markets will close. We should at least store enough supplies for ten days," Kevin said, taking a sip from his glass.

“And we should also stock up on drinks. If I’m stuck at home doing nothing and unable to go anywhere, I’ll lose my mind. In such a situation, I’ll definitely need drinks,” Clara added her demand.

“We’ll do all of that tomorrow itself. The manager has already tasked me with storing fifteen days’ worth of food for the estate laborers. Tomorrow, after meeting Ragini, I’ll be busy with this all day. I’ve also taken responsibility for distributing masks and organizing awareness meetings among the laborers. I think Kevin, Anupama, and Clara should handle the mask distribution and awareness meetings,” Prashant said.

“Excellent. This will give us a chance to observe the lives of the plantation workers closely. We’ll also get engaged in some meaningful work. Raising COVID awareness among people is very important. I’ve also gathered some materials online from the NGO I work with about spreading awareness, which will come in handy,” Anupama said.

“Good idea. Keeping busy will at least help pass the time. The film was supposed to include some content about the laborers. With Kevin and Anupama’s help, gathering information about them will become much easier for me,” Clara said, seeing a glimmer of hope.

“You’re right, Clara. Although the times aren’t in our favor, we must find hope within these challenges. Our goal should be to continue working despite the difficulties,” Kevin encouraged.

“Also, we need to think about what to do if any of the estate laborers contract COVID. If necessary, we must arrange an isolation ward near the dispensary. If an outbreak happens in the estate, it would be catastrophic. The laborers live in small, crowded houses where multiple people share the same space,” Prashant added.

“That’s essential. I saw on TV that the government is building new hospitals in many places. But simply setting up an isolation ward won’t suffice. Doctors and nurses will be needed to serve there. Doesn’t the hospital here have only one doctor? How will one doctor handle everything?” Anupama asked.

“From what I’ve learned, as soon as someone shows symptoms of COVID, they should be isolated to prevent the virus from spreading to others. Initially, they will be kept in the isolation ward. If the person tests positive, they’ll have to be transported to a government COVID hospital by ambulance. There’s no alternative,” Prashant explained.

“Let’s all pray that no one here dies from COVID. We also need to be cautious because this virus spreads through the air from one person to another. If we go to public places, we must maintain distance from others and cover our noses and mouths with cloth or masks while working,” Kevin said.

Just then, Nancy called Clara into her room. Clara went in. “Clara, David wants to talk to you,” Nancy said, pointing at the laptop screen where David’s face appeared.

“Hi David, how are you? Tell me your news,” Clara greeted. David replied, “I’m okay. But the situation in London isn’t good. Almost every household has COVID now. Even in our house, it’s the same. Somehow, I’ve managed to stay safe.”

“Here too, we’re almost confined to our house. It’s said that a lockdown will be announced here in two days. You did the right thing not coming here. But why did you want to speak to me?” Clara asked.

“Someone named Michael contacted me. Somehow, he found out that I’m in touch with you. He asked me to tell you that even if you’ve come to India, you can’t escape him. He says he’ll ruin your life. Hearing this has made me afraid. He seems like a dangerous person,” David said.

Hearing this, Clara’s face turned pale. She asked, “Did he say what he plans to do to ruin me? Do you know anything?”

“He didn’t specify. But you both should be careful. That’s why I called to warn you,” David replied.

After David logged off, Nancy told Clara, “In my opinion, in this situation, that man can’t really do anything to you. If he intended to, he would’ve done so already.

He's only trying to scare you. Don't be afraid. Don't react. He'll eventually quiet down."

But Clara felt extremely uneasy. It seemed to her that all sides were closing in on her. COVID had already put her film dreams on indefinite hold. She couldn't leave the house due to the pandemic. On top of that, there was Michael's continued harassment. She felt as if the mental stress was about to make her head burst. Her mind broke down. At that moment, it seemed there was no one left to comfort her.

Later, she called David privately and said, "David, can you do me a favor?"

"What favor?"

"I want you to befriend Michael," Clara said in a commanding tone.

"Befriend Michael? But why?" David was surprised.

"I have a task for you. If you can do it, I'll help turn your relationship with Nancy into a marriage proposal. I know you love Nancy very much," Clara said.

"But what's the task?"

"I'll tell you when the time comes. For now, just befriend Michael. If necessary, say bad things about me too. Make sure he trusts you. You just need to call me every night and update me on what's happening," Clara explained.

"Alright, I'll try," David said.

"No, not just try. You *must* do it. If you can't, forget about ever getting Nancy," Clara said firmly.

David paused for a moment and then said, "Okay, fine."

CHAPTER 30

This time, Ragini did not seat Prashant in her chamber but had him sit in the drawing room. She gestured him to sit on a sofa and then sat beside him.

“I told my mother about you. She wants to meet you once,” Ragini said.

“Alright. It’ll be nice to meet her. But I’ve come today only to talk about Clara’s case,” Prashant replied.

“We’ve already discussed the case over the phone. What’s going to change in two days? Besides, COVID is spreading everywhere. The courts and offices are practically shut down,” Ragini remarked.

“Clara is very worried. That scoundrel has threatened her again. You must suggest something,” he said in a pleading tone.

“Always Clara and Clara. That foreign woman seems to have consumed your mind entirely. I just don’t understand what you even saw in that half-witted girl. Only God knows how you’ve managed to live with her for so long,” Ragini spoke with slight irritation. Prashant was at a loss for words. He hadn’t expected Ragini to speak about Clara like that. He let out a long sigh.

“Things happen in life, Prashant. Many things occur unexpectedly. But I feel Clara came into your life and turned it completely upside down. The cheerful, simple, and carefree Prashant I once knew seems lost somewhere,” she said in a consoling tone.

Prashant nodded. “You’re right, Ragini. I haven’t slept peacefully for a long time. I can’t even grasp what I’m doing with my life or where I’m headed. I married Clara because I loved her. At the time, I thought it was the right decision. But now I feel I shouldn’t have left my job and followed her to London. My old colleagues at Oil India are now settled in good positions, living comfortably. And here I am—still without any stability,” he said bitterly.

“I could tell from our last conversation that Clara isn’t happy with you either. Though she’s physically here, her mind is still in London. How long will you both continue to live together unhappily?” Ragini asked softly. Prashant stared at her for a long time.

“So what’s the solution? What should I do, Ragini?” he asked helplessly.

“In my opinion, if you can’t be happy with her, you should separate. After all, she deceived you and slept with other men. Why should you bear the burden of her sins? If she truly loved you, she would never have secretly shared another’s bed. From everything I’ve gathered, all your current troubles have been caused by Clara. How else did that man get her nude photos? He has enmity with her, not you. Why should you get entangled in this?”

“But Ragini, Clara is still my wife. She did what she did for us, because our financial situation was so bad at the time. Should I just abandon her now, when she’s in trouble?” Prashant argued.

Ragini smirked. “You really are a fool. She’s seeking your help only because she’s in trouble now. Do you think she came to India for your sake? She came here hoping to make money by making a film. I suspect she still has an illicit relationship with that Kevin. I noticed her eyes sparkle when Kevin was mentioned the other day. In short, Clara is using you.”

Prashant thought for a moment. “So you’re suggesting I should divorce Clara?” he asked, looking at her.

“That’s the advice I give to all my clients. When two people can’t live together peacefully, when one uses or cheats the other and breaks trust, it’s best to separate. I did the same in my own case,” Ragini said. Her words sent a chill through Prashant. Many thoughts raced through his mind. But he had never even dreamed of divorcing Clara.

Just then, Ragini’s mother entered. Prashant touched her feet respectfully.

“She’s been talking about you for days now. She’s so happy to see you again after such a long time. You know, she’s been quite cheerful lately. She always says there

are very few good boys like you. That's why I told her I wanted to meet you myself," the elderly lady said gently.

Her praise made Prashant feel unexpectedly pleased. No one had praised him like this in a long time.

"We studied together back in college. It feels wonderful to reconnect," Prashant said, calling her *maa*, which made Ragini's mother's eyes glisten with emotion. She caressed his head and said, "Come visit us often, my child. If I had a son, he would've been like you. I was never fortunate enough to have a son-in-law either."

After chatting for a while, Prashant got ready to leave. Ragini accompanied him to the door.

"May I say something, Prashant? If you don't mind," Ragini said hesitantly.

"Of course. You don't need to ask," he replied, looking into her eyes.

"If Clara leaves your life someday, never think you'll be alone. If you want, you'll always have me," she said softly, her eyes shimmering with tears.

Prashant gently held both her hands. "I understand, Ragini. I don't know how to thank you," he said. Then he quickly got into his car. As he drove away, he glanced back and saw a pair of wistful eyes silently watching him from the doorway.

CHAPTER 31

As soon as he returned to the estate, Prashant stirred things up. The distribution of masks hadn't started yet. He promptly went and scolded Clara, "I told you so many times—start the work. Why are you still sitting in the bungalow wasting time?"

Clara shouted back equally, "We're not just sitting around! Should we carry the sackfuls on our heads? The vehicle just arrived."

Kevin, who had watched two workers loading the sacks of masks onto an open jeep, came over to Prashant and said, "You two, stop arguing. If we do things calmly and steadily, everything will get done. When we go to distribute the masks, we should all wear our own masks properly. Everyone should carry a sanitizer bottle in hand. If we go like that, only then will the workers take us seriously."

Anupama was already ready. She asked Nancy to stay at the bungalow and then stood by Clara's side. "You are the memsahib of this garden. So wear your mask properly. If you go without a mask, our entire mission will lose its meaning." She placed her hand on Clara's shoulder.

"You know, when I wear a mask, I feel like I can't breathe. Covering my nose and mouth even for a little while makes me feel suffocated," Clara said.

"But you do realize that not wearing a mask could be even more dangerous, right? Until a vaccine comes, masks are our only defense against COVID," Prashant added.

"Maybe you'd be happier if I just died, wouldn't you? But I'm not dying so soon, you see. I still have a lot of things to do. But this COVID has ruined all my plans," Clara retorted.

"Don't lose patience, Clara. This is a rare experience. The entire world is gripped by this pandemic. As long as we live, we have to keep doing what needs to be done," Kevin said calmly.

They all set out carrying the masks, sanitizers, and bundles of soap toward the workers' quarters. In the workers' settlement, a small meeting had been arranged on a playground where a canopy had been erected. As per government directives, people were seated with enough distance between them. On seeing Prashant and Clara, the workers stood up. Prashant asked them all to sit down.

Prashant read aloud the government-issued guidelines for protecting oneself from the COVID pandemic. He told everyone not to leave their homes without reason. He assured them that if a lockdown occurred, the company would supply rations to the workers. Anupama also gave a speech, encouraging everyone not to panic. She explained why wearing masks and using sanitizers was so important. Kevin and Clara did not speak because of language barriers.

As the distribution of masks, sanitizers, and soaps continued, Anupama took Clara along to meet some of the female workers. Seeing the memsahib of the estate approach, the women became nervous. But Anupama gestured reassuringly with her hand and calmed them.

Anupama went up to a young woman carrying a baby tied with a cloth at her waist. The woman looked no older than twenty. Anupama asked gently, "What's your name? Is this your child? How old is he?"

The girl blushed and replied, "My name is Lachmi. Yes, he's mine. He's a year old."

Clara was surprised to see such a young girl as a mother. She noticed marks and patches on the baby's skin and asked, "What are these marks on his skin?"

When Anupama translated, Lachmi said, "Many children in our lines have this kind of skin problem. We've shown them to the doctor, but they haven't improved."

Anupama explained quietly to Clara, "These days, estates use various pesticides to increase production. These chemicals are causing skin diseases among the people. But they don't know that."

Clara was astonished. She realized the workers' living conditions were extremely poor. She turned to Anupama and asked, "Can we go see where they live?"

“We will. That’s the only way we can understand the real picture of life in the tea garden. You and I will go,” Anupama replied and then told Lachmi, “Come, take us to your house.”

Hearing this, Lachmi was utterly surprised. It was unheard of for a memsahib to visit a worker’s house. She thought they were joking and gave Anupama an awkward smile.

Anupama repeated, “You don’t believe me, do you? We really want to go. You lead the way. We’ll follow.”

Lachmi, along with two other women, started walking toward the lines. Anupama and Clara followed behind.

CHAPTER 32

The stone-paved paths had long since deteriorated, crumbling in places. Without careful footing, one could easily stumble and twist an ankle. Rainwater had collected in puddles here and there. Clara had never seen roads like this before.

The small two-room, tin-roofed house where Lachmi's family lived was company-provided quarters. As soon as Clara stepped inside, she felt suffocated by the cramped, unhygienic environment.

"How do people live in such a tiny, unhealthy place?" she exclaimed in discomfort.

"These people have lived like this for generations. They've gotten used to it. The company provides housing, weekly wages, free medical care. Life just goes on like this for them," Anupama explained.

Lachmi offered the two of them wooden stools to sit on. News had already spread throughout the neighborhood that the memsahib had come to Lachmi's house. People gathered outside, eager to catch a glimpse of the new memsahib and her friend.

Lachmi went inside to ask her mother-in-law to make tea. Soon, smoke from the chulha began wafting into the living area. Lachmi said, "We cook everything on a wood fire. The company supplies the firewood. That's why the house is smoky." Anupama translated her words for Clara. Clara was shocked to learn that, even in this day and age, Lachmi's family still cooked using firewood.

"How many people live in this tiny house?" Anupama asked. "Counting the baby, eight people. My husband and son, my father-in-law and mother-in-law, two brothers-in-law, and a sister-in-law," Lachmi replied.

"How can so many people live in such a small, two-room house? Especially now, when they say we should stay distant to avoid COVID," Anupama exclaimed.

“This is how we live, memsahib. If COVID comes here, we’ll all die. Masks and soap won’t help the tea garden workers. Once people get drunk, no one pays attention,” Lachmi said. Anupama translated for Clara.

“Do you drink every day? Where do you even get alcohol here?” Clara asked, and Anupama conveyed the question in Assamese.

“Some people drink every day after work. But everyone drinks on Saturdays when we get our weekly wages. They buy meat and drink for fun. Some people make their own liquor at home. We can’t afford expensive foreign liquor. The houses that brew liquor mark their doors by cutting a plastic bottle and hanging it upside down on a stick. That’s how others know where liquor is available,” Lachmi explained. Anupama translated the explanation for Clara.

“If the tea workers drink so much, don’t the managers do anything about it?” Clara asked, turning to Anupama.

“Alcohol has been part of the tea gardens since the British started them. In fact, the owners encouraged it. They wanted the migrant workers to stay drunk and occupied so they wouldn’t think beyond their labor. Even now, alcohol is widespread, and managers don’t try to control it,” Anupama explained to Clara.

Just then, Lachmi’s mother-in-law, Phulmati, brought out tea in porcelain cups along with a plate of biscuits, placing them on a small table. She stood with folded hands.

“Why did you bring tea? We didn’t come here to drink tea. We just wanted to see the workers’ housing,” Anupama said.

“For people like us, it’s a great honor to have you visit. We should’ve served you a proper meal. But at least have some tea. Don’t worry—the cups are clean,” Lachmi insisted.

Anupama took a cup and sipped the tea. She immediately realized it was salty black tea. Clara also took a sip and grimaced. “Why does this tea taste salty?” she asked, surprised.

“The tea garden workers are used to drinking salty tea. The British taught them that. In those days, they were too poor to afford sugar. It’s said that the British

believed salty tea dulled the brain. They promoted salty tea so the workers would stay subdued,” Anupama explained in English.

After sipping some more tea and nibbling on the biscuits, Anupama and Clara stood up to leave. Lachmi watched them with grateful, teary eyes. Clara discreetly slipped a two-thousand-rupee note into her hand. “Buy some clothes for your little boy with this,” she said. Lachmi’s eyes filled with tears at Clara’s generosity.

As Anupama and Clara left the house, the crowd that had gathered outside followed them like a procession. Some even shouted, “Long live the new memsahib!” Clara waved and greeted them. In a short time, she had become very popular among the tea workers.

Meanwhile, when Prashant learned that Clara and Anupama had gone to the workers’ quarters, he became furious. In tea gardens, the wives of the assistant manager or factory manager held great prestige. As the factory manager (or *mistri sahib*), Prashant was responsible for the factory’s operations. No memsahib had ever visited a laborer’s home before. What Clara and Anupama did was a serious breach of protocol. Seeing the workers forming a procession behind them only added to his anger.

When Clara and Anupama returned, Prashant dismissed the gathering crowd and then turned to Clara angrily. “You’ve made a big mistake going to the workers’ quarters. You’ve violated the tea garden’s rules. Why did you go without asking me?”

Before Clara could respond, Anupama spoke up, “It wasn’t Clara who went alone, Prashant. I took her with me. I’ve heard a lot about the harsh conditions the workers face. Today, I got the chance to see it for myself. I thought, as the memsahib, Clara should also understand how the workers live. That’s why I took her.”

“But if the manager hears about this, he’ll be very upset. He might even issue me a show-cause notice. Discipline is crucial in the tea garden. Without it, managing operations would be impossible. That’s why we must maintain distance from the workers. Because of what you two did, I might get scolded,” Prashant said angrily.

Kevin spoke up, “I understand, Prashant. Anupama and Clara did something they shouldn’t have. They acted out of ignorance of the protocol. If the manager gets angry, just explain the situation. Did you notice something though? The workers were so excited when Clara visited their quarters. They even chanted in her praise. Her visit has had a positive effect. It shows the management cares for them.”

“The manager told me that we mustn’t spoil the workers. If they get even a little leeway, they’ll start making unreasonable demands. Fear is the best way to ensure they keep working. Modern management theories don’t apply here. Here, we need to show the stick to get things done,” Prashant insisted.

“Maybe that worked in the past when most people were uneducated. But today, the young generation of tea workers is educated. They know their rights and will speak up for themselves. Fear-based management won’t work much longer,” Kevin argued.

“I agree, Prashant. The workers appreciated your efforts to distribute masks, teach them about sanitizers, and explain COVID precautions. No other tea garden has done this. If they respect and like you, you won’t need to scare them into working. They’ll work willingly. They were so happy we visited their homes. They even told me they’ve never had such kind-hearted management before,” Anupama added.

“Honestly, mingling with the workers felt good. And if my film ever gets made, I’ll need to show their lives too. They’ll definitely help me then,” Clara said.

Prashant silently thought to himself—maybe Kevin and Anupama were right. The old rules of tea garden management might need to change. But then he wondered, “*Who will bell the cat?*”

CHAPTER 33

The next morning, Manager Mehta summoned Prashant to his office. Mehta got straight to the point.

****“Listen, Prashant. As you requested, we arranged masks and sanitizers for the laborers. We’ve also set up a COVID isolation ward and conducted awareness programs. Even though none of this was included in the budget, you showed interest, and I took special sanction from management so these benefits could be provided. No other tea estate has done this much for labor welfare.**

But even after all this, what was the need for your wife to go into the laborers’ homes and drink tea with them? Perhaps you don’t know, but if management learns what your wife did yesterday, you’ll be in serious trouble.”**

Prashant lowered his gaze. “Sir, she’s not yet familiar with the garden culture. I should’ve warned her earlier. Please forgive us this time.”

“The culture established by the British tea planters must be maintained. Without it, running a tea estate is impossible. Maybe you don’t know, but in the old days, laborers didn’t even dare to speak to the sahib while standing upright. If anyone disobeyed the sahib’s orders or disrespected him, they were whipped with a leather strap. If the sahib’s car passed on the road, workers would step off and bow their heads until the car had gone. When they saw the sahib, they would dismount from their bicycles and walk with their chests covered. Forget visiting laborers’ homes — in those days, even turning toward the laborers’ quarters was unthinkable for the manager or his wife,” Mehta recounted.

“But sir, we’re not accustomed to this garden culture. My wife grew up in a free, liberal environment abroad. She probably never imagined there would be such a big gap between managers and laborers. As you know,

she's planning a film. She wants to portray the lives of tea workers. That's why she may have gone to their quarters," Prashant tried to explain.

"Tell her to drop the film idea during COVID. Besides, she won't be given permission to make a film focusing on laborers' lives or problems. That would only bring disrepute to the estate. And if the garden's reputation suffers, your job will be gone," Mehta's nostrils flared as he spoke.

Prashant kept his head down. He couldn't afford to lose this job. After losing everything else in life, this job was the only anchor he had. If he lost it, what would remain? He decided in his heart to tell Clara to abandon the film project. If she couldn't stay without doing something, she might as well return to England. But he couldn't, under any circumstance, lose this job.

As Prashant remained silent, Mehta continued, **"What's done is done. I'm warning you: you and your wife must never again break the traditions of the garden. Management may forgive you this time, but if it happens again, no one will protect you."**

"Sir, I promise you — there won't be another complaint. If there's even one more, I'll accept whatever action you take," Prashant pleaded.

******"Let me tell you something — don't take it the wrong way, Prashant. You married a foreign woman, fine. That's your choice. But I don't like her behavior. You yourself told me about her naked photos going viral. Even Officer Pegu told me that while you're a good man, your wife could someday land you in serious trouble.

Working in a tea estate isn't easy. You have to be available day and night, no fixed hours, getting leave is difficult. In such an environment, can your wife adjust? You should discuss it frankly. If she can't, maybe you should consider other employment."****** Mehta spoke calmly but firmly.

"I understand, sir. I'll do my best to explain things to Clara. I have no intention of losing this job," Prashant replied.

"Here's my bottom line: whatever happens in your personal life must not affect garden operations. Think about how many families depend on this

estate. If any harm comes to the garden because of our actions, no one will tolerate it. If at any time I see that your personal matters are negatively affecting the garden's interests, I'll personally ask you to resign," Mehta concluded.

Prashant felt utterly helpless. It struck him that ever since Clara had come into his life, disaster seemed to follow. Once, he had a good, stable job near home. Now, he was pleading to save his job. Yet what could he do? He couldn't simply send Clara away. She had also made sacrifices for him, endured struggles, even faced public shame.

In this difficult situation, there was only one person who could help him see the way forward — Kevin. Prashant decided he would open up to Kevin and seek his advice.

CHAPTER 34

March 25, 2020

At 8 PM, the Prime Minister of India appeared on television and announced a total lockdown for three weeks across the entire country. He issued clear instructions for everyone to remain indoors. People would only be allowed to leave their homes to buy essential food items and medicine.

After the Prime Minister's announcement, a wave of panic spread throughout the nation. Within a short time, markets, hotels, restaurants—all shut down. Airplanes, trains, buses—every form of public transportation came to a halt. Police patrolled the streets, beating anyone wandering around and sending them back into their homes.

At the Assistant Manager's bungalow in Nirjury Tea Estate, life for the five residents came to a complete standstill. After hearing about the lockdown, even the domestic help and workers who used to crowd the house refused to continue working and returned to their homes. The household, once bustling with staff and luxury, now had everyone doing their own chores. Anupama and Clara took charge of the kitchen. Prashant took responsibility for sourcing vegetables, fish, and meat, while Kevin was tasked with procuring rice, flour, lentils, other groceries, and medicines.

Work at the tea estate also came to a halt. Workers were afraid even to come out and pluck leaves. With no laborers showing up, the factory was shut down. While it was possible to force workers to continue working, neither the fear of the unfamiliar disease nor the conscience of the manager allowed that. A sense of fear and terror spread across the area.

After two days of living without seeing any outsiders, one day there was a knock at the bungalow's door. Anupama opened it and was surprised to see Lakshmi, wearing a mask, standing there.

“Ma’am,” Lakshmi said, “since your household staff has left, you must be having a hard time. I came to ask if you’d allow me to take care of the housework. I’ve brought a mask, so you don’t have to worry.”

Anupama was speechless at Lakshmi’s sincerity. Clara hugged Lakshmi and brought her inside. Turning to Prashant, she said, “See, Prashant? You were upset when we visited Lakshmi’s home the other day. Now look—she’s the first to come to our aid in this difficult time. Caring for one another is never a bad thing.”

Lakshmi quickly took over the management of the house. Cooking, washing dishes, cleaning the house—she single-handedly shouldered the workload meant for six or seven people. She told Clara and Anupama about how difficult it had become to gather food. Whenever she left for home, Clara gave her some vegetables, a bit of rice and lentils, for which Lakshmi expressed gratitude with a bright smile. Sometimes, Lakshmi also brought her infant son along. Nancy and Clara enjoyed playing with the child and passing time with him.

After her work was done, Lakshmi would often sit with Clara and Anupama and discuss the problems faced by the tea workers. Anupama, being involved with a social organization, was eager to learn more about the socio-economic issues of the plantation workers. She was considering launching a project through her organization to support Assam’s tea workers when she returned to London.

One day, Anupama asked Lakshmi, “What kinds of government benefits do you and your family receive? I know there are several welfare schemes available.”

Wiping the sweat from her neck, Lakshmi replied, “We receive nothing from the government, ma’am. For us, the tea estate owner is like our parent. Whatever we get, we get from the garden.”

“What about your son? Have you thought about where he will study? You should help him become someone important, shouldn’t you?” Clara added. Anupama translated Clara’s words for Lakshmi.

“What future do the children of tea workers have, ma’am? At best, they study a few grades at the garden’s primary school. After that, if they can, they’ll find work

in the garden. If not, they'll head to Dibrugarh town and look for daily wage labor," Lakshmi explained.

"Don't you want your son to become an officer or a teacher? If you enroll him in a government high school, he could pursue a degree and build a better life," Anupama encouraged.

"There's no point, ma'am. In our garden, a boy named Anup Tanti was educated up to a BA degree after his parents sacrificed greatly for his studies. But what came of it? He couldn't get a job anywhere. Even when a clerk's position opened up in our garden, he didn't get it. Now he sits at home talking to himself like a madman. That's why our people believe it's better to teach the children garden work than invest in their education," Lakshmi replied.

Anupama realized that this lack of education was why the tea workers continued to carry the same beliefs from one generation to the next. There was a pressing need for voluntary and social service organizations to raise awareness about the importance of education among tea workers.

"Are you happy living in these conditions?" Clara asked.

"Ma'am, for us, happiness doesn't mean lots of money or property. If we can eat twice a day, we're happy. On wage days, we shop at the market, eat out, drink liquor, and have fun. Our families have lived on the plantation for generations. We can't imagine leaving behind the smell of fresh tea leaves. This is how we live happily," Lakshmi said.

While Anupama and Clara were talking to Lakshmi, Kevin pulled up a chair and joined them. Clara turned to him, "We were talking to Lakshmi about the lives of the tea workers. It's good that you came."

"Good idea. Behind Assam tea's global success lies the sacrifice, hardship, and pain of these workers. Assam tea has made its mark worldwide, but these people have remained much the same as they were during British rule," Kevin observed.

"Did the British not think about these people? In England, we always talk about democratic rights and equal opportunities. Why have these people remained so backward?" Clara asked.

“The reason is simple. When these workers were brought to Assam from various Indian states, British colonial rule was in place. At that time, even in England, capitalist exploitation prevailed. The British managed the tea gardens with that same mentality. They wanted the recruited laborers to always remain backward so that they could manage the estates using oppressive policies. They also kept the workers isolated from mainstream Indian society to prevent anti-British sentiment from spreading into the gardens,” Kevin explained.

Lakshmi, not understanding Kevin’s English, sat with her mouth open, staring at him. Anupama told her to get back to work in the kitchen. She had heard many stories about British managers becoming attracted to the women workers and having physical relationships with them, even fathering children. Some of the women willingly got involved with the white sahibs. That’s why Anupama made sure to keep Lakshmi at a distance from Kevin.

After Lakshmi left, Anupama smiled at Clara and said, “Did you know, Clara, while British sahibs oppressed the tea workers, they also had romantic relationships with many of the women workers? I’ve heard that even managers who had families elsewhere often had physical relationships with tea worker women and fathered children. According to Lakshmi, even in this estate, there are people with pale skin and blue eyes—likely descendants of those British sahibs.”

“Really? The beautiful young women among the tea workers must have been easy prey for those white sahibs. Don’t you think, Kevin?” Clara asked, winking at him.

“Yes. I’ve read such accounts too. Did you know, the Oscar-winning British actress Julie Christie had a half-sister whose mother was a tea worker from Assam?”

“What? Are you serious? Tell us the story,” Clara leaned in eagerly.

“Julie’s father, Frank Christie, was a manager at the Chabua Tea Estate in Assam. Before his marriage, he fell in love with a beautiful tea worker girl. Though he never formally married her, they had a daughter named June. She was born in June, so Frank named her after the month. Frank kept both mother and daughter in his manager’s bungalow, though such an arrangement wasn’t acceptable in

European society at the time. Later, Frank arranged for separate accommodations for them and, three years after June's birth, married Rosemary—a young woman from a respectable British family.”

“What happened to June and her mother?” Anupama asked.

“Although Frank married Rosemary, he continued to provide fully for June and her mother. When Rosemary returned to England, she brought along their two children—Julie and her younger brother Clive. Meanwhile, Frank stayed in Assam with June and maintained his loving relationship with June's mother.”

“Oh my. Frank was running two households. Did Rosemary ever find out?” Clara asked.

“For a long time, she didn't. Though she suspected something from Frank's behavior, he never admitted it. After India gained independence, many Europeans left, but Frank remained. He took June with him to the Jamira Tea Estate, where he became manager. Rosemary occasionally visited Assam but was never told about June. Whenever Rosemary arrived, Frank would send June to stay with a schoolteacher. However, Rosemary eventually sensed that someone was staying in the bungalow during her absence. She questioned the household staff. Though Frank had warned them to remain silent, an elderly servant—who happened to be related to June's mother—revealed the truth. Rosemary discovered that June was living there and confronted Frank, leading to serious conflict in their marriage.”

“Frank may have been a good man, but hiding another family from his wife wasn't right. Of course, Rosemary would be furious. What happened next?”

“Rosemary eventually stopped coming to Assam. Her relationship with Frank was irreparably damaged. Frank arranged for June to stay with him at Jamira Estate. When June became of marriageable age, Frank introduced her to a young Indian man who had just joined as an assistant manager. Initially, their relationship was good, but the man later refused to marry June, breaking her heart. Frank then sent her to Calcutta for higher studies.”

Anupama thought of Kevin's Grandmother Nancy. Nancy's father had sent her to Calcutta for further education too. The similarities between June's life and Nancy's were striking. She became emotional.

"Did June's mother go with her?" Clara asked.

"No. I believe June's mother had passed away from heart disease by then. June went alone and later returned to Assam, living with her father."

"And after returning?"

"Frank retired in 1960 and took June with him to Málaga, Spain. Although he hadn't legally divorced Rosemary, their relationship had become so strained they couldn't live together. After retiring, he lived with June in Spain."

"It sounds just like a novel. I feel like making a film about this story! What happened next?" Clara asked excitedly.

"That would make a great film. If you can't make it, maybe Anupama and I can produce it someday," Kevin smiled.

"No, no. If anyone makes it, it has to be me. But let's hear the rest of the story first," Clara said.

"Julie had already become a famous actress by 1963. Frank, proud of her success, went to England to meet her. While trimming a friend's lawn, he suffered a heart attack and passed away."

"Oh no. Poor Frank. June must have been left all alone," Clara said softly.

"Not only alone—she also lost her home. Since Frank hadn't legally transferred the house to her name, the ownership went to Rosemary by inheritance. Rosemary treated June badly and forced her to leave. Homeless, June wandered the streets. A family friend suggested she go to England to train as a nurse. He helped her financially, and she moved to England, eventually becoming a nurse."

"What a coincidence—Nancy also supported herself as a nurse in England!" Anupama exclaimed.

"Exactly. While June worked as a nurse, she faced many hardships. She even worked on Christmas. Her dark skin color made her the target of ridicule, but she

always proudly identified herself as Assamese. She returned to Assam several times later in life.”

“Did she ever meet Julie in England?”

“June and Julie visited their father’s grave every year and may have recognized each other. But Julie, always in the public eye, never showed interest in speaking to June. June didn’t have the courage to approach Julie either. However, she proudly told her friends about her famous half-sister. Julie, meanwhile, preferred to keep June’s existence a secret.”

“June must have watched Julie’s movies and felt proud.”

“Surprisingly, no. June never watched a single one of Julie’s films. She devoted herself to her nursing career. But both shared a love of gardening. In her free time, June cared for her flower pots—the same hobby Julie enjoyed.”

“What happened to June eventually?”

“After a lonely, difficult life, June passed away in January 2005 from a heart attack and pneumonia. In her final months, she was extremely weak. After her death, efforts were made to contact her family. Notices were sent to Julie and Clive, but neither responded. A local church eventually arranged her funeral. The woman born in an Assam tea garden passed away quietly and alone in an English nursing home.” Kevin’s voice grew husky.

“Such a moving story. Why didn’t you tell us earlier? Even Prashant would have loved to hear this,” Anupama said.

“Where is Prashant? I haven’t seen him today,” Kevin asked.

“He’s gone out with his camera. Since no people are outside, birds have come out freely. He thought it was the perfect time for photography. He also mentioned stopping by Mr. Mehta’s house for some discussions,” Clara replied.

CHAPTER 35

As Prashant slowly drove the jeep through the quiet, tranquil tea garden, camera slung over his shoulder, his heart stirred with excitement. He used to roam through such places once, wandering in the wilderness taking photographs. But caught up in life's endless cycles, it had been years since he'd indulged his passion for nature photography.

Thoughts of Ragini crossed his mind. He hadn't spoken to her in a long time. She had once told him that she too loved spending time amidst nature. He thought, if she had been here, the two of them could have sat by the small stream flowing past the tea garden and shared some quiet moments together.

The phone rang twice and stopped. Curious, he pulled it from his pocket and saw a missed call from Ragini. His heart warmed at the coincidence. He immediately called her back.

"I was just thinking about you. And then I saw your missed call."

"I doubt you even remember me anymore," Ragini replied softly, a note of reproach in her voice. "No calls, no messages for so long. I thought you had forgotten me. That's why I called. But then I wondered where you might be, so I hung up."

"Where are you now? I have the jeep. Let's go out somewhere." Prashant suggested.

"Out? In this lockdown? They'll throw us both in jail. Though..." Ragini laughed. "If I were with you, even jail wouldn't be so bad."

"Our estate vehicles have emergency duty passes. There won't be any problem. Let's go towards Bogibeel. We can watch some birds by the river." Prashant offered.

"I'm so bored sitting at home. If we can go out, I'd love it. Just make sure you won't get into trouble. Will you pick me up from my house?"

A forgotten melody seemed to awaken in Prashant's heart. An emotion he hadn't felt in years suddenly stirred.

"Be ready. I'll be at your house in ten minutes."

It didn't even take ten minutes. The roads were empty. Not a person in sight, only cows lounging leisurely on the road. He arrived at Ragini's gate sooner than expected.

Ragini wasn't quite ready. This was the first time she was going out somewhere with Prashant, so she took her time getting dressed. Prashant waited under the amlokhi (Indian gooseberry) tree near the gate. Neighbors peered curiously from nearby houses, wondering why a jeep had arrived during lockdown.

When Ragini finally stepped out, dressed in a bright orange salwar kameez, Prashant almost didn't recognize her. She looked radiant. As she sat beside him in the jeep, Prashant kept looking at her face.

"What are you staring at?" she asked, locking eyes with him.

"At you."

"Why? Haven't you seen me before?"

"You look so beautiful today."

"Thank you. I dressed up just for you."

Prashant felt a surge of joy. No one had ever said they'd dressed up just for him. Smiling, he started the jeep.

They drove for a while along empty roads and soon reached Bogibeel. Before the bridge, Prashant turned left onto a dusty path leading to the river. Ragini wrapped her scarf tightly around her face to keep out the dust.

By the riverside, there were a few new resorts, all closed due to COVID. Not a soul around. They parked the jeep under a tree and walked towards the river.

Prashant spotted a flock of waterfowl and began photographing them. He adjusted his lens and took several shots while asking Ragini to remain quiet. A large truck crossed the bridge overhead, its horn startling the birds into flight.

Some small wading birds searched for food in the shallows. Sandpipers played along the bank. With fewer people around, the birds roamed freely. Prashant lost track of time photographing them.

Sitting together on a tree stump, Prashant showed Ragini the pictures he had taken. She was amazed. The blending of light and shadow was masterful. She had never realized Prashant possessed such talent.

"These are migratory birds," Prashant explained. "They travel thousands of miles to Assam each year during the winter. As the weather warms, they fly back. It's hard to believe they're visitors."

"But why do they come so far?" Ragini asked.

"They seek climates that suit them. Birds from colder countries migrate to Assam to escape the severe winter. Some also come here to breed and raise their young before returning."

"Aren't you like one of these migratory birds, Prashant?" Ragini asked.

Prashant looked startled. "What do you mean?"

"I mean, like a bird from abroad, you come here, flutter about for a while, and then leave again."

"No, Ragini. No one knows where life's journey will lead. But I didn't come here planning to leave. For the first time in a long while, I feel like I can breathe again."

"Will you stay here alone? Or will Clara stay too?"

"Clara will decide that herself. I won't force her. If she wants to stay, she can. If she chooses to return to England, I won't object." Prashant said, looking out at the distant horizon.

"And what about me? Have you ever felt anything for me?" she asked, gazing into his eyes.

Without a word, Prashant leaned into her lap and closed his eyes. A contented smile crossed his face.

Just then, his phone rang. It was Clara.

"Where are you? It's so late. We've been waiting for you for lunch."

"Go ahead and eat. I'll be a little late." he replied calmly.

"Where exactly are you? Did you leave the estate?"

"I'm near the river, watching birds."

"Come back soon. The news says the police are beating people out on the streets and announcing that no one should leave their homes. The number of COVID cases is rising rapidly. Why did you go out now?"

"Don't worry, Clara. I'll return safely," he said and ended the call.

After a moment of silence, Ragini spoke. "Let's head back. Clara is worried about you."

Prashant took her hand gently. "Let's just sit here a little longer. Don't you like this peaceful setting?"

Ragini pulled her hand away. "You're a married man, Prashant. No matter what, Clara is still your wife. She cares for you. She was worried when you were late for lunch. I feel guilty sitting here with you while she waits. Don't misunderstand me, Prashant. If you seek my companionship, it cannot be like this. As long as Clara remains in your life, I cannot be close to you."

Prashant fell silent for a moment. Clara's face flashed in his mind.

After some time, Ragini continued, "Listen, Prashant. I came with you today as a friend. Maybe I do feel something for you. But I can't behave like a lover. That right belongs to Clara. As long as she's in your life, you must maintain distance with me."

"I understand, Ragini. Sometimes, it feels like I've never been able to live life the way I wanted. Clara and I are together, yet it feels like a wall has grown between us. Maybe if we had a child, things would've been different."

"If you're unhappy with your marriage, why don't you step away? There are legal ways to end it." Ragini said gently.

Prashant looked at her for a long moment.

"If Clara leaves my life... will you take her place?" he asked.

Ragini smiled shyly and rested her head on his shoulder.

CHAPTER 36

By the time Prashant returned, evening had fallen. The rice and curry set aside for him had gone cold, but he ate it anyway, too hungry to bother. Anupama offered to reheat it, but he refused.

Meanwhile, Clara was inside Nancy's room, talking to her. David had sent alarming news—Michael had filed a complaint with the police, accusing Clara of stealing money from him and fleeing. He had also threatened that the London police would soon contact Indian authorities to locate her.

The news shook Clara. She had never imagined someone could be so vindictive. She had hoped that over time Michael would forget the whole matter. But that he would latch onto her like a leech, even across continents, was something she hadn't anticipated. Clara worried what might happen if Indian police really came looking for her at the tea estate. That would be disastrous.

Hearing that Prashant had returned, she rushed out and sat beside him at the dining table, nervous and agitated. Her distress was obvious.

Seeing her unusually quiet, Prashant asked, **"What's wrong, Clara? You're so silent today."**

Instead of answering, she got up, wrapped her arms around his neck from behind, and began sobbing uncontrollably. Prashant had never seen her like this before. He quickly stood up and held her gently.

"What's the matter? Let me wash my hands first, then we'll talk."

Clara leaned against his chest and whimpered, **"I'm so scared, Prashant. They'll throw me in jail."**

"Oh, dear. Let me go for a moment so I can wash my hands," he said gently, freeing himself. After washing up, he sat down beside her on the sofa. **"Now, tell me what happened."**

"I heard Michael has filed a police case against me. The London police are looking for me. Since he knows I'm in India, he's apparently contacting Indian police too. If they arrest me, what will happen?" she sobbed.

Prashant sighed deeply. Placing a comforting hand on her shoulder, he said, **"What will happen? If a case like that gets serious, I'll probably lose my job. I'll have to look for another one."**

"No! No! Why should you lose your job because of me? If I've done something wrong, the police will punish me, not you," Clara protested, panic rising.

"I don't know, Clara. But in our country, especially in tea estate jobs, even small issues can cost someone their position. Officers and workers here always live in fear. No matter how well you perform, the smallest mistake can have severe consequences. If the police come looking for you and it damages the estate's reputation or makes it into the media, my losing the job would be the least of our problems." His voice trembled.

Just then, his phone rang. It was Manager Mehta, summoning him to his bungalow. Usually, Mehta only called during emergencies. Prashant's heart began to pound. Could Clara's feared disaster already be unfolding?

Moments later, Prashant arrived at the manager's bungalow. Mehta did not invite him into the drawing room as he usually did. Instead, he pointed to an outdoor chair where Prashant should sit, while Mehta took the wooden sofa opposite him with a stern expression.

"Listen carefully, Prashant," Mehta began in a harsh tone. **"In the estate, we operate under strict rules. No one has the freedom to do as they please. Breaking the rules is not tolerated."**

Prashant remained silent, steeling himself for whatever storm was coming.

"Why did you take the estate jeep toward Bogibeel today without informing me?" Mehta demanded, his large eyes fixed on Prashant.

Prashant lowered his gaze.

"The jeep was authorized only for extreme emergency use. I'd like to know what emergency made you take it out today."

"Sir, I have a hobby of photography. I went out to take pictures of birds. I should have asked for your permission. Please forgive me," Prashant replied.

"This isn't a matter for forgiveness. You know that due to COVID, the government has repeatedly ordered everyone to stay home unless it's an absolute emergency. Yet you went out without informing me. The police station even called me, asking why our estate jeep was heading toward Bogibeel. I had no answer for them. I was embarrassed. I didn't expect this from you." Mehta scolded.

"I understand, sir. I made a serious mistake," Prashant said, his voice faltering.

"Who was the woman with you in the jeep?" Mehta asked sharply.

Prashant hesitated, then said softly, **"She's an old friend from school. She came along to watch birds with me."**

"Oh, I see. While the whole world stays inside fearing COVID, you went out to romance an old friend. You yourself told me your wife had an extramarital affair. Now it seems you've started one too. Bravo." Mehta sneered sarcastically.

"It's not an affair, sir. We're just friends," Prashant said quietly.

"Really? But such friendships often turn into affairs eventually."

Prashant lowered his head. He had no defense. Sometimes life unfolds in ways we never anticipate. He had never imagined that taking the jeep out would have such serious consequences. He cursed himself for not thinking things through before leaving.

"Look, Prashant. You're a brilliant guy. Very capable at work. But actions like this make management angry. You know how it is. Tea estate jobs—here today, gone tomorrow. If anything else happens, management won't take even a minute to dismiss you. This is my last warning. If I hear even

a hint of further trouble involving you or your wife, I won't be able to protect you." Mehta's words were firm.

Prashant felt his head heat up with anxiety. If the police really came looking for Clara, his job would be lost. He prayed silently to God for protection in this difficult time.

As he stepped out of Mehta's bungalow, he saw that Ragini had left several missed calls. He had no desire to call her back. Besides, his phone battery was nearly dead. He switched off the phone and slipped it into his pocket.

CHAPTER 37

In the middle of the night, Prashant woke up to Clara tossing and turning restlessly. He touched her forehead and felt it burning hot. Sitting up abruptly, he grew concerned—fever was often the first symptom of COVID. He fetched the thermometer, woke Clara gently, and checked her temperature. It was over 100°F.

He quickly knocked on the door of the adjoining room to wake Kevin and Anupama. Kevin opened his medical kit, took out a paracetamol tablet, and gave it to Clara.

Clara swallowed the tablet and said breathlessly, "So, the virus has finally caught me. You all must stay away from me. This is a dangerous disease. I think my time has come."

Anupama tried to comfort her, placing a hand gently on her, "Don't be silly. Just having a fever doesn't mean you have COVID. You'll be fine by morning. Now just rest."

"No, Anupama. You must all stay away from me. I can't be sure—this might really be COVID. Whatever happens to me is fine, but I don't want any of you to fall ill," Clara insisted, pulling her hand away.

"Clara's right," Kevin said. "We won't know if it's COVID until she gets tested. Until then, it's better if she stays in isolation."

"But how would Clara even get COVID? She's been inside the house all along," Prashant asked, puzzled.

"Lakshmi didn't come to work today. When I called, she said she had a fever. Clara heard this and went to her house with some rice, lentils, and medicine. I tried to stop her, but she wouldn't listen. Maybe she got the virus from Lakshmi," Anupama explained.

"Why did she have to do that? We already have a system in place to deliver supplies to the laborers. Doing extra things like this will only create problems," Prashant grumbled.

"There's no point discussing that now," Kevin said firmly. "What's done is done. Right now, the priority is to get Clara tested and arrange treatment if she tests positive."

"I always bring you trouble, Prashant," Clara said with a weak smile. "But don't worry. This time, it'll be the last time I trouble you."

Hearing that, Prashant felt a pang of sadness. He took her hand and said gently, "I'm here with you, Clara. You'll be fine. Don't worry."

Clara looked at him sorrowfully. A faint smile crossed her lips.

"So what should we do now? Is there any way to get her tested tonight?" Kevin asked, looking at Prashant.

"I think we should wait until morning. The fever might reduce after the paracetamol," Anupama suggested.

Clara put on her mask and said, "You must quickly arrange for me to be sent to a COVID hospital. Otherwise, you'll all end up in the hospital with me."

"Anupama is right. A fever doesn't always mean COVID. We should wait till morning. Testing might not even be available right now," Prashant added.

He told Kevin and Anupama to get some rest. After they left, Prashant lay down beside Clara.

"Why are you lying so close to me? Aren't you afraid? If I have COVID, the virus could easily spread to you," Clara whispered.

Closing his eyes, Prashant replied, "Whatever happens, happens. Most people who get COVID recover. If you have it, there's no need to be afraid. You'll be fine in a few days."

Suddenly, Clara sobbed, "But what if I don't recover?"

Prashant pulled her close and said firmly, "Why are you saying such ominous things? Of course you'll recover."

"I don't know, Prashant. I feel like I've brought you nothing but trouble. You've suffered so much because of me. Maybe it's time I set you free. Perhaps that's why God wants to take me away," she wept.

"You're not going anywhere, Clara. I'm here with you," Prashant reassured her.

"Even if I survive, Michael won't let me live in peace. You said Mr. Mehta has already warned you about losing your job because of me. If you lose your job because of my disgrace, I'll never forgive myself. It's better if I leave before Michael stirs up any more trouble," Clara said, her voice breaking.

"Why are you talking like this? I won't let you go. What about our dreams?"

"You will fulfill those dreams, Prashant. I couldn't fulfill any of them. I couldn't even give you a child. I couldn't make the film about the history of the tea gardens that we planned. Remember how much we talked about 'Phalap' while sipping tea? But the film never got made. Will you promise me you'll make it if I'm gone?" she asked emotionally.

"Once COVID is over, you'll make that film yourself. I don't know much about movies. You'll get well first, and then we'll talk about Phalap again," Prashant assured her.

Clara was silent for a while. "If I don't recover, my mother will be devastated. If you ever go to London, please visit her. I've also told Kevin and Anupama to check in on her."

"Why wouldn't you recover? The virus will pass. COVID will end. Then we'll both go to London together to see your mother," Prashant tried to console her.

"Let me tell you something now, Prashant. You've loved me so much. My chaotic life felt a little stable because of you. Despite knowing I cheated on you, you never abandoned me. Even now, I can feel your love. But I also know you're not happy with me. Even when you don't say it, your words and actions reveal the truth. I'm afraid that one day, in anger, you might ask me to leave your life. Before that

happens, it's better if I leave on my own. Don't you agree, Prashant?" Clara's voice broke into sobs.

She began taking long, labored breaths. Prashant noticed she was struggling to breathe. He immediately called Dr. Sandeep Dutta, the tea estate doctor. Dr. Dutta advised him to check Clara's oxygen level with an oximeter.

Prashant remembered Mr. Mehta had once given him an oximeter. He had placed it in the drawer where he kept important documents. Retrieving it, he placed it on Clara's finger. The device beeped—her oxygen level was down to 90%.

Alarmed, he called Dr. Dutta again. The doctor was concerned and advised admitting Clara immediately to the government COVID hospital.

Prashant called the driver to bring the vehicle. He also informed Mr. Mehta that he was taking Clara to the COVID hospital. Not wanting to disturb Kevin and Anupama, he quietly packed a bag with some of Clara's clothes, sandals, toothpaste, and a brush. Dr. Dutta called again and advised him to pack clothes for himself too, as the highly contagious disease could easily spread to him.

In the dead of night, Prashant and Clara arrived at the COVID ward set up at Assam Medical College.

CHAPTER 38

At five in the morning, Prashant called Kevin and woke him up. Kevin sat up with a jolt. After talking to Prashant, he nudged Anupama awake too.

“Did you hear? Prashant and Clara have both tested positive for COVID. Last night, when Clara’s oxygen level dropped, Prashant took her to the hospital. The tests showed they’re both positive. They’ve both been admitted.”

Hearing this, Anupama panicked.

“I kept telling Clara not to go to the labor colony. She didn’t listen and brought this danger upon herself. What if we’ve also been exposed? What will happen now?”

“Stay calm, Anupama. Don’t panic. So far, ninety-eight percent of COVID patients recover. Only the elderly or those with other health issues have had fatal outcomes. People our age don’t need to worry much. Even so, we should get tested. Since we’ve been living in the same house, there’s a chance the virus could have spread to us,” Kevin tried to reassure her.

“We should go check on Prashant and Clara,” Anupama said.

“The authorities won’t allow that, Anupama. Special protocols are in place for COVID patients. Only doctors, nurses, and sanitation workers are permitted in. We’ll have to rely on phone updates. And if our tests come back positive too, there’s no other option—we’ll also have to go to Assam Medical College Hospital.”

Just hearing the name *Assam Medical College Hospital* made Anupama shudder. Memories of her time there with Kevin’s Grandmother Nancy rushed back. She had hoped and prayed that Nancy would return home healthy—but she hadn’t. No matter how much she had pleaded with God, He hadn’t listened.

What if Prashant and Clara don’t come back from that same hospital?

The mere thought made her hair stand on end.

“Kevin, are you sure young people like us won’t be harmed by COVID? Prashant and Clara will come back, won’t they? Swear it to me,” Anupama pleaded.

Kevin had never seen her so distressed before. He held her gently and said, “Don’t think any negative thoughts right now. We’ll hope and pray that both Prashant and Clara recover soon. We’ll all work together to make the Phalap film. After gathering so much information about Phalap, we must bring that dream to life.”

Just then, Anupama’s phone rang. It was Clara.

As soon as Anupama said “Hello,” Clara began speaking: “You must’ve heard by now, Poma. We’re both at the hospital. They’ve put Prashant and me in the same room, so that makes me feel a little better. But I was terrified when I saw the doctors and nurses covered from head to toe in white protective suits. It felt like we were in outer space and they were astronauts. Just a little while ago, someone died of COVID in the next room. There wasn’t even anyone to cry for him. They wrapped the body in plastic and took it away to be cremated somewhere. I’ve heard that when someone dies of COVID, not even their family is allowed to see the body. If I die, you won’t get to see me again.”

“You both will recover and come back, Clara. Kevin says ninety-eight out of a hundred patients recover. So don’t worry. We still have so much work to do together,” Anupama tried to comfort her.

Clara laughed softly, “I’ve lived my life fully, Poma. I’ve done everything I ever wanted to do. So I’m not afraid of dying. But when I think about the people who’ll be sad if I’m gone, it breaks my heart. Promise me something, Poma. If I die, please don’t cry. If I see you all mourning, even my soul will be sad.”

Anupama’s mind drifted back to those days in Oxford, when a carefree Clara would jump around joyfully. She had once given her own coat to an old man shivering in the cold. She could never bear to see others suffer. That’s why, even knowing about the dangers of the virus, she had insisted on delivering rice and lentils to Lakshmi’s house.

If only she hadn’t gone that day... Maybe the virus wouldn’t have reached her.

“Clara, please take care of yourself and Prashant. We probably won’t be allowed to visit you. But if you need anything—anything at all—just let us know. If you feel like eating something, tell us. We’ll find a way to bring it to you. Eat well and get better soon,” Anupama said before ending the call, tears rolling down her cheeks.

Kevin pulled her close. Resting her head against his chest, she sobbed, “I’m so scared, Kevin. Just like we lost Grandma Nancy, will we have to lose Prashant and Clara too? Grandma Nancy never came back from that hospital... What if Prashant and Clara don’t come back either?”

Kevin closed his eyes. Grandma Nancy’s face flashed in his mind. He realized that sometimes, people become so helpless that surrendering to fate is the only option left.

CHAPTER 39

When Manager Mehta learned that Prashant and Clara had tested positive for COVID, he became deeply concerned. He immediately arranged for everyone who had been in contact with Prashant and Clara to be tested. A team of health workers from the COVID hospital came and conducted tests for everyone. Several laborers from the tea estate tested positive.

Fortunately, Kevin, Anupama, and Nancy's results came back negative. Anupama had been very anxious about testing positive, especially worrying about Nancy. Having grown up in the nearly germ-free environment of London, Nancy would not be able to cope with treatment in a government COVID hospital in Dibrugarh. Staying in such an environment might make her susceptible to other diseases.

With Mehta's family testing negative as well, they were reassured. After the results arrived, Mehta invited Kevin and Anupama to his bungalow.

When Kevin and Anupama opened the gate to the bungalow, they found Mr. and Mrs. Mehta sitting on the front verandah. Mrs. Mehta welcomed them warmly and asked them to sit.

"You both arrived in Assam at a very unfortunate time. None of us imagined that the COVID situation would become this severe. No one knows when things will return to normal," Mehta said.

"Yes, Mr. Mehta. Had we known things would get so bad, we would never have come. But actually, it was Prashant and Clara, our long-time friends, who insisted we visit," Kevin replied.

"I understand. How long have you known Prashant and Clara? What's your opinion of them?" Mehta asked, looking directly at Kevin.

"We've known both of them for a long time. We consider them like family," Anupama answered.

"I had high hopes for Prashant. I thought someone with his international experience would be a great asset to our tea estate. But he hasn't performed as I expected. I've been disappointed with him in certain matters," Mehta commented.

"Mr. Mehta, I believe Prashant is hardworking and intelligent. Since this is a new job, perhaps he needed some time to understand the culture and protocols here. But I'm confident he will soon learn everything and perform as you expect," Kevin assured him.

Mrs. Mehta added, "Prashant himself may not be a bad person, but his wife seems to be a problem. I feel like her presence disturbs his peace of mind."

Kevin and Anupama glanced at each other. After a moment's pause, Anupama said, "Clara has had a difficult life. She grew up without the love of her parents, which made her overly sensitive in some matters. She finds joy in helping the poor and wants to enjoy life in her own way. But deep down, she isn't a bad person. Both she and Prashant care deeply for each other."

"I understand," Mehta replied, "but working on a tea estate requires following certain rules and maintaining discipline. The social distance between the laborers and the managers must be preserved. Without that, it becomes difficult to manage operations. Tea estate work is laborious, and to maintain efficiency, a certain level of authority and fear is necessary. When that balance is disturbed, problems arise. If Prashant and Clara are to stay on the estate, they must follow these traditions."

Kevin responded, "But things aren't the same as they used to be. The younger generation of tea laborers are becoming educated. In a few years, they might not even want to work in the gardens. And if they do, they'll demand higher wages and better facilities. How will the estate function then?"

"That's true," Mehta agreed. "That situation is approaching. That's why we're considering introducing mechanical leaf pluckers. We also plan to reduce the workforce in the factories by using modern technology. This industry, which has long depended on manual labor, is moving toward modernization. Eventually, many workers will be let go permanently."

Kevin thought, *Modern technology is making machines more valuable than humans. But if machines replace workers, what will happen to the hundreds of thousands of people who depend on tea garden jobs? These laborers don't know any work beyond this.*

After a pause, Kevin asked, "If these workers are let go, how will they sustain themselves?"

"No private company takes responsibility for its former employees' futures. Even in London, thousands lose their jobs every year. Do those companies take care of them?" Mehta countered.

"That's the saddest part of today's capitalist system. A worker who gives their all to a job is dismissed without remorse if someone more skilled or a machine replaces them. Because of COVID, companies have already begun laying people off. Even if the worker has done nothing wrong, circumstances or poor company performance can cost them their job," Kevin replied.

"Labor issues have long plagued our tea gardens. The British brought workers from Bihar, Odisha, Madhya Pradesh, and other states to work here. British managers extracted work from them through physical abuse and treated them like emotionless machines. During the tea boom of the 1860s, some reckless European managers severely mistreated workers. If that had continued, it would've led to even worse tyranny. To prevent contact with outsiders and suppress rebellious ideas, the workers were confined within the estates and external access to labor lines was prohibited," Mehta explained.

"But didn't workers protest these abuses?" Kevin asked. "I read that the first worker protest occurred in 1884 at Bowalia Tea Estate in Cachar, after a manager publicly beat a young boy. The workers surrounded the manager's house in protest."

"Yes, and the abuses eventually reached the ears of Henry Cotton, Assam's Chief Commissioner. He warned the managers that continued abuse could lead to violent retaliation from the workers. Some managers restrained themselves, but a few accused Cotton of acting against the interests of the tea industry. The Governor General, however, advised them to follow Cotton's directions. From then on, the worst abuses decreased," Mehta elaborated.

“But labor-management conflict continued to grow, especially after the 1917 Russian Revolution, which spread communist ideas even to the tea gardens. Combined with Mahatma Gandhi’s Non-Cooperation Movement starting in 1921, tensions escalated,” Kevin added.

“Exactly. The early trade unions in Assam were fragmented. Later, national trade unions like the All India Trade Union Congress encouraged militant actions. Eventually, Congress-aligned unions formed the Indian National Trade Union Congress and established labor organizations in the tea gardens. In 1958, these merged to form the Assam Chah Mazdoor Sangha, which became the only recognized union representing tea workers. The tea garden owners, however, now have five separate associations,” Mehta explained.

“Isn’t it odd that while there’s just one union for the hundreds of thousands of workers, the owners have five associations?” Kevin noted.

“That’s why labor unrest has become rare. We’ve managed to maintain peace,” Mehta said with a chuckle.

“Still, workers strike occasionally to demand higher wages. They’ve surrounded our bungalows more than once,” Mrs. Mehta added.

“But the wages are lower than outside rates because the workers receive housing, electricity, water, rations, medicine, firewood, and even free healthcare. Numerous welfare programs also help solve their problems. If we paid outside wages, we’d have to withdraw those benefits. That’s why they occasionally strike, but even their union knows that matching outside wages isn’t feasible,” Mehta explained.

“When I spoke to Lakshmi, she mentioned that sometimes they receive poor-quality rice and expired medicine. That really bothered me,” Anupama said.

“Those things happen occasionally due to dishonest suppliers, but the management takes action when we discover such issues,” Mehta assured.

“The workers’ living conditions are poor. They still cook in smoky kitchens using firewood. Their bathrooms and toilets are inadequate. Roads become impassable during the rains. Even if wages can’t be raised, couldn’t better housing, clean

toilets, and cooking gas be provided? Their health is poor, with many suffering from skin diseases caused by pesticides. The children show signs of malnutrition. I know these problems can't be solved overnight, but there are NGOs that can help. I work for one. If you allow it, I can arrange a grant for the workers' welfare," Anupama offered.

"We already receive CSR grants from nearby companies like Oil India and the refinery. They've built roads, a community hall, school libraries, and classrooms, and health camps are held periodically. Additional grants aren't necessary. If we provide too many benefits, the workers might lose interest in working, which would create bigger problems. So, we're not interested in outside grants," Mehta said.

"But an international grant could bring media attention and goodwill to your garden. It would show you care for your workers," Anupama suggested.

"We never allow foreign NGOs into the garden. They often criticize our labor conditions internationally and sometimes try to convert workers' religions, which has caused tensions in some areas of Assam. That's why we don't accept foreign grants," Mehta said firmly.

Just then, Anupama's phone rang. It was Prashant. Seeing his name on the screen made her heart skip a beat.

Prashant spoke weakly, "Anupama, Clara isn't doing well. She's having trouble breathing. Her oxygen level has dropped significantly. They're moving her to the ICU. Before she goes, she wants to speak to you and Kevin."

He held the phone near Clara's face. Gasping for breath, Clara said, "Poma, I may not see you again. I must have caused you a lot of trouble. Please forgive me. Take care of Kevin and Nancy."

"You must get better and come back, Clara. We have our film to finish. You can't leave without making *Phalap!*" Anupama cried.

Kevin took the phone. "Relax, Clara. Don't give up hope. We're all with you. Pray to God. You will recover."

Clara said, “Kevin, you’ve helped me so much. I was lucky to have someone like you as a lover once, and later as a friend. But I was never the person you deserved. I can’t return to London now. Please visit my mother when you go back and help her if you can.”

Clara’s breathing grew more labored. Prashant ended the call.

Anupama began sobbing uncontrollably. Kevin stood beside her, placing a hand on her shoulder.

“We can’t lose Clara, Kevin. We must save her. Do something. How can we go back to London and leave her here like this?”

“Don’t lose hope, Anupama. Many COVID patients have recovered after treatment. Clara is getting the best care available. We must believe she’ll pull through. All we can do now is pray. The rest is in God’s hands,” Kevin said with a long sigh.

Even Mr. and Mrs. Mehta expressed their sympathy after hearing Clara’s condition. Kevin and Anupama didn’t stay long and returned to Prashant’s bungalow. Nancy was alone, and Anupama grew increasingly anxious.

CHAPTER 40

Returning to the bungalow, Kevin gathered all the papers he had collected for the *Phalap* film — notes he had taken and information gathered from others — and sat down. He called Anupama over and said, “Bring the script draft you’ve written. Let’s plan a shooting sequence properly.”

“But why? Why are you doing this in the middle of the night, Kevin?” Anupama asked, surprised.

“Let’s get the shooting sequence ready. As soon as Clara comes out of the ICU, we’ll read it to her. Just hearing the name *Phalap* will make her well again. I know this crazy girl very well. She came here full of hope to make *Phalap*. If we help her even a little, she’ll shout *Phalap, Phalap!* and get better,” Kevin said with a sense of urgency that Anupama noticed.

“You’re very restless tonight, Kevin. We don’t need to work on this now. I’ve made some rice and lentils. Let’s eat and get some sleep,” Anupama tried to calm him.

“Clara has to get better, Anupama. We must make the *Phalap* film we’ve prepared for so long. COVID cannot take her away,” Kevin said, covering his face with his hands and breaking into quiet sobs.

Anupama gently stroked his head. “Whenever I get restless, you always calm me. But now that you’re the one who’s anxious, I don’t know how to comfort you. I know Clara was once a big part of your life. I understand how close you two were when you lived together. I feel deep sorrow too. But I’m also hoping for a miracle. Clara will recover. COVID can’t take her from us.”

Just then, Prashant called. Kevin grabbed the phone anxiously. “Clara’s okay, isn’t she, Prashant?”

“There’s no update yet. They won’t let me enter the ICU. I asked the nurse who came to administer medicine. She said that despite the oxygen support, Clara’s

oxygen level hasn't risen much. I feel like... I might not be able to bring her back, Kevin," Prashant said, his voice trembling with grief.

"No, what are you saying, Prashant? Clara will be fine. Don't worry. So many people have recovered and gone home. Haven't you seen it on TV? It's tough for a couple of days, but then things improve. We're all praying. Clara will recover. If they'd let us visit the hospital, we'd be there already. But it's frustrating that we can't do anything to help," Kevin said.

"I'm feeling so helpless. With this disease, no one can help anyone else. And if something happens to Clara, I might not even get to see her body," Prashant sobbed.

"Don't lose hope, Prashant. We're holding on too. Nancy is very scared. She's never faced such a situation before. She was very close to Clara and keeps asking when Clara will return. She's praying too. Clara will get better," Anupama reassured him, trying to steady herself.

Prashant said he would rest for a while and hung up the phone.

Just then, Nancy came out of her room holding her phone. "Daddy, David's calling. He wants to talk to you," she said.

Kevin looked at her, puzzled. "But why?"

Anupama took the phone from Nancy and asked David, "David, what's the matter?"

"Michael wants to speak to Kevin," David replied.

"Michael? What does he want to talk about?" Anupama was surprised.

David handed the phone to Michael. "It's Michael speaking," said the voice on the speaker. Kevin immediately recognized it. He grabbed the phone from Anupama and said angrily, "Michael, what's left for you to say? Do you know the girl whose life you've made unbearable is now fighting for her life in the hospital, battling this COVID monster alone? What do you want now?"

"I was very saddened to hear about it. David told me. That's why I wanted to speak with you. Clara and her husband blocked my number. Today, I've felt terrible

about it. For the sake of a little money, I caused Clara so much pain. I wanted to call to offer the money back. But now that I've learned she's in the hospital, I feel so remorseful," Michael said.

"I'm requesting you politely — stay away from Clara's life, Michael. She's already suffering enough," Kevin said.

"I know she'll never forgive me. But if she doesn't survive, I'll never forgive myself," Michael replied sorrowfully.

"Whether you forgive yourself or not is up to you. But I beg you, don't bother Clara anymore. If needed, I'll repay the pounds Clara owed you, in installments if I have to. But leave her alone," Kevin pleaded.

"I didn't call today to demand the money. I called to apologize. I've just realized that no matter how much enmity we feel toward someone when they're alive, in moments like this, our humanity resurfaces. I'm praying to God that she recovers. I promise, I'll never trouble Clara again. I'll even withdraw the case I filed against her. All I want is for her to survive," Michael said and ended the call.

Anupama was stunned. The man who had once made Clara's life unbearable was now praying for her recovery and promising never to bother her again. She realized how fascinating human nature could be — the same person can behave in vastly different ways depending on the time and circumstances. At one time, Michael, blind with love for Clara, had turned into her enemy when she didn't reciprocate his feelings. Yet now, learning that she was battling death, he had become a compassionate friend.

Despite Anupama's objections, Kevin stayed up late into the night drafting several sequences for *Phalap*. His grandmother had taught him long ago: *No matter the situation, one should never lose hope. Believe firmly that things will happen as you wish and keep doing your duty. Eventually, even God will be compelled to grant you the outcome you desire.*

When Kevin finally went to bed late at night, Anupama held him tightly. "If Clara gets better, will you return to London or stay here?" she asked.

Kevin sighed deeply and said, "That's Clara's decision. She'll do whatever she wants. Would she even listen to us?"

CHAPTER 41

At the hospital ICU, Prashant grew increasingly restless wanting to see Clara. But no other COVID patients were allowed visitors. He called Ragini, informed her about the situation, and asked for her help.

Ragini, through a doctor friend working at the hospital, managed to arrange for Prashant to see Clara inside the ICU.

When he finally saw her, Prashant was shaken. In just two days, Clara had grown frail and emaciated. Wearing an oxygen mask and struggling to breathe, Clara opened her eyes with great effort and looked at Prashant. He gently stroked her forehead and kissed the unbandaged part of her hand attached to the saline drip. Tears rolled down his cheeks.

After spending only a short while inside the ICU, Prashant felt like he couldn't breathe. The room was completely closed off with doors and windows shut. None of the air conditioners were running. A few ceiling fans rotated slowly, but it wasn't enough for proper ventilation. He went to the attached bathroom, which reeked terribly. Perhaps it hadn't been cleaned in days. When he asked a duty nurse, she said the sweepers hadn't come because there weren't enough PPE kits for them.

Prashant felt that even a healthy person would break down if they had to stay in such conditions for a couple of days. Returning to Clara's bedside, he leaned close to her ear and asked, "Are you feeling any better?"

Clara tried to smile faintly. She whispered haltingly, "Please take me out of here, Prashant. I'm so scared being alone. I don't want to die like this, all alone."

At that moment, a sob echoed from a corner of the ICU. No one needed to ask what that meant. Yet another person had succumbed to COVID.

Prashant resolved that no matter what, he would get Clara out of that dreadful place. He spoke to the nurse and learned that Clara's oxygen levels were almost

normal now. She hadn't had a fever since the day before. He immediately called Ragini again to explore options.

After speaking with the doctor, Ragini promised to update him soon.

Noticing him talking to Ragini, Clara smiled faintly and asked teasingly, "How's your old friend? I'd like to see her again sometime."

"Ragini's doing well. She's the one who arranged for me to enter the ICU and see you. Without her help, I wouldn't have been able to see you today," Prashant replied.

Shortly after, Ragini called back. She said, "I spoke with the doctor. Clara's condition has improved. There's no longer an oxygen level issue. She still has a slight fever, but she might be moved from the ICU to a cabin soon. However, you both will need to stay for a while longer. I've also requested another COVID test for both of you. If the results are negative, you'll be allowed to go home."

"But Ragini," Prashant added, "even if the results come back negative, wouldn't it be unwise to return to the bungalow until we've fully recovered? There's another family living there. They have a small child. I wouldn't want to cause any trouble for them."

"If it's not too much trouble for you," Ragini offered, "you could come stay at my place. There's a fully furnished vacant house on our property. It used to be rented by a manager from a private company, but he moved to Guwahati to be with his family when the pandemic shut down operations. You and Clara could stay there for a few days. Don't worry about food — I'll take care of that."

Ragini's suggestion felt like a relief to Prashant. He silently prayed that their COVID test results would come back negative.

CHAPTER 42

As Prashant had hoped, both of their COVID test results came back negative. However, the doctor told Prashant that although Clara tested negative, her breathing wasn't fully normal yet. It would be better if she stayed in the hospital for a few more days.

But Prashant was worried. Staying longer in the hospital might expose Clara to other infections. Besides, Clara was from England — her immune system might not withstand the unhygienic hospital environment for long. So, the very day the negative reports came, he arranged a car and took Clara to Ragini's house.

Ragini had already cleaned and prepared the house with the help of her domestic staff. By the time Prashant and Clara arrived, it was dinnertime. Ragini had even arranged a chicken curry dinner for them.

When Kevin and Anupama heard that Prashant and Clara had been discharged, they wanted to visit. But Prashant asked them to wait a couple of days for some rest, and then they would all meet at the bungalow.

That night, Clara rested her head on Prashant's chest and said, "Ragini has done so much for us. Who does so much for others these days? It feels like she's someone very close to us, someone from a past life."

Prashant was quiet for a moment. Finally, he said softly, "There's something I haven't told you, Clara."

"What is it?"

"The day I took the office jeep and came back late, Ragini was with me."

"What? Ragini was with you? What were you doing with her?" Clara sat up abruptly.

"We went to the banks of the Brahmaputra. I was photographing migratory birds. We sat by the river."

After a moment of silence, Clara asked, “Are you in love with Ragini? Tell me everything openly, Prashant.”

“No, Clara. There’s nothing romantic between Ragini and me. We’re just good friends. I’ve never had an emotional relationship with any woman besides you, and I still don’t.” Prashant replied firmly.

Clara rested against his chest and said, “How can I hold onto you, Prashant? Even I couldn’t keep your trust fully. I know I couldn’t give you many of the things you wanted. But remember one thing — I’ve never loved or trusted anyone as much as I’ve loved and trusted you.” Tears filled her eyes.

“You’re not fully recovered yet, Clara. You should sleep early. I was with you before, and I’m still with you now. Even if I wanted, I could’ve sought the company of other women. Many have shown interest in me. But I’ve never betrayed you by offering my heart or body to anyone else. You can always be assured — I belong to you.” Prashant held her close.

Clara tried to nestle into his chest and drifted off to sleep.

The next morning, Prashant went out to buy milk and bread. Meanwhile, Ragini brought over dry roti and fried vegetables for both of them. Clara asked her to stay and chat for a while.

“Ragini, we can’t express how grateful we are. Friendships like this are truly rare these days. I’m surprised Prashant never told me about you before.” Clara said.

“Prashant had almost forgotten about me. If he had stayed in London, we might never have met again. Now that I can help an old friend, I’m happy to do so.” Ragini smiled.

“But the work I came here for — that remains unfinished,” Clara said sadly.

“Oh, you’re a filmmaker, right? Prashant told me you were working on a film about the history of Assam’s tea industry. That’s a wonderful project. If I can help in any way, just tell me. I also have a little experience in filmmaking.”

Clara’s face lit up with a smile. “Wow, that’s great! I only knew you as a lawyer. What kind of films have you made?”

"I've made a few Assamese short films. I've also worked as an assistant to a well-known director from Assam. But filmmaking is my passion, not my profession, so I didn't pursue it seriously. And with COVID, everything came to a halt."

"Since you have experience, you must help me, Ragini. I started the *Phalap* project with high hopes, but COVID ruined all my plans. I still hope to make the film. Can you help?"

"Of course. Why wouldn't I? I'd be thrilled to be involved. I grew up surrounded by tea gardens, so I've always had a deep connection to them. If a film about the tea industry's history is being made, I'd love to be part of it." Ragini replied enthusiastically.

"Excellent. Then promise me something, Ragini."

"What is it?"

"Even if I can't, you will complete *Phalap*. Prashant will assist in every possible way. But if I'm not there, you'll have to take responsibility for finishing the film." Clara said.

"But where would you go? This is your film. You have to make it. How can I?"

"Please don't say no, Ragini. Meeting you feels like I've found heaven. While lying in that hospital bed, I kept wondering what would happen to *Phalap* if I died. Who would carry it forward? I found my answer today, Ragini." Clara's eyes filled with tears.

Ragini placed her hand gently on Clara's shoulder. "When someone desires something pure-heartedly, they always get it somehow. God never lets the sincere prayers of an honest heart go unanswered. Because you've so passionately wished for this film to be completed, it will be. Even if you or I aren't there, someone else will see it through. Don't worry. Everything will be alright."

Just then, Anupama called. "Clara, get well soon and come home. Kevin has already prepared the script, camera positions, and sequences for the first scene of *Phalap*. As soon as you return, we'll go to the Palace near Margherita. It was in such a Palace that Robert Bruce first tasted *Phalap* in Assam, or in the Chingpho

language. We've also secured permission to shoot while following all safety precautions. As soon as you're ready, we can begin filming."

Clara's heart filled with joy. After so long, it felt like a heavy burden had lifted from her mind.

"I don't even know how to thank you, Anupama. I thought you all would have forgotten about *Phalap* by now. But learning that you've continued working on it overwhelms me." Clara said emotionally.

"Now you see how much we love you, how much we care about you," Anupama laughed.

Clara joined in her laughter.

After the call, Clara shared her ideas for the *Phalap* film with Ragini. They discussed the story of how Robert Bruce first tasted *Phalap* at the Pallace of the Chingpho king near Bishagaon. Though Ragini had heard parts of the story before, she didn't know all the details. They also discussed how to depict this story in the film.

While Clara and Ragini were talking, Prashant returned. Seeing them deep in conversation and overhearing Clara's last few words, he was puzzled. Clara added, "Do you know how talented your friend is, Prashant?"

Prashant looked at them, confused. Clara continued, "Did you know Ragini is also a filmmaker?"

Prashant had no idea Ragini was involved in cinema. Clara praised Ragini's talents.

"Do you know what the best part is, Prashant? Even if I'm not here, Ragini can complete the film." Clara said with a cheerful laugh.

"Where are you planning to go, Clara?" Ragini asked.

"I don't know. Sometimes I feel like leaving everything behind and disappearing somewhere," Clara closed her eyes and whispered.

After a moment's pause, Prashant said, "You're not going anywhere. Once you've fully recovered, we'll return to the bungalow together."

CHAPTER 43

When Prashant returned to the tea estate with Clara, people were gathered all along the main entrance path of the Nirajuri garden. Everyone had come out just to catch a glimpse of Clara. Leaving their work aside, even though they wore masks, the workers broke ranks and crowded around the vehicle. Never before had anyone seen such a gathering in the tea estate just to see a *Sahab* or *Mem Sahab*.

The workers had come out of their quarters — men, women, elderly people, even children. The woman they fondly called the “Good Mem Sahab,” who had visited their homes, distributed rations and medicines, and taken care of them during their worst times — the affection they held for Clara was clear to both Prashant and Ragini as they sat beside her.

Even Manager Mehta had never imagined that the wife of an assistant manager could be so popular among the workers. He had worked in many tea gardens, but this eagerness to welcome Clara was unprecedented. It was a rare sight he had never seen before.

The car moved slowly. People walked beside it, step by step. When it reached the front of Prashant’s bungalow, Anupama came running and, sobbing loudly, held Clara in her arms.

The crowd stood still where they were. Four men carefully lifted Clara down and laid her on a bamboo platform that had been prepared. Within minutes, the people showered her body with *gamosas*, shawls, and flowers.

Holding onto Kevin’s shoulder, Prashant wiped his tears and said, “I couldn’t bring Clara back, Kevin. I never thought she would leave us like this.”

“But everything was fine until yesterday evening. I even spoke with her then. What happened so suddenly?” Kevin asked in shock.

“I don’t know, Kevin. She was sleeping peacefully last night. In the morning, when I noticed she wasn’t responding, I touched her and found her body cold. We

rushed her to the hospital immediately. But there, the doctors told me she had already passed away. They said several COVID patients had died like this after recovery. What can I say now?" Prashant broke down in tears.

Manager Mehta arranged for Clara's last rites. Since Clara followed the Christian faith, arrangements were made for her burial according to Christian customs. Mehta suggested burying her in the cemetery adjacent to the tea estate.

At that moment, Anupama spoke up. "We won't leave Clara here alone. She should rest beside Grandma Nancy. Perhaps Grandma Nancy had been lonely for a long time and that's why she took Clara with her."

Prashant and Kevin agreed to Anupama's proposal. They had intended to visit Nancy's grave when they arrived in Assam but hadn't been able to due to the situation.

Hearing Anupama's suggestion, Manager Mehta was surprised. "Kevin's grandma's grave is in Dibrugarh? How is that possible? Isn't Kevin from England?" he asked Prashant.

"Kevin's grandmother was actually born in Dibrugarh, sir. During the British era, she was the daughter of a British doctor working at the Berry White Medical School. Later, during the Second World War, she and her parents moved to London. But she carried Assam in her heart throughout her life. When Anupama met Kevin while studying at Oxford, she also got acquainted with Grandma Nancy. Around the same time, Kevin was conducting research on the history of Assam's oil industry. That's why he came to Assam, and on that trip, Grandma Nancy, along with Anupama and Clara, accompanied him. Unfortunately, Grandma Nancy passed away here, and they buried her in Dibrugarh." Prashant explained gently.

Understanding the situation, Manager Mehta arranged for Clara's body to be taken to Nancy's grave in an inner part of Dibrugarh, along with the necessary arrangements for the others to attend.

Nancy's grave had become overgrown with weeds and bushes since no one had visited for a long time. Kevin had previously paid someone to maintain the grave,

but after a couple of months, the caretaker had stopped answering phone calls and the grave had been left untended.

Manager Mehta arranged for workers to clear the overgrowth. Seeing Grandma Nancy's grave, Anupama became emotional. She sat beside it and said, "Aaita, we had forgotten to come see you. But fate has brought us here to leave Clara by your side. She was your countrywoman, and now we will leave her here with you. Please take care of her."

Ragini held Anupama and gently lifted her up, embracing her.

"You must be Ragini, right? Clara told me about you over the phone. Just yesterday, she told me that even if she couldn't be there, you could fulfill her dreams beautifully." Anupama said through tears.

Ragini didn't say anything. She just held Anupama close.

Near Nancy's grave, the workers dug a large pit. Clara's body, placed in a coffin, was gently lowered into the grave. Eventually, everyone covered the coffin with soil, sealing the grave.

CHAPTER 44

After Clara's burial, everyone returned to the bungalow. The air was heavy with sorrow. Manager Mehta's wife brought food for everyone, but no one felt like eating. Even Nancy lay crying on the bed. She couldn't believe Clara had left them this way. Kevin sat beside her, trying to console her.

Prashant sat silently in a corner of the living room. Ragini approached him and said softly, "I should go now, Prashant. Could you drop me home?"

Before Prashant could reply, Anupama intervened. "No, Ragini. Please stay tonight. I want to talk to you."

Ragini's heart trembled. *What did Anupama want to talk about?*

Anupama gestured for Ragini to sit on the sofa near Prashant. She herself sat on another sofa. "You spoke a lot with Clara these last two days, didn't you? While Prashant was away at the factory, you spent a lot of time with her. Clara told me as much. I want to know, what were you two talking about?" Anupama asked, fixing Ragini with a sharp gaze.

Ragini answered slowly, "Mostly about her dream — the *Phalap* film. She discussed how the scenes should be portrayed. Since I've made a few short films before, I have some experience in filmmaking. Clara told me I had to stay by her side when the film was made. Sometimes, she even said that I should direct it myself and that she would watch from afar." Saying this, Ragini broke into sobs.

"Besides the film, what else did she talk about?" Anupama asked, almost like cross-examining her.

Ragini remained silent for a moment. Then she said softly, "She spoke about her life. She said she always wanted to make everyone happy, but she never succeeded. She said she spent her life struggling and now she was tired. She just wanted a little peace."

“But I never imagined she would seek eternal peace like this. That night, I was late returning from the factory. When I got home, she was already lying asleep wrapped in a red shawl. What happened just before that, Ragini? You were with her then,” Prashant asked.

“She suddenly became very restless. She kept saying she wanted to drink. She begged me again and again for just a little. But where could I get alcohol for her? I calmed her down and eventually put her to bed before leaving.” Ragini replied.

“But before that, there was some argument between you and Prashant about your relationship. Clara had even sent me an audio clip of the argument. Tell me everything, Ragini,” Anupama pressed.

Ragini sighed deeply. “She kept asking me the same question over and over, driving me crazy. She kept saying, ‘Prashant has so many friends in Dibrugarh. Why is he so close to you? Why did he bring me to your house from the hospital?’ Even though I repeatedly told her that we were just friends, she didn’t believe me.”

“I had no idea about any of this,” Prashant buried his head in his hands.

Ragini continued,

“The day we went birdwatching by the Brahmaputra, you once rested your head on my lap and closed your eyes. Without you noticing, I had taken a selfie of that moment. I kept it on my phone as a treasured memory. That evening, Clara saw the photo by accident. After that, she became very upset. She told me that she believed I had fallen in love with you and was lying to her. She insisted that I was the right woman for you, that you and I should be together, and that she herself would arrange our wedding. I kept protesting, telling her there was no romantic relationship between us and no intention of being together. But she wouldn’t listen. That’s why we argued.”

Anupama knew Clara well. This was the same Clara who had once stepped aside when she found out about Kevin and Anupama’s love. Clara had a remarkable ability to sacrifice for others. But this time, she had crossed all limits, sacrificing even her life.

Anupama said softly, “In the end, Clara sacrificed her life for both of you.” She broke down in sobs.

“I never crossed any lines with Ragini, Anupama. Yes, we became close friends. I even enjoyed her company. But I never crossed the line. As my wife, Clara’s place in my life was never given to anyone else. I’ve always loved only Clara,” Prashant said, choking back tears.

“When Clara became emotional, she would want to drink. That night, unable to get alcohol, do you know what she did? She took all the sleeping pills she had in her bag and went to sleep, hoping never to wake up,” Anupama said through her tears.

“Sleeping pills? But how do you know that, Anupama?” Prashant was shocked.

“Clara left me a final message on Messenger explaining everything,” Anupama said.

“What message?” Ragini’s eyes widened.

“I’ll read it to you,” Anupama said, pulling out her phone and reading:

*“My dear Poma, my darling, I have a surprise for you. I’ve made a decision today. I feel like I have no more purpose left in this world. I need a new life now. In my next life, I’ll be a good woman like you — someone whom everyone loves and admires. Hey, can you give me a few tips?

For a long time, I’ve felt my work here is done. But I couldn’t bring myself to leave because I didn’t want to abandon Prashant. I also wanted to make the tea garden film. But strangely, God solved both problems for me.

I’ve told you about Ragini. She’s a good filmmaker. I believe she can make my film. You both can just help a little, as you did with my first film. And you know what? Today, I realized that Prashant and Ragini are in love. They both care deeply for each other but couldn’t express it because of me.

That’s why I have to go, Poma. I couldn’t give Prashant what he truly wanted — a child. I feel he will be very happy with Ragini. They’ll have a beautiful child.

After I'm gone, please arrange their wedding. My blessings will always be with them.

I'm feeling very emotional tonight. I desperately want a drink, but who will get me one? Prashant isn't back from the factory either. Without a drink, I can't sleep tonight.

So, I've taken out the bottle of sleeping pills from my bag. You know I occasionally took them. But tonight, one pill won't be enough. I'll take them all and go to sleep, hoping never to wake up again.

I wish I could give Prashant a kiss before leaving, but if I did, I'd become even more emotional.

By the time you receive this message, I may no longer be in this world, because I've set the delivery time for tomorrow afternoon. Raise Nancy to be a good girl like yourself. I miss her terribly tonight. Keep loving Kevin too. You stay well. Think of me sometimes, Poma. And if I ever caused you any pain, please forgive me.

I'll take the pills now and go to sleep. I hope never to wake up again. — Clara."

After listening to Clara's final message, there was a deep silence in the room. No one spoke for a long time. The air was heavy with grief.

Ragini, overwhelmed with emotion, leaned forward and held Anupama's hand. "I never imagined Clara thought that way about me. I tried so hard to convince her that there was nothing between me and Prashant. But she never believed me. And now... she's gone forever."

Anupama wiped her tears and said softly, "Clara wasn't someone who could easily be convinced once she made up her mind. She always wanted to sacrifice for others. That was her nature."

Prashant sat with his head bowed. His face was pale.

"I can't believe she's gone," he said hoarsely.

"I should have understood what she was going through. I should have stayed with her that night. But I failed her. I failed Clara."

Kevin, who had been silently listening, finally spoke up. “No, Prashant. Don’t blame yourself. Clara made her own decision. It’s just that... she never let us see how much pain she was in. She always smiled and tried to make others happy. We couldn’t have known.”

Nancy, who had been crying quietly, got up and came over to them. “Dad... will we never see Clara again?” she asked in a trembling voice.

Kevin hugged her tightly. “No, darling. We won’t see her again. But we will always remember her. And we’ll complete the dream she left behind. We’ll make the *Phalap* film. That will be her legacy.”

Anupama nodded. “Yes. We’ll do it. For Clara.”

Ragini wiped her eyes and said, “I’ll take responsibility for the film. Clara trusted me with it. I won’t let her down.”

Prashant looked at Ragini, his eyes filled with gratitude and sorrow. “Thank you, Ragini. I don’t know what to say. Clara believed in you. And so do I.”

Kevin stood up and addressed them all. “We have to gather ourselves now. Clara’s gone, but she left us a mission. We’ll complete *Phalap* no matter what. It will be a tribute to her.”

Everyone nodded silently.

That night, no one slept much. They sat together in the living room, sharing memories of Clara, recalling her laughter, her dreams, her kindness.

The next morning, Kevin called a meeting. They gathered around the dining table.

“First, we’ll prepare the full shooting script,” Kevin said. “We’ll finalize locations, scenes, costumes, everything. Clara already discussed some ideas with Ragini. We’ll follow her vision.”

Ragini added, “We should also arrange a small ceremony before shooting starts — to dedicate the film to Clara’s memory.”

Anupama suggested, “And let’s include a scene about Clara herself at the end of the film. So future viewers will know who inspired this project.”

Everyone agreed.

Prashant looked at them all and felt a surge of determination. “Clara’s gone. But her dream lives on. We’ll make sure her story is told.”

Nancy, sitting quietly beside Kevin, whispered, “I’ll help too.”

They smiled at her.

Outside the bungalow, the tea garden stretched green and endless under the morning sun. Birds chirped. Life moved on.

But for the people inside the bungalow, a new chapter had begun — the chapter of fulfilling Clara’s final wish.

CHAPTER 45

15 December, 2022

Crossing the suspension bridge, *Samannoy Setu*, over the Tirap River near Margherita, one enters Bichagaon.

Today, the community hall of Bichagaon was abuzz with people. Crew members from outside were busy setting up cameras, lights, microphones, and shades.

Michael kept glancing at the sky.

It was overcast.

If the sun came out properly, the camera shots would be better.

Kevin, already in makeup, waited for Michael's cue.

David, now Michael's associate, was also there.

He had learned much about filmmaking from Michael and had even been given a good role in this film.

Tired of waiting, Kevin muttered to Ragini,

"Why does the director keep looking at the sky? Do I have to sit here with makeup on forever? Can't you tell Michael that this is Assam, not London? Here, the weather is unpredictable — the sun and rain take turns without notice!"

"Michael is an experienced director from London and also the producer of this film. So, it's best you sit quietly and wait," said Anupama, holding the script.

Ragini looked at Anupama and asked softly,

"I find it strange that Michael, who once made Clara's life miserable, is now producing this film about Assam's tea garden history. How did that happen?"

Anupama sighed.

“We all felt terrible that Clara’s dream of this film, *Phalap*, remained incomplete. Kevin and I decided we would make the film — and make it big. These days, if a film doesn’t meet technical standards, platforms like Netflix won’t even consider it. But making a high-quality film requires a lot of money. We didn’t have that kind of funding. We approached several producers but were rejected. They all said historical films don’t sell. We were about to give up when, surprisingly, Michael himself came forward. He wanted to atone for the wrongs he had done to Clara. He offered to produce and direct the film.”

“He wanted an Indian filmmaker’s help for the local cultural aspects. That’s when we mentioned you, Ragini. Clara had also entrusted you with the responsibility of making the film,” added Kevin.

“I know. Prashant often reminds me that once *Phalap* is released, Clara’s soul will finally be at peace,” Ragini replied.

Anupama smiled faintly, Clara would have been so happy today. I miss her terribly. But somehow, I feel she’s smiling wherever she is. She was someone who could give up everything for others’ happiness.”

Ragini sighed, “To this day, I feel guilty. If I hadn’t met Prashant, maybe Clara would still be alive.”

“Don’t think like that,” Kevin said gently. “What was destined to happen, happened. Perhaps it was God’s will. Now, the best tribute we can offer Clara is to complete her dream — to make *Phalap* the way she envisioned.”

“Prashant has worked tirelessly to make this film a reality too,” Anupama added.

“But where is Prashant? I haven’t seen him,” Kevin asked, looking around.

“Didn’t you know? He’s playing the role of Bichagam, the king of the Singpho tribe. The actor originally cast for the role fell ill. Michael asked Prashant to step in. He’s over there, getting into costume and memorizing his lines,” Anupama explained.

“And Nancy? I haven’t seen her either,” Ragini asked.

“Nancy took little Hiya and went for a walk in the tea gardens. She’s thrilled to be with your nanny and Hiya.”

“Nancy looks completely like an English girl — so fair and lovely. What name have you given her?” Kevin asked.

“Prashant calls her Hiya. Sometimes, when she gets too naughty and I call her Clara, she immediately calms down,” Ragini said with a faint smile.

“Is that so, Ragini? Maybe Clara has returned to us as Hiya. She’s fulfilling Prashant’s long-cherished desire for a child,” Anupama said, her eyes moist.

“I don’t know, Anupama. But I do know Prashant adores Hiya so much that sometimes I feel he might even forget me,” Ragini replied with a soft smile.

Suddenly, Michael’s excitement grew as the sun broke through the clouds. He quickly instructed the cameramen, sound engineers, and actors to get ready. Once everyone was set, David clapped the slate and called out, “Lights, camera, action!”

Robert Bruce, played by Kevin, was brought in by Singpho guards into King Bichagam’s court. Robert, bound, followed the guards into a grand wooden council hall where the king’s ministers sat on cotton cushions around a long wooden table. At the head sat King Bichagam himself.

Seeing Robert tied up, the king expressed displeasure and ordered the ropes removed. He invited Robert to sit beside him.

Though they didn’t understand each other’s languages, Robert used gestures to explain that he had come by boat to explore the beautiful land and assess trade possibilities. King Bichagam, understanding Robert’s gestures, reassured him that as a guest, he had nothing to fear.

Robert was moved by the king’s generosity. Only moments earlier, he had feared for his life. Now, he smiled and silently thanked God.

Noticing Robert’s exhaustion and thirst, the king ordered food and drink to be brought in. Soon, Singpho women entered with shiny brass pitchers, offering

water for everyone to wash their hands. Then they served rice cakes and snacks. Afterward, they brought a special drink in earthen cups.

When Robert tasted it, he closed his eyes in delight. A shiver ran through his body. It was the same magical drink he had tasted once in Calcutta — tea, crafted from special leaves imported from China. A beverage known for its revitalizing properties.

Eager, he gestured to ask the name of the drink. King Bichagam responded with a word, but Robert couldn't catch it. He gestured again, pointing to his ear, indicating he hadn't understood.

Understanding his intent, the ministers all shouted in unison, "Phalap! Phalap! Phalap!"

At that moment, David, observing his father's performance, glanced at Nancy. She was watching too, holding little Hiya in her lap.

Hearing the ministers chant "Phalap, Phalap," Hiya suddenly burst into laughter — just like Clara once did.

The End.