

THE LAST PITCH

**“A True Story of Slums, Struggles,
Startups and Scars”**

The Last Pitch

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“To every young boy or girl who dares to dream in
forgotten corners of the world — may this story
remind you that your dream matters, and that the
world needs it.”

Acknowledgments

To Team BREE — those who stood beside me through the storms, and even those who left me in the dark — you were all my teachers. Every step of this journey, whether lifted by loyalty or tested by betrayal, shaped the story that lives in these pages.

And above all, to the people — the children whose laughter lit up our cafés, the students who made BREE their second home, the mothers who cradled their babies while sipping tea, the daily wagers who discovered dignity within our walls, and the transgenders who, perhaps for the first time, felt they belonged — you reminded me why we build, why we endure, and why we never stop dreaming. You made me believe that BREE must exist.

This book exists because of you. If this story travels far, it is because of you. And if BREE rises again, it will be because of you.

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Chapter 1: Before I knew My Name

I was born in the winter of 1989, in a village the world had almost forgotten—Shublan, just outside the city of Parachinar. The summers there were soft and kind, but the winters came like wolves. Cold crept under doors, filled the cracks in the walls, and sat heavy in our bones.

My name was Qamar, but nobody called me that. To everyone, I was Kamran. Perhaps they misheard it once and it stuck, or maybe it simply rolled easier off the tongue. I never corrected them. I was too small to care. Soon, I started believing it—whenever someone called out “Kamran,” I answered without hesitation, as though that was who I had been all along. Funny how a name, the very first gift of identity, can bend and shift before a child even knows who he is.

What I remember most clearly is our tiny mud house. Just two rooms, yet it felt like the whole universe. In the courtyard, a deep well stood like a silent elder, its dark water watching over everything. One corner held a small chicken coop patched with sticks and mud, always clucking with life. Outside the door, my father’s van rested—dusty, tired, loyal—waiting for the roads

he drove every day. He was a van driver, a man of journeys, though his heart was always tied to home.

But what stayed with me more than anything else was the swing. A simple babies' swing, hanging from the black wooden beams of the ceiling, creaking gently above my parents' charpai beds—beds made of handwoven ropes. Those ropes were made from Mazari Palm, a plant that touched every corner of our lives. Its leaves became carpets, baskets, trays, bread boxes, even slippers. We burned its dried branches for fire in the winter. Every house had a pile of it stacked high in a corner, like treasure from the earth. Mazari Palm was not just a plant. It was survival. It was life itself.

Beside our house stood an Imam Bargah—a place of black curtains and heavy silence. A dark flag rose above its roof, crowned with a metal hand, fingers stretched toward the heavens as if pleading for justice. I would watch it from our courtyard, wondering why God needed such symbols.

Inside, the air was even heavier. A lone pulpit, wrapped in black cloth, stood at the edge of the hall divided by a heavy black curtain—men on one side, women on the other. The walls were drowned in black drapery embroidered with the same words again and again: “Ya

Hussain.” Even as a child, I felt the weight of those words pressing on the air. The silence of the Imam Bargah wasn’t like the silence of night—it wasn’t peaceful. It was thick, mournful, like the place itself had been crying for centuries.

Sometimes, my mother would take us there. She would cut a long strip of Mazari Palm leaf, wrap it around our necks like a strange necklace, and tie it with a knot. Then she would walk us barefoot to the Imam Bargah, her steps slow, her face somber.

“We need mercy,” she would whisper, as though she was speaking less to us and more to herself.

I never understood. My small hands would fidget with the rough palm leaf, itching against my skin. Why did God need this? Why did we have to wear something so uncomfortable to catch His attention?

In my childish thoughts, I would argue silently: Does God really need to be convinced? Does He only listen if we wrap ourselves in leaves? He is merciful—why should He be blackmailed into kindness?

But I never asked these questions aloud. They stayed locked in my chest, pressing and pressing, like the black

silence of that hall. Even now, I don't know the answers.

My family was small but complete. My father, sun-brown and quiet, carried the weight of work without complaint. My mother was steady as the earth, her soft voice smoothing every storm inside the house. My four sisters—Anwar, Najmeena, Yasmeen, and Basmeen—were a mix of playmates and protectors. After me came my younger brother, Aamir, still a bundle in my mother's arms. That was our world—two rooms, a well, a swing, a van, a God behind black curtains, and a plant that held life together.

Every village has its strange figures, and ours had Kukoo—the madman. We feared him, laughed at him, and pitied him all at once. The boys teased him often, throwing stones near his feet, running off in shrieks of laughter when his temper exploded.

“I'll kill you today, I swear by God!” he would roar.

Then he would bite the edge of his dusty Chitrali cap, bend low, grab a handful of stones, and fling them wildly in every direction. His aim was rarely true, but once he clipped a rooster. The whole village spoke of it

for weeks. After that, even the chickens learned to keep their distance from Kukoo.

But there was another man, stranger in a different way. His name was Laghan Dada. He was no madman—he was something else. A healer, a mystic. People came to him with fevers, broken hearts, and troubles they couldn't name. He sat cross-legged on a rough Mazari Palm bed in the village ground, whispering prayers and tying amulets. Mothers held out their coughing babies, begging, "Blow on him, Dada."

And he would. Closing his eyes halfway, he'd murmur verses and blow softly across the child's forehead, as though lending them his own breath. Whether it cured or not, people believed. And sometimes, belief was the only cure they needed.

Not far from us lived my uncles, their homes mirror images of ours—mud walls, creaking swings, Mazari Palm beds. One uncle, Noor Hussain, we all called him Abba. He sold rice pudding in the village, cold and sweet in chipped bowls. His leg carried a limp, though no one knew why. But he never let it stop him. His movements were steady, his purpose unshaken.

Another uncle, Haider Ali, spent his days stretched on a charpai, his head resting on a greasy black pillow, a radio perched on his chest. The radio's crackling voice mixed with static, telling stories from a world I couldn't understand. He listened like it was sacred scripture, though to me it was only noise.

Then there was Hussain Ali, my eldest uncle—a man of calmness and quiet love. When my fragile arm slipped out of place, as it often did, he had a gift for fixing it. He would move my hand gently, left and right, then give it a sharp pull. With a sudden click, the bone would return. Pain gave way to relief, and I looked at him as if he carried magic in his hands. He also played the Rabab, his old mud-walled room echoing with the strings' deep, mournful music. Sometimes, he told stories of ancient Syed saints—tales wrapped in mystery, half history and half legend. His voice, steady and low, carried me into worlds I could barely imagine.

And then there was Ammai—my father's sister, my aunt. She was a storm in the body of a woman. She spoke like men, argued like elders, and no one ever dared silence her. Her two sons worked in the UAE, and that alone made her powerful. In our village, to

have children abroad was to have wealth. But even without their money, her presence alone commanded respect.

Behind our home, the air was filled with the constant hum of a flour mill. It belonged to Qanbar Mama, a man always powdered white with flour. His eyebrows, his hair, his face—everything looked ghostly pale, like a man dusted in snow. Yet he was strong, patient, and steady, grinding the wheat that fed the village.

At home, my sisters were my first world. Anwar and Najmeena went to the boys' primary school—a rare sight for girls in our tribal Pashtun society. Yasmeen and Basmeen stayed home, helping my mother, their hands already learning the rhythm of chores. But all four of them loved me fiercely. Maybe because I was the only boy, maybe because I had arrived after four daughters. In those days, a son was a celebration.

And I felt it.

I felt important.

Cherished.

Some memories from that time have clung to me like carvings in stone.

The smell of my father's van in the early mornings—the smoky burst from the silencer as he warmed the engine. To anyone else, it might have been choking. To me, it was the scent of adventure, a promise that something was about to begin.

Another joy was when my sisters came home from school. They always brought me treasures. Not toys or sweets—no, things far more magical. A fruit plucked from someone's garden, a shiny stone, a candy. To a child, love is hidden in such small, ordinary gifts.

And the greatest joy of all—the moment my father returned at night. First came the groan of the van pulling in, then the slow creak of the wooden door, and finally his tired footsteps crossing the courtyard. It was only then that the house felt whole again. Like a puzzle with all its missing pieces finally in place.

This was Shublan. My Shublan. A village of mud houses and Mazari Palm, of swings that creaked in the night, of mystics and madmen, of faith and fear. A world so small, yet to me, it was everything.

Then, one day, something shifted.

I remember my mother and sisters packing our things. They moved quickly, quietly, as though they didn't want the air itself to know. Blankets were folded, pots stacked, clothes tied into bundles. The rooms, always so full, now echoed with emptiness.

“Where are we going?” I asked.

“To the city,” they said. “To a new house.”

“A city?” I whispered. The word itself felt enormous. I had never seen one.

They told me the new house was made of cement, not mud. That it was inside the grid station—a place that powered the whole city. They said the streets were paved with bitumen, with streetlights shining at night.

To my small mind, it sounded like heaven.

The next morning, we packed our lives—beds, pots, blankets, memories—and loaded them onto a tractor cart. The wheels groaned under the weight as it rolled forward. I sat in my father’s van, peeking out of the window, and watched our little mud house grow smaller and smaller until it was nothing but a memory at the edge of the fields.

The house didn't cry.

But I think I did.

Chapter 2: The Grid Station

Our journey ended in front of a massive blue steel gate. At least, it looked massive to me back then. Everything did. Gates. Roads. Rooms. People. When you're four years old, the world isn't measured in meters—it's measured in awe.

The gate creaked open and we entered.

“This is it,” someone said.

The grid station.

It didn't feel like the village. But it didn't feel like the city either. There were no bazaars, no fruit sellers shouting and no crowds. And yet, the roads were solid, smooth bitumen, lined with proper streetlights, and the houses—quarters, they called them—were built from cement, not mud. It was something in-between. A half-city. A waiting city.

Surrounding the grid station was a tall boundary wall, and beyond it? A strange kind of land—not desert, not forest, but a semi-arid sprawl, filled with silvery, wild-smelling plants called Tarkha. The locals knew the name. I just knew they looked like little ghosts dancing in the wind.

We stood in front of a small government quarter.

It looked like a palace to me.

Two rooms. A kitchen. A concrete floor.

“How is it so big and beautiful?” I thought, stepping through the door.

Now, when I visit the same place as a grown man, I smile. It looks tiny—as if time shrank it while memory kept it large.

While my parents and sisters began unloading our things—pots, bedding, and bundles wrapped in old quilts—I stood off to the side, watching. And that’s when I saw two boys, just about my size. They were running. Laughing. Free.

One of them smiled and waved.

“I’m Javed,” he said.

“I’m Kamran,” I replied automatically, still not knowing I was really Qamar.

The other boy stepped forward. “I’m Hadi.”

We didn’t shake hands. We didn’t need to. We were friends within minutes.

Together, we began exploring.

There was a strange silence in the grid station, a silence that wasn’t empty—it was alive. It made every sound louder. The rustling Tarkha, the buzz of insects, the creak of rusted

hinges... but most of all, it was the hum. That deep, electric hum.

“What is that sound?” I asked.

“It’s the grid,” Javed said.

He led me to it—a chain-linked fence enclosing a field of giant machines. Transformers, towers, wires hanging like metallic vines. The sound vibrated in my chest like a heartbeat from the earth itself.

“This place gives light to the whole city,” Javed whispered, as if we were standing near something sacred.

Next, we ran toward the servant quarters. There were eight quarters in total—only four were filled. We were the fifth. The other three stood empty like skeletons of stories never told.

We ran inside one. The echo of our laughter bounced off the bare walls.

“Hello!” I shouted.

My own voice shouted back.

We ran faster, trying to outrun our own echoes.

All the families living here were employees of the grid station. Except us.

“Why did they give us a house here?” I once asked.

No one had a clear answer.

Maybe someone had connections.

Maybe they just wanted to fill the emptiness.

Maybe the house had been waiting for us.

There were three families in total. The fourth house was occupied by a quiet gardener from Bannu. An old man who lived alone, always trimming something, watering something, or sitting silently with a cup of tea. He didn’t say much. But he nodded a lot.

I was four years old.

And just like that, we all began to find our people.

I had Javed and Hadi.

My little brother Aamir found his own friend Raza—a tiny boy who followed him around like a shadow.

My sisters found girls to play with.

And even my mother, who rarely spoke to strangers, found someone to laugh with over cups of tea.

There was no school bell here. No market chaos. But something was blooming.

A life was beginning.

Not louder. Not richer.

But quieter.

And maybe, deeper.

By nightfall, our little cement home had begun to feel like a place we belonged to. A few rugs, some charpais, pillows, and our basic kitchen pots were all we had—but they were arranged with love, and that made them enough.

Outside the window, the streetlight hummed softly, casting long shadows through the curtains. It felt like a hotel room in a movie—clean, bright, and somehow full of promise.

I looked outside and whispered to myself,

“We’ve upgraded.”

The next day, Javed and Hadi had something to show me.

“A secret,” Javed grinned, his eyes glowing.

“You can’t tell anyone,” Hadi added.

We snuck behind the quarters, past the chain-link fence, through a narrow hole in the boundary wall that led to the open lands beyond. On the other side sat an old government veterinary hospital, barely alive.

At the back of the hospital was a tiny toilet room, now transformed into a strange little shop. It belonged to Mittha Khan, the hospital's watchman. A small man with a red face, short like a child, but sharp as a hawk.

He'd covered the toilet bowl with a wooden plank, laid a table over it, and on that table he displayed snacks and candies. Popcorn, chew gum, sugar lollipops, and our favorite—the one rupee lottery.

It was a paper packet filled with sugary popcorn, but hidden inside was a tiny plastic toy. A spinning top. A whistle. A finger puppet. Useless—but magical.

“Try your luck, Kamran!” Javed laughed.

I handed over my one rupee note with a trembling hand, tore open the pack... and found a tiny red whistle inside. I blew it immediately, and it squeaked like a rat. I was overjoyed.

But when I returned home, the joy vanished like smoke.

The house was in chaos. My mother's face was pale. My sisters were crying.

"Where were you?!" someone shouted.

"Why did you disappear?!"

I was pulled inside like a thief.

Yasmeen, my sister, had gone looking for me. She had wandered near the road outside the gate and was hit by a car. Her leg was fractured. My father had rushed her to the hospital.

And me?

I was dragged into the house and met with slaps, shouts, and chappals flying from every direction.

"Because of you!"

"She could've died!"

I didn't cry. I just stood there, my whistle still in my dirty little pocket.

But somehow, despite it all, I still loved life in the grid station.

That place gave me something I had never felt before—confidence.

It whispered to me:

“There’s more out there. More to see. More to become.”

Then came a new wonder—one that changed everything.

Javed’s father, Abid Baba, bought a black-and-white TV. He kept a cow in the back and had planted a few fruit trees, so his quarter always smelled of milk and damp earth.

But the TV... that was treasure.

Only Javed’s elder brother Ghadeer was allowed to turn it on. The rest of us sat on the floor like worshippers in a shrine. And when “Ainak Wala Jin” came on—magic filled the room.

The room was small. But during those episodes, it became a cinema, a kingdom, a dream.

Whole families would gather—women, children—shoulder to shoulder, wide-eyed, smiling. I didn’t even understand all the dialogues, but I understood the feeling: wonder.

Other families began to matter to me too.

There was Najaf Mama, Hadi’s father. A calm man. He too had a cow, and fruit trees. His daughters were kind and often came to play with my sisters.

Then there was Yusuf Mama's family. They were Christian. Their job was cleanliness and sanitation in the grid. But what made Yusuf Mama special was his stories.

He'd sit cross-legged in his room, framed pictures of white-bearded saints hanging behind him, and tell tales of miracles, invisible hands, and holy footprints that healed the sick.

I'd listen, eyes wide, wondering if such things were true.

"Do saints really walk among us?" I once asked myself.

Life in the quarters became richer with every passing week.

People shared food—a kind of unwritten ritual. Every evening, you'd taste something different. Biryani from Yusuf Mama's home, chicken korma from Abid Baba's, Zarda—the sweet rice from Hadi's mother.

I loved it. Our home was simple, but our table was full of variety, flavor, and stories.

One by one, the remaining empty quarters filled.

A welder from Bannu arrived with well-educated daughters.

Muneer Hussain, a school principal, moved in. His son Nadeem became my friend.

Then a family from Punjab came. They spoke Urdu, wore polished shoes, and carried books. The father was a banker. His son Fawad became another friend, and slowly, from him, I started speaking Urdu too.

My world was stretching.

I was learning that not everyone looked, dressed, or spoke like us.

And that was okay. That was beautiful.

The grid station became a world of its own—a neighborhood carved out of emptiness. Girls gathered in groups to play, boys invented games from dust and dreams, and the echo of laughter replaced the earlier silence.

I was happy. Truly, innocently happy.

And then, without warning, it ended.

A notice came. Evacuation.

“All non-employees must leave within 30 days.”

We weren’t employees. We had to go.

I watched as my father silently began making arrangements.

And then one day, another tractor cart appeared.

Another morning of folding rugs, tying bundles, and lifting beds.

As we loaded up, I stood at the edge of the quarter and looked back one last time.

The rooms that gave me my first taste of belonging.

The friends.

The hole that opened to another world.

The popcorn lottery.

The electric hum.

The shared dinners.

The black-and-white TV.

All of it was fading.

As the cart moved forward, I turned and looked back again. And again.

The grid station grew smaller and smaller, until it was just a blur on the horizon.

Then it disappeared.

Chapter 3: Imamia Colony

We were on the move again. My father drove the van, steady as always, while behind us a tractor pulled our life—beds, pots, bundles of clothes, and everything that made up a home.

After some time, the road opened into a place that felt entirely new to me. It wasn't like Shublan, and it wasn't like the grid station either. This was different. This was a city.

Near the Headquarter Hospital of Parachinar, the world felt alive. The streets were crowded, the air thick with movement. I remember the smoke first—the smell of barbecue drifting through the air, making my stomach ache with hunger. The smoke curled upward, blending with the noise of the bazaar: vendors shouting, taxis honking, footsteps rushing. Everywhere I looked, people seemed busy, as if each of them had a mission, a place to be.

“This is the city,” I thought. And it excited me.

We drove deeper, into the heart of it all, where the roads grew tighter and the crowds denser. Soon, we reached Eidgah Market, a place bursting with life, more alive than anything I had seen before. My eyes darted from shop to shop, colors and sounds blurring together.

Then, we turned off into a branch road that led to a residential area—Imamia Colony. It didn't look like a market or a hospital, but it was still full of energy, full of people. And it was here, in this busy neighborhood, that we were going to live from now on.

Imamia Colony was larger than any place I had lived before. It wasn't just another stop like the grid station—it was an important residential hub of the city. And yet, the shifting itself looked so familiar: once again, all of our belongings were stacked on a tractor cart, rattling their way into another house. Another move, another beginning.

While my family busied themselves with unloading, I slipped away to explore. Curiosity was always stronger than duty.

Behind our home, looming nearer than I expected, stood a tall, ancient building. It was the Government Middle School for Boys, and its architecture carried the weight of another time. Built before Partition, the structure had an air of age and severity. Its very walls looked frightening to me, as though they guarded secrets of generations past.

In front of the school lay a wide, empty plot where children played noisily. I watched them from a distance, hoping for the warmth I had once received from Javed and Hadi at the grid station. But the children here only stared back, their eyes hard and curious, as if I had arrived from another

world. There was a toughness about them, a violence in their energy, and I felt a knot of fear tighten inside me.

Then my gaze shifted to something else entirely: a massive bungalow facing our small new home. Its high boundary walls hid much of it from view, but above the walls, tall trees stretched skyward, their tops swaying in the breeze. The green corrugated metal sheets of the roof glinted faintly in the sunlight, adding to the mystery of the place. It looked important, unreachable.

Around me, the streets branched into complicated twists and turns, some lined with large homes, others with modest ones like ours. The whole colony felt like a labyrinth, vast and confusing. I worried that if I wandered too far, I might be lost forever in this new world.

The unease I felt from the violent boys outside drove me back quickly to the safety of our new home. It was another modest dwelling, just two rooms and a single toilet, with no kitchen. The roof was made of corrugated steel sheets, thin and unforgiving.

That very night, heavy rain began to fall. As the drops struck the roof, the noise was deafening, like bullets ricocheting above our heads. Each strike seemed to carry a threat, and fear spread through us. Worse still, the roof leaked. Water poured into the rooms in narrow streams, seeping across the floor. With no veranda to shield the entrance, the rain lashed

directly against the doors, rattling them as though trying to force its way inside.

And yet, by morning, my mother and sister had already begun to transform the bare space into a home. They had a gift for creating ambiance out of almost nothing. Old newspapers became decoration, used metal packaging turned into storage, and within a day the rooms felt alive.

We spread our cheap rugs woven from Mazari Palm, their rough texture grounding us with a sense of familiarity. Wooden planks were mounted on the walls, turning into shelves that held our cups and utensils. To soften the emptiness, newspapers were cut in delicate curves and placed beneath the shelves, giving the walls a surprising touch of design. Wooden frames and clippings from old magazines were hung up, their faded colors becoming art in our small world.

That was everything to us then. Those little arrangements, those makeshift designs—they were not just decorations, they were hope. They turned an ordinary, leaking shelter into a home. For us, that was the whole world, and it meant everything.

The next morning, my restlessness returned. I wanted to see more of this new world, but my freedom was tightly measured. My family's instructions were clear: do not go far, and show your face every hour. If I didn't, consequences

would follow. So I set out with caution, exploring in little bursts of adventure, always circling back like a tethered bird.

The first landmark that caught my attention was impossible to miss—a giant bungalow belonging to Dr. Afzal Hussain. To my child's eyes, it looked like a palace. My father whispered that he was a wealthy doctor who had returned from London, and indeed, his private hospital stood inside the grand mansion's walls. Its tall gates and towering trees seemed to guard secrets of a life far beyond my imagination.

There were other bungalows too, with iron gates so large they looked like fortresses. I never knew what lay behind them, but their silence felt heavy, almost intimidating. A little further on stood another private hospital, this one belonging to Dr. Amjad. And of course, looming over everything nearby, was the Government Middle School—the ancient building whose shadow seemed to watch our every move.

But I wanted more than these glimpses. Something inside me urged me to push further, to walk beyond the familiar road that led into the heart of Imamia Colony. Taking those steps felt, in my childish mind, like venturing into outer space—leaving the safety of my little planet to discover a larger universe.

As I walked, the same boys I had seen before were playing nearby. Their stares burned into me, sharp and hostile, as

though I was some strange creature that had wandered into their world. I kept moving, pretending not to notice, my small heart beating fast.

Then, rising ahead of me, I saw black flags swaying in the air above a massive building. It was the Imam Bargah. I had been taught since childhood to show respect, so I approached carefully, placed my lips on the door, and kissed it. For a moment, I felt the weight of reverence that my elders had spoken of.

Inside, I saw a man teaching Qur'an to a group of young boys. Their voices, reciting verse after verse, filled the hall. I hesitated at the threshold, unsure if I belonged there, then quietly turned back and retraced my steps toward home.

I showed my face to my family, as promised, before slipping out again—this time to explore another road.

And this exploration took me toward the quieter side of the road that passed in front of our home. Unlike the busy lanes with schools, hospitals, and bungalows, this one seemed to lead into silence. I followed it with hesitant steps until it opened into a dry stream, its bed littered with pale stones that crunched under my feet.

Beyond the stream lay a graveyard. The sight of graves always stirred unease in me. They seemed like doorways to another world, silent and watchful. At first, I thought of

turning back, but then something inside me urged me forward. Crossing that stony stream felt like crossing into a secret, forbidden territory—the most daring adventure of my young life.

Not far from the graveyard, I saw it: a small shrine crowned with black flags fluttering in the still air. The place was empty, so empty it felt alive in its silence. Fear rose in my chest, and almost instinctively, I walked to the gate, bent down, and kissed it. It wasn't just respect—it was refuge. I tied my trembling heart to that shrine, as though the saint resting within could shield me from whatever unseen danger my imagination had conjured.

That little shrine later became more than a place on a road. It became a companion. The shrine of the Sufi saint known as Agha-e-Irani. Every Thursday evening, its emptiness would transform—filled with fragrance from burning incense, drifting like invisible prayers through the air. People lit candles and incense on the graves, their smoke carrying both grief and hope skyward.

In time, this place became my refuge too. A sanctuary I would return to again and again. When shadows gathered in my life, when fears grew too heavy, or when loneliness pressed in, I remembered the shrine. It was not just a place of worship—it was a quiet hand on my shoulder, reminding me that even in emptiness, there could be comfort, even in silence, a kind of answer.

Chapter 4: The Day I knew My Name

After a week of wandering and exploration, life took an unavoidable turn. One morning, my father held my hand and walked me to a nearby primary school—not the tall and frightening building I had often seen, but another one, a little farther away, just ahead of the Imam Bargah.

This was an important day for him. Education was the very reason he had uprooted us from Shublan. Now, he was fulfilling that responsibility, making sure his children stepped into the world he had sacrificed so much to reach.

The school was small—just a four-room building, with no boundary wall to guard it from the noise of the streets. It looked fragile, as though a strong wind could carry it away.

Inside, we found the headmaster seated in the classroom of the fourth grade. His name was Kamaal Ustaad. The word “Ustaad” carried authority in our world. Only children of private schools, dressed in starched English uniforms, spoke of their teachers as “Sir.” For us, “Ustaad” was enough.

Kamaal Ustaad was a slim, graceful man with a neatly kept white beard and glasses balanced on his nose. Yet there was nothing gentle in the way he received us. In those days, government school teachers carried little respect for their

students—or even for the parents who brought them. He looked at us as though we were just another burden added to his day, another responsibility forced upon his desk.

Perhaps they even lacked respect for themselves, I thought, never daring to lift the title of Ustaad into the more dignified “Sir.”

The school was noisy, restless. A chaos of boys filled the rooms. The students were dressed in black uniforms made of a coarse material everyone called Kashmiri fabric, their black caps stitched with red crescent moons. They sat cross-legged on jute rugs stained with ink, their voices rising like a storm.

It was into this storm that I was now being placed.

The next moment, something unexpected happened—something that changed me forever.

Kamaal Ustaad asked my name. Without hesitation, my father replied, “Qamar Abbas.”

I froze. For the first time, I had heard my real name spoken in a place that mattered. Not Kamran, the name that had followed me since birth like a shadow. No, this time it was Qamar Abbas. Official. Written. Recognized.

I looked at my father in surprise, my heart bursting with excitement. In that single moment, it felt as though my old

identity had been washed away and replaced with something brighter, truer. I loved my new name.

The Ustaad pulled out a large register, uncapped his pen, and carefully inscribed it: Qamar Abbas. Then he closed the book and told me to start coming to school from the next day. He also instructed my father to buy me a Takhti—a smooth wooden tablet for practicing alphabets and numbers.

For those who have never seen one, a Takhti was more than just a board. Its main purpose was to refine our handwriting. We wrote on it with thick black ink, which we prepared by dissolving dry, grainy black powder sold in tiny packets at every stationery shop. Once a lesson was complete, we washed the Takhti, rubbing it with a special clay to smooth its surface, and then dried it for neat writing again. It was a humble tool, yet it shaped the first steps of learning for thousands of children like me.

That same evening, my father took me to the city's famous bookstore—Khyber Books. It stood proudly near the Girls' High School on the bustling road everyone called School Road. Inside, the air was thick with the smell of paper and ink, and clerks moved busily among the tall wooden shelves. To me, it felt like a treasure house.

But my father's pockets were thin. With careful calculation, he bought me only what he could afford: one notebook, a

black cap, a Takhti, and two of the required textbooks. From there, he took me to a cloth shop, where he purchased a piece of black Kashmiri fabric—on credit. He knew the shopkeeper, promised to pay him the next month, and walked out with hope wrapped in a bundle of cloth.

Back at home, he handed the fabric to my mother. She was a skilled tailor, always accompanied by her stitching machine. That night, she stitched my uniform and a small school bag from spare cloth. By morning, everything was ready—my uniform, my cap, my bag, and my books. A whole new world prepared for me overnight.

My sisters, too, were admitted to the Government Girls' School. For my parents, this was no ordinary accomplishment. In a single week, they had fulfilled the very purpose that had pulled them away from Shublan. Their children were now in school. Their dream had begun to take shape.

The next morning, dressed in my freshly stitched black uniform and carrying the little cloth bag my mother had made, I stepped into the schoolyard for the first time. It was as if I had entered an entirely new world—a world of noise, faces, and unfamiliar languages.

Everywhere I looked, children were scattered across the small building and its surroundings, each one carrying a story I could not yet read. Some boys spoke a strange tongue that

rolled differently on their lips; I would later learn it was Persian. Others looked wild and rough—noses running, faces unwashed, their laughter echoing without restraint. Incredibly, even in Class One there were boys so tall and mature that they looked more like young men than children.

The environment overwhelmed me. I felt small, lost among the sheer number of children and their different cultures. Fear outweighed my excitement.

Yet, one thing gave me a quiet shield. Though we were poor, my mother and sisters carried a sacred discipline of cleanliness. Our clothes might have been stitched from cheaper cloth, but they were always spotless. Our hair was combed, our hands washed, and our appearance neat. That small dignity became my introduction. It softened the eyes of teachers and even drew some boys towards me.

By midday, I found my first friend. His name was Hassan Mehdi, though everyone called him Chaani. He was lively, quick to smile, and his home was barely two hundred meters from ours. Soon, I also grew close to his elder brother, Muhammad, who welcomed me with the same warmth.

To my surprise, the alphabets and numbers I had already learned from my sisters became my advantage. When the teacher asked us to recite or write, I managed to keep pace easily. This small skill caught the teacher's attention and

earned me a measure of respect from classmates who had struggled.

That very first day, my circle began to grow. By the time school ended, I had already made friends—Murtaza, Sadiq, Hilal, Wahid, and even the class monitor, Qanbar. I walked home with my heart lighter than it had been the day before, carrying not just books but the beginnings of belonging.

In the evenings, life stretched beyond school. Some of the neighborhood boys, though enrolled in private schools, lived close to our home. With them I played cricket and football in the open plot nearby—the same empty land that had first seemed intimidating now began to feel like a playground.

That was how my school life started: with fear, then slowly with friendship, until the strangeness of the place softened into something I could call my own.

But unlike my ordinary school friends, a true shift in my life came when I befriended the boys of a widely respected Syed family—close relatives of the famous doctor who had returned from London. Their names were Syed Hassan and Syed Shahid, and they studied in one of the most prestigious schools of the city, Kohisar Public School.

Their home was unlike anything I had known: spacious, graceful, filled with an air of refinement. They even had a

large color television—something that, to me, felt like a window to another world. I still remember sitting in their living room, eyes wide, as we watched my favorite drama, *Ainak Wala Jin*. Those evenings felt magical, like stepping into a dream I never wanted to end.

But it wasn't just the TV or the grandeur of their house that left its mark on me. My friendship with Hassan and Shahid quietly reshaped me. From them, I learned manners—the art of how to speak, how to sit, how to carry myself with dignity. I watched their confidence, their polished way of talking, and I tried to compete with them in every small detail. Slowly, these lessons lifted me, giving me a sense of self-worth, at least in comparison to the underprivileged boys at my own school.

It was as if, through Hassan and Shahid, I glimpsed a higher version of myself, one I was determined to reach someday.

But there were some rogue boys in our class room named Wahid Khushi and Shareef Khushi.

They were refugees from Afghanistan and were big boys. They were torturing everyone in class. They used to work in fruit shops after school. They were blackmailing me and beating me almost every day. There was a strange rule in the school that whenever I complained about them the teacher started beating me equally. 5 sticks for the complainer and 5 for the complainee. So I preferred not to complain to the

teacher in future. These guys were the biggest torture in my life for long two years. The sadness, fear and depression was so extreme that I cannot explain. Everyone has a different suffering and for a child this was a suffering equal to the biggest sufferings of big boys. Similar other bullies were there in school and at neighborhood that was a big torture in that time. I can call it depression, considering that age and time.

But then came another trial in my life, one far more painful than any physical hardship. It was a torture of the mind, a wound that quietly cut deeper than anything else.

It was the weight of **inferiority**.

Every day I felt it, like a shadow following me. My friends and neighbors who studied in elite private schools seemed to belong to another world. They wore crisp English-style uniforms, three-piece suits that shone with pride. They rode to school in vans and buses dedicated for them, while I walked on foot in my plain black shalwar qameez and cap—the uniform of poverty.

The sting grew sharper when I heard their words. The private school boys had given our government school a mocking name: “Tomato School.” To them, we were nothing more than a joke, the kind of children to be laughed at, pitied, or ignored. And the worst part was—they were

not entirely wrong. Compared to their schools, we had nothing: no facilities, no comfort, no prestige.

Every morning, on my way to class, I found myself hiding from them, taking longer routes or lowering my gaze, just so they wouldn't see me dressed in the mark of inferiority. My black cap, once a source of neatness and pride, now felt like a stamp of shame.

My biggest wish in those days was simple yet impossible: I wanted to study where they studied, to sit beside them as equals. But that dream never came true. Instead, I carried the longing silently, and with it, the slow ache of knowing that the world was divided, even among children.

That was my reality then—friendship and play on one side, but on the other, a quiet humiliation that shaped the way I saw myself for years to come.

But I had no escape from the life of inferiority, so I kept going. What I did have, however, was a new name—Qamar Abbas. And in those days, that name alone was enough to give me a reason to smile.

Chapter 5: When God Was Listening

This was the mid-90s, and Parachinar was alive with a kind of beauty that only diversity can create. It was a Shia-majority city, yes, but Sunnis lived alongside us in large numbers. We studied together in the same schools, played together in the neighborhoods, and shared the same streets without thinking much about our differences.

Afghan refugees had also poured into the city during those years, bringing with them a whole new layer of culture. Their presence added fresh colors to the fabric of our lives. I would hear unfamiliar languages like Farsi flowing through the bazaar, catch sight of their unique fashions, taste their foods, and even see boys practicing martial arts in open spaces. Even the Pashto spoken in Parachinar carried different accents, shaped by so many influences.

The bazaar, at the heart of the city, reflected all of this. It was more than a marketplace—it was a living portrait of cultures meeting and mingling. The restaurants breathed out a special kind of aroma. Whenever you passed one, the smoke of Afghani tikka rising from glowing coals wrapped itself around you, teasing your hunger before you even realized it. Even a simple naan from the bazaar tasted richer, fuller, like bread born of many lands.

And then there was the light. Parachinar, blessed in those days with free electricity, stayed bright long after sunset. The city glowed under the soft yellow bulbs, streets bathed in a warmth that gave the nights their own quiet magic. To walk through that light was to feel that the city was alive, awake, and unafraid of the dark.

And this detail matters because the Parachinar of today no longer has it. Today, the city is drowned in darkness, without electricity, and the bazaars close before sunset. That darkness has stolen the true aesthetics and vibrant vibe the city once had. We, the millennials, were perhaps the last generation to experience a Parachinar glowing with lights, alive with beauty, and filled with its unique charm.

What made the city even more attractive were the rich rituals that gave meaning to life. Most of these rituals were religious, and in those darker times, religion felt like a gift—something that added beauty, order, and hope to everyday existence.

Fridays were holidays in those days, which meant Thursdays were our weekends. One fine Thursday afternoon, after returning from school, the little explorer in me woke up again. I decided to break my usual boundaries and head toward the main city, half a kilometer away from Imamia Colony.

My destination was the Central City Imam Bargah, the most famous and grand one in Parachinar. Almost all my classmates had been there and spoken of attending Matam inside its walls. It was considered the heart of our city's rituals, and I had learned the way from Chaani. So, with a mix of curiosity and courage, I began my journey.

As I entered the bustling bazaar, I was struck by the rush of life. Thousands of people moved about, fruit and vegetable sellers shouted their prices with booming voices, and the smoke rising from barbecues filled the air with a hunger-stirring aroma. I carried 5 rupees in my pocket—a fortune for a boy like me at that time. Perhaps it was this money that gave me the confidence to wander beyond my ordinary limits. Money, I realized, is the greatest motivator; it lends courage where none exists.

On my way, I spotted an ice-cream seller perched on a tall chair beside his cone machine. For 2 rupees, I bought myself a cone, licking it slowly as I walked further toward my destination. The sweetness in my mouth matched the excitement in my heart.

When I finally asked a passerby for directions, he pointed me ahead—it was close. Moments later, I found myself standing before the Imam Bargah's massive gate. I froze, stunned. Its sheer size and design radiated a sense of supremacy. People were pouring in and out, a constant stream of devotion.

I stepped inside. In the center stood a towering Alam, its fabric fluttering, kissed by every hand that passed. Some bowed their heads before it, some pressed their foreheads gently against the cloth. The devotion in the air was heavy, yet beautiful.

The Imam Bargah had three entry gates, connecting different corners of the city like a living artery. Following the cultural teachings instilled in me, I too kissed the Alam before entering the enormous hall.

Inside, I was greeted by a tall black pulpit. The walls were draped in black fabrics embroidered with golden “Ya Hussain.” Paintings of a dignified man, with a handsome beard and a green Arab turban, adorned the space—images that captured reverence and awe.

It was overwhelming—excitement mixed with a slight trembling fear.

Then, from another hall, I heard an echoing voice. I followed it and reached the mosque section of the Imam Bargah. Rows of young boys sat neatly, reciting Dua-e-Kumail with remarkable focus. At the front, a man led the prayer into a microphone, his voice amplified across the loudspeakers. The rhythm of his words filled the entire complex, creating an atmosphere that was both spiritual and mesmerizing.

For the first time, I felt the weight of belonging to something greater—a culture, a ritual, a tradition that bound us all. I was lost in it, and deep inside, I longed to become part of that world.

After wandering through the Imam Bargah, I noticed the sunlight beginning to fade. Panic struck me—I ran towards home, desperate to escape the scolding, or worse, the beating that awaited me if I was late.

But nature wasn't done with me that day. On the way back, another surprise crossed my path. I came upon a Government Park, lush and green, alive with laughter. Dozens of boys were running, climbing, swinging. The park was full of colorful play structures, a small paradise for children.

Yet I didn't step inside. Instead, I froze at the gate, watching from the outside. My inferiority complex was so deep that I didn't even have the courage to imagine myself among them. I told myself this beautiful place must belong only to the rich and fortunate, not to a boy like me. How could I dare to enter a playland that seemed reserved for kids who had everything?

So I stood there, quietly watching the joyous faces, their laughter echoing into the evening, while I remained on the outside. After a long while, as the sky grew darker, I turned

back and walked home—already late, carrying both wonder and a silent sadness inside me.

When I finally reached home, my family was already restless, searching for me. After a sharp taunt from my mother, I was told to join them for a visit to the shrine of Agha-e-Irani. They had prepared a packet of cheap red candies to distribute among children, and another of candles to light at the shrine. My exhaustion vanished instantly. Nature, it seemed, wanted to gift me yet another surprise that day, and a fresh wave of excitement rushed through me.

The shrine of Agha-e-Irani was already my favorite place, but that evening it felt even more magical. The air was heavy with the fragrance of burning agarwood, and the flickering glow of hundreds of small candles lit up the shrine and graveyard like a piece of heaven on earth. The scene was alive—men, women, and children moving in and out, exchanging smiles, greetings, and blessings. People handed out candies generously, and on our return home we even received a dish of sweet yellow rice, Zarda, sent by kind neighbors.

All of this activity had a single purpose—to make God happy so that He might grant their wishes in return. And Thursday was believed to be the day when prayers were most readily heard.

That is why Thursdays became the most cherished day of my childhood. They were weekends—no school the next morning—and they were filled with rituals that soothed the soul, lit up the heart, and healed the quiet wounds of our everyday struggles.

And then the rituals of Muharram—a month when the rituals grew deeper, richer, and more powerful. The whole town seemed to drown in black fabric. Music disappeared from homes and streets. The audio-cassette shops that once displayed singers now replaced them with banners of Noha artists, their voices echoing through loudspeakers to attract customers. Even the VCR shops shifted, renting tapes of Muharram processions and Noha recitations instead of films.

For us children, one of the most exciting things was the torches people carried on their way to the Imam Bargah. They weren't really needed for light, but holding one became a ritual, almost a luxury. I longed to carry one too, but I could never afford it. Still, just walking alongside those torches, watching their flames dance in the night air, was enough to fill me with joy.

From the 7th to the 10th of Muharram, the town transformed. Every night carried a different rhythm, a sacred beauty. The sound of chest-beating with Nohas rose so high that the beat could be heard from miles away, adding a haunting, musical cadence to the mourning. On the 10th,

the most intense ritual took place—Zanjeer Zani—where men struck their backs with chains tipped with blades, bleeding in devotion.

But in our family, the rituals were even more layered. I was a Mian Mureed, and that gave me a sense of richness others did not have. We were different—following the path of Syeds and Sufi saints as much as we followed the Shia rituals. Music, unlike in most places, was not forbidden in our devotion—it was embraced.

We had our own sacred space, not the Imam Bargah, but something called the Doya. In the Doya, the rituals came alive with fire and sound. A great fire burned in the center, and around it, devotees performed Matam with music. Nohas were sung with drums and instruments, and the rhythm carried men into a trance. They danced in solemn, whirling movements around the fire, each step and strike of the chest syncing with the beat of the music.

It was unlike anything else—a fusion of grief, love, rhythm, and devotion. To me, it felt heavenly. A ritual that had both pain and beauty woven into it. And today, through these words, I wish to show the world that side of our culture—a side that carried light, fire, and music even in mourning.

And Ramadan—a month wrapped in rituals and joy. As a child, waking up for sehri felt like an adventure in itself. The taste of a special paratha, prepared only during those

pre-dawn meals, was nothing less than heavenly. Fasting carried its own pride. For us children, it was an ego, a badge of honor—we wanted everyone to know we were fasting like the grown-ups. The long wait for iftar made the evenings even more special, and when the call for prayer finally broke the fast, the neighborhood lit up with the fragrance of food. Every home sent dishes to another, and the tables overflowed with a diversity of flavors.

Then came Eid, each one with its own magic. Eid cards were the first ritual—the excitement of buying them, then carefully writing messages in our own handwriting. Those cards were never just plain words; they carried poetry, blessings, and prayers, making them treasures of friendship. On Eid morning, we woke early, dressed in our new clothes, and rushed out into the streets. There was always a unique fragrance in the air—that beautiful smell that rose from freshly stitched clothes, a fragrance that belonged only to Eid mornings. It mingled with the scent of perfumes and the freshness of the day, and it made us feel renewed, as if we were stepping into a brighter version of life itself. House after house, we collected our little Eidi money, our pockets growing heavy with happiness. And then came the tradition of smashing colorful eggs—another small joy stitched into the fabric of Eid.

Other days brought their own color too. The 12th of Rabi-ul-Awal, the day of both the birth and passing of Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him), was celebrated

with great zeal by the Sunni community of Parachinar. A grand procession of thousands moved through the streets, green flags rising like waves, slogans echoing through the town. For us children, it was another world of fascination. We would run to our Sunni friends, asking with innocent curiosity about what happened in the procession, eager to catch even a glimpse of the excitement.

As I have said earlier, I belonged to the famous Turi tribe of Parachinar—a Shia tribe with a sub-sect known as Mian Mureed. And within that identity lay a culture unlike any other, rooted deeply in mysticism, music, and devotion to saints.

The beauty of my tribe was that rituals filled every corner of life. It seemed as if every day carried its own sacred rhythm. There was always something to mark—the birthday of an Imam, the death of an Imam, or a special event in the history of Karbala. Beyond that were the anniversaries of Syeds and Sufi saints, each day giving reason for remembrance, gathering, and ritual. For children, it was a world full of occasions; even the days of mourning carried a unique atmosphere and a certain beauty.

Unlike most Muslims, who celebrated only the two great Eids—Eid al-Adha and Eid al-Fitr—we had many more. Eid-e-Nawroz, Eid-e-Ghadeer, and others gave our calendar a richness that stretched across the year. In short, our lives were never without rituals.

In that forgotten part of the world, these traditions and religious practices meant everything. They were more than gatherings—they were a lifeline. In poverty and chaos, they kept people thankful. They gave dignity to suffering and turned despair into a dose of hope. Religion was not just belief—it was rhythm, community, and survival.

Time kept circling forward—through pain, through rituals, through the ordinary flow of childhood. And then, suddenly, the same year of 1996, everything shifted.

Chapter 6: When Minarets Became Bunkers

It was the 5th of September, 1996. The morning carried the kind of stillness that tricks you into believing the day will stay kind. I had eaten breakfast with my younger brother Aamir — roti dipped in tea, the usual meal — and we had walked together to school. He had just begun his schooling; I was already in class one.

The classroom smelled of chalk and dust. Our teacher sat on his chair, his face stern, the kind of face that silences children without words. I was trying to keep my head low, not to attract his anger, when a sound cracked through the air. At first, it was distant, but then it grew heavier, louder, like the earth itself was shattering.

Gunfire.

The teacher stood up suddenly, his eyes wide. A roar of whispers filled the room, rising like a wave of fear. And then the whispers turned into shouts: “Shia-Sunni war has started!”

My little body froze for a second. I didn’t think, I only moved. I ran out of the class, pushing past other children, my heart thudding in my ears. I had to find Aamir. His classroom was close to mine, and when I reached it, the

chaos had already swallowed everything. Children crying, teachers trying to hold them, the gunfire still echoing outside like thunder.

I saw him — small, confused, standing by the door. I grabbed his hand tightly, almost too tightly, as if my grip alone could keep him safe. Without looking back, we ran.

Home was far, but fear made our legs faster than ever.

As we ran, fear made me think in strange ways. I looked at Aamir, his small hands clutching the wooden board we called Takhti, the slate we used to write on at school. I whispered to him, almost commanding, “Hold it in front of your chest.” In my child’s mind, I believed it could stop a bullet. That was our shield, our fragile defence against a war too big for children.

Some instinct, older than my years, told me not to take the open road. The roads were exposed, dangerous. Instead, I pulled Aamir into the narrow streets, twisting through the alleys that coiled like veins across Parachinar. My heart pounded, my hand refusing to let go of his.

But no street was safe. The air itself was trembling. Bullets cracked and whistled from every side. And it wasn’t just guns anymore — there were heavier weapons, the kind that shook the ground beneath our feet. Rockets roared, their sound tearing the sky into pieces.

Parachinar had always been defined by its skyline — two tall white minarets belonging to the Shia mosque, and one towering red minaret of the Sunni mosque. They were landmarks, guardians of the city. When you stood atop them, the whole of Parachinar stretched below like a map.

But that day, those sacred minarets became something else. They were no longer symbols of prayer. They had turned into strongholds. From their heights came the unending rain of bullets and the thunder of rockets. The very places that once echoed with the call of Allahu Akbar were now spitting fire and death.

The irony cut deep, though I was too young to name it then. Those tall spires, built to summon people to God, had become towers of war. And because they stood above us, no home, no street, no body was beyond their reach. The whole city was a battlefield, laid bare under the shadow of its own mosques.

I remember thinking — where does one hide, when even the houses of God have become bunkers?

By some miracle, we reached home without a scratch. The moment we stepped inside, my mother rushed toward us and wrapped us both in her arms. I could feel her trembling, her tears wetting my hair as if to wash away the dust of fear clinging to us. My father's eyes, though heavy with worry, softened for a moment as he saw us safe.

But peace did not last. Two faces were still missing. My sisters, Yasmeen and Basmeen, had not yet returned from school. Mother's relief turned quickly into dread. She wept helplessly, pacing the room, her hands pressed together as if in prayer. The sounds of gunfire outside only sharpened the silence inside our home, each shot making her flinch, each blast carving deeper into her fears.

Then came a knock at the door — sharp, urgent. My mother almost stumbled as she ran to open it. For a breathless second, none of us knew what awaited on the other side. And then, like light breaking through clouds, there they were — Yasmeen and Basmeen, standing in the doorway. An old man from the neighbourhood had walked them home, shielding them from the chaos.

We exhaled together, a long sigh of relief that filled the room. For that moment, amidst the roar of war outside, our family was whole again.

That day became the first time I truly learned what sectarianism meant. The first time I saw how faith — something meant to unite people — could be twisted into a weapon to divide and destroy. Until then, religion was only prayer and rituals for me, a bond that tied our family and neighbors together. But suddenly, it became a line drawn in blood between Shia and Sunni.

Parachinar had both communities in large numbers, though Shias were the majority. The whispers we heard at home said the war had started from the Government High School, where some Sunni students had written “Shia Kafir” — “Shias are infidels” — on the walls. That was the story we were told, repeated until it became truth in our ears. But I was only a child; I never heard the other side, never knew what the Sunnis said about how it began. What I did know was that every story was one-sided, and we were bound to believe the version our people gave us.

In the chaos, even innocence was not spared. The principal of Government High School, Mr. Israr, was killed — not because he took sides, but because he refused to. He had sheltered some Sunni students in his office, trying to protect them from the violence outside. His courage cost him his life. Today, that same school carries his name: Israr Shaheed High School. A name carved in memory, a reminder that even in a war of hate, there were still people who chose humanity.

The war raged for days, leaving behind streets stained with blood and silence heavy with fear. Hundreds were killed before the government finally intervened. Soldiers marched into Parachinar, their boots echoing against the broken roads, and a curfew was declared. The curfew locked us inside our homes, turning every door into a prison gate.

Food quickly disappeared from the bazaars, and hunger became our uninvited guest. For days, we survived only on plain white rice. No vegetables, no meat, not even lentils — just rice, morning and night, until our stomachs forgot the taste of anything else.

When the curfew eased, people slowly stepped out of their houses. But they came out carrying something darker than hunger — hate. Hatred that had taken root during the war and was now watered by grief and anger.

I had many Sunni friends before, children I played with, laughed with, trusted. But after those days, I was brainwashed to see them differently. To hate them. Thousands had been killed on both sides, and each sect believed its fight was holy, each death a martyrdom. My Shia friends rejoiced when Sunnis died, and wept bitterly when Shias were killed. The war had reshaped our emotions, teaching us to measure joy and sorrow only by the blood of our own.

There was a Sunni family who lived close to us — the Zazais, a respected and wealthy clan of cloth merchants. Their son Khalid was one of us, a boy of our streets, studying in the Government High School. He was killed in the very place where the war had begun. Before all this, everyone respected Mr. Zazai. In Ramadan, we exchanged food with them, shared greetings, and trusted their friendship. But after the war, all of that was gone.

Nobody mourned Khalid. Nobody grieved with his parents. His death was swallowed by silence, as if he had become a stranger overnight. The war had burned away not just lives, but also the bonds of humanity.

After the war, Parachinar felt like an emptied shell. Many Sunni families packed their belongings and left the city. Their absence was not just in numbers — you could feel it in the silence of the streets, in the half-empty markets, in the way familiar roads no longer carried the same life.

But soon an even heavier shadow fell upon us. The main road that connected Parachinar to the rest of Pakistan passed through Sadda, a city with a completely Sunni population. And when the people of Sadda blocked that road, it cut us off from the entire country. No food, no supplies, no medicine could reach us.

Starvation began to creep into every home. The bazaars had nothing left to sell. Families rationed their meals, children cried in hunger, and kitchens turned cold and silent. I remember watching my mother look at empty shelves as if hoping something might suddenly appear.

Then, one day, government aid arrived. Trucks carrying flour, sugar, and cooking oil rolled into the city like a promise of survival. People rushed to the ration lines. Men in fine clothes who once never imagined standing in queues now stood shoulder to shoulder with the poorest of the

poor, each waiting for their share of food. I was among them too, a small boy holding a sack of flour like a treasure.

That was the price we paid. Not just the hunger or the humiliation of ration lines, but the blindness that sectarianism had forced upon us. It had stripped us of our dignity, our friendships, our humanity — and left us clinging to survival in a city that no longer felt like home.

When the war ended, Parachinar was not the same city anymore. The silence that followed was heavier than the sound of bullets. Streets that were once alive with the chatter of vendors and schoolchildren felt hollow. Many Sunni families had packed their belongings and left, leaving behind empty houses and locked shops. Their absence was felt in every corner — in the quiet streets, in the deserted markets, in the spaces where laughter and greetings once lived.

But emptiness was not the only shadow left behind. Hunger too began to haunt the city. The main road, our only lifeline to the rest of Pakistan, passed through Sadda — and now it was sealed by the Sunnis who lived there. A city cut off is a city condemned. Trucks carrying wheat, sugar, rice, medicine — all stopped outside our reach. Mothers went to bed listening to the cries of their children, unable to offer anything more than plain white rice. Even men who once carried themselves with pride — teachers, merchants, shopkeepers — could be seen standing in long lines before

ration trucks, their dignity surrendered to survival. I too stood in those queues, clutching my share of flour and sugar, never forgetting how war had reduced us all to beggars of mercy.

But the most painful hunger was not in our stomachs. It was the hunger growing in our hearts, fed not by food, but by poison. In the narrow streets of our neighborhoods, the children no longer spoke of marbles or cricket. Instead, they told stories — stories of men they called “heroes.” They spoke of uncles, cousins, and neighbors who had stormed into Sunni homes, who had killed, who had fired rockets from rooftops. These tales were told with excitement, not sorrow. We listened with shining eyes, clapping at the bravery, not understanding the weight of death. Our childish imagination painted those men larger than life — men who had turned into giants, protectors of our faith.

Almost every alley had one or two such figures. Ordinary men — a tailor, a fruit-seller, a laborer — who now walked through the streets with a new kind of pride. Their faces were unchanged, but something in their walk carried the arrogance of violence. The little ones, including me, looked at them as if they were saints draped in glory. We stood aside in awe when they passed, whispering their names with reverence, as though war had made them holy.

That was the cruellest part. War had stolen more than lives and bread. It had stolen our innocence. It had taught us to

clap for the sound of gunfire, to cheer for the blood of others, to measure bravery by the number of bodies fallen. Without knowing it, we were becoming more Shia than children, more soldiers than sons, more divided than human.

And that poison, I would later realize, was far more destructive than hunger.

The war had left a chain of destruction that could not be measured only in bodies. It had changed the very soul of Parachinar.

The once-bustling bazaars, where colors and fabrics dazzled the eye, now stood muted. Many of the most beautifully decorated shops had belonged to Sunnis, and with their departure, their shutters were sealed. The great cloth markets that once spilled with silks and embroidered shawls now looked like ruins. The restaurants where families gathered, where the air was filled with the aroma of fresh bread and kebabs, had vanished. Even the sound of the city had changed — fewer footsteps in the streets, fewer voices in the schools. It was as if someone had taken the music out of Parachinar, leaving behind a hollow silence.

The cultural diversity that once gave the city its flavor was gone. The little exchanges of food in Ramadan, the easy greetings between neighbors of different sects, the invisible thread that stitched people together — all had been torn

apart. Parachinar was no longer the same. A beauty, once fragile but real, had been shattered.

When the curfew finally lifted and schools reopened, life tried to crawl back to what we called normal. I walked into my classroom and saw the empty seats of friends I once laughed with — Naseem, Zubair, Abdullah. Good boys, gentle souls. They had left with their families, and in their absence, our classroom felt smaller, poorer. The number of students had noticeably shrunk. And yet, even within those walls of learning, war still echoed.

The boys no longer traded stories of cricket matches or favorite teachers. Instead, they bragged about heroes from their neighborhoods — men who had fought, who had killed, who had made their names in blood. Some boys said, with pride in their eyes, that they too wanted to fight when they grew up. I remember listening in silence, feeling the weight of something I could not yet name. Childhood had been replaced by the language of war.

And so, a small city, once alive with beauty and diversity, was left limping under the ashes of hate.

Chapter 7: The Boy from the Bungalow

A year after the sectarian war of 1996, life began to stitch itself back together. Some Sunni families still lived among us. Others slowly returned, especially those who owned property or businesses. The city's beauty, once buried under smoke and gunfire, began to show its face again.

The bazaar filled with voices. The smoke of kebabs and barbecue once more perfumed the air, carrying with it the memory of better days. And as I walked those streets, I felt something stir inside me—a quiet love for Parachinar returning to life.

The Thursdays at Agha-e-Irani shrine were alive again too. The fragrance of incense, the flickering of candles, the whispers of prayer—all of it glowing brighter than before. But this time, the rituals carried a heavier weight. The war had changed us. Shias became more Shia. Sunnis became more Sunni. Faith hardened into identity.

Yet in my own heart, something else was happening. The hate I once carried in my chest was softening, fading like smoke in the wind. My priorities were changing. I no longer wanted to be swallowed by anger. I wanted to live. I wanted to dream of things beyond hate.

One fine afternoon, I went to Syed Hassan's home. They were gentle, peace-loving children—different from the roughness of the streets. I liked being around them because of their calmness, their manners. But with them, I always carried a quiet discomfort. A shadow.

I felt inferior.

Their clothes, their accents, their way of living—it wasn't the world I belonged to.

That day, they were playing cricket with their cousins, and it was there I was introduced to a boy named Syed Kumail. He looked like he had stepped out of another universe. Civilized, polite, dressed in neat jeans and a striped casual shirt—the kind of dress I had only ever seen on television. A faint scar near his eyebrow gave his face a strange grace.

He was my first glimpse of the truly elite.

Kumail was kind, friendly, and within minutes, we became friends. After some chitchat, he pressed a crisp 100-rupee note into my hand.

“Go bring some snacks and candies from the shop,” he said lightly.

I obeyed. But inside, I felt it. The truth I already knew: to him, I was the errand boy. To him, I was lesser.

Still, I went. Because 100 rupees for candies was a kind of luxury I had never held before. The whole way to the shop and back, I thought of the life he lived—a life that was beyond imagination for me.

I returned with a big bag filled with treasures of the 90s: Tattoo sticker bubble gum by Candy Land, the famous Top Pops, the tangy thrill of Imli. It was like carrying back a piece of heaven. Kumail shared them generously—with his cousins, with me too.

When cricket grew dull for him, he turned to me.

“Let’s play hide and seek.”

I agreed at once. And what a game it was. His house wasn’t just a house—it was a kingdom. Big rooms opening into other rooms, fine interiors, wide verandas, a courtyard with green grass and trees. A home so vast that hide-and-seek felt endless.

For a boy raised in narrow lanes and small rooms, that bungalow was larger than life. It was like stepping into a television screen, a dream made of bricks and paint.

And as we ran through its halls, laughing and hiding, I realized something:

Things already feel huge when you are little. But some homes... some lives... were built to feel huge forever.

We lived in a slum-like tiny house, but Kumail lived in a bungalow.

His father, Syed Muneer, was a politician—and in our part of the world, politics was never a service. It was a hobby of the rich. That explained everything. Kumail wasn't just comfortable—he was born into privilege.

He didn't even study in Parachinar. He went to an elite school in Islamabad. The very name of the city carried weight for me. To study in Islamabad was to belong to another world, a sign of the true elite. That alone made Kumail different from every child I had ever known.

I wanted to be like him. I wanted to live in his world.

Normally, I avoided people who made me feel inferior. I stayed away from those who reminded me of what I didn't have. But Kumail was different. Despite the sting of my inferiority complex, I couldn't stay away. His friendship carried with it a strange kind of hope.

Yes—hope.

I began visiting him every afternoon. Even though it hurt sometimes, even though I felt small, his presence gave me a kind of superiority I had never felt before. It wasn't just a friendship—it was a window into a bigger life. A life I dared to imagine for myself.

This friendship began to change me.

I started to dress a little better.

I began speaking more confidently, more boldly.

I started dreaming bigger than before.

And then there was Maaji, his grandmother. Everyone called her that. A kind-hearted old woman, she always welcomed me with a smiling face, as though I belonged there. His mother and sisters too—gentle, polite, never making me feel unwelcome.

In their home, for the first time in my life, I didn't just see wealth. I felt the possibility of rising beyond poverty.

And that possibility was intoxicating.

But in my world of poverty, such connections never lasted long.

Our friendship was hardly a week old when, one afternoon, I went to Kumail's house as usual. Maaji met me at the door, her smile dimmed.

“They left this morning,” she said softly. “His father won the elections. They've gone to Teerah Village.”

Her words fell on me like thunder.

There were no mobile phones then. Even landlines were a rare luxury, reserved for the rich. When someone disappeared physically, they vanished from your life completely. And just like that, I lost Kumail forever.

I walked home that day carrying a grief far too heavy for my young shoulders. His father was now a Member of the National Assembly. His family had shifted, elevated to another orbit, unreachable to me.

And I was left behind.

Yes, even in those few days I had suffered the sting of inferiority. But still—I wanted to hold on to that friendship. I wanted to believe in the hope it gave me. And when Kumail left, it wasn't just a friend I lost.

It was hope itself.

I had always been a hopeful boy, carrying dreams even in hardship. But his sudden disappearance carved a hole in me. For days, I moved in silence, like a shadow of myself.

At night, I found comfort in a PTV drama that was popular then—Dhuaan. In one unforgettable episode, a military cadet dies, and in the background plays Nusrat Fateh Ali Khan's voice, mournful and eternal:

“Kisy da yaar na vichray...”

No one should ever lose a friend.

And sitting there in my slum-like home, staring at the flickering TV, I wept. Because I had lost mine.

Why am I dedicating a whole chapter to a friendship that lasted only a week?

Because I believe it was the greatest turning point of my childhood. In that brief time, Kumail planted seeds in me—hope, inspiration, confidence, and dreams larger than my small world. Seeds that would take years to grow, but they were sown in those afternoons.

And if Kumail ever reads these words, I want to thank him—for the little time he gave me, for the glimpse of a life beyond poverty, for the hope he unknowingly left behind.

Back then, I carried silly childhood imaginations. I dreamed of becoming successful, of becoming wealthy, only so that one day I could reunite with Kumail in some faraway university in England. And that very idea—studying in England—was born the day I met him.

Time, as always, softened the wound. A month or two later, the ache of his absence dulled. Life crept back to its old rhythm.

And once again, I began to find joy in the same rituals—the Thursday nights of incense and candles, the voices of Noha,

the sacred fire of Doya. The city's heartbeats became mine again.

But deep inside, a new dream had been lit.

Chapter 8: The Fragrance of Sragala

During my primary school years, we would occasionally visit our maternal grandparents' home. Those trips felt like small pilgrimages, each one carrying its own excitement.

Sragala was more than just a place to us; it was a world of its own. The house stood like a fortress, surrounded by high boundary walls, and within those walls were smaller homes where close relatives lived. It felt like a village tucked inside a single compound, alive with its own rhythm.

From the courtyard, a majestic mountain rose before us, a constant backdrop that seemed both protective and commanding. Beside the house ran a rocky mountain stream, its waters tumbling and singing in the quiet hours. A narrower stream curved around the compound like a silver bracelet, giving the home an almost enchanted feeling.

The real magic of Sragala, though, was not in its walls or streams, but in its people. More than a hundred family members lived within that vast compound, each carrying their own stories, their own energy. On special occasions, especially weddings, the air buzzed with celebration — laughter echoing off the walls, children running in playful flocks, and elders gathered in circles of wisdom.

And then, there was the fragrance. Everything in Sragala seemed scented. Perhaps it was the *ittar* that everyone wore,

a perfume that lingered in the air and seeped into memory. Even now, that fragrance is etched in me, a key that unlocks a flood of nostalgia whenever it returns to my senses.

The homes were always neat, their orderliness carrying a beauty of its own. Clean courtyards, polished walls, fresh linens — all touched by that quiet, subtle fragrance. It gave Sragala an atmosphere that was both aesthetic and deeply comforting, as if the very air had chosen to dress itself in celebration.

My grandfather, Sardar Hussain — whom we lovingly called Dado — was a man of joy. He had a way of carrying himself that drew people in, but what fascinated me most was the way he held his cigarette. He would close his hand into a fist, grip the cigarette between his tight fingers, and let it stick out from the side like a secret ember. It was a small habit, yet I watched it with admiration.

Dado had a gift for humor. He could take the most ordinary routines of life and turn them into comedy. He would mimic people's little habits, exaggerate their ways of speaking, and make everyone laugh. As the eldest among his brothers, he carried respect, but what made him unforgettable was his ability to keep things light, to bring smiles into serious spaces.

If Dado was our laughter, then my grandmother, Kako, was our anchor. She was the most special person in Sragala, a

figure of quiet care and endless giving. Kako had a habit of collecting small things for us — combs, little pots, even pieces of used beauty soap. She would hand them to us as treasures, not just objects, because in her eyes they were ways of saving us money, ways of easing our life in small but meaningful ways.

Her heart carried a constant worry for us. My aunts had married into wealthy households, while my mother had chosen a man who was poor but determined, a man who carried his dignity in hard work and who refused to compromise on our education. Kako knew the weight of that struggle, and so she became our biggest hope. For us, she wasn't just a grandmother — she was a guardian, the one we looked up to with trust.

Her house always carried a fragrance, delicate and sweet, that seemed to come from everything — candies tucked in corners, folded fabrics, little boxes on shelves. That scent, like Sragala itself, became part of my memory, one of those invisible threads that still ties me to her.

Kako had a sister, Agara, who was so close to us that in many ways she became another grandmother. She had three rooms of her own within the giant home, and whenever we visited Sragala, we naturally drifted toward her. Agara had one son of her own, and she had also adopted my maternal uncle, Khalid, as if he were her blood. Her kindness made her house feel like a second nest for us.

The family tree of Sragala was large, and each branch had its own story. Dado's brother, Kamal Hussain, worked as a bank officer in Kohat City. His children lived a good life there, attending fine schools, and I remember looking at them with admiration. To me, they were symbols of what was possible.

Another of Dado's brothers was Gulab Hussain, a teacher by profession. Tall, strong, with a clean-shaven face that gave him an almost English look, he was straightforward but kindhearted. Though not the eldest brother, responsibility had made him the leader of the household — the one everyone turned to for decisions and guidance.

Then there was Lal Hussain, the third brother, also a government teacher. He stood out for his unique style — long brown hair that flowed with the wind, a red muffler draped around his neck, and a blue Vespa scooter that carried him everywhere. His personality was as striking as his appearance, and to us, he seemed larger than life.

But what made Sragala truly unforgettable were its rituals. My grandparents were devoted Mian Mureeds, and through them the house breathed music and mysticism. Almost every boy in the family knew how to play an instrument — the dhol, the harmonium, or the flute — and their talents kept the nights alive. Music was not entertainment alone; it was a way of life, woven into the fabric of our gatherings.

Each evening, the courtyard would transform into a stage. Laughter softened into melodies, conversations turned into verses, and soon the rhythms filled the air. There was always a music party, a communion of voices and instruments that seemed to lift the house beyond its walls.

At the heart of it all was a sacred space we called Doya. It was more than just a room — it was the mystic heart of Sragala, where rituals and remembrance came alive. Muharram in Sragala was unlike anywhere else. The mourning was not only solemn; it carried a spiritual intensity that was heightened with music. To witness it was to step into something heavenly, an elevated experience that stirred both sorrow and beauty.

Among the elders, there was also a deep love for literature. Poetry was recited, shared, and appreciated with an understanding rare for that part of the world in those days. Words and music walked hand in hand, shaping the very soul of Sragala.

And always, in the center of this vibrancy, was Kako's home. Her house was spotless, every corner cared for, every detail reflecting her discipline. Education had found its place in her household, and many of her family members were well-learned. The combination of knowledge, neatness, and warmth made her home a place of joy — full of life, full of vibes, full of happiness.

Chapter 9: Shadows of Shublan

Just as we visited Sragala, we also made trips to Shublan, the birthplace of my father. Unlike the vast, bustling compound of Sragala, life in Shublan was quieter, scattered. My uncles and aunts each lived in their own small, muddy houses, each home modest but filled with its own warmth.

Among my cousins there, my favorites were Hashmat and Darwesh. Hashmat was the son of my uncle, while Darwesh was the son of my aunt. Darwesh was older, already a father of four children, yet he carried such humor and friendliness that being around him never felt like being in the company of an elder. His presence was lighthearted and full of joy, and we gravitated toward him naturally.

The highlight of our visits, though, was my aunt's home. They had something extraordinary for those times — a VCR. Watching a movie there felt like stepping into another world, a luxury we couldn't imagine anywhere else. I still remember the first Bollywood film I ever saw: Karan Arjun. The story gripped me so deeply that I nearly cried. Shah Rukh Khan and Salman Khan were not just actors to us then; they were idols. Boys collected their picture cards like treasures, and even Eid cards bore their faces.

Darwesh's mother, whom we called Ammai, was my favorite aunt. She had a heart full of kindness, always caring and

affectionate. I have already spoken of her personality earlier in the story, but even here, her presence shines through as a constant source of comfort and love.

Hashmat was a different kind of character. Even though he lived in extreme poverty, he carried himself with a sense of style. He loved good dressing, always trying to keep up with fashion, and often sought friendships with boys from wealthier families. He wanted to match their elegance, to feel as though he belonged among them.

He worked in a photographer's shop in Parachinar — and in those days, that was no small thing. Photographers were considered elite professionals, and photography itself was a luxury, an expensive hobby reserved for the privileged. For Hashmat, the job was more than just work; it was a window into a world he longed to enter. He dreamed high, always wanting to break free from the grip of poverty.

His father, my uncle Noor Hussain — whom we called Abba — was a humble man, earning his livelihood by selling food in the canteen of a local school. It was honest work, but the struggle was endless. Hashmat had six brothers, all of them hardworking, yet fortune seemed to turn its back on them time and again.

During my visits, I often wandered through the village with my cousins Jamal and Akhlaq, who were my age. They were skilled with slingshots and could hunt birds with surprising

accuracy. Once caught, we would light a fire in the fields, roast the birds, and eat them together. Those simple meals, cooked under the open sky, had a taste that no feast could ever match.

On the way to Shublan, there was a village called Mali Kaly, where another of my maternal aunts lived in a large compound with her joint family. Whenever our plans took us to Shublan, we would always stop there for an hour or two, meeting them before continuing our journey. Shublan was only four kilometers farther along the same road, but Mali Kaly always felt like a pause of affection in the middle of the trip.

In that village, my favorite cousins were Musawir and his brother Imtiaz. Both were humble, obedient, and carried a gentle nature that made them easy to love. Near their home stood a vast nursery of plants, a place alive with greenery, and it became a backdrop to many of our memories there. Imtiaz, resourceful and hardworking, also ran a rental crockery shop, lending out dishes and utensils for weddings. His little business gave him a kind of respect and responsibility among the villagers.

This was life in my childhood — a mixture of colors and contrasts. Happiness and struggle, pride and inferiority, joy and longing — all existed side by side. And within that blend, the places of Sragala, Shublan, and Mali Kaly became

chapters of my growing up, each shaping me in ways I would only understand much later.

Chapter 10: Stories and the Farewell

So let's get back to life in Imamia Colony and my primary school days.

By the time I reached 3rd and 4th grade, I had gathered enough confidence—and perhaps a little recklessness—that I started wandering beyond the boundaries of our colony. I could now go to the public children's park or the central city Imam Bargah whenever I wanted, and often did. The city that once felt enormous and intimidating was slowly becoming mine.

And the credit for that went to Chaani.

Chaani was a real badass, the kind of boy every kid wanted to follow. People didn't even call him by his real name—he was just "Chaani," nothing more, nothing less. He carried himself with a confidence that rubbed off on those around him. He loved sports, especially football, and for his family football was not just a game—it was bloodline. His brothers, cousins, all of them were football players. Even today, Chaani is remembered as one of Parachinar's famous footballers. Football truly was in their DNA.

The city's football stadium was far from Imamia Colony, but distance meant nothing when you had Chaani leading the way. Together we would make the long walks, exploring

the backlands of Parachinar on the way to matches and practices. Each trip felt like a new discovery.

One of my favorite sights was Noor Market. It stood like an ancient masterpiece of architecture—tall, old buildings leaning toward each other over a narrow bazaar. And above it, thousands of pigeons made their home. Looking up at the sky and watching them swirl and scatter felt like stepping into the frame of some artistic movie.

Then there was Maan Singh Gate, another landmark from the pre-partition era. Its structure carried the whispers of history, a reminder that Parachinar had roots far older than our lives and struggles. Around the bazaar, more such ancient buildings stood quietly, holding stories that none of us could fully know but all of us felt.

Afghan refugees had brought with them martial arts clubs and gymnastics culture, and those little gyms became a form of free entertainment for us boys. We would gather outside, wide-eyed, watching young athletes flip, stretch, and kick with a discipline and energy that felt almost foreign. That was another gift of the cultural diversity that made Parachinar so unique in those years.

As I have said earlier, the Parachinar of the late 90s was a very different place—an amazing Parachinar. The restaurants offered foods that felt heavenly, and the smoky aroma of beef seekh kebab filled the bazaar like a

spell. The hard-hitting taste of a chilled Pepsi was something we called food from heaven itself. But Pepsi was a luxury—we only had it once in a blue moon, usually when Chaani had won a prize in a football match and generously shared his joy.

Another gift of those days was light. The city had free electricity, without power cuts. Nights in Parachinar glowed with yellow bulbs strung across shops, streets, and homes, giving the city its true character. That brightness is something today's Gen-Z can never imagine. They have only known Parachinar drowned in darkness, the bazaar shutting before sunset. We didn't move forward—we reversed.

Back in Imamia Colony, life was built around friend circles. Different age groups had their own worlds. The elders' group wasn't just about friendship—they were the caretakers of the colony's necessities. They collected money when a transformer burned out, arranged for water supply, and looked after other needs of the people. In truth, they were less of a "circle" and more of a committee of social workers.

One unforgettable figure among them was Mehdi. He was a tall, huge man, towering over everyone else. Because there were other men named Mehdi too,

people started calling him “2 Mehdi”—double the size of the rest, both in body and presence. Men like him also became the main organizers of Majalis and other religious gatherings. Imamia Colony, in that sense, was more than just a neighborhood; it was like a single large family, bound together in rituals, responsibilities, and care.

At school, I had many teachers, but the one who left the deepest mark was Master Asad Ali. He was my class teacher for three consecutive years—perhaps he liked our class, or maybe it was just fate. I can still picture him: a dark-skinned, strong man, wearing a white cap, walking with a limp from some disease in his foot. His personality was a strange mix of contradictions. At times he was gentle, almost fatherly, and we would feel a warmth toward him. But then, without warning, the brutal side of him would appear. He would snatch up the stick and beat the boys mercilessly, like animals. With him, love and fear lived in the same classroom.

One of the strangest and most amusing things from those days was the marriage of our classmate and monitor, Qanbar. He got married while still in the 4th grade. Imagine that—a little boy in our classroom suddenly becoming a groom. We were so excited that

we even arranged a garland for him to wear at his wedding. For us, it felt like a magical event. If Qanbar could get married, then surely we too could dream of marrying a beautiful girl soon. Childhood innocence often confuses fantasy with reality, and in those moments, marriage seemed like the greatest adventure of all.

In Imamia Colony, I had dozens of friends, but one who deserves a special mention is Anwar. He lived near the Government Middle School, in a large compound that held only one big mud-walled room, the rest of it an open courtyard. Anwar was a small, delicate boy, always with red, watery eyes and a head of coarse, curly hair. I used to visit his home almost daily—not just for him, but because of a girl.

She was his neighbor and often played with Anwar's sister. I will not name her, but she was my first childhood crush. I was only nine years old, and though it wasn't a serious love, it was certainly a feelingful one. I tried endlessly to impress her with my silly mimicry and lame jokes, but nothing worked. In fact, it was written all over her face that she did not like me at all. Still, I kept trying, fueled by the foolish bravery of a child's heart.

In my imagination, I wanted to marry her—just as Qanbar had managed to do in the 4th grade. But, of course, that never happened. Slowly, like all childish dreams, the crush faded, and I continued with the ordinary rhythms of life.

Here I must mention something important: my circle of friends was divided between two very different worlds. On one side were the Syeds—calm, well-mannered, polite, and refined in their behavior. On the other side were boys like Chaani—street smart, daring, and real badasses.

Looking back, I realize that both kinds of friendships shaped me. The Syeds taught me manners, patience, and how to carry myself with dignity. But the streets, through boys like Chaani, taught me confidence, courage, and survival. And I must say, if you are born in poverty, being street smart isn't optional—it is necessary. It is the only way to grow, to protect yourself, and to eventually become self-made.

Sometimes parents try to isolate their children from the streets, fearing their roughness. But in reality, the streets are the greatest teachers of life. They are raw, tough, and merciless, but they give you the kind of lessons no classroom can.

Finally, we gave our 4th-grade exams. I had always been among the brightest students, and the recognition I received from classmates and teachers gave me the strength to keep going, despite the weight of my inferiority complex and the hard times we lived through.

And then came the day we had all been waiting for—our last day at primary school. To our surprise, the 3rd graders had arranged a farewell party for us. At that time, it felt like a grand luxury, a hi-tea in its truest sense. Each of us was given one cup of tea and a single piece of dry cake. That was it. But to us, it was nothing less than a royal feast. We sat on the dirty, ink-stained jute rugs like kings, sipping our tea and chewing the cake with pride.

The best part was not the tea or the cake but the atmosphere. For the first time, our teachers treated us like ordinary human beings. They smiled, laughed, and spoke to us without fear or authority. For one single day, they felt like companions rather than rulers.

At the end, we were handed our certificates—a simple piece of paper, yet heavy with meaning. It was proof that we had completed this part of our journey, and in

our young minds, it felt like the whole world had just opened before us.

When the boys had all left and the school stood in silence, I went to Nawroz Mama, the school watchman, and asked him to keep the four classrooms open a little longer. I wanted to see them one last time. Perhaps I was the only boy who carried such deep emotions, because nobody else even looked back at that tiny school.

For the first time, I found myself falling in love with the very things I had once hated—the blackboards, the ink-stained jute rugs that had hurt our backsides for four long years, and the dirty, ink-smeared walls of the classrooms. I wandered through each room slowly, as though I could trap the memories within me: even the filthy toilets felt like a part of me that I could not let go.

When Nawroz Mama finally locked the classrooms, I sat alone on the verandah for a long while, my certificate resting on my lap. The silence wrapped around me like a blanket, and the moment was so soothing, so tender, that words will never fully capture it.

At last, I rose and walked back home with a heavy heart, as though I had lost something precious.

A chapter of my life had ended.

Chapter 11: From Takhti to Notebooks

After graduating from primary school, which went from class one to class four, I finally passed the 4th grade and got admission in Government High School, Parachinar. This was not just any school—it was the only and the biggest high school in the city, the same school where the war of 1996 had once begun.

The year was 2000. I went there for admission, all alone, carrying my certificate with pride and a little nervousness. A teacher was sitting on a chair under a tree outside the office, collecting primary school certificates and enrolling new students into a large register. We, the fresh students, sat in rows, waiting for our turn.

The sound of the morning assembly echoed across the campus through the loudspeakers, filling the air with a sense of discipline and grandeur. For me, it felt like the voice of a new life calling—an entry into a bigger world of education. It was encouraging, almost uplifting, as if I was stepping onto a larger stage of life.

After all the certificates were submitted, the teacher stood up and instructed us to return on Monday, four days later, to begin classes. By then, the Friday holiday policy had already changed. I still remembered how, in our primary

school days, Nawaz Sharif, the then Prime Minister, had shifted the weekly holiday from Friday to Sunday in 1997. Now, even in our new school, Sunday was officially the day of rest.

I didn't immediately return home. Instead, I began wandering through the giant, wide school, trying to take it all in. The place felt endless to me. There were so many classrooms, long corridors, and wide playgrounds dedicated to every sport. The lush green grass, neatly trimmed plants, and colorful flowers gave the school a beauty that was almost overwhelming for my tiny steps and eyes. It felt like a different world altogether.

The school felt enormous, and stepping into it gave me a strange, unfamiliar feeling—as if I had suddenly moved into a whole new metropolitan city. It reminded me of the time when we shifted from the quiet, open Grid Station Quarters to the congested, bustling Imamia Colony. The same sense of being overwhelmed, yet curious, surrounded me.

This school was the only high school for boys in all of Parachinar, enrolling students from the city as well as far-flung villages miles away. It was a gathering of every background, culture, and language. I noticed students speaking Persian, Pashto, Urdu, and our own Turi dialect. For the first time, I was surrounded by such diversity.

For us, two major changes made this new life even more exciting. The first was that in our primary school, we had sat on the ground all day, on dirty jute rugs, which often left our bodies aching after eight long hours. Now, at high school, we would finally be sitting on benches like real students. That alone felt like a step toward maturity and dignity.

The second change was the end of the Takhti. From class five onward, there was no more writing on wooden slates. The Takhti had always been a burden. Every day at home we had to wash it, dry it carefully, and then prepare it again for writing. It demanded so much effort for something so simple. Now, it was over. We were moving on to proper notebooks, like the grown-ups.

Both of these changes, benches and notebooks, seemed small, but for us, they were nothing less than a revolution.

The most striking part was how big and mature some of the students looked. This school was from 5th to 10th grade, but some senior boys were so grown up that they were already shaving their beards. Even some of the students in 5th grade were tall, broad, and carried themselves like adults. And there I was—just a small boy among them, feeling like a child lost in a crowd of men.

It was both exciting and stressful, but a kind of stress that carried its own thrill. When I returned home, my mother

was sitting with her sewing machine, stitching my new black school uniform from the official fabric my father had already bought for me and Aamir. My younger brother, still in class 3 at Imamia Colony Primary School, watched curiously. His time would come later, but for now, I was the one stepping into this new world.

I shared my excitement with my mother and sisters, telling them about the school, how vast and beautiful it looked. This time in life felt a little better compared to the past. Two of my elder sisters had started jobs—one as a teacher, the other in the health department—so our financial situation had slightly improved.

At home too, there were signs of change. We now had a black-and-white television, and my father had managed to purchase some wooden furniture. The ambiance of our house was slowly shifting from bare necessity to something closer to comfort.

Buying books for my new class was no longer an impossible burden. The next day, my father took me to a bookshop called Maisam Books on School Road. It was a new shop, opened near the old and famous Khyber Books. Maisam Books offered a 10% discount, and with the bundle of books, they gave me a free low-quality fabric bag. Still, that bag felt like a prize.

I carried the books and bag back home, my heart full of anticipation. I kept waiting for Monday to arrive, the day I would step into my new school and begin this next chapter of life.

Chapter 12: Becoming Someone

Finally, it was Monday morning. I woke up early, took a bath, had my breakfast, and slipped into my brand-new uniform. One thing I still hated was the black cap carried over from my primary school days—it was unfortunately still mandatory. But at least this time I wasn't carrying a Takhti in my bag, and that alone felt like freedom.

The fragrance of the new uniform carried its own magic. There was something special in the smell of fresh fabric—it gave me a strange sense of pride, almost a luxurious feeling, as I walked towards school. My new school was nearly two kilometers away, and the journey itself felt like part of the adventure.

On the way, near a roundabout called Zeran Chowk, I saw dozens of laborers sitting together, waiting to be hired for construction work. They looked tired, patient, and hopeful.

As I moved along, I also noticed students from elite private schools. They wore polished English-style uniforms, their shoes shining, their hair combed neatly. Unlike me, they rode in dedicated vans or cars, clean and comfortable. My inferiority complex wasn't gone; it still pinched me, but I forced myself to go with the flow.

Closer to my new school was the auto mechanic market. There, many children my age were already working in greasy

workshops. Their faces were smudged with oil, and their clothes were so dirty with black grease that the original color of the fabric was impossible to tell. Looking at them, something inside me shifted. My inferiority complex didn't disappear, but it softened. At least I was walking to a school with books in my bag, while they were working with spanners and grease.

I told myself: Maybe these kids don't have ambitions. But I do. I want to be somebody.

Many other students were walking along the same road with me, all heading to the new high school. That's where I first met Ghadeer, a boy with short height, red watery eyes, and a soft voice. He was walking with his cousins, and as we talked, I learned that his home was far away, near the football stadium—almost six kilometers from school.

On the way, he asked me, "Which class did you get admission in? Are you new here too?"

"5th class," I replied.

His face brightened. "Me too!"

That small exchange made me feel lighter. By the time we reached the giant, graceful gate of the school, it already felt like I had a friend. Out of habit, I kissed the school gate—just as I had done every morning at my primary school—and then stepped inside.

The school was alive with the energy of hundreds of students. Me, Ghadeer, and his cousins sat near the enormous football ground where senior students were already playing. We talked about our old schools, nervously trying to adjust to this new chapter of life.

Suddenly, I spotted familiar faces. Qanbar and Hilal, my old classmates from the primary school, came running toward me, followed by a few others I knew. That moment filled me with joy and comfort, as if a piece of my old life had quietly walked with me into the new.

The bell rang, and we all stood in the vast assembly ground. A senior student was leading the assembly with authority, his voice echoing through the loudspeakers:

“Stand at ease!” — we spread our legs apart and clasped our hands behind our backs.

“Attention!” — we snapped into straight posture with feet together and arms at our sides.

The drill repeated several times, until PT Master Moeen entered the ground. I already knew him—he was from Shublan. Stylish and confident, he was always dressed neatly, wearing sunglasses that gave him a unique charm. He stood in the center of the ground, watchful and alert, as if every student was under his radar.

The assembly moved forward. A boy recited the Quran, his voice trembling yet clear. Then, thousands of us sang the national anthem together. With over a thousand voices rising in unison and the loudspeakers boosting the sound, it felt like the anthem shook the very air around us.

Afterwards, absent students were punished—two lashes each, right there in front of everyone. Discipline was strict and public.

Then came a man with undeniable grace—Mr. Ibrar, the principal. He took the mic, welcomed the 5th graders, and in the same breath, issued a stern warning: study hard, or you will not be spared. His words were both inspiring and intimidating.

Finally, another teacher announced the division of the new 5th graders into two sections. Section A was the larger room, packed with around 70 boys. Section B was smaller, holding about 40 students. I checked the list pinned near the 5th class block—and my name was placed in Section B.

When I finally entered my new classroom, my excitement collapsed in a moment. To my extreme disappointment, the room had the same old jute rugs spread across the floor. The boys told me that benches would only start from 6th class. So once again, I had to sit on the ground.

Our class teacher was Mr. Ikhtiar, a gentle and caring man with a warm smile. His kindness made the first day easier to bear. But the subject teachers who came later were harsh—just like the ones from my primary school. Discipline and fear were still the tools of teaching.

Fortunately, I managed to impress them. Whenever they asked questions, I answered confidently, and soon I found myself in the good books of many teachers. That small recognition gave me courage.

Then came the lunch break. I had just 2 rupees in my pocket. At the canteen, I bought half a bread and one samosa, served with a watery thin mint chutney. The chutney may have been thin, but when it touched the hot samosa, it felt heavenly—like the taste of real freedom in high school.

Back in the classroom after lunch, I was introduced to two boys who would soon become very important in my life—Farhad and Irshad. Farhad had noticed me earlier when I was answering the teacher, and he was the first to approach me. Both of them lived in Noor Market, the old housing blocks near Central City Imam Bargah.

That day itself, we bonded quickly, and I began calling them my best friends. Farhad was a tall, strong, dark-skinned boy with a nose full of hair, while Irshad was small like me, slim,

with a red face and an innocent look. Together, they gave me a sense of belonging in this new world.

On the way back home, I often walked together with Farhad and Irshad until our paths separated. Those moments of walking and laughing together gave me a sense of comfort in this new phase of life.

After a few days, I made another friend, Mujahid. He was hilariously funny—always cracking jokes, pulling pranks, and turning the dullest moments into laughter. I loved his company. My circle of friends kept expanding, but still, Farhad and Irshad remained my closest ones.

One afternoon, I was surprised to see Nadeem, an old acquaintance from the Grid Station days. He was a senior student at my new school now. What caught my eye was the storybook in his hand. When I asked, he proudly said he had borrowed it from the school library.

A library? I was astonished. The word itself felt magical to me. I begged him to take me there immediately. Nadeem smiled and led me straight to the librarian, a kind and soft-spoken man. Nadeem recommended my very first library book—the adventures of Hatim Tai, a legendary character known for his generosity and incredible journeys.

That evening, after returning home, I opened the book and was lost in its world. The adventures, the magic, the daring

quests—it was like nothing I had experienced before. From that day, thanks to Nadeem, I became a reader. I had discovered a new universe hidden in pages, and it made me fall in love with books forever.

But school was not all joy. There were also some violent boys, morally corrupt even at such a young age. They thrived on fights, threats, and intimidation. Their presence terrified me, and I often felt depressed because of their bullying.

Still, I refused to let fear pull me down. I buried myself in my studies, determined to prove myself through performance. And despite the darkness around me, I continued to shine—always standing at the top of my class.

Life was moving on in its usual rhythm when suddenly everything was shaken. We received an evacuation notice from the landlord of Imamia Colony.

In those days, the arrival of Afghan refugees had created a high demand for housing. Landlords had become greedy, always chasing higher rents. Even a small increase was enough for them to evict old tenants and bring in new ones. And so, despite our years there, we were asked to leave.

For me, this was not just a house—it was a home. Imamia Colony had wrapped me in its chaos and its warmth. I had

grown attached to its streets, its people, its energy. The thought of leaving it behind hit me hard.

My father began the search for a new place, looking for something affordable. But fate played its trick: the only house we could manage was close to the town of those very boys from school—the violent ones I had always feared. My heart sank the day I learned of it. I didn't want to go.

But life does not always bend to our wishes. Sometimes, no matter how tightly we hold onto something, it slips away. And so, with heavy hearts, we prepared to leave our beloved home in Imamia Colony. We had to shift before the month's end.

Chapter 13: The Haunting Goodbye

I was falling in love with my home and with Imamia Colony more than ever, just as we were about to leave it behind. The thought of shifting to a new place felt unbearable. That evening, I walked to the tomb of Agha-e-Irani and the nearby Imam Bargah. With a child's innocent heart, I made a wish: "God, please give us enough money overnight so we can buy our home and never leave." Children often make such impossible prayers, yet they feel so real in the moment.

By then, most of our belongings were already packed. Only a few rugs remained so we could sleep one last night in our home. The next morning, a tractor arrived, and we loaded our household items onto it. This time, we had more possessions than before, so the tractor had to make two trips to carry everything.

Our new house was on Dandar Road. It had three rooms, sturdier walls, and looked better built than our old one. But to me, it didn't feel like home. To me, it felt like we were moving into a place surrounded by danger—because this was the area where those badass boys lived.

They weren't only violent; they were also immoral. Many of them targeted younger boys, exploiting them in shameful ways. In Parachinar, strict social rules kept women and girls

inside, always veiled in black burqas that covered them completely, leaving them to see the world only through a narrow stitched screen. Perhaps it was because of these restrictions that so many men and boys grew frustrated, turning their desires toward other boys. Affairs between boys were whispered about in schools, in villages, and in towns.

I was deeply worried about this. I didn't want to fall into such a world. I wanted to protect myself and hold onto my dignity.

By afternoon, all of our belongings had finally reached the new house. That was when I was introduced to Hassnain, the landlord's elder son. He was a year senior to me at school. Their family welcomed us warmly and even prepared a good lunch for us—a gesture that made the strangeness of the new place feel a little softer.

During lunch, Hassnain told me he was preparing for admission to Cadet College Razmak, one of the most prestigious institutions of the time. His words instantly lit a spark of inspiration in me. One of his cousins was already studying there, and I longed to meet him. Hassnain spoke about the heroic adventures of hostel life, the camaraderie among cadets, and the high standard of education they received. His stories painted a picture of another world, a disciplined and almost royal life, far beyond what I knew.

As I was lost in his tales, a sudden scream broke the moment—my mother’s voice. She cried out that our new Irani carpet was missing. Panic set in as she explained that she had rolled it up and placed it behind the door of a rarely visited room. In the chaos of shifting, it had been left behind.

Without hesitation, I turned to Hassnain and requested him to come with me to our old home, about a kilometer away, to fetch the carpet. We decided to bring it back in a wheelbarrow.

As I drew closer to Imamia Colony, my heart grew heavy, and tears threatened to fall. My old friends were still playing in the open land near our house, while the sun had just set and darkness was spreading across the sky.

I collected the keys from our landlord’s pharmacy shop and slowly opened the door of my old home. Inside, the rooms were drowning in shadows. My voice echoed strangely when I spoke to Hassnain—it felt like the house was no longer mine, but some haunted shell of memories.

I tried to hold back, but my throat tightened painfully. I sat on the ground and began to cry. The home that once embraced me with warmth now felt cold and ghostly. Hassnain placed his hand gently on my head and said softly, “Don’t cry. It’s not a big deal. You’re a big boy now, and big boys don’t cry.”

I forced myself to stand, wiped my tears with the edge of my shirt, and picked up the carpet. We loaded it onto the wheelbarrow. On the way back, Hassnain and I walked in silence.

But the grief stayed with me. It was unbearable—like watching your most beloved companion transform into a zombie, someone you once loved deeply but could no longer recognize.

This new home brought deep changes in me, and the very first was that I became intensely religious. I began praying five times a day and even rose in the middle of the night for Tahajjud prayer, the prayer that people said God never refused. I started reciting the Qur'an regularly. My only prayer to God was simple: "Give us money so we can move back to Imamia Colony and buy a home of our own."

The next morning Hassnain was waiting, and together we went to school. The days at school seemed routine, yet the shadow of fear never left me. The badass boys would stare at me with threatening eyes, and I would turn away, too afraid to meet their gaze.

Then one day it happened. As I stepped outside, one of them walked straight into me, crashing his shoulder into mine. Before I could understand what was happening, he grabbed me by the neck and shouted, "How dare you hit me?" I was stunned. He slapped me hard, and I knew worse

was coming—but a few passersby intervened and pulled him away.

That night I could not sleep. I cried and prayed to God with all my heart to protect me. I was drowning in fear and depression. But after my Tahajjud prayer, something shifted inside me. I told myself: Enough. Even if they kill me, I will fight back. I cannot live in this fear forever.

There was another strange thing about this new home. Almost every night, I was haunted by terrifying dreams. They were so dreadful that I began to dread falling asleep. My nights became battles of their own.

The next day at school, I saw him again. He was staring at me, laughing with another boy, and bragging about how he had beaten me the day before. My blood boiled. I walked straight up to him and said, “Stop staring at me, or I will not spare you.”

He shoved me. Without thinking, I struck back and landed a punch right on his face. The fight broke out instantly. Other boys rushed in, and soon the matter reached the teacher. The teacher decided to be fair—he gave me two lashes and him two lashes as well.

But my anger didn’t end there. After school, I went home, grabbed a sharp pen, and marched straight to the poultry stall where he worked with his father. Luckily, he was there.

I lunged at him and struck with the pen. It bounced off, but I didn't stop. I grabbed him with all my strength and beat him the way I had wanted to for so long.

A crowd quickly gathered, and people separated us. His father came to my home to complain, but I told my father my side of the story, and he listened.

From that day forward, those boys still looked at me with anger, but they no longer dared to ambush me. I had stood my ground.

Yet, deep inside, my old enemy—my inferiority complex—was still alive. Life continued as routine at school. I focused on my studies, fought my battles quietly, and finally sat for my 5th class exams.

Chapter 14: The Good Eviction

And then one day, another storm arrived.

A piece of news that felt unbearably heavy at first, but secretly carried within it a hidden reward—a blessing in disguise.

Our landlord handed us an eviction notice. Not even a year had passed since we had shifted, and now his cousins from the village were coming to live in the same house. Once again, we had to pack our lives into bags and bundles.

Finding a rental house in those days was like chasing a mirage. Every landlord wanted higher rents, and the flood of Afghan refugees made the search even harder. After weeks of restless effort, my father finally found us a flat—newly built, modern, and beautiful. But there was one problem: it was still under construction.

By the date of evacuation, the flat was so new that it was still wet, the cement walls sweating with moisture, the floor giving off the raw smell of fresh plaster. Yet, with no other choice, we moved in. We spread our rugs over the damp floor, leaned our trunks against the half-dried walls, and began living in a home that felt unfinished, fragile, almost temporary.

But time is a healer. Slowly, the wetness faded, and the house began to reveal its true grace. It was, in fact, a marvel compared to our previous homes. Bright rooms, smooth walls, a wide balcony, and best of all—a beautiful dedicated rooftop. That rooftop became our sanctuary. On summer nights, we would carry our dinner upstairs, sit under the open sky, and eat together with the cool night breeze brushing our faces.

As weeks passed, life began to bloom again. My sisters added their touch of beauty, arranging curtains, spreading clean sheets, placing flowers in reused jars. Piece by piece, we bought new furniture. Then one day, a dream came true: my father purchased a color television and a VCR. For us, it wasn't just an appliance—it was a window into another world.

For the first time, I felt our life lifting. This new home was not just shelter; it was dignity, comfort, and a step forward. Slowly, I began to love it so much that even the memories of Imamia Colony, once so painful to let go, started to soften and fade.

The greatest surprise of this new home revealed itself in its basement.

There, beneath our feet, was a Martial Arts Club—a place that would change me in ways I could never have imagined.

The instructor was a tall, broad-shouldered man with a commanding presence. His name was Ustaad Afzal, an Afghan with a deep voice and sharp eyes, who spoke Persian with the grace of a warrior-poet. One evening, while wandering curiously, I stood by the open door and watched the boys inside. Their synchronized kicks, the rhythm of their shouts, and the discipline in their movements struck me like lightning. I was captivated.

That very night, I begged my family to let me join. After some hesitation, they agreed. My father, always careful with money, approached Ustaad Afzal and asked if he could charge me half the fee since we were his neighbors. The Ustaad, with a faint smile, accepted. And so, my journey into the world of Taekwondo began.

From the first day, I was hooked. The stretching, the punches, the kicks, the sweat—all of it felt natural, as though my body had been waiting for this discipline. Day by day, my passion deepened. And soon, my efforts did not go unnoticed.

Gradually, Ustaad Afzal entrusted me with responsibilities—taking daily attendance, collecting fees from students, and keeping order in the class. My role grew until I was no longer paying any fee at all; instead, I had become part of the management of the club.

Recognition came quickly. My speed, my sharp kicks, and my relentless spirit earned me respect among the boys. I was no longer just a student—I was becoming a martial artist, carrying within me a confidence I had never felt before.

Martial arts was shaping me in ways I hadn't expected.

It wasn't just about the kicks and punches anymore—it was molding my mind, confidence, and personality. I began to walk with sharper focus, to think with more strategy, and to carry myself with a confidence that others noticed.

Another gift of the club was the circle of people I was beginning to know. Many of my fellow students were young men from Parachinar who, outside the training hall, were running small businesses across the city. Some owned vegetable stalls, others managed fruit shops, meat shops, or clothing stores. They were not educated men in the traditional sense, but their pockets were fuller than those of most salaried workers I knew.

Even our instructor, Ustaad Afzal, wasn't just a martial artist. He ran a bustling popcorn shop in the bazaar. Popcorn was in huge demand—it was a gift of choice at weddings and community events—and his business kept him comfortably well-off. His stature made it clear: he had found a way to live with both dignity and prosperity.

Watching them, I couldn't help but compare. My father, despite working endlessly and driving his van with sweat and struggle, was earning less than these men who sold vegetables or popcorn. It made me realize something profound: business had power—perhaps more power than labor alone.

That thought was the spark. For the first time, the seed of entrepreneurship was planted in my heart. I began to dream of finding a small business idea for my father, something that could lift us from the grind of survival into the possibility of a better life.

At the same time, another transformation was unfolding within me. By the time I reached seventh class, I had begun to crave something deeper—knowledge, stories, worlds beyond my own. I started reading mature literature: novels, biographies, even English newspapers and magazines. Hollywood movies, too, found their way into my evenings, offering glimpses of lives and dreams that felt galaxies away from Parachinar.

But every time I walked into the school library, disappointment hit me like a wall. The collection was painfully small, barely scratching the surface of my growing hunger. I turned instead to the city's public library, only to find it no better—a meager, worn-out collection that left me restless. My thirst for books remained unquenched, gnawing at me day after day.

Still, something was shifting. The once overpowering tide of religious obsession that had consumed me was beginning to recede. I was moving toward balance, toward curiosity, toward a broader vision of life. While most boys my age were still lost in the simplicity of play, I was chasing knowledge, imagination, and ambition—things that felt bigger than the boundaries of our small city.

My life was changing, quietly but profoundly.

Chapter 15: Entering the Internet

In seventh grade, I found a friend who would soon feel more like a brother—Qaiser. From the beginning, our bond was different. We shared the same passions, the same curiosities. Like me, he was drawn to martial arts, and he, too, had a fascination with the English language.

At that time, a man named Toor Gull had opened an English language institute in Parachinar, and it quickly became the place to be. The so-called “cool guys” of the city flocked there in droves, eager to polish their accents and carry themselves with the confidence of city-bred students. The institute had thousands of students, and Qaiser was among the lucky ones admitted.

His family could afford it. With a brother working abroad and their own LPG gas business running well, they were able to invest generously in his education and grooming. Qaiser himself was hardworking, but not particularly gifted—his effort was admirable, yet he could never quite impress me.

I, on the other hand, was teaching myself the language in my own way—through books, newspapers, magazines, and the flickering worlds of Hollywood movies. What he was learning in classrooms, I was absorbing in solitude.

Yet, beneath these similarities, we were also different. Qaiser remained deeply religious, while I was slowly loosening my grip on extremity. By seventh grade, I was finding balance, stepping away from the intensity of my earlier religious obsession, while Qaiser still held it close to his heart.

One day, destiny pulled me toward an experience that reshaped my imagination forever. Qaiser once took me along to his computer learning institute. Until that moment, I had never seen a computer in real life.

When he switched it on, the screen lit up with a glowing logo: Windows 98. I was spellbound. The humming machine, the flicker of light on the monitor, the strange click of the mouse—it all felt like stepping into another world.

Then Qaiser guided me to the keyboard. My fingers trembled as I touched the keys, pressing them one by one until the letters of my name—Qamar Abbas—appeared on the screen in MS Word. For the first time, I wasn't seeing my name scribbled in ink, but glowing in digital light. Then Qaiser, with a few clicks, gave it shadows, colors, even curves. My ordinary name turned into something extraordinary, like calligraphy crafted by magic.

The institute was run by a man named Ishtihar Agha. His computer instructor, Naib, was someone I recognized from Imamia Colony. I rushed to him with excitement, speaking

of the miracle I had just witnessed. “This software,” he explained calmly, “is called Windows. It’s made by a company called Microsoft. And do you know? The richest man in the world owns this company. His name is Bill Gates.”

I was stunned. The richest man on earth didn’t own gold mines, oil fields, or vast lands. He owned something invisible—software. That day, I fell in love with the computer, as though I had discovered a new universe.

I pleaded with Naib for a discount on the fees so that I, too, could learn. He agreed, and soon I was a student at the institute. For a month, I attended diligently, diving into the mysteries of this machine. But over time, the routine lessons began to feel dull, mechanical, and uninspiring. The spark of that first encounter faded, and eventually, I left the institute.

During this time, I became close to a computer geek named Shafaat. He ran a small PCO—Public Call Office—in the city, where people lined up to make calls abroad. His father was a doctor, and his brothers were all highly educated, working respectable jobs overseas. Unlike most of us, Shafaat already had a computer at home—a rare privilege in those days.

He was the first person who truly impressed me with his knowledge of computers. He seemed to know everything,

even in those early years when most of us hadn't even touched a keyboard.

One day, I dropped by his PCO, and he told me something that lit a spark inside me: "An internet café has opened in Parachinar. They charge twenty rupees per hour."

I asked him, "What is the internet?"

Patiently, he explained about Yahoo Messenger, websites, and the strange new world where people could talk to strangers across the globe. It sounded like science fiction.

I agreed to pay for one hour, on the condition that he would create a Yahoo ID for me. Together, we walked into the café. The place had separate wooden cabins, each with a glowing monitor inside, humming like a secret portal. We sat in one of them, and Shafaat logged in with his username and password.

On the screen, chat rooms appeared. He clicked on one, and suddenly, we were in conversations with people I could not see—people from cities and countries I had only read about. He typed, they replied. In a few clicks, he had made new friends.

I sat there, amazed. It felt as if the world had leapt centuries ahead, while I was just beginning to catch up.

Before the hour ended, Shafaat created a Yahoo ID for me. I carefully wrote the username and password on a small scrap of paper and slid it into my pocket like it was a treasure map. I even scribbled down the names of a few websites. And then, just as the excitement was swelling, our hour was up.

I began using the internet once a week, saving up for those precious hours in the café. Each time, I would visit a few prominent sites. The dot-com bubble had just burst, and the headlines on Yahoo were filled with staggering stories of startups rising and collapsing—billions of dollars flashing across the screen as though money were made of air.

My main sources of information were AOL, MSN, and Yahoo—the giants of that era. They weren’t just websites; they were entire worlds in themselves, offering email, instant messaging, news, and endless windows into a universe I had never imagined.

Every time I saw a figure in dollars, I multiplied it by sixty in my head to convert it into rupees. The sums left me stunned. Numbers so vast that I could barely hold them in my imagination. It was a whole new world—a world of business, finance, and possibilities far beyond Parachinar.

And yet, in that vast world, I felt how small and forgotten we were. Pakistan seemed like an invisible corner on the map of opportunity. That realization didn’t discourage me. It ignited me.

With every news headline, with every digit I multiplied, my dissatisfaction with my own reality grew sharper. I wanted more than the life I saw around me. I wanted to be part of that other world—the world where ideas became empires and numbers touched the sky.

I started dreaming bigger than ever before. And deep inside, I made a quiet promise: one day, I would find a way to cross that invisible wall and step into that world.

Chapter 16: Whispers of a Bigger World

It was the year 2002, and my life had settled into a strange, rhythmic dance—school during the day, martial arts in the evening, stolen hours on the internet whenever I could, and nights spent dreaming of a life that seemed galaxies away. I was no longer the boy who once sat wide-eyed at the edge of the playground—I was growing sharper, faster, more curious. My heart beat not just with ambition, but with hunger. A hunger to know, to create, to become.

Beyond our quiet struggles, the world was changing too. America had stormed into Afghanistan, and the ripples reached even our secluded Parachinar. Refugees were being told to leave. General Musharraf's announcement echoed through our bazaar radios like a warning bell: go back, or face the consequences. Among those who packed their lives and left was Ustaad Afzal. He closed the martial arts club and sold his popcorn business. Just like that, the place that had been my sanctuary—the echo of our synchronized movements, the discipline, the brotherhood—it vanished.

That void was followed by another blow. We received an eviction notice. Again.

This time, we shifted into a place that could barely be called a home—a crumbling mud house with only two rooms. The floor was cold, the walls wept in the rain, and the ceiling hung low like a burden. It was a dip—sharp, painful, and unforgiving. Unlike before, we couldn't rise from it. Not immediately.

But hope is a stubborn thing. We had heard whispers of government-allotted homes near the Cantonment area—a place of neat roads, manicured trees, and the soft dignity of order. We clung to that dream. My father wrote application after application, and we made rounds to the offices, following up with the desperation of those who had nothing left to lose.

Then, in 2003, in the middle of my 8th grade year, something miraculous happened: we were allotted a government house—for twenty years.

When we first saw it, our breath caught in our throats. It stood like an old lion—weathered, proud, and vast. Two portions. The upper portion, where we would live, had four rooms, their tin roofs rusted and leaking. The lower portion, freshly built, had six rooms

gleaming with polished floors and wide windows. We rented that part to a doctor for his clinic. The rent covered the cost of the entire house, so we could live upstairs—free, but not quite dry.

Rain became our enemy. The roof gave in like an old man’s back, and no number of pots or buckets could hold the tears it shed. But it was ours. A big house. A roof, however leaky, over our heads. That meant something.

We still lived in an era before mobile phones. When you wanted to meet a friend, you walked. Sometimes for miles. And if they weren’t home, you just walked back. That was the gamble. That was the innocence of Parachinar.

One afternoon, Qaiser came to me, his eyes glowing with mischief and excitement. He had saved some money.

“Let’s go to Peshawar,” he said, like it was a casual stroll.

My heart skipped. *Peshawar?* The name itself was legendary. In our minds, it was not a city—it was a universe. Tall buildings, fast lives, endless roads. A place

you could disappear into. A place where the future already lived.

When I asked my family, they hesitated, fearing for our safety. But eventually, they relented—with one condition: we stay together and never let go of each other’s hands.

So, on a chilly morning before sunrise, Qaiser arrived at my door. He was lugging a massive suitcase like he was crossing continents. I had only a tiny backpack—borrowed from my sister Basmeen—carrying three neatly folded suits.

We began the seven-hour journey through winding roads and rough terrain. As we neared Peshawar, the first things that hit us were the suffocating smoke of rickshaws, the sticky heat, and a strange mix of scents—some foul, some floral. But none of that could dampen our spirits. We were wide-eyed explorers, drunk on freedom.

We checked into Pak Hotel, a dusty little place nestled in the heart of Qissa Khwani Bazaar. It was more than a hotel—it was a legacy of our people. Built by donations from the community and managed by the Central City Imambargah, it offered subsidized stays for

Parachinaris. Our room was old, the sheets stained, but it was our launchpad into a wider world.

Qissa Khwani itself was a contradiction—chaotic and charming. The flower sellers lined the narrow alleys, their stalls bursting with color and scent. Roses, tuberose, and marigolds floated in the air like music in a dirty symphony.

With our to-do list in hand, we hit the city.

We visited Army Stadium, a colorful playland that stretched out like a dream. Then came Islamia College and the sprawling campus of Peshawar University—grand buildings that once starred in our textbook illustrations. I had once dreamed of studying here, but my path had shifted toward commerce, economics, and finance. Still, the grandeur of it left me awestruck.

We walked the hallways of Lady Reading Hospital, our minds echoing with the literature we'd read in Urdu textbooks. Every place we'd once studied about—we now walked through.

But the real magic waited in Hayatabad.

Nothing prepared me for it.

The wide, tree-lined roads. The manicured parks. The majestic bungalows behind ornate gates. My obsession with beautiful homes came alive in Hayatabad—it was like stepping into a movie. I kept looking at each house, imagining what it would be like to live in one. Maybe this longing came from never really having a home that stayed—each move, each eviction, had left me hungrier for stability.

But Hayatabad didn't just give me dreams of houses. It gave me a vision of the future.

Mobile phones. Everywhere. In glass displays, on streets, in the hands of rickshaw drivers. Shiny, glowing Nokias—some basic, some with cameras. The kind we had only seen in magazines. In Parachinar, no one had a mobile phone. Most hadn't even seen one. We didn't have rickshaws either—our steep, mountainous roads made them impractical.

And then, Gul Haji Plaza.

A temple for the tech-obsessed.

I had heard about it from Shafaat, but the real thing was overwhelming. Floor after floor, shop after shop, filled with computers—sleek machines that looked like

spacecraft to me. Some had price tags dangling from them. Others displayed signs offering easy installment plans.

I stood there frozen. Not in envy. In resolve.

After four days of roaming, we returned home.

Back in school, we shared our story with the class. It was like we'd returned from the moon. The students hung onto our every word—eyes wide, jaws dropped. No one could believe we had actually gone. On our own. Seen the world. And come back alive.

But the moment that stunned them most was the mobile phone. "There's no wire?" they gasped.

"And even rickshaw drivers have them?" someone asked, eyes popping.

"Even rickshaws?" another echoed. Most had never seen one.

Parachinar was frozen in time. But I was not.

Something inside me had shifted. My world had grown. My dreams, too.

And I knew—I would never let them shrink again.

Chapter 17: Unnamed Emotions

I wasn't sure if I should include this chapter. For days, I hesitated—torn between silence and sincerity. But I had promised myself before I began writing this story: I would be honest, even if it meant revealing parts of myself I never fully understood. So, I will speak—not to shock, not to confess, but to reflect. Maybe someone, somewhere, will read this and understand their own story better.

In our school, there existed an invisible thread—a quiet, unspoken phenomenon. Among the boys, sometimes, there were bonds that ran deeper than friendship. Not physical, not perverse, but intensely emotional. A kind of affection that didn't fit the mold of normal boyhood camaraderie. It was confusing, because no one ever named it. And yet, everyone knew it existed.

Some boys were admired, adored—idolized even. If one happened to be good-looking, it wasn't rare to see dozens of others captivated by his presence. He'd be called *beautiful*, not just *handsome*. And beauty, in our world, was powerful. It could rearrange friendships, stir emotions, and shake identities.

It happened to me too.

There was a friend—someone I played cricket with, someone who shared the same seriousness about school and life. He was quiet, focused, and had an aura that drew people in. Then suddenly, the class began to notice him. They whispered about his looks, praised his every movement, and called him “beautiful” with a kind of awe.

And something shifted inside me.

I began to see him differently. I didn’t want to—tried to ignore it—but I couldn’t. My emotions betrayed me. It was not attraction the way people often think of it. There was no sexual urge, no perverse desire. But it was not normal friendship either.

I wanted to be around him all the time. I thought about him constantly. And when I stood before him, my confidence crumbled like a paper wall. I couldn’t meet his eyes. My voice trembled. I became someone I didn’t recognize.

During the winter break, I made the excuse of borrowing his notebook. His house was miles away, but I didn’t care. I just wanted to see him again. I

walked the distance, borrowed the book for two days, then returned it—only to get another glimpse of him.

It felt strange and heavy—this emotional dependence. I had once disapproved of such behavior in others, quietly labeling them weak or confused. But now, I was becoming what I didn't understand.

Still, I knew—just like them, I was not gay. Nor were they. In the years that followed, I watched those boys marry, raise children, live heterosexual lives. I am sure their orientation was never in question. So, what was it?

I think now it was the environment. The structure of our society. We were raised in deeply segregated spaces, where boys spent their lives with other boys, where emotional expression had no outlet, and admiration had nowhere to go but inward. In that tight-knit, emotionally deprived world, even friendship could become something... more. It was never physical. It was psychological.

I write this not to expose, but to understand. To let the reader glimpse a strange yet very real part of boyhood in certain societies—where emotions are repressed,

where admiration becomes obsession, and where love is never spoken, only felt in silence.

That was my emotional state in eighth and ninth grade.

But life, as always, moved forward.

Classes turned serious. Ninth and tenth grade were no longer internal assessments—they were governed by the Kohat Board, an institution that supervised the exams of hundreds of schools. Board exams carried weight. They shaped your future. The colleges you dreamed of, the scholarships you chased, the careers you envisioned—all depended on those results.

I was ready.

My preparation had begun long before most. My study time was short but sharp. I had developed a method—targeted, efficient, relentless. What others did in twelve hours, I could do in four. Not because I was special, but because I had learned how to focus.

But there was one great disappointment: my teachers.

They were dull-minded, uninspired, and in many cases, unqualified. I looked at them and felt a strange grief. These were the people meant to shape our minds, and

yet, they barely had control over their own. Some openly encouraged bribery. Others promised us good marks—if we played the game.

That game was cheating.

It wasn't just tolerated. It was promoted. Students were told to collect money, bribe invigilators, pass answer sheets like notes in class. Some even memorized cheat codes more than textbooks. And the worst part? It worked. Those who paid and cheated scored higher than those who didn't.

But I couldn't play that game. Not because I was noble, but because I was terrible at cheating.

I hated the injustice of it all. I hated the sight of my classmates, proudly handing over cash to teachers who were supposed to be our moral compass. I hated that honesty made me the outsider. But still, I chose it. I had to.

Then came 2004. The exam season.

The halls were packed. Papers distributed. Tension thick in the air. And then, the deals began. Invigilators walked between rows, looking for the nods—the silent signs from students who had “arranged” their cheating.

They turned a blind eye as pages turned and chits were passed.

I sat in the middle of it all, refusing to look left or right.

Maybe I was the only one in that room who didn't cheat.

The exams ended. We threw a farewell party for the outgoing tenth graders. Laughter filled the air. But underneath the celebration, I carried a quiet pride.

Then, the results were announced.

I had topped the class.

My scores were proof—not just of intelligence, but of integrity. I had fought a crooked system, and I had won.

In that moment, I realized something: even if the world was unfair, I didn't have to be.

And perhaps, that is where greatness begins.

Chapter 18: The Last Bell

Tenth grade—our final year at Government High School Parachinar.

It was strange how a place I once found ordinary, even harsh, had slowly become my haven. I had started falling in love with my school—not just the memories we made, but the very walls, the dirty benches, the worn-out blackboards. There was something sacred about that mess. Perhaps it was nostalgia, or maybe it was the ache of knowing I was nearing the end of this chapter.

Tenth grade had its own charm. Some boys, who had hidden behind silence for years, suddenly revealed their humor. The class clowns were born just as we were about to leave. Their jokes were like fireworks in a sky that had been gray for too long.

And yet, beneath the laughter, I was more serious than ever. My mind had already started to drift beyond Parachinar. I was spending late evenings on the internet at the local café, researching different fields of study. The traditional routes—medicine or engineering—never spoke to me. I wanted to learn

about business, finance, the systems that moved money and power in the world. There was a commerce college in Parachinar, sure, but I wanted more. I wanted out. I wanted exposure, challenge—life beyond the mountains.

Peshawar. That was my dream city. A place where possibilities felt endless.

I talked to my family, again and again, trying to convince them. I knew money was tight, but this was my chance. To my surprise, they agreed. My father and sisters decided to support my dream and help me get into a college in Peshawar. That decision filled me with a newfound energy. The horizon widened. Hope came alive.

Meanwhile, back at school, everything had softened. Even the notorious boys—the “badasses”—had become oddly kind and civil. Maybe leaving was making us all more human. Even the teachers, once so merciless with sticks and slaps, had become gentler. For the first time, it felt like we were truly seen. It was a dream—almost too good to be real.

Then, as always, exams arrived. And the anxiety returned with them.

The long nights of study, the quiet desperation in our eyes, the cold dread outside the exam hall—it was all there again. And so was the cheating. The invigilators, corrupt as ever, welcomed bribes and turned blind eyes. But I, like before, stuck to my way—clear concepts, clean conscience. I didn't know if it made me brave or foolish, but it felt right. And my papers went well.

When the last exam ended, I stepped out of the hall and stood still, just staring at the building that had been my second home for years. The playground was littered with torn cheating slips. Dust hovered like smoke in the air. Still, it was beautiful to me. I decided I'd say my real goodbye on the day of the farewell party.

The farewell was simple, almost painfully modest. If someone from a Western school or upper-class background tried to picture it, I'd ask them to imagine a gathering of poor students—wearing their best clothes, sipping tea, nibbling on dry pastries, laughing at old jokes. There were no balloons, no decorations. Just heart.

It was the first time I saw many of my classmates without their black school caps, their hair neatly combed, their clothes ironed. It made me realize how little we had, and how much we made out of it.

After the farewell, I took a slow walk around the school, reliving every class I had sat in—from fifth grade to tenth. I visited my exact seating spot in each room. I stepped into the small, dusty library that had fed my hunger for knowledge. I went to the tree in the playground, the one that offered shade in summer, and I wrapped my arms around it. That tree had heard our laughter, our secrets.

Then the results were announced—I had scored well, again. It was a quiet victory.

But to study in Peshawar, I needed to migrate to a new education board. So I traveled to Kohat and stayed at the home of my mother's paternal uncle. He worked at a bank, and for three days I lived in their modest yet warm house. My cousins Yasir and Nargis were also tenth graders, and they had done well in their exams too. Their school in Kohat was impressive, and so was their city life. It all felt so big, so far from the narrow, dusty roads of Parachinar.

I got my migration certificate and returned home.

Then the day finally came. Qaiser and I packed our bags and left for Peshawar. He got admission in a medical college, the traditional path. I, however, joined a

commerce college to study business and finance. Back then, commerce wasn't considered respectable—certainly not as honorable as engineering or medicine. But I knew this was my path.

I submitted my documents. Our classes were to begin in two weeks.

We returned to Parachinar for one last stay.

And just like that, I fell in love again—with the city I was about to leave.

For two weeks, I wandered the streets of Parachinar. Every road, every tree, every wall had meaning. I looked at them as if I was seeing them for the last time. But more than the city, it was my family I couldn't stop thinking about. I was falling in love with them all over again—my father, my sisters, my home.

Especially Basmeen.

She was my equal—brilliant, ambitious, but without the privilege of leaving. She had passed tenth grade with flying colors but had no choice but to attend the only girls' college in Parachinar—Benazir College. All our elder sisters had studied there. It was a path worn by footsteps of compromise.

Basmeen and I were close. Perhaps I was the only one she truly talked to. She would sit beside me in silence, gently massaging my head after a long day. I knew she would miss me. And I knew she wouldn't say it.

Then came the morning.

I picked up my bag and stepped out into the cold, silent dawn of Parachinar. The air was crisp, the sky still gray. I walked out of the house, my heart full. I was leaving behind everything I loved—for something unknown.

Peshawar was hot, noisy, chaotic. That night, I arrived at my hostel and collapsed onto the unfamiliar bed. The college was only 200 meters away, but in my heart, it felt like a thousand miles from everything I'd ever known.

Tomorrow, a new chapter would begin.

But that night, I was still the boy from Parachinar—holding tightly to a memory that was already slipping away.

Chapter 19: The Turning Point

The college building, to my disappointment, lacked the inspiration I had imagined. After dreaming of grand halls and towering campuses, the reality felt underwhelming. It was a small, modest structure—its construction visibly aged and tired. The walls were stained, the paint long forgotten. Rust clung stubbornly to the edges of windows and doors, and the old wooden furniture creaked under the weight of years. It didn't resemble a place of dreams—it looked like a place that had stopped dreaming long ago.

The hostel was no better. A narrow, three-story building that resembled more a prison than a home. Its long corridors echoed with footsteps and murmurs, and the rooms were small and dimly lit. Most of us slept on traditional rope-tied beds—charpoys—which groaned every time someone turned in their sleep. Study tables were a rare luxury, claimed by a few; the rest of us had to read and write lying on our beds or sitting cross-legged on the cold cement floor. There were no study lamps. If one of us wanted to study late into the night, the others had to sacrifice their sleep. The walls were cracked and stained, and the paint had

long faded into patches of sorrow. It felt like no one had cared for this building in years.

But there were rays of kindness in this dreary place—Mr. Zia ur Rehman and Mr. Abdul Wahid, our hostel wardens. Mr. Zia was young, full of energy and humor, often joking with students and easing the tension that filled our days. Mr. Abdul Wahid, with his calm demeanor and white beard, was the opposite—soft-spoken, kind, and deeply respected. They were more than just wardens; they were teachers, mentors, and silent supporters.

Beside the hostel lay Shahi Bagh, an old public park that became our evening refuge. On the days homesickness gripped us hardest, we would wander its paths in silence, watching the trees sway, hoping to feel just a little less far from home. Around us, the hostel buzzed with boys from every corner of the province—different accents, different faces, but the same loneliness. We were all far from home, all searching for purpose in the same broken place.

The hostel mess was its own world, run by Amir Lala—a hot-tempered cook with unpredictable generosity. If he liked you, your plate would overflow.

If not, you were left to make do with scraps. His mood determined your dinner.

When we needed supplies or simply a change of air, we explored Hashtnagri Bazaar, a lively market tucked beneath a flyover. Narrow lanes packed with vendors, the scent of spices, roasted corn, and frying samosas filled the air. Just across from us stood the Arbab Niaz Cricket Stadium, a massive oval that brought occasional cheers drifting into our hostel windows. Next door was Government College Peshawar, and just down the street, College Chowk—a chaotic hub of food carts and makeshift stalls, where the street food tasted like heaven, especially when we were broke and hungry.

It wasn't ideal. It wasn't perfect. But this was where life had brought me—and slowly, painfully, it was beginning to shape me.

Section C. That was where I was placed in college—an average group, filled with students no one really expected anything extraordinary from. It stung a little, but I accepted it. Deep inside, though, I wanted more. I had come a long way from home and I didn't want to settle for mediocrity. I wanted to rise. I wanted to prove myself, not just to others, but to me. I wanted to go to

Section A—the section of toppers, of ambition, of brilliance.

And so, I started working harder than ever before.

The environment at the hostel was new, and my roommates were all from Parachinar, the very city I had just left behind. Farhad, Iftikhar, and later Shahid. Somehow, fate had wrapped me back in familiarity. Out of them all, Farhad stood out. He was extremely hardworking, always up late at night with his books, his lamp casting shadows over his determined face.

Watching him study lit a fire inside me. I wanted to compete with him, and though I still studied less than he did, I was sharp-minded and gradually began staying up later, pushing myself further. My nights and days became more productive as I fought against my own limitations.

But even with all this effort, something heavier loomed over me—**homesickness**. It was like a cloud that never left my head. I missed my family so much it hurt. My sisters, my father, my mother, my brother—every memory of home stung like salt on a wound. I started dreaming badly. Nightmares plagued me, sometimes showing terrible things happening to my loved ones. I'd wake up in cold sweats, my chest heavy with anxiety. I

had no mobile phone to call them. There were only public call offices—PCOs—that charged for every minute. And I was too poor to afford even a call most days.

So I made a decision. I stopped eating lunch. I saved that money, every rupee, and spent it on phone calls to my family. I'd go to the nearby PCO and dial home. Even hearing their voices for just a few minutes felt like breathing again. At the same time, to fight off the crushing homesickness, I started exploring Peshawar—Hayatabad, Sadar, Qissa Khwani Bazaar. The streets, the markets, the strangers—they began stitching confidence into me, one outing at a time.

College was no different in terms of diversity. There were boys speaking Hindko, Urdu, Punjabi. Afghan boys too, some of whom spoke fluent English. One of them, Rashid, even ran an English language institute for refugees. It was inspiring. This city was alive, and I began to feel its pulse.

Still, a sense of **inferiority** gnawed at me. Even my roommates had mobile phones. I didn't. It was my dream to own one—not for luxury, but for a simple call home whenever I needed. This feeling of being left behind drove me even harder to prove my worth.

Then came the **first assessment exams**—the moment I had been preparing for with all my heart. I had studied extra books, poured my energy into understanding every subject, and stayed up long nights. I felt ready. And when the results were announced, everything changed.

It was a morning I'll never forget.

The sun had just risen as the students gathered for the assembly. Mr. Ilyas Faruqi, our principal, stood at the podium—his henna-dyed beard a burning shade of orange, his movements sharp, his speech lightning-fast. He was an energetic man, always in motion, always commanding respect.

And then, he called out my name.

I froze.

I, a thin, almost invisible boy from Section C, had topped the entire college in the first assessment exams—second only to a boy named Adnan from Mardan. But from Section C, I was the first ever to achieve this. My name echoed through the assembly ground. Heads turned. Eyes locked on me. I felt the

weight of recognition fall upon my shoulders, and it didn't feel heavy—it felt like wings.

Mr. Faruqi approached me later that day, looked at me with those curious, proud eyes, and congratulated me. It was the first time he had spoken to me. I had always admired him from afar, and now, suddenly, I was in his spotlight. He told me that he had been waiting for a boy like me, someone who could carry the name of the college forward. I felt my chest swell. That was the day everything changed.

After college, I ran to the PCO. I called home and told my family that I had topped the whole classroom—no, not just the classroom, the entire section system. My parents were overjoyed. Their voices lit up with pride, and that pride melted my heart.

That evening, I returned to my room, cleaned up my desk, arranged my books in a perfect order, and sat down with a sense of purpose like never before. I was no longer just trying—I was *becoming*.

Shortly after, I was transferred to Section A.

A new classroom. New faces. New energy.

That's where I met **Ijlal Haider**. He spoke Hindko and belonged to the Shia community—the same as mine. He already knew about Parachinar and the hardships of its people. That connection made our bond stronger from the beginning. He became my first close friend in the new section.

Then came **Kamran**—the joker of the class. Always funny, always light-hearted, and someone who made the days easier with his jokes. And then there was **Murad**—a wise and sincere friend who brought a quiet kind of strength into my life. The three of them became my core circle. I started visiting their homes, getting to know their families, and my world began expanding beyond the walls of the classroom.

That victory in the first assessment didn't just change my academic path. It changed my entire **identity**. I was no longer just a boy from Parachinar. I was someone with potential, with friends, with respect—and above all, with *hope*.

This was the real beginning of my journey.

Chapter 20: Wings of Hope

For the first time in my life, the weight of inferiority had lifted from my shoulders. I was still poor—still struggling to meet hostel fees, still skipping meals to save money—but something inside me had shifted. I no longer felt small. I no longer looked at the world from beneath the shadow of self-doubt. I had proven to myself that I was capable of greatness, and that belief became my armor.

Mr. Ilyas Faruqi's words echoed in my heart like a divine prophecy: "*You shall top the entire province.*" His confidence in me was not just a compliment—it was a firestarter. It lit a torch within me, and with it, I plunged into my books with renewed passion. I entered another spiritual phase too, one I hadn't known since childhood. I began waking for *Tahajjud*, the silent midnight prayer. In the quiet hours, while others slept under the dim hostel lights, I knelt on the cold floor, whispering dreams and fears to the heavens. My prayers became conversations, my solitude a sanctuary.

And then—there was her.

She was like an apparition in my thoughts, ethereal and untouchable. A girl so graceful she seemed born of poetry, her presence lingered in my mind like the final note of a haunting melody. I won't reveal her real name here—she deserves her privacy, her mystery. I'll call her *Lilly*. I won't even say where we met. What matters is that she became the spark in my darkness, the muse to my struggle.

Back when I was drowning in insecurity, I used to push her from my thoughts, convinced that someone like me could never deserve someone like her. But now—now I dared to hope. I remembered her voice, husky yet musical, the kind of voice that could calm storms. I remembered her number too—every digit carved in memory, untouched even after eighteen long years.

Somewhere inside me, a teenage dream began to grow wild and bright: *Maybe if I topped the board exams... just maybe, she'd see me. Consider me. Choose me.*

Love, even in its most silent form, can be a powerful motivator.

But life was still hard. My family back in Parachinar was struggling to pay my hostel and college fees. Every rupee came with sacrifice. I couldn't earn, couldn't

support them yet, but I could honor their pain by cutting every possible cost. I stopped spending on transport. On weekends, instead of taking a bus, I wandered through the streets of Peshawar on foot. I came to know the city's pulse—the winding alleys, the smell of roasted corn, the dusty faces of strangers, the rhythm of its markets. In every step, I was not just saving money—I was discovering resilience.

Peshawar gave me more than a city. It gave me families.

Ijlal Haider, my classmate and dear friend, had lost his father, but his mother had raised her sons with strength and dignity. They took me in like one of their own. His brothers treated me like a sibling, and his mother, with her warm smile and quiet kindness, felt like a second mother. I had found a home within their home.

Then there was Murad. His family, too, embraced me. They had high hopes for Murad, and he worked hard to live up to them. I visited their house often, drawn in by the delicious food and the comfort of being around people who cared. His parents, brothers, even cousins—all treated me with affection and respect. I helped them with their studies, and in return, I received something more precious than meals—belonging.

The college didn't have a library. But my hunger for knowledge didn't care. I read whatever I could get my hands on. Often, I'd pick books left behind by seniors in the hostel—dusty, dog-eared, filled with underlined lines and scribbled notes. They were my treasure, my window to worlds beyond mine.

As the midterm exams approached, my days and nights blurred into study marathons. I had one goal—to meet the expectations of Mr. Faruqi. And when fatigue crept in, I'd close my eyes and think of Lilly—her smile, her voice, her imagined laughter. It was enough to keep me going.

When the exams finally arrived, I had a strategy. I'd prepare hard but sleep well the night before each paper. Outside the exam halls, other boys were panicking, their faces pale, books trembling in their hands. I couldn't bear to look at their anxious expressions—it drained my calm. So I timed my arrival perfectly. I'd enter the hall just as the doors opened, walking past the chaos like it didn't belong to me.

Inside, I was calm. Focused. I wrote with clarity. I gave the best of myself.

And then, it was over. Two weeks of exams had ended. A short vacation followed.

I packed my bags—every book, every note—and with Farhad and Iftikhar, headed to Kohat Adda. The buses to Parachinar lined up like waiting horses. My heart raced. I was going home.

As the bus rolled through the landscape, we passed through a city that I knew all too well—the city where Lilly lived. The air changed as we entered it. It felt scented, magical, like the very wind carried her essence. I looked out the window, imagining her walking down one of those lanes, her laughter echoing off the walls. I spotted an area where I thought—just thought—her house might be. My heart ached to fly, to go there, to see her from a distance. But I sat quietly, holding my longing like a secret.

Soon after, nausea struck. I had always been terrible at traveling. I popped the infamous orange-colored pills and leaned onto Iftikhar’s shoulder, trying to sleep.

Five hours later, the air shifted again. This time, it was cooler—crisp and clean. The kind of air that can only belong to one place.

Parachinar.

I opened my eyes and gazed out. The rolling green hills, the familiar streets, the silent strength of home—it all rushed into me like music. I was no longer a visitor. I was returning as someone new, someone changed.

Home welcomed me with open arms. My favorite sister, Basmeen, hugged me tight, her eyes glowing with pride. I had lunch in the warmth of our old kitchen, surrounded by familiar voices. Then I lay down in my bed, breathing in the cold, pure air of Parachinar.

The world felt right again.

And somewhere far away, a dream named Lilly still danced in my heart—no longer impossible, no longer forbidden.

Just waiting.

Chapter 21: The Return to Parachinar

Parachinar felt different this time. It wasn't just a city anymore—it had become a companion, a muse, a quiet lover whispering hope into my ears. The roads were the same, the buildings hadn't changed, and the poverty still clung to us like old dust—but something inside me had shifted. My dreams had grown larger, and so had my heart.

Our house, with its leaking roof and fading paint, looked like it had been waiting for me. My father's old car sat faithfully in the courtyard, silent and tired, yet somehow proud. We still had little, but I had brought home something invisible yet powerful—ambition. And that alone made everything glow.

The first breath of Punjabi Bazaar wrapped around me like an old friend. The scent of samosas and kebabs from Khaar Bazaar brought back a rush of childhood hunger and laughter. Noor Market, with its narrow lanes and tall buildings, looked like pages from an antique book. The shrine of Agha-e-Irani stood serene, the smoke of incense curling through the air like prayers made visible.

Thursdays in Parachinar were something magical—pilgrims at the shrines, children in bright clothes, laughter blending with the call of the muezzin. I thought to myself, if the world knew about this place, they'd come here just to feel what I felt now.

Cantt Road was my favorite—an avenue of peace beneath arching maple trees whose rust-colored leaves carpeted the ground like forgotten poetry. The shrine of Syed Abbas stood silently by the roadside, a place where weary minds found rest.

At Maan Singh Gate, I paused. Its ancient wooden doors and iron grills told stories no book could capture. I imagined warriors and traders passing through centuries ago, unaware that one day a boy with big dreams would find comfort in the same view.

I wandered to Sra Gala, the old neighborhood of my childhood. Kako and Agara had long returned to the earth, but their home still breathed the scent of time, of earth and firewood, of home. Shublan had lost none of its spirit—the laughter of its people still echoed through its alleys.

Imamia Colony was alive with sport as always—boys playing football in dusty fields, their shouts carrying a

rhythm I had long missed. But something was gone—the Afghan refugees, once a vibrant part of our community, had moved on. Their absence left the air thinner, less colorful. The diversity was missing, like a song without its harmony.

Yet I wasn't here just to reminisce. My mind buzzed with visions of the future. I saw business potential in every street. Parachinar was untouched, full of opportunity. I dreamed of modern interiors, customer service, branding—ideas borrowed from Peshawar that could revolutionize this place. In small towns, trust and connection mattered more than billboards.

But dreams need money, and I had none. For now, my only capital was ambition—and the board exams. So I folded my dreams like paper planes and put them aside, promising I'd return to them when the time was right.

At home, pride blossomed in quieter corners too. Basmeen was excelling at college, her name now a synonym for success in the family. Little Naila, barely in seventh grade, showed signs of brilliance that left me stunned. Her questions were sharp, her thoughts even sharper. I told my father that we must never compromise on their education—not even for food.

My parents, bless them, were already a step ahead.
Their hearts beat only for our futures.

But as the vacation wore on, I realized I hadn't touched a single book from the heavy pile I had dragged all the way from Peshawar. They sat unopened, like scolded companions, reminding me of the time I had squandered. I regretted bringing them.

When it was time to leave, Basmeen, ever the helper, repacked my mountain of things. Before dawn broke, I stood at the bus terminal at Eid Gah Market, half-asleep, shivering in the morning chill. I always wondered why Parachinaris began their journeys before the sun rose. Why not wait for light? But some things aren't meant to be questioned—they're just the way they are.

I popped the usual little orange pills to stop the nausea that always came with travel and boarded the bus. We stopped in Doaba after three hours for lunch at a greasy roadside hotel, the kind where dust and spices shared the same air.

As we resumed our journey, my heart started to flutter—Lilly's city was near. I closed my eyes and imagined her—her voice, soft and husky, still echoing

in the chambers of my mind. I dreamed, foolishly but sincerely, of a future where she might be mine. Her city felt like a garden of fragrance, and even the wind seemed to carry her name.

But the fantasy faded fast as the dust of Peshawar swallowed us. The smog, the horns, the grayness—it was all there waiting. I returned to the hostel, now quiet and ghostlike, the walls whispering stories of students past and dreams half-fulfilled.

The midterm results were only three days away, and the air was heavy with tension. Everyone walked slower, spoke softer, and stared longer at the notice board as if willing it to speak. I lay on my creaky bed, tired but restless, the thought of Lilly and my future dancing in my head like fireflies in a jar.

Tomorrow, life would resume—and I had promises to keep.

Chapter 22: The Crown of Expectations

The air in college had changed. It was no longer filled with just the rustle of books or the whisper of chalk on the board—it pulsed with nervous energy. All of us high achievers, the so-called serious lot, were waiting with pounding hearts. The midterm results were coming.

The morning of the result day felt heavier than usual. Everything looked a little blurred to me—my vision clouded by anxiety. I woke up early, took a bath hoping to shake off the nerves, and made my way to college, my steps slow, my chest tight.

As I passed by the principal's office, Mr. Ilyas Faruqi emerged. He looked at me—sharp, long, and strange—as if he were trying to read my soul. His eyes weren't kind, but they weren't unkind either. He had a way of carrying expectations like swords. His affection came in odd shapes: sometimes as criticism, sometimes as silence. Making him smile was like trying to crack a

stone with whispers. But I could feel something in his gaze today—it was loaded.

The morning assembly passed like a blur. Routine words, familiar prayers, and then we were sent back to our classes. Moments later, the silence of the corridor was broken by a sudden wave of murmurs. The results had been pinned outside the admin office. A tide of footsteps rushed there.

But I stayed back. I didn't have the courage. I remained glued to my seat, staring blankly ahead, too afraid of what I might—or might not—see. And then, the classroom door burst open.

It was Ijlal.

He rushed in, wrapped me in a hug, and whispered with a beaming smile, “You did it... you’re the topper!”

Everything paused for a moment. Time, air, fear—it all froze.

I stepped out, surrounded by curious eyes. There it was: my name at the very top of the list, shining like a crown. And the gap—oh, the glorious gap—between my score and the second-highest was wide, bold, and impossible to ignore.

A fire ignited inside me. Not of arrogance, but of confidence. A pure, burning pride.

Mr. Ilyas Faruqi summoned me to his office. This time, he didn't scold or frown. He opened his arms and hugged me—tight, warm, silent. And then, he handed me a cup of tea. I sipped it slowly, with a strange sense of honor, as if I'd finally earned his unspoken approval.

That day, I was also introduced to the Managing Director—Haji Aslam. A tall, majestic figure with a long beard and eyes that smiled before his lips did. He hailed from Thall, not far from Parachinar. He had a peculiar habit of giving small, affectionate slaps to students he admired. I received one—and I loved it. That soft slap felt like a medal.

From that moment, the entire college seemed to look at me differently. Seniors nodded in recognition, teachers paused mid-sentence when I entered. I wasn't invisible anymore.

Later that day, I walked to the PCO and called home. My voice trembled as I shared the news. I could hear the joy in my parents' silence. After the call, I walked. I needed air.

As I moved through the streets, I saw the struggle painted on the faces of the poor—men bending their backs to the earth, women dragging burdens twice their size, eyes that had forgotten how to dream. When I reached Saddar, I saw the contrast—rich faces, relaxed steps, skin unmarked by the sun, dressed in privilege.

And something hit me.

Why did the poor, with their striking cheekbones and natural grace, still appear so worn—while the rich, regardless of features, seemed radiant?

That day, I made a vow: I would fight poverty with everything I had. I would never let it define me again. Poverty was not just a lack of money—it was a wound on dignity, a constant thief of dreams.

Back at the hostel, I began receiving subtle protocol. Respect appeared in gestures, in words, in how people paused when I passed. But I knew the real war hadn't even begun.

A month slipped by and the shadow of the final board exam grew larger. Mr. Ilyas Faruqi began drilling motivation into us. The teachers wrapped up the

courses and began the cycle of revisions. I was ready, but beneath my calm surface, a storm brewed.

What if I failed to top the board?

The weight of expectations pressed down like a mountain. I began preparing in ways others didn't. I practiced writing my papers not just with knowledge but with style—neat, legible, clear. I added extra content at the end of my answers, to signal that I knew more than what the textbooks offered. I trained my mind in silence—meditation, focus, control. Doubt was the enemy now.

And then, the day came.

Final exams.

I arrived just in time—deliberately—so I wouldn't see the panic on my classmates' faces. I had slept a solid eight hours, drank a strong, black tea, and felt alert. The paper was handed to me.

But I didn't read it.

I closed my eyes and told myself, *You are ready. You've read more than anyone else. There's no one like you here. You've earned this moment.*

Then I opened my eyes and began. One word after another. One paper after another. I gave them everything I had.

At last, the final exam was over.

The next morning, we packed for Parachinar again. We reached Kohat Adda, climbed onto the bus, and began the journey. But this time, even as we passed Lilly's city, my heart was too heavy for butterflies.

Parachinar wasn't the same either. It didn't sing to me like last time. The charm had faded because the storm was still ahead. I had appeared in the final board exam—and now, my competitors weren't just from my college, but from all across the province.

Self-doubt crept into my thoughts like shadows at sunset.

I pretended confidence at home, laughing and smiling, but inside, I was fighting. I didn't leave the house much. I wasn't in the mood for shrines or bazaars or football in the colony.

The vacation stretched for two long months. Every day felt like a question.

And then, at last, it began to end. The countdown to results began. My heartbeat raced. The closer we came to the result, the heavier the air became.

Parachinar had no color now. Only waiting. Only hope. Only fear.

And so, I waited—with clenched fists, sleepless nights, and a silent prayer sealed behind my lips.

Chapter 23: The Tears of Triumph

One afternoon in Parachinar, our landline phone rang with its sharp, metallic chime—a sound that always stirred a small storm in our quiet home. My heart jumped as I picked up. On the other end was a voice I knew too well.

It was Mr. Ilyas Faruqi.

His words were brief, as always. “Qamar, come to Peshawar. Tomorrow.” No explanation. No details. Just that firm, commanding voice.

As I hung up, my heart was racing. His tone was unreadable, but the call itself was strange—out of the blue and urgent. I tried to calm myself, torn between fear and hope. *Why would he call me back unless... unless something big had happened?*

I barely slept that night. My mind was spinning with possibilities. I packed my bag under the dim yellow light of our room, my hands trembling slightly. Just before dawn, I left for the Eid Gah Market terminal. The sky was still dark. The wind carried that familiar early morning chill of Parachinar, brushing against my cheeks like a secret being whispered.

I took the usual orange pills for nausea before the long ride began. As the bus pulled away from the hills of my hometown, my heart thudded against my ribs with every turn. This time, the city of Lilly shimmered in the distance like a silent promise—my soul hopeful, despite the uncertainty.

By afternoon, I was back in the furnace of Peshawar—the suffocating heat and dust curling around me. I headed straight for the hostel. Mr. Zia-ur-Rehman, the kind-hearted warden, was there. I told him Mr. Ilyas had summoned me.

He smiled knowingly. “Expect good news. The result comes tomorrow.”

A flicker of hope lit inside me. I called Mr. Ilyas that evening from the hostel’s old telephone. He simply said, “Good. Be ready.”

That night, he arrived in his Silver Toyota Townace, and I got in without saying much. As we drove through the city, he finally broke the silence.

“You haven’t performed according to my expectations,” he said, looking ahead, his voice flat.

His words hit me like ice water. My stomach dropped.
Why would he bring me all the way here... just to tell me that?

I nodded, stayed silent, hiding the sting behind my calm face.

We reached Nishtarabad and stopped in front of a dimly lit old office with a fading board: *Aaj News*. The air smelled of ink and old files. He told me to wait. I sat alone on a metal chair outside the glass door, my mind spiraling with doubts.

Then he came out.

In his hand was a paper—faint, warm from the printer.

He handed it to me and smiled.

“Congratulations, Qamar. You did it,” he said. “You haven’t just hit sixes. You’ve hit eighters.”

I looked down. My photo stared back at me. *Qamar Abbas has topped the board examination*, the bold headline read.

It felt like the world froze.

Tears rushed out of my eyes before I could stop them. My body shook. I had always thought people crying from happiness was something out of movies. Fiction. A lie.

But it was real. I was crying—deep, uncontrollable tears that blurred the paper in my hands.

Mr. Ilyas pulled me into a hug. His white shirt soaked my tears. I held on to him like a child.

Inside the news office, the staff surrounded me with congratulations, handshakes, and warm smiles. I was no longer a student—they looked at me like a symbol.

He drove me back to the hostel and made me promise to keep the news to myself until the morning.

But secrets don't last long under starlit skies. Mr. Zia saw my face and asked gently. I couldn't hold it in. "I topped the board," I said.

He hugged me and laughed like a proud uncle, then took me to a restaurant on his motorcycle, zipping through the sleepy streets of Peshawar. There, over a simple dinner, he gave me his phone. "Call home," he said.

It was past midnight. I hesitated, but dialed.

My brother Aamir answered, his voice groggy. “Aamir,” I said. “I topped the board.”

There was a silence. Then an eruption.

He woke the whole house. One by one, I spoke to everyone—my siblings, my parents. The air on the other end of the call turned into a festival. That night, they didn’t sleep. Neither did I.

Morning came. I had barely dozed off when Ijlal burst into the hostel, newspaper in hand. He was glowing with joy. We embraced tightly. Word had spread like wildfire.

We went to college together, where I was met with cheers and pats on the back. The college accountant, Dileep Kumar—a short, dark-skinned man with a kind heart—shook my hand firmly and called me “Qamar-e-Aalam.”

Murad arrived soon after, and others followed. That entire day was filled with laughter, hugs, and celebration.

But my mind was already flying back home.

The classes were still weeks away. I couldn't stay. I packed again and boarded a bus for Parachinar.

As we passed through Lilly's city, I stared long at the neighborhood I believed she lived in. Her face danced in my thoughts. I felt something different this time—not longing, not pain—but a strange sense of worth. *I deserved her now. I had proved myself.*

Back in Parachinar, my home exploded with joy. My family smothered me with kisses. My mother wept as she clutched me. I wasn't just their son anymore—I was their pride, their shining hope.

That summer, Parachinar felt like heaven. I walked through the bazaar like it belonged to me. I sat longer at Agha-e-Irani's tomb. My walks through the streets were filled with imagination. I held dreams like lanterns, lighting up the corners of my mind.

One day, Aamir gifted me a mobile phone—an old Motorola. It was the first in our family. I don't know how he got it, but he handed it to me with a smile I'll never forget. That tiny device felt like a treasure.

But vacation passed like a blink. Time, now, was a horse galloping faster than ever. The day came when I had to return.

Once again, I packed my bag. Once again, I said goodbye. Once again, I boarded that bus and watched the green hills of Parachinar disappear.

Back at the Peshawar hostel, a new chapter was waiting. Twelfth grade classes were about to begin. And this time, I wasn't just another student—I was the board topper.

And now, the real challenge began.

It wasn't just about becoming great. It was about *staying* great.

Chapter 24: The Weight of a Crown

My second-year classes began under a new sky.
Everything had changed—but not everything was easier.

Now I was known.

Teachers greeted me with warmth in their eyes, their words often echoing with admiration. My name had weight in the corridors. Boys in the hostel would stand when I passed, smile when I spoke, and often ask for my notes, my advice, or simply a few minutes of my time. I was no longer invisible. I was a symbol.

And yet—recognition brought pressure. Fame has its own gravity.

In my pocket was a mobile phone of my own, a modest Motorola gifted by Aamir. Sometimes, under the cover of night, when the hostel lights dimmed and the air stilled, I would silently press the digits of *her* number—Lilly's number—etched in my memory like poetry. I never called. But the presence of her number on my keypad felt like a silent link between two worlds: my burning reality, and the dream that kept me breathing.

But beneath it all, a storm brewed inside me—the unrelenting pressure to stay on top. It gnawed at my sleep, my appetite, my peace. To win once is glory. To stay a winner is war.

I moved out of the suffocating top-floor room where summers felt like hell and winters like exile. This time, I was offered one of the best rooms in the hostel. Suddenly, everyone wanted to be my roommate. I wasn't just a student anymore—I had become a magnet.

New faces moved in. Among them was Kamran Khan.

Kamran was a strange paradox—an odd blend of contradictions. He was funny, yet ambitious. Average in his studies but sky-high in his dreams. From a poor background, yet carried himself with the air of someone from an elite family. Physically weak, yet mentally bold. His courage often outpaced his reality, and I found myself learning things from him—how to carry yourself when you have nothing, how to dream without apology, how to act rich even when you're broke.

Kamran made life lighter, even under the crushing pressure of expectation.

That entire year, I had only two true companions: my books, and Lilly in my thoughts. Each night, after exhausting study sessions, her face would drift into my mind like a lullaby. I would fall asleep thinking of her, and wake up with her memory somewhere still warm inside me.

In the middle of this whirlwind, Mr. Ilyas Faruqi came with surprising news: my name had been selected for inclusion in the book *Who's Who in Pakistan*. I was to receive an award in Karachi.

The idea felt surreal—*Karachi*. A city so far and foreign, a place I'd only heard about in stories and seen in blurry TV clips.

I scraped together what little money I had, filled out the forms, and arranged the trip with my closest companion—Murad Ali.

We boarded the bus for what turned into a grueling 24-hour journey. Karachi welcomed us with dust and decay. It was nothing like I had imagined. The air was heavy with pollution, the streets overcrowded and chaotic. Our stay was a disaster from the beginning. We had no proper hotel. We first crashed at Murad's

cousin's small, crumbling house for two nights, then moved to the home of Mr. Ilyas's brother.

That place... it felt like a warehouse more than a home. I slept under the open sky, beside walls blackened with humidity. Mosquitoes whined in my ears all night. It was the worst living condition I had ever faced. There, in the city of lights, I saw shadows instead.

The day before the award ceremony, I visited the office of the award-giving institution, holding my hopes like fragile glass.

And that's when the truth shattered me.

They demanded **Rs. 25,000** for the award. Not as a fee—but as a price. It wasn't an honor. It was a transaction. A private organization selling awards, selling recognition like it was merchandise.

I was devastated.

My college refused to help. No funds. No support. No care. Despite all the name I had earned for them, they turned their faces. I didn't protest. I didn't even fully understand the betrayal back then.

But now I do.

Still, God had His own plans. The organization had already printed the book. My name was there, permanently etched in ink. They later sent the book and a trophy by courier. I received them quietly, without a ceremony, without applause. I placed them on my shelf and stared at them one night. They meant something—if not to the world, then at least to me.

And then, I buried my disappointment and returned to what I knew best—my books.

I threw myself into study again, fueled by pain, ambition, and something deeper—a fire that no one else could see. I topped every exam. Every single one.

When the final board results came, once again, my name was printed across newspapers like a stamp of glory. I had done it *again*.

My family rejoiced like before—tears, hugs, fireworks of love. But for me, the celebration was quieter. I had learned by now: every peak has a price.

And now, a new mountain waited to be climbed.

I had set my eyes on Chartered Accountancy.

Lahore was the next step. But it came with a weight I couldn't carry—**money**. My family had nothing to support me. The burden of dreams was mine alone to bear.

Still, Murad and I set out for Lahore to explore our future. The city did not charm me. Like Karachi, it felt too large, too harsh, too soulless. I preferred the quiet heart of Parachinar, even the dust of Peshawar. Lahore felt like it would swallow me whole.

We got a rickshaw and headed to PAC—the legendary institute for CA. But when we arrived, it was underwhelming. A plain building that looked more like a coaching center than the temple of commerce we had imagined. No marble floors, no chandeliers—just tiled classrooms and faded noticeboards.

But I had already made up my mind. I wanted to become a Chartered Accountant. I had heard all the stories: Chartered Accountants were the highest earners, the kings of the financial world.

CA meant getting dirty rich.

I looked at that building and told myself, **accept it.**
Accept the ordinary, because your journey will make it
extraordinary.

It wasn't love at first sight.

But it was fate.

Chapter 25: A Stranger's Kindness

I returned to Parachinar with a heart full of dreams but pockets empty. My only mission was to convince my family for the heavy expenses ahead. Deep inside, I already knew they could not afford it, yet I carried the burden of hope.

I spoke about my ambition of pursuing Chartered Accountancy in Lahore. My words fell heavy in the room, and I still remember the worried faces of my parents and sisters. Their silence said everything—their love, their helplessness, and their fear for me.

But then, like a sudden miracle, a spark of hope entered our home the very next day. My younger brother Aamir came running with news. A friend had told him about a wealthy man, a philanthropist, who supported poor students in their education. His younger brother was already studying in Islamabad under his guidance. Even more surprisingly, Aamir had managed to get his mobile number.

Now the chance was right before me. But I was the least confident boy when it came to talking to big people. My heart shrank at the very thought. Still, I

knew I had no choice. If I wanted to chase my dream, I had to gather every drop of courage in me and call him.

That evening, with my heartbeat racing and my confidence sinking, I finally gathered the courage to call him. He answered. In a trembling voice, I told him about my past academic achievements and my dream of becoming a Chartered Accountant. I requested his support.

To my surprise, he listened with warmth and encouragement. Then he said the words that changed everything—he would support me. He even invited me to his office in Islamabad.

I cannot describe the joy of that moment. It felt as if the whole world suddenly belonged to me. At home, the happiness spread like a festival—every face glowing with hope.

Later, I went out for a long walk in Parachinar. My steps were lighter than air, my heart sang like a free lark. I went straight to the shrine of Agha-e-Irani and bowed my head in prayer, thanking God for this mercy. That night, I could not sleep—not because of worry, but because of overwhelming happiness.

The next morning, my father and I began our journey toward Islamabad. We first reached Peshawar and spent the night there. At dawn, we set off again, and by early morning we arrived at our destination—his office.

It was no ordinary office. A beautiful farmhouse nestled among lush nurseries, serving as the headquarters of his construction company. There we finally met him—the man who had opened a new door of hope for me. Dark-skinned with white hair, he carried himself with strength and authority. His voice was deep, almost grudgingly dominating, yet behind it was a heart generous enough to change destinies.

He welcomed us and, to my astonishment, offered more than I had ever imagined. He promised to pay my tuition fees and insisted that instead of living in a hostel, I should stay in his annexe in Lahore.

As we stepped out of his farmhouse office, I looked around. Islamabad struck me instantly—it was different from any city I had seen. Green, clean, and calm. Unlike the chaos of Karachi or Lahore, it carried a serenity that touched my heart.

My father and I left with joy written on our faces. This support was nothing less than a miracle for us.

Returning to Parachinar, I carried with me a new fire. My preparations to move to Lahore for studies had truly begun.

A new era of hope had begun.

Seeing my path open, my sisters were inspired as well. A fresh ray of ambition lit up their hearts. Basmeen and the younger ones began to dream bigger, and I became their motivator. I shared with them the techniques of study, the art of attempting papers in exams, the little tips and tricks that had once helped me. To my delight, they worked wonders. Basmeen later rose to the top of her college, while Naila—the youngest—was already known for her brilliance. The others, too, found new energy in their studies. My achievements had become their fuel, and their progress was my pride.

At last, the day arrived. I packed my luggage, took a long breath, and said my goodbyes to the clean, cold breeze of Parachinar—the air that had shaped me, tested me, and carried me through every storm. With a heart full of hope and fear, I stepped onto the path toward Lahore—a city hot, crowded, and polluted, yet carrying within it the promise of my future.

Chapter 26: Through Fire, Toward Freedom

When I reached Lahore, all I carried was the contact number of the servant at the annexe.

He was a fat, dark-skinned man who wore many hats at once—chef, caretaker, and manager. Single-handedly, he looked after the entire place and its guests. The annexe itself was a small but elegant three-room building in one of Lahore's posh neighborhoods. It wasn't grand, but it carried an air of grace. I was given a beautiful room on the first floor, while the ground floor had a special room for dignitaries, a large hall, and a dining room.

After taking some rest, the servant asked me to visit the philanthropist's daughter. I went there and met her. She was a kind, soft-spoken woman. Her son, a gentle and courteous young man, soon became my friend.

In short, life began smoothly. I was attending classes, coming back home, and settling into a rhythm. For the first month, everything felt new and exciting. Hope was alive in me, and Lahore felt like the gateway to my dreams.

But then, suddenly, a storm entered my life. A storm so brutal that I still wonder how I survived it. It was chaos—chaos that shattered peace, broke dreams, and tried to crush me. A chaos that was lethal for education, for love, for life—for everything.

The first storm that struck me in Lahore was the chaos of love and romance.

Lilly had always been my favorite girl in the world. For years I had carried an unspoken love for her, locked inside me like a secret treasure. But now, after reaching Lahore, after gaining some academic achievements and a little confidence, I felt perhaps I deserved her. Maybe the time had come to finally express what I had been holding in my heart for so long.

One fine Sunday morning, gathering all my courage, I picked up the phone. My heartbeat raced as I called her. When she answered, I told her directly—I wanted to marry her.

Her reply was like a thunderbolt. She calmly said that I was like a brother to her. My heart sank. And then came the strangest part: she told me she wanted to marry someone with whom she wouldn't have to

change her last name. It was clear she already liked someone whose name matched her father's.

It was true—she had a boyfriend with that same name.

I was crushed. The love I had carried for years, the dream that had quietly kept me alive, vanished in a moment. I surrendered it all. I accepted defeat. Lilly was gone—not in reality, but in the corner of my heart where I had kept her all along.

The next blow was to my dream itself. I had come to Lahore to study Chartered Accountancy believing it to be a fast track out of poverty — a title that would change a life overnight. But reality arrived quietly and then all at once.

At the institute I met qualified CAs who were teaching us. I watched them — their cars, their clothes, their manner — and expected to see the comfortable life I had imagined. Instead I found modesty, struggle, and salaries far lower than I had pictured. When I asked about pay, the numbers drained the color from my hope. The profession I had built a future around suddenly looked smaller than the dream I'd attached to it.

Worse still, my growing fascination with technology made things feel even more uncertain. In classrooms and conversations I heard about modern ERP systems and software that automated much of what accountants once did by hand. The skill I had believed would be my passport to upward mobility was being reshaped — maybe even replaced — by machines and programs. The thought made my chest tighten.

And then there was the philanthropist who supported me. I admired him not just for his generosity but for what he represented: a builder, a man with vast assets, a life of scale and influence. He spent millions on guests in his farmhouse; his world felt immediate and tangible in a way that the distant promise of CA no longer did.

Slowly, the bright, neat line I had drawn from study to status began to blur. Chartered Accountancy, once my beacon, now felt over-hyped and incomplete. The dream that had carried me to Lahore was losing its light.

And then, suddenly, another storm of blood swept across Parachinar. A sectarian war erupted again — the same old Shia–Sunni conflict, but this time more severe, more violent, more merciless. Thousands were

slaughtered. Families were burned alive in their homes. Entire bloodlines vanished in a single night of rage.

The stories reached me like knives cutting into my soul. One story, especially, made me cry until my chest hurt. My sister Basmeen's Sunni friend lost her five-year-old little sister. The child was shot dead in the street, right in front of their home. Her elder sister watched helplessly from the window. For two whole days, the firing was so relentless that she couldn't step out to drag her sister's body inside. Can you imagine the weight of that grief? And hers was only one story among hundreds, each soaked in the same brutality.

In the aftermath, all Sunnis were expelled from Parachinar. It was a mass exodus — a cleansing of diversity. The town that once breathed with Shia and Sunni voices together now carried only one echo. Parachinar lost a part of its soul.

But I... I lost even more. That war changed me from within. I began to hate my own people — not for their faith, but for their blindness. For the sectarian poison they carried in their veins. I hated those who justified the killings, and I hated even more those who stayed silent when their voices could have condemned the monsters.

Because my life told me a different truth. The teachers in Peshawar who had guided me were Sunnis. The philanthropist in Lahore who lifted me when I was nothing — he was Sunni. Many of my best memories were shared with Sunnis. How could I accept the narrative drilled into me that they were enemies?

But hatred was louder than reason in Parachinar. The road connecting the city to the rest of Pakistan — a road passing through Sunni areas — was shut down. My town was cut off. Food and medicine vanished. My family's survival grew uncertain. Even the little pocket money my family used to send me in Lahore stopped.

The war had crossed from headlines into my own life.

Now the chaos became even more brutal. It made me homeless in the middle of storms already shaking my life. At the annexe, a strange pattern started. Whenever the philanthropist's guests arrived with their families — women and children — it meant one thing for me: immediate evacuation. I had to leave the building until they went back. At first, I thought it would be rare. But soon, it became frequent. Too frequent.

In those moments, I had nowhere to go. Luckily, my old friend Farhad — yes, the same Farhad from

Parachinar — had also secured admission at Punjab University. He was staying in a hostel with two other boys. Whenever I was forced out of the annexe, I used to run to his hostel. He would let me stay, but even there, the constant visits raised suspicion. The warden finally warned Farhad not to entertain “guests” anymore.

Farhad was kind, but I couldn’t burden him. He was sharing a small room already. And so, my wandering nights began.

I started spending whole nights in public parks or sometimes in hospital corridors, pretending to be a patient’s relative. Imagine the humiliation — a boy who came with dreams of becoming a Chartered Accountant, with hopes of a new life, now reduced to searching for benches in a park to pass the night.

Even during my exams, this nightmare followed me. The night before a paper, instead of resting, I was homeless under the open sky.

The fallout from the sectarian war kept worsening, rolling into new disasters we could not have imagined. Tensions boiled over; Sunnis attacked a convoy carrying food to Parachinar, and revenge answered with

brutality. The world around me felt smaller and harsher by the day.

Then, one evening, the worst news arrived. A bomb had exploded at a political rally in Parachinar during the election campaign. I heard it like a distant thunder that cut straight through my chest. They told me my cousin Hashmat was among the dead.

I was spending the night in the courtyard of the Punjab Institute of Cardiology when the news came, and whatever shelter the hospital offered felt thin and fragile. My grief doubled. I walked alone along Jail Road, tears blurring the streetlights, my footsteps echoing in a city that suddenly seemed empty of meaning.

Hashmat's body was later identified by my brother Aamir at the hospital in Parachinar. He had been like a third brother to us—quiet, peaceful, full of modest dreams. He loved life in the small, steady way of people who hope without spectacle. That he joined a political rally was, perhaps, a small step toward recognition—a way to make connections and fuel the ambitions he carried in private.

Losing him was like losing a corner of our family's heart. There was anger, yes, and a hollow that would not close. But there was also a dull, stubborn acceptance that settled over everything: this was the life we had been given. There was no clean escape from it. We learned, again and again, to live with the damage.

The chaos only deepened. Even the annexe, which had once felt like a safe haven, was now turning against me. The servant—fat, dark-skinned, always busy in the kitchen or with chores—had begun treating me like I was his helper. He ordered me to wash the dishes, sweep the floors, clean the rooms, as though I were beneath him. His tone carried authority I could not accept.

One evening, a relative of the philanthropist visited the annexe, a man of wisdom whose words carried weight. I complained to him about the servant's behavior, and he listened carefully. Then, with calm conviction, he said: "It is your job to treat the servant the way he deserves. Make him realize your place and his place." His words struck me like a revelation.

That very night, when the servant barked another order at me, I answered him sharply. I told him I was not his servant. I reminded him that I was here as a

student, supported by his master's generosity, not employed to wash his dishes. My voice trembled, but it was firm.

The servant, insulted, went straight to the elder son of the philanthropist, who often visited the annexe. A few nights later, the son arrived, called me downstairs, and his face was full of rage. His anger shook me to the core; for a moment, I thought he might strike me. I tried to explain what I was enduring, but he cut me off, not allowing a single word. He stood there, reciting every favor his father had done for me, every bit of generosity I had received, and how dare I challenge even the servant.

That night, alone in my room, I made a quiet decision: I would leave this place. No matter what came next, I could not continue living under the shadow of humiliation.

The chaos of homelessness was perhaps the most urgent to resolve. I could not go on drifting between parks, hospitals, and temporary corners of the city. So, I began applying to organizations that supported students in need. After many days of waiting, a kind man responded. He agreed to bear my hostel expenses. His generosity became my escape.

Before my second year was even complete, I left the annexe behind. I finally walked away from that house of humiliation and uncertainty, and shifted into a hostel. My new roommate was a kind soul, and though our room was small and bare—more like a prison cell than a home—it belonged to me. Nobody could order me to leave, nobody could humiliate me or throw me out for the sake of guests. That little space gave me freedom, and with it, happiness.

I had lost much, but I had also gained. I had endured storms of chaos—love broken, dreams shaken, war raging, family suffering, and death striking close. Yet every blow had made me stronger. Every humiliation had carved lessons into my soul.

In that small, plain hostel room, I found peace. And in that peace, I found the strength to move forward.

Chapter 27: The Fractured Homeland

I finally found some relief after shifting into the new room, but back home in Parachinar the situation was suffocating. The food crisis had reached its peak. To reach Peshawar, people first had to cross into Afghanistan through the Khost border and then re-enter Pakistan through Torkham—a long, exhausting, and costly journey. At home, the grief was unbearable: Hashmat’s death still weighed heavily, poverty was tightening its grip, and the siege had turned Parachinar into a prison.

Meanwhile, I had my own survival to manage in Lahore. To cover my everyday expenses, I started looking for work. By then, I had mastered the accounting software QuickBooks. One day I went to the wholesale auto parts market in Badami Bagh and pitched my services to the traders. I explained the power of keeping accounts on software instead of endless paper registers. I promised them clarity in financials and offered to record their daily transactions myself.

That very day, two wholesalers agreed to hire me for a solid monthly salary. A week later, through their reference, I also signed a deal with a wholesale cloth merchant. With that, I had my first freelance clients—working just a few hours a day while continuing my studies.

The most exciting part was not the money, but the discovery of the trading business itself. Behind the small, cramped shops were giant warehouses, and the volume of their transactions amazed me. These traders were earning far more than the salaried professionals I once admired. And with the one-click audits and real-time financial clarity I gave them, they were delighted—and their happiness fueled my own.

This was my first true introduction to the world of business.

On the other hand, life gave me a substitute for Lilly. For privacy, I will call her Emaan. She was studying English Literature at a university in Lahore. Her way of speaking, her grasp of society and politics, and her broader worldview left me inspired. For the first time in my life, I had come across a woman whose intelligence and confidence made me pause and reflect.

Talking to her felt like therapy—calm, thoughtful, and deeply nourishing.

Emaan loved poetry, and her choice of verses was remarkable. She carried wisdom beyond her years, and every time she recited or discussed a poem, it felt as if she was unlocking hidden meanings of life for me. She was not just a girl I spoke to; she was a voice of healing, a gentle reminder that the world could still be kind, thoughtful, and beautiful despite the chaos around me.

Once, we decided to meet for lunch. She came along with her friend. To my disappointment, she was not beautiful in appearance. That day, I silently wished I had never seen her at all. Yet soon, I realized that her worth was never in her looks. Her real beauty was in her mind, her heart, and the depth of her words.

From then on, we continued to talk once a day. And every conversation became like a lamp in the darkness of my life—a soothing therapy, her voice carrying strength and calmness when I needed it the most.

Life was slowly becoming kind to me again, yet deep inside I was homesick. I desperately wanted to see my family. Somehow, I managed the long journey through Afghanistan and finally reached home. The moment I

entered, my family's joy was overwhelming—it had been too long.

But my first steps took me to Shublan, to the grave of Hashmat. Once a jolly boy full of dreams now rested in silence beneath the earth. Standing there, I could not hold back my tears. I cried aloud, remembering the way he walked, the warmth of his laughter, the kindness in his voice. It felt impossible to accept that such a vibrant soul was now reduced to a mound of earth and stone.

Parachinar itself no longer felt like the place I once loved. It was like a ghost town. The ruins of demolished homes and deserted markets—once belonging to Sunnis—stood as painful reminders of war and hatred.

The city that had been the center of my childhood was drowned in depression and darkness. The light had gone out of Parachinar, almost literally. The energy crisis had gripped all of Pakistan, but here, electricity was nearly non-existent. People seemed to have forgotten what it meant to live with light; the nights were long, heavy, and silent.

And yet, one place still flickered with fragile hope—the tomb of Agha e Irani. It was filled with the grieved

faces of women and children, whispering prayers to end their suffering. The rituals of incense and candles continued, casting small flames into the shadows. Those candles did not erase the darkness, but they reminded us that even in the hardest times, some light still survived.

After spending a week in Parachinar, a government-protected convoy was scheduled to leave for Peshawar the next morning. I packed my luggage, booked my seat in a van, and silently prayed for a safe passage.

The journey began with heavy silence, every passenger tense yet hopeful. But when we reached Sadda, chaos erupted. Suddenly, gunfire shattered the air. Our convoy was ambushed—attacked by Sunnis in revenge, because the vehicles were carrying Shia passengers.

Bullets whistled past. I didn't think twice. I hurled myself out of the van through a broken window and landed on the road. Then I ran—back towards Parachinar. Gunshots cracked around my ears, echoing like death itself was chasing me.

Fear gave me wings. I ran and ran, covering nearly eight kilometers without stopping. Even when I reached a

safe zone, my legs refused to halt; my body was still in flight. My phone kept ringing, but I couldn't hear it through the thunder of my heartbeat.

Finally, I stopped, breathless, and answered. It was Aamir. He asked me where I was. I told him I had run back and was in a safe village. He was already on the way. Soon, he reached me, and together we returned home.

The roads were blocked again. The convoy never made it. And once more, I was trapped inside Parachinar.

I was trapped in Parachinar, waiting for the next government convoy. After a week, another one was finally announced.

A day before my departure, Farhad—the same friend from Lahore—was also home for vacations. I called him and suggested we go out and enjoy ourselves. We bought some chicken and fruit, and I borrowed my father's car. I was still a new driver, barely experienced behind the wheel.

We took the Kirman road, laughing and enjoying the ride. Then, suddenly, a dangerous turn appeared. My hands slipped, the steering shook, and in a split second,

the car veered off the road and fell. The crash was terrifying. Metal crumpled, glass shattered—but somehow, both of us came out alive and unhurt.

When Aamir arrived at the scene, he stood still, staring at the wreck. The car was badly damaged. For me, it was one of the worst days of my life. I knew the truth: we were poor, and my father had no money for such heavy repairs.

I came home broken inside and we hid the bad news from my father. That night, as I lay down, Basmeen sat beside me. She was always the most caring sister. While moving her fingers gently through my hair, she suddenly stopped and asked softly,

“Why are there tiny pieces of glass in your hair?”

I froze, then lied, brushing her concern away with a fake smile. She didn’t press further, but her eyes told me she knew something was wrong.

The next morning, I joined the convoy and left for Peshawar. By the time I reached, the bad news had already reached my father. His voice on the phone was sharp, full of anger and taunts. I felt crushed, but I

gathered courage and promised him I would send money for the repairs.

Back in Lahore, I scraped together whatever I could from my friends. My contribution was small, but Aamir managed the rest and eventually repaired the car.

Back in Lahore, I got busy with work and studies, trying to hold on to whatever normal life I could manage. But life was not done testing me.

After some time, another devastating piece of news struck. My uncle Khalid, my mother's younger brother, was returning home from Peshawar after his university vacation. On the way, he was ambushed and brutally slaughtered. His body was found in pieces.

The shock was unbearable. Khalid had been a bright young student, full of dreams, and now he was gone—like so many others in those cursed years.

By then, the graveyards of Parachinar were overflowing. Thousands of innocent people had already been buried, victims of the endless sectarian clashes. The aftermath of the war was now taking a heavier toll on the Shias.

Every home carried grief. Every street echoed with mourning. Death had become routine, and the people of Parachinar had forgotten how to smile.

Amidst the chaos of war and death, Basmeen was preparing for the elite public service exam—CSS. In Pakistan, CSS officers are considered among the most prestigious, and the exam itself is known for being unforgiving. I knew deep inside that it would be hard for her to focus, not in a time when our loved ones were dying and the rest of us were living in constant fear.

She was discouraged, her health was declining, and the gastro problems she had were getting worse by the day. Yet, I couldn't let her dreams fade away in the smoke of war. I encouraged her to attempt the coming CSS exam, to at least take a chance at the opportunity she had worked so hard for. I even filled and submitted her form myself while I was in Lahore. Thankfully, she had already collected the necessary study material.

Basmeen was ambitious and talented, but the deaths of Hashmat and Khalid—and the unending grief of Parachinar—had left her spirit bruised. Still, I wanted her to fight for her future.

Meanwhile, in the middle of all this darkness, I, too, was looking for new doors to open. My mind was restless with ideas, and I was eager to step into the world of trade. A trading business of my own—that was the seed I had started planting in my heart.

And through all this, Emaan was still there. Her voice, her wisdom, her way of looking at the world—it was like a lamp in my nights of darkness. Her talks were my therapy, a quiet beacon that kept me from drowning.

Chapter 28: Sparks in the Battery Room

They say the universe always listens to dreamers. Maybe it listened to me too, because in the middle of chaos and uncertainty, it quietly opened a new door—the door of business.

My friend Kamran from Peshawar called me one day. He was in Lahore with his cousin, who was running a small business of automotive batteries. The word business immediately caught my ear. I wanted to meet him, to learn how he worked and what made his trade run.

The next day, I reached Firdos Market, Lahore. It was not a big office, not a showroom, but a three-room house. One room was his living space with simple furniture, while the other two rooms were packed wall to wall with stock—batteries stacked neatly, each carrying the name HANKOOK.

His cousin, Mr. Awais Javed, welcomed me with unusual warmth. He was confident, friendly, and spoke with the tone of someone who believed in his work. We

connected instantly. He didn't treat me like an outsider; he spoke as if we were already friends.

I asked him everything—how the business works, who buys the batteries, how much profit is in it, and how he manages supply. He answered with clarity and openness, almost like a teacher guiding a student.

What surprised me most was not his answers but his perspective. To me, a battery had always been a dull product with a long life cycle. I thought, "How big can this market really be if people buy it once in years?" But Awais explained the market differently. He spoke about demand patterns, distributor networks, wholesale margins, replacement cycles, and the sheer size of the market.

In that moment, my thinking shifted. I realized that great businesses are not always built on glamorous products. Sometimes, it's the simple things—basic, necessary, and unavoidable—that carry the biggest opportunities.

That day, inside a modest house filled with batteries, the first spark of entrepreneurship lit inside me.

Very quickly, my connection with Awais turned into a close friendship. Every weekend he would call me, and we would sit together over dinner, talking endlessly. He was no longer just a businessman I had met; he had become my best friend in Lahore.

Through him, I began to see the real face of the battery business. It was a niche product, yes, but even a small company like his was generating millions of rupees in revenue. What shocked me most was that even small retailers were making millions. The energy crisis had transformed the battery from a car accessory into a household necessity. In those days, batteries were no longer just auto parts—they were lifelines for homes and shops battling electricity shortages.

I was so fascinated that I offered Awais my services as a free financial consultant, just to learn more. I suggested an ERP-style accounting system to bring structure into his business. I moved all his records onto proper accounting software, and suddenly, the numbers started to speak. The potential of the battery business became crystal clear.

I began accompanying him to the market. Every day, he would visit retailers, meet shop owners, and take orders for his maintenance-free (MF) batteries. At that time,

the market was dominated by locally manufactured lead-acid batteries, which required regular maintenance. But MF batteries were a new category—imported, more expensive, but far more convenient. And in those days, HANKOOK was the only MF brand available in Pakistan.

It was like watching a new technology being adopted. Retailers were hesitant at first, but slowly, demand was building. Even as a relatively new entrant, HANKOOK was doing surprisingly well in Lahore. The profit margins were outstanding, as the financial statements showed me.

I dug deeper. I wanted to understand the business model fully—revenues, margins, and especially the cost of warranty claims, since they offered a one-year replacement guarantee. That meant the true profitability could only be measured over time, once claims were accounted for. But even with that uncertainty, the opportunity was massive.

In time, I met Mr. Arif Ali, Awais's business partner. He was just as friendly and welcoming as Awais, and soon I had not one but two friends in this new world of batteries.

What began as a simple curiosity was turning into a practical case study in entrepreneurship—a living classroom where the product, the market, and the numbers all came together.

While I was busy learning the ropes of business, another story of ambition was unfolding back home. Basmeen had her CSS exam in Peshawar. She was the dreamer of our family, a girl from the tribal areas who dared to imagine herself in the elite civil service of Pakistan. In those days, it was almost unheard of for tribal women to think so big, let alone prepare for such a competitive exam. I was proud of her with all my heart. She carried the same fire I had always carried—an unshakable belief that destiny could be rewritten.

At the same time, my focus shifted towards Aamir. He was still studying at Parachinar Degree College, but I wanted to bring him into the world of business. I could already see the potential in him, and I knew that together, we could build something beyond the limitations of our circumstances.

Meanwhile, my own curiosity was taking me deeper into the automotive parts industry. The more I explored, the more I realized how massive this field was. Every niche product—whether batteries, filters, or

engine oil—represented not just a market, but a million-dollar opportunity waiting to be unlocked.

I spent weeks studying the trade of engine oil and filters. The demand was constant, the margins were healthy, and the opportunities seemed endless. It was a market where even small traders could build wealth, and I was hungry to be part of it.

The only thing standing between me and the business was capital. I had the vision, the skills, and the will—but not the money. Still, I wasn’t discouraged. In my mind, the blueprint was ready. Now it was only a matter of arranging resources.

The universe had already conspired to bring me this far—from a lost boy in chaos to a young man with a map of possibilities in his hand. I believed it would also show me the way to turn this vision into reality.

Chapter 29: The Longest Night

My life had a strange rhythm—whenever hope arrived, despair soon followed; and whenever despair struck, some small light of hope would appear. But that night, the cycle broke. It was the worst night of my life, one that shattered me in ways I could never repair.

It was late when my phone rang. The call was from my aunt. Her voice trembled as she asked, “Qamar! Are you in Lahore? Didn’t anyone tell you about Basmeen?”

A chill ran through me. My heart raced. I asked in shock, “Why, what happened to Basmeen?”

There was silence for a moment, and then her words struck like a dagger: “She died.”

I froze. My mind refused to believe it. “No,” I said quickly, almost shouting, “she was fine! How can she die?”

I immediately called Aamir. At first, he tried to hold it back, hiding the unbearable truth. But then his voice cracked, and he broke into tears, crying loudly, “Basmeen is gone.”

The world collapsed around me. My dearest sister, the dreamer of our family, the one who dared to think beyond the walls of our circumstances, was no more. She had been carrying the weight of Parachinar's grief—the funerals, the killings, the endless fear. Depression had consumed her spirit. Then came a sudden health emergency, and in a city with no real hospitals, no life-saving medicines, and no proper care, fate showed no mercy.

I rushed out that very night and boarded a bus to Peshawar. My mind was a storm, replaying every memory of her. I thought of that evening when she had gently moved her fingers through my hair, pulling out tiny glass shards from the car accident I had hidden from our father. I remembered the long talks we had during her CSS preparation, when she would dream about her future and I would cheer her on.

And now... she was gone.

I had lost not just a sister—I had lost a world.

As the bus rolled through the night towards Peshawar, my heart was drowning in grief. Then my phone rang—it was Emaan.

The moment I heard her voice, I broke down. Between sobs, I told her about the last time I had seen Basmeen, how she had lovingly run her fingers through my hair, worried about the glass pieces after my accident, how she had dreamed so big despite the storms around us. Every word I spoke was soaked in pain.

Emaan listened quietly, and then, with her calm and graceful tone, she tried to hold me together. She had a way with words—literary, thoughtful, almost healing. She said softly, “Qamar, time heals. One day, years from now, this pain will not cut as deep. Life will move on. We all have to die—none of us are here forever.”

Then she paused and said something that struck me deeply: “Think of life as if it is just a code, written by a genius. We are not real, Qamar. It’s like a dream we are all living inside. Nothing here is permanent. Nothing is real.”

Her words felt strange yet powerful. For a moment, my grief eased. It was as if she had lifted me outside of my pain and shown me another way to look at life. A dream. A code. A temporary world.

For the time being, her words cured me.

I reached Peshawar at midnight and slept at Murad's place, hollow and exhausted. Morning came, and the roads were still closed—travel by land meant death. The only way back to Parachinar was by a tiny airbus, a cramped lifeline across the mountains. I took the seat as if sleepwalking through a nightmare.

The flight felt too short and too long at once. When we landed, my cousins were there, faces drawn, and they took me straight to Shublan. By then Basmeen had already been buried. I could not see her one last time. The last image I had of her—her fingers gently worrying my hair after the car accident—felt suddenly small and unbearably distant.

I went to her grave and the grief that had been sitting like a stone inside me broke loose. I cried until my throat hurt and my voice was hoarse. The sound of my own crying surprised me—raw, animal, without restraint. For a while the world felt empty and useless; the idea of living felt heavy and pointless.

Home no longer felt like home. Her room looked like a set from a ghost story—small things left as if she might return, a quiet that had teeth. Parachinar, the city that once held my childhood, had become a place of ruins

and silence; it seemed to be swallowing everything I loved.

I could not stay. I wanted to run away from the town that kept killing my people, from the house that had become haunted by memory. So I left—fleeing not only the place, but the unbearable weight of loss that had settled over it.

I came back to Lahore through the dry dust winds of Afghanistan, carrying a grief that had settled into my bones. My face wore the story of those days—hollow eyes, a tired jaw, a man who had seen too much. For a long time I wondered how to stop the pain. I prayed, not for life, but for an accidental end, some way to be released. I was not brave enough to act, only brave enough to wish the suffering would stop. It felt as if the wrath of so many lost souls from Parachinar had settled on us and would not let go.

Then I looked at Aamir and the picture cut deeper. His color had drained; he moved like a man twice his age. Depression had hollowed him out. I could not leave him to rot in that darkness. I called him to Lahore and brought him into the thin shelter of this city. Seeing him that weak—his spirit broken—forced something

awake inside me. I was the eldest son now, whether I liked it or not.

I gathered whatever courage and small savings I had and began to act. I enrolled Aamir in a college course to learn computer programs—skills that would give him a foothold. I pulled him into the battery business with me, teaching as we worked. At the same time I was trading small on commodity futures with the little capital I had; the returns were modest but steady, enough to buy time and food.

Slowly, Aamir found a pulse again. He began to like the business—its order, its numbers, the way an invoice could become a plan. The idea took hold: we would start our own battery business in Parachinar. From the ashes of grief, a fragile plan grew—small, stubborn, and hungry.

After spending a year in Lahore, Aamir had transformed. He had learned discipline, business skills, and the patience that comes only through hardship. When he returned to Parachinar, he rented a small shop in the auto market. It was a humble space, but in his eyes, it was the foundation of a bigger leap—our first real foothold in business back home.

As for me, grief had changed the shape of my days. Somewhere in that haze of sorrow and survival, Emaan drifted out of my life. I still do not know how it happened. Maybe I was too broken to hold on, maybe she was too distant to stay. Neither of us reached out. A year later, when I finally dialed her number, it was permanently off—just silence on the other end.

And so, the story of an intelligent, graceful woman ended in my life without closure. Like a chapter torn out of a book, it simply disappeared, leaving only memory—unfinished, but unforgettable.

Chapter 30: Drowned Horizons

We named our company Abbas Enterprises, proudly carrying our family name with the abbreviation and logo AE mounted high above the shop. That signage wasn't just a board; it was a declaration. A new beginning.

With my little savings, I arranged a distribution of automotive filters and stocked up on HANKOOK batteries on credit from Awais Javed and Arif Ali. The business had officially started. For the first time since the storms of grief, my family had an activity, a new purpose. Slowly, the depression of losing loved ones began to fade. Time truly has a way of healing even the deepest wounds.

But the reality of business was quick to test us. Filters were doing great, but the MF (maintenance-free) batteries we had high hopes for were struggling. They were expensive, and people in Parachinar still preferred the cheaper, locally manufactured brands. If we wanted to survive in the battery business, we had to get into local acid-filled batteries.

I pushed hard. With some help from friends and family, we scraped together a little capital. It wasn't nearly enough, but I decided to pitch anyway. I went to the sales head of a promising new local battery brand and sold him my vision. I told him I was young, ambitious, and ready to work harder than anyone else to make his brand a market leader in Parachinar. To my surprise, he saw potential in me and handed me the distribution rights despite my limited investment. That deal was a turning point.

We worked relentlessly. Within no time, sales shot up. The energy crisis across Pakistan had made batteries a necessity for every home, shop, and office. Demand was skyrocketing while supply lagged. AE became the market leader in Parachinar, and for the first time, we started tasting financial freedom.

The margins were high, and our lifestyle transformed. My father, once weighed down by grief and poverty, began to feel younger, more energetic. My younger sisters found a better environment to focus on their studies. Slowly, our home was filling with light again.

But for me, success in Parachinar was not enough. My eyes were on Islamabad, the city I loved the most. I

wanted to build something bigger there. But bigger dreams needed bigger money.

At the time, the battery industry was hot. Investors were looking at it as a goldmine because of the energy crisis. An acquaintance from Peshawar had already hinted at interest in partnering with me. So I prepared a pitch deck—my first real attempt at fundraising. I proposed a partnership: he would bring in 7 million rupees in capital while I contributed my expertise, operations, and time. We would split the business 50-50.

He agreed. I shifted to Islamabad, rented a shop in Rawalpindi, designed the interiors, installed racks, and began negotiating distribution deals with battery brands. I was finally on the verge of building the kind of business I had always dreamed of.

But my excitement didn't last long. The investment started arriving in tiny installments, far below what we had agreed. Four months in, I had received barely half the capital. I pressed him to honor his commitment, but instead, he started giving me lectures on growing slowly, reinvesting profits, and being patient. His intentions were clear—he never planned to fulfill his promise.

I stood firm. I told him this wasn't going to work; our business model needed the agreed capital, not drips of investment. But instead of honoring his commitment, he demanded his money back. That broke me.

Legally, I knew he was in breach of contract. Ethically, I knew I was right. But my personality—respectful, shy, unwilling to fight—got the better of me. I didn't argue. Instead, I sold an asset in Parachinar, exchanged it for a piece of land in Islamabad, and gave him the land to settle his demand. I was left alone to carry the weight of a struggling business, starved of the fuel it needed—capital.

Still, I did what I had always done: adapted. I shifted my focus to retail sales, where cash flow was immediate and margins were stronger. Wholesale, with its credit sales and slim profits, was draining me. I kept my distribution targets alive through the Parachinar shop, while keeping Islamabad afloat with a mix of retail and limited wholesale.

It wasn't what I had envisioned, but it kept me alive. This was the first time I had been deeply hurt by choosing the wrong investor.

Over time, things began to stabilize, but the dissatisfaction inside me only grew. I was a dreamer sitting in a small shop, chasing collections, counting margins, waiting for miracles. I wanted to scale, to build something bigger than myself. But expansion needed capital—and the right partners.

In Pakistan, that was the hardest thing to find. Most people lacked investment acumen, and those with money lacked trust. The banks were worse. They would only lend you money if you could prove you didn't need it. Loans were reserved for the already wealthy. For dreamers like me, they had nothing to offer.

So, once again, I had to accept reality. I had to go with the flow. To keep moving, keep building, keep dreaming—no matter how many times life broke my plans.

Entrepreneurs' Takeaway

Business is not just about products, sales, or even profits. It is about people—partners, investors, customers—and the trust that binds them together. My first investor taught me a brutal lesson: the wrong partner is worse than no partner at all.

I realized that capital can build a shop, but character builds an empire. And until I found partners who shared both my vision and my values, I would have to rely on the oldest investment of all—my own hard work, resilience, and belief in the dream.

Chapter 31: The Wasted Generation

Business has a direct connection with peace. When peace arrives, even for a short time, it creates oxygen for businesses to breathe. And in those days, a temporary calm began to spread across Parachinar. Abbas Enterprises, like many others, started reaping the benefits of this brief season of stability in Parachinar.

But Parachinar has always been a land where calm never stays for long. Beneath the silence, a storm was quietly cooking. Two major changes reshaped the fabric of society in those days.

The first was the sudden obsession with asylum in Australia. Almost overnight, the idea of escaping to the West became a fever. Human trafficking agents turned into businessmen of dreams, selling tickets to a promised land. Families with wealth paid millions to send their children away—sons who were once seen in Parachinar's streets and markets suddenly vanished. Those who could not afford it were left only with silent envy, dreaming helplessly of the West while watching their friends disappear.

But dreams bought with money often turned into nightmares. A great tragedy struck when a boat sank in the Indian Ocean carrying nearly a hundred boys from Parachinar. Some bodies were recovered, but more than seventy disappeared into the sea forever. Their families clung to false hope, praying at shrines, refusing to believe that the ocean had swallowed their sons. For many parents, the pain never ended—even after a decade, they lived as though their children might one day walk back through the door.

Still, the exodus did not stop. Boys continued to leave, chasing asylum, chasing the mirage of a new life. In the end, thousands of young men from Parachinar were scattered to far-off lands, while the bazaars of home grew quiet. The land felt denuded, emptied of its youth.

And so, while businesses like mine were expanding, society itself was contracting. The wealth of Parachinar was leaving in human form, and the city that once glowed with youthful ambition started to lose its soul. But not everyone had the fortune—or misfortune—of buying a ticket to Australia.

The boys from poor families were left behind, watching the rich ones fly away while they remained

trapped in the narrow lanes of Parachinar. This created a dangerous kind of inferiority complex. They had no millions to hand over to human traffickers, no passports stamped with escape. They were jobless, restless, and desperate for purpose.

And then, an opportunity arrived.

But it was not the kind that builds futures—it was the kind that destroys them.

The war in Syria was raging, and Iran's IRGC began recruiting young Shia men from Parachinar to join a proxy army against ISIS. For these boys, it seemed like the only door that opened for them. They were "perfect candidates": Shias, familiar with sectarian conflict already, and unemployed with nothing to lose.

The deal looked attractive. They would be paid a considerable salary—far more than they could earn at home. Their families were promised financial support, even possible settlements. And unlike the boys lost to the sea, these fighters found something else too: prestige. They were suddenly relevant. In Parachinar, people called them heroes, warriors fighting for a holy cause. They were not seen as unemployed boys anymore; they were soldiers of faith.

This became another kind of mass exodus. But this time, instead of Australia, the destination was Syria. Thousands went. They were trained, armed, and their profession became war itself. For four long years, they fought fiercely against ISIS. And when Assad's regime finally stood defended, people said the war had been won for Assad, or perhaps for the IRGC.

But in truth, the war was won not only with guns and salaries, but with the power of belief. These young men were not pulling the trigger only for money. They carried with them deep religious convictions, and that made them unstoppable. They were not just employees on a battlefield; they were believers on a mission.

And with that victory, the story of those young men was sealed. Their purpose was exhausted, their worth diminished. Once hailed as defenders of faith, they returned to Parachinar as forgotten men—jobless, purposeless, shadows of themselves.

Hundreds never returned at all. They lay buried in distant lands, under foreign skies, in the soil of Iran and Syria. Their families were given a word in return—martyrdom. Perhaps it was only that sacred

title that gave their mothers the strength to weep with dignity, that allowed their widows to carry on, that consoled their children who would grow up without fathers.

But grief remained cruel. For many, there was no grave to embrace, no stone to weep upon, no candle to light on a Thursday evening. Their loved ones had vanished into the deserts and ruins of another land, swallowed by a war that was not theirs.

They were lionized when needed, discarded when the cannons fell silent. They had been pawns in the games of greater powers—used, consumed, and then forgotten. What remained in Parachinar was silence, sorrow, and the haunting realization that a whole generation had been wasted.

Chapter 32: Maan, The Music in My Words

It was during those quiet, restless nights when the world felt heavier than my shoulders could carry that I stumbled upon a smartphone application called Tango. A digital space for strangers, for fleeting conversations, for voices drifting in from unknown corners of the world. I wasn't searching for love. Perhaps not even for friendship. Maybe only for distraction.

A casual scroll. A match. A spark.

Her name was Maan. Or at least, that's what I came to call her.

At first, it was nothing more than polite exchanges within the app—ordinary words tapping across a small screen. But from the beginning, something about her lingered. The rhythm of her replies. The subtle warmth tucked between her sentences. It was more than small talk; it was connection disguised as conversation.

Soon enough, we exchanged numbers. And then—hesitantly, nervously—I called her.

The first time I heard her voice, I froze.

It wasn't simply a voice. It was grace itself—confident, musical, elegant. She didn't just speak; she sang. Every sentence carried a rhythm, a gentle cadence, as though Urdu itself had been waiting for her tongue to prove its beauty. Her words didn't merely enter my ears; they settled deep, coiling like velvet around my soul.

For the first time in my life, I fell in love not only with a person but with a language—because she spoke it.

And yet, it wasn't only her voice, it was how she used it. Every time she addressed me, she carried a profound respect, a softness that felt rare in this world. She never once said my name directly. Not once.

Except—when she wanted to tease me. Then, with a playful cruelty, she would call me “Kamar” instead of Qamar, her tongue curling deliberately around the “K.” She would laugh softly after saying it, as if she had stolen something sacred and returned it slightly bent.

That mischief became ours alone. A secret between two strangers who were no longer strangers. A signature of closeness. A private code that said: I see you. I know you. You belong to me in this small, unspoken way.

And each time she whispered my name wrongly, I knew she was the only one saying it right.

And then came the day of our first video call.

I had thought her voice was enough—that it was already too much for one person to hold. But when the screen lit up, and her face appeared before me, I was stunned into silence.

She was breathtaking.

Not the kind of beauty that shouts, not the kind that seeks attention. Hers was the quiet beauty of a sunrise—the way the world pauses for a moment when the first light touches the horizon. Her eyes held entire poems in their stillness, her expressions danced with meanings I could never completely catch. She didn't

just look into the camera—she looked into me, as if she had been waiting there all along.

I had never seen a woman like Maan before.

She wasn't just beautiful—she was complete.

Poetic. Graceful. Intelligent. Minimal. Confident.
Musical. Funny. Elegant.

Every quality in her felt whole, perfectly in place, as though life had composed her with deliberate care.

She could speak with the depth of a scholar, then laugh with the innocence of a child. She could carry silence with dignity, and then break it with a song that felt borrowed from the heavens.

And oh—when she sang, the world stopped.

She did not sing songs. She sang emotions. Her voice was a river—sometimes rushing with passion, sometimes flowing with sorrow, sometimes sparkling with mischief. It was as if she borrowed pieces of her heart and gifted them in melody.

Often, overwhelmed, I would tell her the only thing that felt true:

“You’re a complete package.”

And each time I said it, I meant it more than before.

I couldn’t believe my luck.

Every day after that, our conversations stretched into endless hours. Video calls became our world—where jokes tumbled easily between us, where poetry was exchanged like currency, where stories unfolded without fear, and where songs stitched the distance shut.

Time lost its meaning in her company. Even across screens, she was presence itself.

I would often recite verses of poetry to her, lines I had carried quietly in my heart. She, in return, would gift me melodies I had never heard before—songs born from some secret chamber of her soul. Our conversations became a duet, a weaving of words and tunes, each thread strengthening the fabric between us.

Her favorite verse of mine was this:

تو کے آج قاتل ہے
پھر بھی راحت دل ہے
زیر کی ندی ہے تو
پھر بھی قیمتی ہے تو

“You, despite being lethal to me, are still the peace of my heart.

You, though a river of poison, are still the most precious part.”

Whenever I spoke these lines, she would fall silent for a moment. A pause that was never empty, but heavy with meaning. As if she was drinking every syllable, letting it dissolve inside her. And then—she would smile.

That smile was my victory. My prize. The quiet reward I waited for each time I reached for words.

We even laughed the same way.

The things that made me laugh—really laugh—the unpolished, unfiltered laughter that escapes without

warning—made her laugh just as loud, just as unrestrained. It was like watching your reflection in water, not just copying your image, but sharing your joy.

That's when I realized a truth that had never occurred to me before:

If your girl doesn't laugh at a joke that feels funny only to you, then maybe she's not the one.

But with Maan—it was different. With her, every emotion I felt seemed to travel across the invisible bridge between us. Joy, sorrow, mischief, longing—it was all mirrored in her.

We weren't just talking.

We were tuning into each other.

As though two separate instruments had, without effort, fallen perfectly into the same rhythm, the same key, the same song.

Maan, if you ever read this—I want you to know something:

I still love you.

I couldn't stop it even if I tried.

You were—

you are—

the best thing that ever happened to me.

I want you to know that on the day I felt you slipping away, I cried.

Not the quiet, hidden kind of crying. No. I cried loudly, uncontrollably—like a child who has just lost his whole world. My chest felt hollow, my voice broke into pieces, and I knew in that moment: I was mourning not only you, but also the part of myself that existed only because of you.

And even though I knew our story might never find its ending, I still whispered those same lies. Lies that were more like prayers. Lies that weren't meant to deceive, but to delay the inevitable. Just so the ending wouldn't come so soon. Just so we could live in the illusion a little longer. A little sweeter.

I once promised you that if I ever wrote my life story,
you would have your chapter.

Well, here it is.

Because you deserve it.

Because you were real to me.

Because our love—however brief, however
impossible—was pure.

We stayed connected for years. Years of laughter, of
poetry, of songs and silences. Years of knowing and
unknowing.

And then, one day, it ended. Just like that.

You moved on.

And I... stayed still.

I still have your pictures.

From those goofy, grainy childhood snaps that made
you look like mischief wrapped in innocence, to your

radiant portraits where grace seemed to live in your very posture.

I've kept them all.

Not for obsession. Not even for nostalgia.

But because some memories are too sacred to erase.
And some people... become entire seasons in your life.

In truth, I think I've only loved once.

Everything before you was confusion—half-formed feelings, shadows mistaken for light.

But with you, it was clarity wrapped in beauty.

As one verse says:

وہ اتنا ذہیر حسیں تھا کہ مجھ پہ لازم ہے

تمام عمر بچھنے کا غم کیا جائے

“She was beauty itself—so rare, so divine,
That I am bound to mourn her loss for all of time.”

Maan, if you are reading this—this part is for you:

تم کو دیکھا، تو میں سمجھا، بوسکتابی

اک انسان بھی پوری دنیا بو سکتا ہے

“When I saw you, I realized—
Yes, it's possible...
One person can be a whole world.”

Chapter 33: Capital Without Courage

Let us return to my journey — the restless fight against poverty and the fragile business I was struggling to build.

My office was a small, separate room tucked inside the shop, a modest space where my dreams were far bigger than the walls that contained me. One afternoon, as I worked alone, a man from Parachinar walked in. His real name is not important here — some names are better left unsaid — but his presence marked a chapter worth remembering.

He had come for something simple: a backup battery for his home. But as often happens in life, ordinary transactions sometimes open unexpected doors. As we spoke, the conversation drifted toward business. He told me of his own search for opportunity, of his interest in partnership. I explained my reality to him honestly: I had no capital to contribute. My hands were tied in the battery business already. But he insisted. *“I will bring the capital,”* he said, *“and you bring the expertise.”*

That insistence ignited a thought in me. I proposed we venture into the engine oil distribution business — a sector aligned with batteries, both serving the automotive industry. I already held a proposal from a prominent engine oil brand. The plan was simple yet ambitious: he would bring the money, I would bring the sweat and the strategy. My current office would serve as the nerve center; the shop front would stand as our showroom; the basement would hold our warehouse. And together, we would carve out a market for the brand, expanding across the twin cities and beyond.

He listened, weighed the idea, and after a month of back-and-forth discussions, finally agreed. My hopes rose. I reached out to the company, and the deal was set. The next morning was supposed to be decisive — the day we would sign both the distribution agreement and our partnership agreement.

But morning brought silence. His phone rang unanswered. I called again, and again. Nothing. Finally, desperate, I went to his home. And there, with a casualness that cut deep, he told me he had changed his mind. He had joined a friend in construction contracting instead. Just like that, the dream dissolved.

I wished him luck, though inside me something broke. The opportunity slipped away, and the engine oil distribution was handed to someone else. And I, once again, returned to my lonely battle in the battery business — the fight against poverty that seemed determined to never let me win.

Two months later, the same man returned. The investor who had once vanished without a word now stood before me again. *“I want to do business with you,”* he said. I reminded him of the engine oil opportunity he had abandoned, the deal that had slipped through our hands. But he brushed it aside. *“We can do something else,”* he replied.

So I began to think. To plan. To search for a new path.

After weeks of restless exploration, an idea crystallized — corrugated packaging. At first glance, it seemed an unlikely choice, but to me it carried promise. Packaging is not just paper and glue; it is the dressing of every product, the silent salesman on every shelf. With packaging, you serve not one industry but all industries, and in doing so, you glimpse into their worlds. For me, it was not just a business, it was an education, a window into the vast economy I wished to master.

Our capital was modest — only three million rupees, barely enough to scratch the surface of manufacturing. But risk is the only fuel dreamers know. I decided to take the plunge. We bought basic machinery from Lahore, rented a small hall, hired a few skilled laborers, and after three months of struggle, sweat, and improvisation, the packaging factory was born.

I was a newcomer in this trade, but I learned fast. One of our paper suppliers taught me the sacred formulas of costing, the arithmetic that decides whether a factory lives or dies. We hired a young marketing graduate straight out of university, hungry and eager, and he managed to secure us contracts from the pharmaceutical sector. For a while, the rhythm felt right — production rolling, invoices printing, contracts signing.

But three months in, reality caught up. The factory was too small, the machinery too basic. Without expansion, profitability was a mirage. So I prepared an expansion pitch and laid it before a new investor. He agreed. With his capital, we moved to a larger space, bought the additional machinery, and tried to scale.

Yet here, a new challenge emerged — leadership. The investor who had stepped in to lead operations was a

man paralyzed by fear. He lacked confidence so deeply that even the smallest decisions seemed mountains before him. His strategy was avoidance: make no choice, and you cannot be blamed for the outcome. It was the kind of leadership that suffocates a factory, draining energy from every worker who looks upward for direction and finds only hesitation.

And once again, I realized — capital can buy machinery, but it cannot buy courage.

But the real problem was not machinery, not contracts, not even capital — it was chemistry. My partner and I were never in harmony. At times he could be funny, even light-hearted, but when it came to business, he clipped wings instead of giving them. He never lifted me, never lifted our employees.

My own style of leadership was built on encouragement — on seeing sparks in people and fanning them into flame. I dreamed of a company where every worker felt valued, where ambition was shared, where innovation was nurtured. But with him, I never dared to voice my true dreams. They stayed locked inside me, too fragile to be dismissed, too precious to risk being laughed at.

Perhaps it was my failure, perhaps it was his presence, but I could never fully show him what I was capable of. I felt drained. I longed for a partner who could look me in the eye, hear my wildest ideas, and still say, *“Yes, I believe.”* Instead, I carried those dreams alone.

Outwardly, I remained the confident CEO — well-spoken, authoritative, respected. He never questioned my authority in front of others. Yet even with the title, the power, and the appearance of control, something was missing — that invisible current that gives an entrepreneur the freedom to soar. Without it, I settled into the rhythm of the work.

And so, I kept going with the flow, channeling my energy into one thing I could control: acquiring more clients from the manufacturing sector. It was progress, yes, but without wings, even progress can feel heavy.

Entrepreneurs’ Takeaway

Let me confess that entering packaging without industry knowledge was a classic case of poor founder–market fit. Manufacturing is not trading; it requires mastery over supply chain, process

optimization, working capital cycles, and cross-functional management. I also learned the importance of co-founder alignment — because capital can buy machines, but not decision-making courage.

The entrepreneurial takeaway: youth gives you the audacity to leap, but wisdom comes only when the market teaches you the brutal lessons of misfit and mismanagement.

Chapter 34: The Boy Who Believed

And then, once again, the universe conspired in my favor.

Our marketing manager had left after three months, and I was restlessly searching for a replacement. That was when a friend introduced me to an eighteen-year-old boy named Farhan Khan — a Pathan raised in Karachi.

At first glance, Farhan seemed an unlikely candidate. His education was limited, and as he spoke, he stuttered. Yet behind the stammer stood something undeniable: confidence. The kind of raw, unpolished confidence that does not come from degrees or credentials but from an inner fire. I felt it immediately.

I had grown tired of the so-called “experienced professionals” in Pakistan — men who demanded inflated salaries while offering little in return, clinging to hollow résumés rather than real knowledge. What I needed was not experience, but hunger. People who were unshaped, untamed, and willing to be molded into **“people like us.”** Farhan was exactly that.

I offered him the role in marketing. He asked for two things: a motorcycle and a modest salary. I agreed without hesitation. The very next day, I bought him the motorcycle, and Farhan became part of our packaging company.

From the moment he joined, his energy was electric. He was more than a marketing manager; he was a force. I mentored him closely, pouring my knowledge into him, and he absorbed it all with an eagerness I had rarely seen. Every responsibility I handed him, he carried with zeal. He thrived on challenges.

In Pakistan's corporate world, even meeting a procurement manager without an appointment is a struggle. But Farhan had no such boundaries. He slipped past gatekeepers, charmed or tricked receptionists, and somehow found himself in the offices of CEOs. His audacity was unmatched, his stories hilarious. Each time he returned with tales of how he had managed to corner a CEO without an appointment, we laughed — but behind that laughter, I saw the making of a marketer who understood what boldness really meant.

As our days together stretched into weeks, I found myself opening up to him in ways I had never done

with anyone else. I began to share my bigger dreams with Farhan — the visions of entrepreneurship that often felt too fragile to expose to others. But he listened, and more than that, he believed. His belief became my wings.

Farhan was not polished by education, nor was he eloquent in speech. He stuttered, stumbled over words, yet carried himself with a boldness that no degree could manufacture. I tried to give him wings, to make him see that he could fly. And he did. His dreams grew larger, his confidence stronger, until one day I realized: Farhan had become someone.

With his stuttering voice and fearless stride, he managed to meet procurement heads of large corporations, securing packaging contracts that seasoned professionals failed to win. Each contract was not just a victory for the company, but proof that belief and audacity can move mountains.

Farhan became my favorite companion in business, and before long, my best friend. In every way that mattered, he proved himself — again and again. He was the kind of person every entrepreneur secretly hopes to find: loyal, relentless, and brave enough to chase impossible things.

Farhan was not just an employee. He was the best thing that happened to me in my entrepreneurial journey. In him, I found more than a colleague — I found someone I could share everything with, someone who carried not just my strategies, but also my dreams.

Entrepreneurs' Takeaway

Farhan taught me that in entrepreneurship, talent is not always about polished résumés or Ivy League degrees — it's about hunger, adaptability, and grit. In startup ecosystems, this is often called hiring for attitude, not just aptitude. He embodied the principle of human capital leverage: one hungry, relentless individual can outperform ten disengaged “professionals.” His boldness was a live example of guerrilla marketing — bypassing bureaucratic gatekeepers, creating direct access to decision-makers, and converting audacity into contracts. More importantly, Farhan became proof of the founder’s multiplier effect — when a leader transfers belief into a teammate, that belief compounds and creates exponential value. In business schools, we talk about organizational culture and intrinsic motivation; in real life, it is about finding people who don’t just work for

you but believe with you. Farhan was not only an employee; he was proof that belief is the rarest currency in entrepreneurship, and the right believer can change the entire trajectory of a startup.

Chapter 35: The Startup Circus

By 2017, the word startup had become the new anthem in Pakistan. Entrepreneurship was no longer a distant concept whispered in classrooms or discussed in boardrooms; it had become a trend, almost a fashion statement.

Careem, Uber, Foodpanda, Daraz — these names echoed everywhere. Their stories of rapid growth and unbelievable investments stirred the imagination of a restless youth. Ordinary ideas were suddenly worth millions, and the promise of funding lit up the air like neon lights. Social media, too, shifted its current — timelines filled with pitch decks, inspirational posts, and glossy photos of “founders” with confident smiles.

I watched as cool boys and girls in crisp shirts and borrowed accents filled stages, speaking English laced with the fancy jargon of entrepreneurship. Their voices carried the allure of possibility, even when their ideas had little substance. Elders, too, had joined the performance — posting daily doses of wisdom about the “startup ecosystem,” offering tips, advice, and lessons to thousands of young hustlers who, in turn, showered them with flattering comments.

There were courses for sale, each promising the secret formula of entrepreneurship. Seminars and workshops popped up like mushrooms after rain, filling hotel halls with slideshows, motivational quotes, and carefully crafted promises.

To me, it felt eerily like another dot-com bubble, a wave too big to ignore. And in that moment, one thought burned inside me with clarity: I cannot afford to miss this.

So I made a firm decision — whatever it took, I would be part of this rising tide.

I had missed the first dot-com bubble, the one I used to read about in a dusty net café in Parachinar, where the dial-up tone was the sound of dreams too far away. Back then, I was too young to ride the wave. But this time — this time I swore I would not stand on the sidelines. I wanted my share of this new revolution.

So I began attending startup seminars. The halls were filled with energy — bright lights, PowerPoint slides, and role models of entrepreneurship sharing their “*journeys*.” I would note down the names of founders and their startups in my phone, hoping to study them later. They spoke of innovation, though their

“**innovations**” were little more than selling T-shirts online or the lazy formula of “Uber for X.”

But when I checked their websites, the reality was sobering. Most were unimpressive, some half-built, some forgotten. A few of these so-called icons were so poorly prepared that even their social media presence was hard to find.

It dawned on me then: for many, entrepreneurship was not about vision or value. It was fashion. It was about the title — Founder, CEO — the glamour of it, the status symbol that came with a business card. They wanted to look cool, not build something that mattered.

Many players in that ecosystem were chasing vanity metrics — stages, followers, titles — instead of focusing on unit economics, product market fit, and sustainable revenue models.

I, on the other hand, carried a different weight. I was already running two real businesses on the ground, bleeding through failures and grinding through reality. My journey was not hashtags and stages; it was factories, clients, suppliers, debts, contracts — the actual battlefield.

When we visited startup incubation centers, our disillusionment deepened. These centers claimed to nurture innovative ideas new to the world. Yet inside, we found shallow imitations, ideas that were already old abroad, or worse — mere fantasies. Some startups didn't even have a working prototype of the applications they pitched, and many never would. And yet, they were celebrated as entrepreneurs.

It was a performance. And behind the stage lights, there was nothing.

Entrepreneurs' Takeaway

This chapter reinforced that entrepreneurship should never be confused with fashion or titles. The startup wave in Pakistan showed me that while hype, pitch decks, and buzzwords can create visibility, they cannot replace fundamentals like product–market fit, value creation, execution capacity, and revenue models.

Many so-called startups were chasing vanity metrics, investor attention, and ecosystem validation without building sustainable business models. Real entrepreneurship is about solving problems, managing operations, serving customers, and scaling sustainably — not just looking good on a stage.

A founder must focus on building real traction and cash flow, because capital markets eventually punish theatrics but reward substance.

Chapter 36: The Ego Trap

I had always believed in practical entrepreneurship — not the kind dressed in buzzwords and borrowed slides, but the kind that solves real problems. So I decided to breathe innovation into my small, conventional battery business.

I gave it a new name: **Batterylala**. We built an e-commerce website, listed our products, and went live. But selling batteries was not like selling T-shirts or gadgets. A battery is an urgent purchase — no one can wait three days for delivery when their car is stranded on the roadside. That was the first problem. The second was that a battery isn't just delivered, it must be installed. And the third: every battery comes with an exchange value for the old one, something no courier company could handle.

This was why conventional e-commerce models could never make batteries work. But we could. **Batterylala** offered three-hour delivery with installation across Rawalpindi and Islamabad. I even made videos explaining our services, and soon the traction began. The calls started coming. People understood the value

instantly, because we weren't selling hype — we were solving a headache.

But when I took **Batterylala** to the **National Incubation Center**, it was rejected. The reason? "*Selling batteries online is not innovative.*" To them, importing a 3D printer from China and printing trinkets was innovation. Selling custom T-shirts online was innovation. Buying cheap IoT gadgets from the local market and using them to switch a light bulb on and off with a smartphone — now that was innovation.

I tried to explain, to argue that a country like Pakistan could not win the global war of innovation at this stage. That we needed to build sustainable, profitable, even copied models first. Lay the foundation, prove that startups can survive, and then — and only then — innovate. But my words fell on deaf ears.

To this day, I am still unsure. Perhaps I was wrong, or perhaps they were.

An important turn in my entrepreneurial journey came when Pakistan launched its own startup reality show — **Idea Croron Ka** — a local reflection of **Shark Tank**. For us at **Batterylala**, this was more than an

opportunity; it was a lifeline. We desperately needed investment to expand to other cities, to stock more brands, and most of all, we needed the kind of visibility that only national television could bring.

So, with conviction burning inside me, we traveled to Lahore to pitch. I knew exactly what we were building, and for once, I felt that clarity and purpose would shine through. And it did. Our pitch was electric — the kind that cuts through noise and lingers in memory. Even the producers admitted it was one of the finest pitches the show had ever hosted.

On stage, I secured a commitment of investment, and when the episode aired, the effect was immediate. My pitch went viral among startup enthusiasts. Suddenly, people recognized me everywhere. My social media filled with messages from fellow entrepreneurs. For the first time in my life, it felt as though I had stepped into the shoes of a celebrity.

But behind that shine was a shadow — and I must confess this with brutal honesty. That moment of fame became my downfall. Instead of pouring my energy back into the grit of business, I became obsessed with the glitter. I began to brag. I crafted posts about my **“achievements”** and basked in the praise of strangers,

while my startup quietly struggled in the background. I exaggerated my sales, pretended Batterylala was thriving, and spoke like a seasoned sage on social media, when in truth, I knew very little.

Even today, I regret it. The immaturity embarrasses me. I was drunk on recognition, and I let the applause distract me from the battlefield.

Overnight recognition became a distraction. I slipped into the founder's ego trap — bragging online, inflating numbers, and posturing as a thought leader before I had truly earned the wisdom. This mistake diluted my focus, distracted me from execution, and slowed down the business.

And as for the investment — it never came. Like countless others in Pakistan, I discovered the painful truth: most so-called "**investors**" were performers, more interested in self-promotion than in funding ventures. The promises on stage dissolved into silence off stage.

Yet, all was not wasted. The free publicity we gained through the show was no small thing. In a land where advertising budgets suffocate young startups, that spotlight was priceless.

Just as I had tried to bring innovation into batteries, I longed to do the same in packaging. The industry, as I saw it, was dull — stuck in its traditional patterns, its designs uninspired, its quality unimpressive. I wanted to change that. I wanted packaging to become branding, to make every box speak for the product it carried.

Farhan, my confidant and dream-catcher, carried these ideas to our clients. He spoke with passion, presenting our innovative designs. But innovation comes at a cost, and that extra price was something our clients were unwilling to bear. They wanted packaging to be cheap and functional, while I could not bring myself to continue in the old, soulless way.

So, with heavy hearts, we dissolved our old partnership. Not because we lacked the will to fight, but because we wanted the freedom to experiment — to build something new, even if it meant starting from scratch. That was how **Lalapack** was born.

We infused **Lalapack** with the spirit of innovation. We built an e-commerce platform where anyone could order custom-designed packaging — boxes for birthdays, weddings, anniversaries, gifts that carried

not just an object but a memory. It was fresh, it was creative, it was ours.

But dreams do not always translate into sales. The venture faltered. Pakistan's e-commerce ecosystem was still fragile, weighed down by logistics, consumer behavior, and a market not yet ready for such novelty. The innovation, beautiful as it was, simply did not work.

And so, we found ourselves at another crossroads. Lalapack had taught us valuable truths about timing, about markets, about how even the brightest ideas can flicker in the wrong environment. It was clear we needed to change course once again, to search for a new direction within packaging — one grounded in the realities of our market.

Amidst the struggles of startups and the restless chase for innovation, life placed a new chapter before me — her name was **Munazzah**.

My mother, with her instinct sharpened by years of wisdom and prayer, had chosen her for me. She spoke of **Munazzah's** beauty, her manners, her education in

one of Peshawar's prestigious colleges. To my mother, this meant she was not only graceful but also talented. I trusted her judgment, and perhaps because I had already lost Maan, I did not resist. I agreed, and the elders fixed a date for our engagement. That is how marriages are often made in our tribal culture — not through long stories of courtship, but through the quiet decisions of families.

When I finally received her number and spoke to her, I realized she was... different. That is all I can truly say. She was a good girl, with simplicity at her core. But in my heart, I never again came across the “complete package” I had once found in Maan.

Then came the days of Covid, when the world stood still, yet in the middle of that silence my engagement date was set. Munazzah carried with her a love for tradition, and our very first fight came when she was dissatisfied with the engagement arrangements. She wanted things done in the old ways, the proper ways. It was a clash of expectations — something that happens in every bond where two worlds try to align.

Still, despite these sparks, she was kind. She was gentle. The engagement happened, and when it was over, I

returned to Islamabad to continue the only thing I knew — the pursuit of my entrepreneurial journey.

Entrepreneurs' Takeaway:

Innovation is often misunderstood in emerging markets. Too many founders chase vanity innovation — flashy technologies, buzzwords, and “Uber-for-X” clones — instead of tackling real customer pain points. Batterylala taught me that problem–solution fit matters more than impressing incubators with jargon.

Attention is not traction, and fame is not product–market fit. Founders must stay grounded. Resist the temptation to chase vanity metrics — likes, followers, applause — and instead track real KPIs like sales, retention, burn rate, and CAC-to-LTV ratio. Public recognition can accelerate you, but only if it rides on the back of sustainable execution and unit economics. Otherwise, it's just noise.

Chapter 37: Paper, People and Power

Returning to the packaging business we were reshaping, the universe sent us another young soldier — Ahmad Raza. He came from Okara, sharp-eyed, quick on his feet, and eager to learn. In no time, he proved himself a fast learner, especially in operations, where his discipline and energy brought much-needed order to our small empire.

But the problem with packaging was deeper than operations. No matter how well we designed or delivered, we were invisible. Our boxes carried the branding of others, never our own. We were craftsmen building castles for others to rule. And replacing us was effortless for our clients — a competitor offering a slightly lower price could erase us overnight.

Yet in those endless hours of cutting, folding, and branding for others, we gained a rare expertise. And then came the thought: Why not create a brand of our own? Why remain ghosts behind the curtain when we could step into the spotlight?

That is when Tiloyo was born — our first FMCG brand, a tissue paper brand that carried not just a product but our ambition.

Ahmad Raza took charge of manufacturing operations, and he thrived. We procured tissue paper from importers, trained our existing workers to package it with precision, and poured our creativity into design. We dreamed in SKUs: toilet rolls, kitchen rolls, pocket packs, elegant car tissues, and a flagship box that could stand proudly in any home.

When Tiloyo finally came to life, it looked nothing like a small local venture. Our designs shimmered with a polish that made people pause and ask, “Is this an international brand?” That single question was enough to assure us — we had created something that carried the fragrance of possibility.

Now that Tiloyo had a name and a face, the real battle began — distribution. A brand is only as powerful as its reach, and we wanted Tiloyo to be seen in every corner of Pakistan. For that, we needed more than packaging machines; we needed people who could sell a dream.

I turned to Mr. Ahsan, a friend through another friend in Peshawar. He carried years of experience in pharmaceutical sales, a man who knew the art of persuasion and the science of building networks. I offered him more than a job — I offered him a stake in Tiloyo, partial ownership in exchange for his role as sales head. He accepted, and with him on board, our sales front gained both wisdom and credibility.

But Tiloyo's journey was born into a strange world — the world of COVID-19. As the world locked itself indoors, we were producing stock after stock of kitchen rolls, toilet rolls, pocket tissues, and car boxes. Our warehouse was full; our challenge was to make Pakistan our marketplace.

It was then that a boy named Haider Khan Kakar appeared. From Quetta, a seasoned sales professional in pharma, Haider had left his job to carve his own path. At first, he came as a distributor, becoming our very first. But Farhan, with his instinctive eye for talent, saw something deeper in Haider. He approached him not as a client but as a comrade, and asked him to join Tiloyo's sales team.

It was August 2020 when Haider made the move. He packed his luggage, left Quetta, and boarded for

Islamabad. Yet what impressed us most was not just his decision to join, but his spirit. On the journey from Quetta to Islamabad, Haider signed two distributors on the way. Before he had even reached our office, he had proved himself.

From that day, Haider was no longer an outsider. The team embraced him as if he had always been there. His energy was magnetic. He spoke the language of corporate circles with ease, knew how to sit with distributors, how to listen, and how to close. He brought with him the structure and confidence of a pharma professional, but also the hunger of an entrepreneur.

For me, Haider became more than a teammate. He was a signal — proof that Tiloyo could rise above its humble beginnings and grow into a national brand.

Tiloyo was no longer an experiment; it was becoming a movement. Orders worth millions started to flow in, and with every order came a single demand — speed. Fast, uninterrupted production became the lifeline of our survival.

We were still procuring raw tissue from suppliers in Lahore. That city wasn't just a market; it was a hub of

printing presses, machinery, and industrial expertise. It made sense to move closer to the fire. So I made the call: Tiloyo would shift its manufacturing to Lahore. Ahmad Raza, our operations head, led the charge. He rented a small industrial hall, oversaw the shifting of machinery, and planted the seeds of Tiloyo in Lahore's soil. Meanwhile, the head office — the heartbeat of strategy — stayed in Islamabad.

To give Tiloyo more meaning than a name, I registered Lalapack as a company and distributed 5% equity shares to each teammate. It was not just equity; it was a gesture. A silent promise that this journey belonged to all of us. I held back the larger chunk, knowing that one day, investors would ask for their share too.

With Lahore in motion, the real war began — sales. We rented a car, filled its tank, and started what I called our “distributor-hunting campaign.” Haider, now the spearhead of our sales force, poached some heavyweights from the pharmaceutical and FMCG industries — men with polished shoes, corporate resumes, and heavy salaries. Their mission was simple yet monumental:

1. Crack open new cities.

2. Appoint a main distributor in each city.
3. Build sales pipelines through order-bookers who would flood the retail shops with Tiloyo boxes.

It was a bold strategy. And Tiloyo's strength lay in its face — our packaging. Every box we produced was not just a container; it was branding, storytelling, persuasion. That's what made us irresistible. Within just two months, distributors of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, Balochistan, and Punjab had stocked Tiloyo on their shelves.

Yet, beneath the glow of early success was the hard truth: our distributors were our investors. We had no capital, and every order they placed became our working capital. They funded our production in advance, and in return, they ate away at a massive portion of our margins. It wasn't ideal, but survival rarely is.

Sales became more than a department; it was our oxygen. Every teammate, directly or indirectly, became part of it. Even those who weren't holding order sheets or sitting with shopkeepers carried the burden of sales

on their shoulders. In Tiloyo, everything began and ended with sales.

But with the rush of expansion came my first bitter taste of disappointment. I began noticing that some of the high-salaried sales professionals, the ones we had hired with so much hope, were failing to meet the targets of their distributors. The machine of sales was sputtering. Salaries were draining our fragile reserves while results trickled in like a leaking tap.

Yes, Tiloyo Tissues had conquered maps with lightning speed. Within just two months of operations, we had a footprint across Pakistan — our cartons stacked in the warehouses of distributors in city after city. On paper, it looked glorious. Tiloyo was “available” almost everywhere.

But I knew the truth. Primary sales — the bulk orders from distributors — were not the real victory. My concern was with secondary sales — the moment when a customer in Quetta, Peshawar, Multan, or Karachi walked into a shop and picked up Tiloyo off the shelf. That moment meant Tiloyo was alive in the hearts of the people. Without it, our expansion was just a mirage of numbers, a swelling inventory sitting idly in warehouses.

The tension grew inside me. I asked myself every night: What is the point of conquering warehouses if we cannot conquer shops, households, and lives?

Farhan once again proved why he was irreplaceable. With his raw courage and relentless persistence, he placed Tiloyo on the shelves of the retail giants (LMTs) in Islamabad. He walked straight into the offices of CEOs of big chains — the very doors where seasoned salesmen struggled to get appointments — and convinced them that Tiloyo deserved its place alongside the established industry leaders.

The first time I saw our product resting proudly on those shelves, gleaming under the supermarket lights, I felt the kind of joy only an entrepreneur knows. It was not just paper wrapped in packaging — it was our struggle, our nights of planning, our risks, and our dreams standing tall for the world to see. And the whole team shared that happiness.

What surprised me most was that, despite the weaknesses in our product — the limitations caused by our lack of advanced packaging machinery — Tiloyo still competed head-to-head with the industry leaders. It was our branding, our design, our packaging

philosophy that gave us strength. We were punching far above our weight, and the market was taking notice.

Yet, even in moments of triumph, shadows lingered. Farhan remained the closest to me, but our bond was quietly thinning. I was spending more of my time with the newer teammates — Haider, Ahsan, and others — and Farhan felt it. The boy who had been my wings now walked a little lonelier, though he never said a word.

Meanwhile, Haider and Ahsan were opening new doors. Together, they marched into Karachi, the city of giants, and secured for Tiloyo a major distributor for the entire province of Sindh. The distributor invested a handsome amount, and for us it felt like another milestone — Tiloyo was no longer a small, struggling experiment. It was becoming a national brand.

But even amidst the celebrations, my mind refused to rest. I could not shake off the deeper worry: Are people really buying Tiloyo again? The truth of any FMCG brand is not the first order, but the second, and the third. It is not about how many warehouses you fill, but how many households you enter. My obsession was with repetition, not first-time sales. And that question still haunted me.

Amid these tensions, we shifted to a new office — a space that reflected the company we were becoming. A professional environment with polished walls adorned by framed displays of our SKUs, a conference room where strategies were to be born, separate cabins for each department, fine furniture, and even a small kitchen to serve tea and coffee for our guests and staff. It looked like the office of a rising FMCG company. But behind those polished walls, my mind was restless, chasing answers about Tiloyo's true future.

Chapter 38: Boxes, Battles and Belief

I believe Tiloyo was the true beginning of my education in entrepreneurship. Everything before it was practice, experiments, and small hustles. But Tiloyo was where the curtain lifted, and I stood face-to-face with the realities of building a brand, managing people, and fighting in the unforgiving arena of FMCG.

I had always admired the power of branding, but Tiloyo taught me its essence. Branding was not just a logo or a tagline. Branding was a gut feeling — an instinct that came alive the very first moment a consumer touched the product. And in our case, that spark was ignited by packaging. Packaging was branding. The way the box looked, the way the design whispered quality and care, it created a feeling larger than the product itself.

I had taught myself Adobe Illustrator, and most nights I sat behind my laptop, not as a CEO but as a designer, carefully shaping the identity of Tiloyo. Every curve of a font, every shade of color, every line in the design was me fighting to make Tiloyo look like it belonged in the league of giants.

Haider was silently watching me in those days. He noticed how much of Tiloyo's presence in the market was rooted in the design strategy. He began experimenting too, borrowing my laptop, sketching his own ideas, learning the craft by observation. It was not just packaging anymore; it was a culture of design we were cultivating inside the team.

But while I was dreaming through designs, I was also waking up to the harshest side of entrepreneurship: management. For the first time, my company had crossed fifty employees. And instead of pride, I felt the weight of it. Most of them, I soon realized, were not warriors in my battle — they were simply passengers waiting for their monthly salary. Worse, many were stationed in remote cities where supervision was nearly impossible. We had no choice but to trust them, and that trust was fragile.

I wanted discipline. I wanted accountability. I wanted technology to measure and enforce it. So I began experimenting with HR systems where each salesperson could report progress, where sales targets could be chased and tracked. But in FMCG, sales was a world of its own. Many of the so-called sales professionals had little education, even less loyalty, and

some were shamelessly working for multiple companies at the same time. Dishonesty was not an exception — it was the rule. And Tiloyo was forcing me to confront that reality.

Because I had no capital, I often felt like a crippled commander on the battlefield — holding the banner high but without the weapons to lead my army. In front of my own teammates, I was weak. The absence of money stripped away my authority. It is difficult to roar when your pockets are empty. So instead of commanding, I softened my voice. Instead of imposing orders, I disguised them as requests. I kept my leadership in a friendly tone, not because I wanted to, but because it was the only way to keep the brand moving forward. Human management, in those days, was not just tough — it was brutal.

Our production was another battlefield of its own. We had little to no machinery; most of Tiloyo's lifeblood depended on human hands. Every box, every roll, every package carried the burden of manual labor. And humans, unlike machines, came with moods, with flaws, with inefficiencies. Delays in production became routine, and routine delays became silent killers.

The worst wound, however, was in deliveries. Without capital of our own, every order was funded by the very distributors who purchased from us. They were our lifeline, yet also our limitation. We had no capacity to hold stock of our own. That meant small wholesalers, the ones who could have given us better margins and consistent demand, slipped away from our grasp. They wanted ready stock, and we only had promises.

I knew what was needed — heavy capital, fuel to turn this engine into a roaring machine. But this was Pakistan, and this was the time of Covid. Investors were already a rare species in this land, and during the lockdowns they vanished altogether, retreating into their caves of caution.

And so, Tiloyo marched forward — not with strength, but with survival. And I, its captain, carried the double burden of vision and helplessness.

Entrepreneurs' Takeaway

As I write this story, I will unveil the brutal reality with honesty. Maybe at that time I was unable to identify it, or perhaps I was showing hypocrisy to

myself—choosing not to give a damn about reality, or I was practicing the art of not giving a fuck, because the lies I told myself were more comfortable than the truth.

Beside the capital constraints and secondary sales, Tiloyo was fighting a war on multiple fronts.

First, with the market size. Tissue paper in Pakistan had a very limited adoption curve. It was primarily consumed by the upper-middle and upper-class households. For the majority of people, tissue paper was still considered a luxury rather than a daily essential.

Second, there were no barriers to entry. Anyone with a little capital could design a box, buy tissue sheets from vendors, and start selling under a new name. This meant the only unique value proposition we could rely on was branding and design. But branding alone cannot sustain a business in a commodity market, especially one with such a small size and cut-throat competition.

Third, distribution dynamics were stacked against us. The large modern trade (LMT) stores—the Carrefour, Metro, Hyperstar type mega outlets—were already captured by the big market leaders. Shelf visibility was

almost impossible for new entrants. Even if you got approved, they demanded heavy discounts and shelf-rent from small players, killing any chance of profitability.

That left us with only the small street shops. But those shops catered mostly to the lower and lower-middle class—the very segment with minimal adoption for tissue paper.

Tiloyo taught me great lessons in a brutal way. It taught me that early traction can be deceptive. Primary sales—just pushing inventory to distributors—are vanity metrics. What matters are secondary sales, when the product leaves shelves and reaches real consumers.

A distributor's reorder is the only proof of product-market fit. If reorders stop, the truth is simple: the market has rejected you. The hardest part of entrepreneurship is to accept that silence from customers is also a feedback.

So in the end, the truth is, Tiloyo was never a product-market fit.

Chapter 39: The Betrayal

And then the fog began to lift, and clarity — cruel clarity — started to seep in.

By the third month, I received the salary sheet of our sales employees. A sheet heavy like a burden on my chest. When I compared those numbers with the sales data from our distributors, it was heartbreakingly clear. The revenue was nowhere near the cost. The staff, who were supposed to be soldiers of the battlefield, had barely raised their swords. They were eating from the company's plate but not hunting for the company's food.

This is the curse of our land. Human resources in Pakistan, especially in FMCG, often fail to understand the spirit of entrepreneurship. They do not see themselves as part of a dream. They see themselves only as salary collectors. A job, not a mission. A pay slip, not a purpose.

I called Haider to my office. He sat in front of me, and I asked him, man to man, about the situation. His words were shaky. He lied — small lies, big lies — and

then, almost casually, he dropped another bomb: he wanted three days off.

“Why?” I asked.

“My engagement ceremony in Quetta,” he replied, as if he were talking about a picnic, not a storm swallowing the ship.

I stared at him. How could anyone demand leave in the middle of a collapse? But what could I do? I let him go. I had no choice.

The next morning, my office was a ghost town. Desks empty. Phones silent. Doors closed. One by one, I called every teammate. One by one, they refused to answer. For three days I dialed, prayed, begged for a ring on the other side. Silence.

That silence was perhaps the worst sound of my entrepreneurial life.

The factory, meanwhile, was in another city under Ahmad Raza’s control. But Ahmad too, like the others, was unreachable. No messages. No calls. Only silence.

And in that silence, I understood. Something was terribly wrong. Something was broken. Something was slipping away from my hands.

At last, after days of silence, Farhan walked in with Ahsan. For a moment, my heart felt a flicker of relief. Perhaps they had returned to explain. Perhaps this storm could still be calmed.

But then Ahsan opened his mouth. His words were not answers, not solutions — only noise, nonsense, accusations thrown like stones in the dark. I listened carefully, and the more he spoke, the more I realized: this was not confusion. This was concealment. Something darker lay behind his words.

And then the veil lifted. The truth surfaced like a blade from water.

They had already registered a new company. Ahsan had crowned himself the CEO. The Tiloyo stocks had been sold off behind my back, the money divided like spoils among thieves. The machinery — my machinery, bought with sweat and borrowed capital — was under their custody.

Farhan. Haider. Ahmad Raza. Ahsan. All of them.

They had deceived me and left me alone in the arena.

I could have expected this from any of them. They were new, temporary players in my life. But not Farhan. Not the boy I had mentored. Not the one who had stuttered and grown wings under my guidance. He had spent years with me, while the others had been with me only for months. And yet, he too was there, part of the conspiracy.

I refused to believe it at first. My heart kept saying no, but reality kept screaming yes.

And reality was brutal. This universe, I told myself, does not discriminate. It breaks, it burns, it betrays.

Even families were part of this grab. One of the boys had his father and brothers fully involved in the looting, standing side by side with him as if it were a family business of betrayal.

Haider, the charming salesman, revealed himself as the master liar he had always been. He had gone to the new investor — the very distributor we had just appointed in Karachi — and fed him dreams of impossible profits in the tissue business. The distributor, blind with

greed, promised them investment for their new company.

Haider had hijacked my sales team. The distributors I had worked so hard to win over were now theirs.

Ahmad Raza had hijacked my little factory in Lahore. The empire I had dreamed of was scattered like ashes in the wind.

On my resistance, and through legal complaints, they were forced to hand over the factory back to me. But even that victory was poisoned. They dumped the burden of undelivered and unsold stock — worth millions — on my shoulders.

I was left with a hollow factory, dead weight in warehouses, and the bitter taste of betrayal in my mouth.

This was one of the darkest passages of my life.

Among the many distributors, there was one from Peshawar — a drug addict, a rogue, and unfortunately, a close friend of Ahsan. One afternoon he stormed into my office with a gun. He laid it on the table, its cold presence louder than any words. Then, with a smirk, he made me sign an agreement that I would either sell or

return his stock, and on top of it, he forced a security cheque from me.

I was terrified. I obeyed. The ink of my signature bled from fear, not choice.

Yet, once the gun left the table, I took back control of the factory. I called every employee, every distributor, and laid the truth bare: the betrayal, the theft, the conspiracy. Some distributors showed rare decency. They stood by me, refusing to abandon the brand we had built together. But the sales staff—oh, the sales staff—were full of double tongues. By day they asked for salaries from me, by night they pledged loyalty to the new bosses who had stolen Tiloyo.

That was the worst time of my life. Alone, stripped, and betrayed, I stood in the ruins of what I had built. The weight of it pressed me to the ground. And yet, somewhere inside, I forced myself to rise.

I told myself this was a trial. An examination from God. Perhaps, I thought, this too was part of the universe's conspiracy in my favor. Perhaps the betrayal was not destruction, but purification. Maybe it was my training ground. Maybe it was spiritual courage—or

maybe it was just my desperate attempt at self-satisfaction, searching for meaning in wreckage.

Either way, I refused to surrender.

I gathered myself, dusted off the ashes, and began knocking on doors once again. I told investors my story. I told them about Tiloyo, about its reach, about its promise. I asked for capital, offering thirty percent equity in return.

I was broken but not finished. And that made all the difference.

Entrepreneurs' Takeaway

Betrayal in startups is not an anomaly, it's a structural risk — and my Tiloyo experience taught me that blind trust without systems is fatal. Founders must design governance mechanisms, vesting schedules, transparent reporting, and legal safeguards that tie loyalty to long-term value while minimizing room for manipulation. In emerging markets like Pakistan, informal risks — coercion, mafias, and power games — demand extra vigilance, making system-dependence more critical than people-dependence. Employees who

only see salaries will chase short-term gains; employees who see vision and structured accountability will stay aligned. Ultimately, sustainable startups aren't built on charisma or relationships — they're built on structures that protect the mission from betrayal.

Chapter 40: Curtains Fall on Tiloyo

At last, the universe seemed to give me a lifeline. I found an investor for Tiloyo. He visited the factory, ran his due diligence, and after long discussions we agreed on terms. But as always, the terms were not in my favor.

First, I compromised on the sum of capital—accepting half of what I truly needed. Second, I compromised on equity—handing over fifty percent of Tiloyo, my own creation. And there were many smaller concessions hidden between the lines of that agreement.

Still, I accepted. Because ambition has a way of silencing reason.

I made my plans. I retained the good men in my team, the ones who had stood by me when others had betrayed. I was excited, restless, almost drunk on the thought of what was to come. With this capital I would buy proper machinery, machinery that could transform Tiloyo into a brand of international quality. I would stock our warehouses, quicken our supply chain, and finally serve distributors not with delays and excuses, but with speed and confidence.

But then—came the reality of investors in this part of the world.

The promised capital never came in the way it was promised. It arrived in drops and drizzles, never in the downpour I needed. And each small installment was swallowed instantly by operating costs. Salaries. Rent. Utilities. The daily grind of survival.

The machinery I dreamed of buying never came. The production lines I planned to automate remained manual and broken.

And then, after paying barely forty percent of the promised investment over long months, the man stopped. Instead of fulfilling his commitment, he demanded profits.

Profits! From a company he had starved of the very lifeblood it needed to grow.

It was not just a disappointment. It was a betrayal dressed in formality.

Once again, I found myself at the mercy of bad luck—or perhaps the bad luck that is called “investors in Pakistan.” I still wonder whether I was simply unfortunate in the men I met, or if this is the normal

character of capital in this country: all promises on paper, but never real commitment when it is most needed.

The blame game began. He claimed he couldn't release the funds because he had to first sell a piece of real estate. I had no such luxury of time. My reality was far more brutal: heavy salaries to pay, rents due, utility bills piling like mountains. While he delayed, I was drowning.

And so, I made the hardest decision of my entrepreneurial journey.

The first thing I did was fire almost the entire staff. I kept only a handful of loyal employees—enough to help me wind down operations with dignity. Their faces were heavy with disappointment, but they understood the storm we were in.

Next, I sold what little assets we had left. The machinery, the furniture, even the small things that once carried the hope of an empire. I sold them for prices that barely cleared the debts and payables.

And with that, Tiloyo—the brand that once looked like an international dream—was gone.

It was not just the end of a company. It was the end of my chapter in packaging, a final goodbye to the industry I had given years of sweat, sleepless nights, and ambition.

I walked out of Tiloyo with nothing but lessons. Bitter lessons. Necessary lessons.

The curtains had closed.

As Tiloyo was taking its last breaths, I came to know that Haider's new tissue brand had set up production close to my factory in Lahore. He was now leading the company as its CEO, while Ahmad Raza headed production and Farhan commanded the sales department. Ahsan, interestingly, was no longer with them.

Haider, at least in front of me, was always respectful. And so, when we met in Lahore, it was like two old friends meeting again. We spoke, we laughed, we shared stories, as if nothing brutal had ever happened between us.

I must confess—I had a strange admiration for him, even though he was among those who had betrayed me. Haider was a big thinker. He set the bar of

expectations so high that everyone around him had to stretch beyond their comfort. And he was a doer—unafraid of mistakes, unafraid of consequences.

Despite being the reason for my pain, I respected him. Because it was through his fire that Tiloyo once touched a presence across all of Pakistan. For the first time, I saw my brand resonate nationally, and Haider had been instrumental in that leap.

With only fragments of knowledge about design, printing, and packaging, he had dared to start something of his own. I knew that it was this little exposure to packaging and branding that gave him the confidence to sit in the chair of a CEO. His personality, his knowledge, even his discipline were never truly fit for that seat. And yet—he attempted. He carried the title, he led the team, if only for some months.

For that courage alone, I could not dislike him entirely.

Farhan too had stood among those who conspired against me. He had left me in my darkest hours, when my world was collapsing. Yet in my heart I always knew—he was not born a traitor. He was simply misled.

He had loved me once, believed in me once, but my shifting attention during Tiloyo's brighter days had sown insecurity in him. And when the opposite camp rose in power and promises, he was dazzled, convinced they could give him the future I, perhaps, had failed to show him.

And so he drifted away.

But even in betrayal, I could not hate him. I understood him.

For Haider, I carried respect because of his courage—because he dared to set the bar higher, dared to do, even if recklessly.

For Farhan, my heart softened because of his innocence—his simple, fragile soul that longed for recognition.

Yes, they had destroyed me. Yes, they had left scars on my journey. Yet I had already forgiven them. Because in the end, I believed the universe tests us through people, and even betrayal is sometimes just another lesson wrapped in human form.

Entrepreneurs' Takeaway

Tiloyo's final collapse taught me that bad capital is worse than no capital at all. Accepting unfavorable terms, diluted equity, and half-funded promises is a mistake that suffocates startups before they even scale. In emerging markets especially, founders must master investor due diligence, term sheet negotiation, and capital structuring, ensuring that commitments are enforceable and disbursements align with business needs. Money in drizzles can never build machinery or fuel growth; it only prolongs survival. The true discipline of entrepreneurship is knowing when to walk away from exploitative capital, because not all money is smart money. In the end, every founder must remember: equity is your blood, capital is your oxygen—protect both, or your company will suffocate.

Chapter 41: The Seed of DILOYO

The bruises from Tiloyo had taught me one of the hardest truths of entrepreneurship in Pakistan: investors were unreliable, capital was fleeting, and trust was fragile. If I was to rise again, I needed to design a business that demanded little capital, promised high margins, and allowed me to keep human resources under my direct watch. Most importantly, it had to hold the seed of a brand—because I had already tasted the power of branding, and I knew it was the only path to greatness.

That is when I returned to an old spark of an idea that had first crossed my mind in the days of packaging: DILOYO.

The vision was simple yet bold—to disrupt the age-old fruit retail industry. Where others saw fruit as mere commodities, I saw them as gifts of nature waiting to be wrapped in dignity, in luxury, in packaging that whispered a story. I had already experimented with fancy fruit boxes in the packaging business, and they had caught attention. Now, I wanted to take that inspiration and build it into a full-fledged brand.

DILOYO would not be about selling fruits. It would be about reimagining them—through modern outlets, elegant design, and next-level packaging. Just as clothing brands elevated fabric into fashion, I dreamed of elevating fruits into an experience.

This was the canvas where I would paint my next chapter.

The basic idea of DILOYO was nothing less than a disruption. I wanted to rewrite the rules of a billion-dollar fruit retail market in Pakistan. For decades, the city streets had been littered with rusty carts and unhygienic stalls where fruits were tossed about carelessly. I dreamed of replacing those carts with glass-covered, modern, and elegant stores—spaces that would shine like international brands yet sell fruits at the same price as those dusty roadside vendors.

The model was clear in my head: fruits would be procured directly from farms, ensuring freshness and fair value. To eliminate wastage, each outlet would have its own juice section. Small pieces or lightly bruised fruits, which the market usually rejected, would be transformed into fresh juices. Nothing would go to waste. For the fruits left unsold at night, dehydrator machines would dry them, creating a premium dried

fruit line. In this way, every fruit would find its purpose, every investment its return.

Our architecture design was finalized with precision. Each outlet was a reflection of modern elegance—glass façades, warm lighting, minimal yet refined interiors. Workers wore proper uniforms and gloves, handling fruits as though they were jewels. Hygiene was not just a promise; it was a discipline.

Looking back now, I realize how far ahead of time I was. DILOYO wasn't simply a business; it was a revolution in how retail could look, feel, and operate. It was my first true experiment with building a retail brand—not just a company, not just a trade, but a living, breathing brand that could either soar or collapse.

I was optimistic, perhaps too optimistic. In my mind, DILOYO was destined to become the talk of the town from day one. I had no idea then that time itself had its own plans for me.

But once again, I was faced with the same barrier that had haunted all my ventures—capital. Vision without fuel is like a car without wheels, and I had to find a way to bridge that gap.

So I devised a model as daring as it was necessary: the DILOYO franchise. The idea was simple—an investor would finance the creation of a DILOYO outlet, and I would operate it for them through the best management practices, modern systems, and a proven business model.

To inspire trust, I built a fine ERP system that brought transparency to every corner of operations—sales, inventory, finances—everything was visible, everything accountable. I wanted my franchisees to see not only the fruit but also the roots.

Then came the real gamble. I created the franchise literature, carefully drafting every clause, every promise. To make it irresistible, I kept the franchise price small. But more than that, I offered what no one else dared: complete investment security. If the franchise failed, I promised to pay back the full investment. I knew it was risky—almost reckless—but I also knew it was the only way forward. Without such a promise, no one would bet on me, no matter how small the amount.

This time, I was all alone in the execution of DILOYO. There was no Farhan, no Haider, no team to share the burden. So I did what a hustler must do—I reached

out to random people, offered them a handsome commission, and asked them to help me sell DILOYO franchises. It was a lonely battle, but loneliness is the true test of an entrepreneur.

I was staking not just my reputation but my very soul on the belief that DILOYO could work. And when you are standing on the edge of everything, sometimes the only way forward is to risk it all.

Chapter 42: The First Flame of DILOYO

My first lead came from Peshawar, through a relative I had appointed on a handsome commission to sell franchises. He had convinced one of his office colleagues, who was eager to invest in something new, to open the first DILOYO outlet. The idea was strong, the model was convincing, and above all—his investment was secure. That one promise sealed the deal.

At first, I hesitated. Peshawar wasn't the city I had envisioned for DILOYO's launch. The concept was too modern, too futuristic, and I feared it might be "too much, too soon" for the city's traditional retail culture. Islamabad or Rawalpindi seemed like natural choices. But then reality spoke louder than strategy—I had no other serious lead.

There was another challenge too. One store alone was never going to make sense. The DILOYO model demanded scale. To justify a centralized office, management team, and operational systems, we needed at least ten stores in a single city. That's where

economies of scale would kick in, and that's when the brand would start to shine.

Sensing my hesitation, my relative made a bold promise: he would sell nine more franchises in Peshawar after the first one was completed. His confidence gave me comfort, and I agreed. It was settled—we would make Peshawar the first city to host DILOYO.

The concept of DILOYO carried its own charm—everyone who heard it felt inspired. After all, where else could someone invest just nine thousand dollars and get a complete business setup—construction, machinery, merchandise, and inventory included? We weren't even charging franchise fees. No hidden costs, no personal cut. We were working entirely for the franchisees, because in truth, I wasn't selling a franchise—I was building a brand.

Peshawar became our first battlefield. I traveled there myself and finalized a shop on Warsak Road. That was where the first DILOYO outlet would rise. When I signed my very first agreement, it felt less like a business deal and more like sealing a promise with destiny.

But I wasn't strong enough to carry this dream alone. So I called my brother, Aamir. He came from Parachinar and stood beside me, not just as family but as a director in DILOYO. Together, we laid the foundation of something that was more than just a shop—it was a statement.

For a month, we poured ourselves into building that first outlet. From construction to machinery, from racks to counters, every detail carried our vision. When the final touches were done, DILOYO looked nothing like a "fruit shop." The focused lights bathed every rack in brilliance, making each fruit glow like a work of art. A giant LED price board outside displayed real-time fruit prices—transparent, honest, revolutionary.

And then it happened. People stopped, stared, whispered, and walked in with awe. They had never seen fruits presented with such elegance. DILOYO wasn't just a store; it was a shockwave to their senses. For the first time, a fruit shop felt like an elite international brand.

But soon reality started whispering its truths to me. The price of the franchise was so little that it could barely cover the cost of construction. Even in our very first outlet, every rupee we took from the franchisee

was poured into bricks, racks, lights, and machinery. In fact, I had to add a little from my own scarce resources to complete the setup.

That meant something clear and cruel—I would not be able to sustain the burning period of this startup if it didn't perform from day one. And I already knew the psychology of Pakistani investors: they want only profits, never burning.

We trained the staff, dressed them in uniforms, and set the standards. By July 2021, the first DILOYO outlet finally opened its doors. The response was fascinating. Some customers were thrilled to try something new. They admired the hygiene, the glow of the fruits under focused lights, the elite feel of the shop. But many others stood back, hesitant, thinking, “If it looks so elite, it must be expensive.”

Meanwhile, the salesperson I had trusted to sell more franchises failed to deliver. Despite my own efforts beside him, not a single additional franchise was sold. And because we were procuring fruits for just one outlet, I could never secure a competitive price.

So the verdict was mixed—consumers were impressed, but our model wasn't ready for survival with just one

store. One outlet alone in Peshawar could not validate or sustain the grand idea of DILOYO.

The store kept running, but I knew my battlefield was elsewhere. I left Peshawar behind and came back to Islamabad, ready to test the idea where it truly belonged.

Entrepreneurs' Takeaway

The first DILOYO outlet in Peshawar taught me one of the most sobering realities of franchising and retail: a single store cannot validate a scale-driven model. As entrepreneurs, we often underestimate the burning period and overestimate early adoption. Peshawar showed me that while strong branding can spark curiosity, unit economics must work from day one. Low franchise pricing won me quick deals, but it also starved the business of sustainability—every rupee went into construction with no margin left for growth. The lesson is clear: a franchise isn't just about selling a dream; it's about ensuring the economics align for both franchisor and franchisee. Without scale, procurement power collapses, investor confidence weakens, and the model stumbles. Startups must design structures where

the first outlet is not just a showcase, but a proof of viability—because inspiration without scalability is only half a business.

Chapter 43: The Rise of DILOYO

A window had opened—a real opportunity to build something iconic. The DILOYO model had potential. The problem was, I was still running solo. And no brand is built alone.

I knew I needed a team.

The first person I called was Farhan.

He had been more than a colleague; he was part of the DNA of my startup journey. When I shared the DILOYO blueprint with him—along with visuals and footage from our first outlet in Peshawar—he lit up with excitement. The fire in his eyes reminded me of the early days. He said just one thing: **“Let’s do it.”**

Then he added, “Haider’s tissue paper business is collapsing after a fallout with his partner. Why don’t we pull him in too?”

The idea made sense.

Say what you will about Haider, he was a force of execution. He knew how to scale fast, how to break ground in new markets. I picked up the phone and

pitched DILOYO to him. After watching the videos and hearing about the vision, he said yes. But there was a caveat—he needed a month to wrap up his existing commitments.

We couldn't wait to start building the team.

Farhan introduced me to Qasim, a young distributor they had worked with before. When Qasim and I met, I saw a spark in him—the same kind of hunger I had carried in my own eyes years ago. Once I laid out the vision for DILOYO, he was in. No second thoughts.

That's how we began the next chapter of DILOYO—from zero to traction again, this time in Islamabad.

Qasim led the franchise sales effort and brought in promising leads. I closed five deals back-to-back. We rolled out construction simultaneously across all five locations. The momentum felt organic—there was no paid marketing, no franchise exhibitions. It was all word-of-mouth, belief, and hustle.

The DILOYO value proposition was straightforward: a high-end retail fruit brand with a price tag as lean as \$6,000 for full setup—including machinery,

construction, merchandise, inventory, and branding. We charged zero franchise fee. Not a single rupee. This was about building the brand first, revenue second.

Meanwhile, Haider began operations in Quetta. In a matter of weeks, five more franchise deals were secured there too.

No founder scales alone. My first attempt in Peshawar showed the limits of a solo hustle, but bringing in Farhan, Haider, and Qasim unlocked exponential growth. This is the essence of founder–market fit plus team leverage—where the vision remains centralized but execution is distributed across capable hands.

It felt like we were finally building a movement—across provinces, across cities, across all the pain of the past.

Our entire team had become obsessed with DILOYO. We weren't employees or executives—we were builders. Every one of us wore multiple hats: from franchise development and construction to HR, vendor negotiations, and logistics. We were operating like a true early-stage startup—lean, relentless, and full of heart.

Qasim proved to be one of the best decisions we made. He didn't just believe in the idea—he embodied it. He brought in high-quality people, each more committed than the last. His leadership was instinctive and hands-on. So, we elevated him to Chief Operating Officer. It was an earned title, not a given one.

By November, construction on our Islamabad-based franchises was complete. The outlets looked stunning—crystal-clear glass storefronts, elegant lighting, smart displays. They weren't fruit shops; they were showrooms of freshness. Haider flew in from Quetta to see them, and when he did, even he—who had seen big moves before—was speechless. He said, **"This doesn't look like Pakistan."**

We launched with modest events—no celebrities, no unnecessary PR. Just clean execution and operational excellence. And soon, DILOYO began attracting attention. Customers with higher spending power were impressed. But the everyday consumer was hesitant—our elite presentation made them assume we were expensive, even though our prices matched local carts and stalls.

That's when we had a strategic realization: we needed burn capital. We needed six months of financial

runway just to build consumer trust and familiarity. To change habits. To fight perceptions. We also needed to implement our original plan of zero-waste through fruit dehydration units, so no unsold produce ever went to loss. Every piece of fruit had to have a revenue path—fresh, juiced, or dried.

My stores stood like diamonds in the middle of chaos—visually arresting, disruptive, and inspiring. People paused. People stared. We just had to make them walk in.

I knew I was now in a position to pitch real capital. I had a working model, a visible brand, a strong leadership team, and traction in multiple cities. We didn't just need investors—we needed believers. The right funding at this stage would mean creating Pakistan's first fruit retail unicorn. And we were aiming exactly for that.

Meanwhile, Haider activated new teams in Lahore and Peshawar, focusing on franchise sales. The machine was in motion. It felt like we had finally built something with the power to go national.

But just when everything was aligned—team, traction, visibility, and momentum—the worst thing in my life happened.

It didn't just slow me down. It shattered me.

From the inside out.

Chapter 44: When Reputation is Executed

It was the early morning of November 22nd, 2021. I was asleep in my flat when a loud knock jolted me awake. Still half-dreaming, I stumbled toward the door. As I opened it, three uniformed policemen stood in front of me—alongside the former Tiloyo distributor from Peshawar, the same drug-addicted extortionist who once walked into my office and forced me to sign papers at gunpoint.

Before I could process anything, one of the policemen grabbed my arm.

"Pick up your phone," he ordered.

Confused, I complied. They entered the flat, confiscated my phone, and shoved me into a small car—the car of the distributor himself. It was a scene I had only watched in crime dramas. Now, I was living it.

They drove me to Gulbahar Police Station, Peshawar. My mind was racing. I had no pending case, no real dispute—so why was I here? That's when it hit me: the old security cheque. The same cheque the distributor

had extracted from me under threat. He had now used it to file a fabricated complaint, fully backed by bribes and forged documents.

What broke me wasn't just the betrayal—it was how systemically it was orchestrated.

One of my former teammates from Tiloyo—someone who once handled sales—had access to my signed letterheads. I had trusted him to speed up distributor documentation by pre-signing a few. He had handed one of those sheets to this man. On it, they had typed a fake declaration: that the stock had been returned and acknowledged by me. A complete lie, backed by a signature I had once written in good faith.

That night in custody, the officer who arrested me summoned me for questioning.

"What's the password to your phone?" he asked.

Naively, I told him—thinking it was part of some routine investigation. Only later would I realize the access they wanted wasn't for evidence, but for leverage.

The next morning, I was presented in court.

Within hours, I was sent to jail.

The cell they put me in for the first ten days was nothing short of a nightmare. A massive, overcrowded compound—hundreds of men, many of them addicted to drugs, others with criminal records for violence and murder. The air was heavy with sweat, filth, and hopelessness.

And there I was—a clean-handed, self-made entrepreneur. A man who had once pitched to investors, designed brands, and built startups from scratch—now caged among criminals, framed by a cartel of dishonesty.

I felt like a lion in a dogfight.

Still, I kept myself composed. I used the prison telephone to call Aamir. He was already in Peshawar. He had hired a lawyer and assured me, “Don’t worry. I’m handling everything.”

After ten days, I was shifted to another cell—a smaller one, shared with only ten inmates. Cleaner. Quieter. But no less cruel.

Most of the boys there were young—barely out of their teens—but all were in for serious charges. Murder.

Armed robbery. Attempted homicide. And yet, they treated me with respect. Maybe they sensed I didn't belong there. Maybe it was the way I carried myself. I had nothing in common with them, except that we were all prisoners now.

But the anger never left me.

Every time I looked at the cracked walls or felt the weight of the cell door closing behind me, I thought of that distributor. I thought of the former teammate. I thought of revenge. Vivid, dark thoughts filled my nights.

They didn't just take my freedom.

They took my dignity.

And in that prison cell, the fire inside me was reignited—not just to survive—but to fight back harder than I ever had before.

Every day in prison, I had two scheduled calls: one to Aamir, who was managing my legal battle, and the other to Haider, who was running DILOYO. The business still needed to breathe, even if its founder was behind bars.

But just when I thought I had hit rock bottom, I found out there was still room to fall.

Through a bribe, the rogue distributor—the same one who had orchestrated my arrest—managed to obtain my mobile phone from the corrupt police officers. What he did next was malicious beyond words. He logged into all my accounts and deleted the social media pages for BatteryLala, Lalapack, and Tiloyo—years of brand equity, erased overnight.

Then came the final insult.

He uploaded a photo of me in lockup, taken illegally by the police, and circulated it across WhatsApp groups and social platforms. My last seen on WhatsApp bore witness to the exact date I was jailed. The shame, the humiliation—it was carefully curated to destroy my reputation, assassinate my credibility, and paralyze my brand presence.

That day, I learned what “law” truly meant in Pakistan. And that was the day I stopped believing in the system.

I spent New Year’s Eve in a jail cell, watching faint fireworks burst over the distant skyline through the

rusted bars. Outside, the world celebrated. Inside, I made a silent vow: this is not how my story ends.

Finally, on January 7, my bail was approved. As I walked out of prison, I said farewell to the few men I had befriended behind bars—some criminals, some wrongly accused, all human. Outside, Aamir was waiting, and with him stood my team, like soldiers in civilian clothes. They hugged me like I'd come back from war.

Without losing a minute, I sat in the car and drove straight to a restaurant where Haider had summoned the Peshawar sales team of DILOYO. I listened carefully. Within minutes, my entrepreneurial instincts told me the truth: Haider had repeated the same mistake he had made at Tiloyo—an unvetted, incapable sales team with zero market understanding, paid hefty salaries with no real results.

Disappointed but composed, I made my next stop: Gulbahar Police Station. I went to retrieve my phone, the very device that had been used against me. I confronted the officer—told him exactly what I thought of him, his corruption, and his betrayal of the uniform. Instead of shame, he responded with threats. That's when I understood—there's no justice in a

rigged courtroom. The lawyer I consulted later confirmed it: “Forget revenge. You’ll get nothing but headaches. Focus on your life. Win through success.”

I returned to Islamabad and walked into my office—the same office that had witnessed dreams being born and broken. I immediately asked for a report from the Lahore sales team. The results were disastrous. Again, overpaid, underperforming personnel. No pipeline. No traction. No results.

I didn’t wait.

I shut down all operations in Lahore and Peshawar, terminated all underperforming staff, and retained only the Islamabad and Quetta teams, where the franchise performance was still stable.

The closures burned us financially and left behind debts and liabilities. Worse, some franchisees in Islamabad—spooked by the jail incident—demanded refunds on their investments. DILOYO was under siege from all directions.

And yet, I didn’t break.

Instead, I pivoted.

I handed the fundraising responsibility to Farhan, my most trusted comrade. I tasked him with finding serious investors—not talkers, but doers—who could see what we were building and commit to a long-term play.

We didn't want a cheque. We wanted belief.

And then... finally... after endless closed doors and polite rejections, a glimmer of hope appeared.

An investor who understood scale.

An investor who believed in brands.

An investor who wanted to create a unicorn in Pakistan.

The war wasn't over.

But a new battle was just beginning.

Chapter 45: Capital That Never Came

DILOYO was ready to grow, but growth required more than passion. It needed capital — the fuel without which even the brightest idea remains grounded. We had reached that phase in the startup cycle where enthusiasm alone could not buy machinery, fund marketing campaigns, or cover the burn rate while waiting for adoption.

It was January 2022 when fate introduced us to an investor, a man whose wealth came from building towers and selling land. I will not name him, but I remember his presence clearly — calm, calculating, yet curious about ventures beyond real estate.

I pitched him DILOYO. He listened with patience, and I could see in his eyes that he liked our energy, our clarity, and the way we spoke the language of entrepreneurship rather than just the language of dreams. We were not only telling him a story; we were presenting a business model.

Our ask was bold: two million dollars in exchange for 30% equity.

The plan was precise. Half the capital would cover our burn rate — or in startup language, extend our runway until adoption was strong enough to sustain the business. The other half would go into capex — plant, machinery, outlet expansion, and marketing. Among the equipment were fruit hydrators, machines designed to cut wastage and protect margins. They were not just tools; they were efficiency enablers, a way to reduce operational drag.

To our joy, he agreed. He would join us as a partner. I can still recall the mood of that day — the happiness on the faces of my team, the relief of finally being noticed, and the thrill of a promised partnership. For the first time, we felt the runway beneath our feet. With this capital, we believed DILOYO was no longer crawling; it was preparing to fly.

In our minds, the trajectory was already mapped. With two million dollars, we could achieve customer adoption, strengthen our brand equity, and establish ourselves as the uncontested category leader. In three years, we dreamed of becoming a unicorn.

DILOYO was more than a fruit retail brand; it was a cultural innovation. Nobody in Pakistan had imagined fruit shops with the elegance of elite lifestyle outlets.

We had already secured the first mover advantage, and if adoption followed, monopoly was not just a dream — it was an inevitability.

The promise of capital felt like a turning point. In the startup world, moments like these are rare — when everything suddenly feels possible, when the horizon looks wide and clear, when all you can see ahead is growth.

The promise of two million dollars soon turned into a never-ending cycle of meetings. Each day we walked into his office, expecting progress, and each day we walked out with only more conversations. He kept introducing new faces — consultants, assistants, advisors — and almost every time we explained BREE from scratch. Our energy, instead of being spent on customers and operations, was consumed in that conference room. It felt as though our headquarters had shifted to his office.

He introduced us to a kind lady from his team, a “coordinator” as he called her. Every evening, she assigned us fresh homework — new documents, new reports, new formats. We spent nights preparing whatever she demanded, delivering within twenty-four hours. Yet none of it translated into funds. We were

caught in a loop of bureaucratic busywork, what in the startup world is the worst use of founder energy: endless non-value-adding tasks.

By May 2022, patience had worn thin. We pressed him for clarity. Were they truly going to invest, or were we wasting time? Finally, he gave us ten thousand dollars. But even that was not equity, not capital infusion. It was simply payment for a franchise he had sold to a friend.

We told ourselves it was just the beginning, that the larger check would soon follow. We delivered the franchise, clinging to the hope that the two million would arrive any day. But it never did. What we got instead were more meetings, more empty words, and more wasted time.

Meanwhile, reality outside the boardroom was brutal. Our Quetta and Islamabad franchises were bleeding. Cash flow was suffocating. DILOYO was financially drained, and the promised capital had become a mirage. By July, we demanded a final answer. Either he would invest or he would not.

But instead of capital, he sold three more franchises — to his friends again — and gave us the money as

proceeds of those sales. This was not investment. This was him using our brand to trade with his circle. He had turned us into franchise suppliers, while his promise of investment became nothing but bait.

We were not naïve. We saw the trick. He was never going to infuse the two million. He was leveraging our time, our brand, and our desperation for his own deals. We told him, clearly and firmly: We don't need middlemen to sell franchises. We can sell them ourselves. What we need is the promised capital — for machinery, for marketing, for burn. Without it, you are wasting our most valuable currency: time.

But in the world of startups, betrayal often comes not through blunt rejection, but through endless delay. And by the time we realized it, our company was already gasping for air.

And then the truth came out.

This man — who had spoken in millions, who had promised us a runway to build a unicorn — had no money even to fuel his own real estate business. How could he ever invest in DILOYO?

It was another harsh lesson in entrepreneurship: not every investor is truly an investor. Some carry only the illusion of capital, not the capacity for it. We had once again placed our hopes in the wrong hands.

The news broke my team. Haider, who had stood with me through the storms, finally left. The weight of disappointment was too much for him. With no cash to sustain operations, we closed every single branch in Quetta.

But shutting doors did not mean shutting liabilities. A mountain of obligations stood tall before us.

Franchisees demanded their returns, suppliers awaited their payments. My personal debt soared to an unbearable one hundred thousand dollars — a number that pressed on my chest like a boulder. I had no way to pay it back. The only thing I could offer was a promise — a distant future date, a hopeful repayment someday.

My personality began to crack under the pressure. I no longer had the courage to face my creditors. Their calls rang on my phone like alarms I could not silence. I avoided them, not out of arrogance, but out of helplessness. I was empty-handed, clueless, searching for answers that did not exist.

Islamabad too had to be abandoned. The rents, the salaries, the mounting expenses — all of it came crashing down, and we had nothing left to keep the lights on. Some liabilities we paid. Many we could not.

Entrepreneurship is often glorified as resilience and victory. But in truth, it is also about walking through fire barefoot, with wounds no one sees. DILOYO, once a dream with wings, was now crawling, gasping for breath, crushed under promises that were never fulfilled.

And yet, within that collapse lay a silent lesson — that failure, though brutal, carves the entrepreneur into something sharper, wiser, and unbreakable.

Entrepreneurs' Takeaway

Promises aren't capital until the money hits the account. Always validate an investor's financial capacity before building plans. A founder's most valuable currency is time, so avoid endless meetings and non-value-adding tasks. Franchise sales may generate revenue, but they are not a substitute for strategic investment in systems, marketing, and infrastructure.

Clarity is better than hope—push for decisions early to save energy and momentum. And when failure strikes, treat it as fire that forges sharper instincts and a stronger entrepreneurial mindset.

Chapter 46: Munazzah, My Fiancée

In the middle of all the chaos—financial burdens, collapsing startups, false investors, and lonely rebuilds—there was one light that stayed kindled: **Munazzah.**

She was the girl I was engaged to. Chosen by my mother. A decision rooted more in trust than in romance. But as life would have it, some stories bloom not in the first chapter, but after a few pages of understanding.

In the beginning, Munazzah had her own dreams. She wanted to be a doctor. That was the norm—every high-achieving girl in our culture was expected to wear a white coat and earn the title of MBBS. But when she fell short of the merit list, it shattered her.

I remember those conversations. Long, winding dialogues over the phone, where I tried to sew back the pieces of her confidence. I told her that medicine wasn't the only path to meaning. That the future didn't belong to stethoscopes alone—it belonged to algorithms, AI, and machine learning. It belonged to technology.

“Look around you,” I’d say. “Every system that works, every city that breathes, every business that scales—it’s all tech underneath. From mobile banking to blockchain. From e-commerce to artificial intelligence.”

She listened. Quietly. And then slowly, she started believing.

She applied to one of the most prestigious institutions in Pakistan—FAST NUCES—for a degree in Computer Science. And when she got in, I celebrated her victory more than I had celebrated my own wins.

What began as an arranged engagement, started transforming into a bond rooted in shared curiosity and growth. She went from being a girl who once doubted her future to the one who began updating me on emerging technologies, coding languages, and new innovations in the tech world.

The teacher became the student.

And I fell in love.

Not with the idea of her, but with the version of her that was growing every day. Her mind, her resilience, her quiet strength. She became a source of light in the

darkest rooms of my entrepreneurial life. When everything else collapsed—when DILOYO struggled, when debt mounted, when I questioned myself—she stood still, radiating faith.

Yes, we had our fights. Some silly. Some serious. Love isn't perfect. But she learned the art of compromise, of standing beside a man building empires out of broken bricks. She didn't ask me to quit. She never questioned the hustle. She understood that entrepreneurship is not a job—it's a storm, and she chose to stand in the middle of it, with me.

Her calmness was my chaos's cure.

Her code was my poetry.

In a world where I was building brands to make people believe in ideas, she was building me, brick by brick—coding my confidence back in every conversation, scripting stability in my unpredictable journey.

And somewhere between her assignments and my investor calls, a love story quietly compiled itself.

Chapter 47: Back to the Counter

After closing all the DILOYO branches, it wasn't just the financial loss that weighed on me. It wasn't even the debt. What haunted me most was the trust—the trust our franchisees had placed in me. They had believed in the vision. They had believed in me. And I had failed them.

I needed to understand: What really went wrong? Was the idea flawed—or the execution?

I realized that I had scaled too fast, with too little capital, in markets that weren't ready. So I decided to go back to zero. Not square one, but ground truth. I needed to build from scratch again—this time, brick by brick, with full control and full presence.

We had equipment and machinery from the shut-down branches. That was all we had—and it was enough. We used what we had, and opened a small, self-owned outlet in an area called Hostel City.

Hostel City was unique. It was a dense student hub surrounded by universities and dozens of hostels. Thousands of young men and women from across Pakistan lived here—ambitious, educated, and

open-minded. They weren't just customers. They were early adopters. They were a community.

This time, I wasn't managing from a distance. I decided to be on the ground myself. I called Aamir from Parachinar—my brother, my friend, my quiet co-founder in spirit—and he joined without hesitation. We hired our cousin Khizer as well. I trained both of them personally—not just in operations, but in mindset.

We made a big strategic shift.

We dropped the fruit retail business completely. DILOYO was no longer a fruit brand.

We repositioned it as a neighborhood café—small, cozy, experience-driven. The product line was focused and simplified: fresh juices for cold beverages, and tea and coffee for hot. We also added a few desserts—milk cake and brownies—to create a complete café offering.

It wasn't a pivot. It was a reinvention.

The area had what we needed—captive demand, low competition, and a connected community. These students understood modern branding, were price-sensitive but curious, and—most

importantly—they talked to each other. Word of mouth could make or break us here.

So we rolled up our sleeves and went back to the counter.

We crafted a signature chai recipe—refined it, tested it, mastered it. Aamir prepared juices with his own hands, blending not just fruits but experiences. He engaged with customers directly, learning their preferences, hearing their stories. Khizer handled service, clean-up, and customer feedback. And me? I became everything—from barista to branch manager, from floor cleaner to cashier.

We were working with the brand, not for the brand.

There is a kind of learning that books or boardrooms will never give you—only the counter can. That's where we discovered the true anatomy of operational efficiency.

We learned that small things create big differences. The placement of a blender on the right versus the left side of the counter saved us five seconds per order. Multiply that by a hundred orders, and it becomes a full hour of saved labor.

Tool size, pot shape, even the grip of a spoon—it all mattered. The thickness of a chai cup changed the way heat traveled. UHT milk gave a creamier texture for one item, while pasteurized milk brought out better flavor in another. Frozen fruit smoothies taste different than fresh.

And flame—flame was everything.

Too high, and the flavor is burned. Too low, and the richness is lost. We learned when to boil, when to simmer, and when to stop stirring altogether. These weren't recipes. These were systems—manuals being written through muscle memory and repetition.

We understood why customers complained, how they decided to return, and what made them fall in love. This wasn't market research. This was market intimacy.

Hostel City's DILOYO had just twelve seats. But that tiny space became our lab, our factory, our headquarters, and our dream incubator. Every drink we served was a data point. Every compliment was traction. Every complaint was product-market feedback.

And when Qasim and Farhan left—because I could no longer pay them—I didn’t panic. I didn’t blame. I went back to the counter, because that’s where I belonged. At least for now.

I wasn’t focused on scale. I was focused on clarity.

Because in startups, clarity is the most valuable capital.

So I stood at that tiny counter, day after day—not chasing metrics or media coverage—but quietly brewing the idea of what DILYOYO could truly become.

And I left the outcomes to God.

Entrepreneurs’ Takeaway

In Hostel City, I discovered something most entrepreneurs never do in boardrooms—that product-market fit isn’t a line on a pitch deck, it’s a pulse you feel at the counter. Every complaint, every repeat order, every smile was market data flowing in real time. Operational efficiency wasn’t about big systems, it was about the way a spoon was gripped, how a flame was managed, where a blender was placed.

Those seconds saved at the counter weren't small—they were unit economics in motion, compounding silently.

What mattered most wasn't scale, but clarity. Too often, founders chase investors before chasing truth. I realized that clarity itself was capital—maybe even more valuable than money in the bank. When I stripped away the noise, I saw the difference between a pivot and a reinvention. A pivot is when you patch a broken model; a reinvention is when you shed an old skin to grow into a new identity. DILOYO in Hostel City wasn't a survival tactic—it was a rebirth.

In those long nights behind a twelve-seat counter, I stopped obsessing over growth and started listening to habits. Because startups don't scale on products—they scale on habits. And before you can ask the world to believe in you, you have to stand inside the fire of your own clarity and believe in yourself first.

Chapter 48: Goodbye to Parachinar

During the ups and downs of my entrepreneurial journey, another wave of terrorism began to rise. The peace of Parachinar mattered to me more than anything else—not just because it was my hometown, but because my family was still living there while I was alone in Islamabad.

Talking about the wars of Parachinar is unavoidable in this story, because they shaped me as much as business ever did. They left scars deeper than financial loss or failed ventures.

In 2023, my Hostel City branch was finally doing well. I was learning new things, working with my hands, experimenting with flavors, systems, and customers. It felt like, at least in that small corner of my life, I had created some balance. But in Parachinar, balance was breaking again.

The city itself was almost entirely Shia, but small Sunni villages surrounded it. That fragile geography meant that while large-scale massacres were unlikely, the violence took another shape: sudden ambushes, bullets

fired at cars on lonely roads, and whispers of a shepherd killed in the mountains.

Then came the incident that ripped through every heart in Parachinar. Seven Shia teachers were murdered in a Sunni village school—men whose only weapon had been a blackboard and chalk. Their blood painted the classrooms where they once taught children to read.

That massacre ignited a fresh wave of grief, rage, and hatred. I knew what was coming next. The revenge would be merciless. And the revenge of that revenge—even more merciless. That was the curse of our land: every wound invited another, and every cycle of violence returned sharper than before.

Parachinar has always carried a unique weight in the larger game of geopolitics. Pakistan is important on the global stage, but within Pakistan, Parachinar holds a particularly sensitive position.

Kabul, the capital of Afghanistan, is only a three-hour drive away. On the map, Parachinar extends like a wedge deep into Afghan territory, almost more inside Afghanistan than Pakistan itself. That proximity alone

makes it a place of interest for powers far beyond our borders.

The Shia majority adds another layer of complexity. For certain global players with sectarian or strategic agendas, Parachinar becomes more than just a border town—it becomes a lever. And when you combine that with a pool of trained but idle fighters—men who know warfare but have no work—the risk multiplies. That human resource, untapped and restless, is always one spark away from being used by someone.

These thoughts terrified me. Because this wasn't just politics—it was my reality. My family was still there. My nieces, nephews, cousins—their lives were tied to this land. And I couldn't help but think of the children of Parachinar. What future was waiting for them in a place that had become both a home and a battlefield?

The seed my parents had planted, and which I had struggled to water through the years, was finally bearing fruit. My sisters were blossoming into the very dreams my parents had once whispered about in our childhood home.

Naila, the eldest, had completed her MBBS and was now a practicing doctor in Lahore. She was already

preparing for the USMLE, her eyes set on the United States—a horizon far beyond Parachinar, where she could refine her skills and carve her future.

Saira, younger than Naila, was deep in her CSS preparation, determined to step into the corridors of civil service. Her books were not just exams—they were her path to authority, responsibility, and perhaps even change.

Maria, the youngest, was pursuing her law degree in Peshawar, eager to arm herself with the power of knowledge and justice.

Yet their successes, as proud as they made me, also filled me with fear. Because every vacation, every holiday, carried a shadow. Going home to Parachinar was not a simple journey—it was a gamble. The road itself had become a battlefield, where an innocent traveler could fall victim to a stray bullet, a targeted shot, or the violence of an unseen hand.

For me, their return home was never rest—it was risk.

I began to notice a dangerous shift among the youth of Parachinar. A whole generation—our Gen-Z—had grown up without diversity, without ever knowing the

meaning of coexistence. Their worldview was narrow, shaped only within the walls of one community, and against this backdrop, the thousands of fighters returning from Syria became catalysts of destruction.

These men, once hailed as heroes of a foreign battlefield, had come back with military training but no purpose. They sought to reinvent relevance out of nothing, and in doing so, they began poisoning the minds of the young. For these impressionable youth, Sunnis were not neighbors or fellow countrymen—they were demons. Perhaps the same was happening on the other side, but I could only see the sickness taking root in my own soil.

Hatred was spreading like wildfire, and this time it was armed with discipline, experience, and deadly skill. What once were mere street clashes could now evolve into militarized conflicts. That realization filled me with dread—not for myself, but for the family still living in Parachinar, surrounded by a storm that could break at any moment.

And so, I made one of the hardest decisions of my life. I resolved to move my family permanently to Islamabad, away from the constant fear of bullets and bloodshed. My father, along with a few loyal old employees,

managed what remained of our business there. But eventually, I had to make peace with another painful truth: the business that had once been a part of our identity in Parachinar could no longer survive. We sold it—for a fraction of its worth.

It was not just a sale. It was a farewell.

We found a new home in Islamabad, and my family said goodbye to Parachinar forever. A chapter of our lives, written in that valley of beauty and blood, came to a quiet, reluctant close.

Chapter 49: The Birth of BREE

In Hostel City, the business finally began to make commercial sense. Margins were strong, sales were steady, and most importantly—we had found our product-market fit.

It all came down to one product: Chai.

The traction was undeniable. Our tiny outlet, with space for only twelve people, was packed every evening. Customers queued outside, waiting for their turn at a table. Those who couldn't sit carried their cups away; others ordered deliveries. The product had become a habit, almost an addiction.

The demand forced us to scale operations internally. First, we hired two additional boys and trained them. Even then, the load was heavy enough that a third had to be added. For a shop of just twelve seats, three staff members running at full throttle was a strong signal—we had hit something real.

For me, this was more than just sales. It was validation of a principle I had always believed in but now experienced firsthand: the decisive advantage of a startup is Time.

Capital matters, execution matters, and the team matters. But all of these are secondary to timing. A startup launched too late enters a market already saturated. A startup launched too early burns its energy educating customers about a product they are not yet ready to adopt.

But when the timing is right—when the market is primed and the product meets an existing habit—you need less effort to win. For us, Chai was that bridge. It was universal, affordable, and deeply cultural. Everyone took it. We were not educating the market; we were simply serving it better.

That was the trick. That was the reason DILOYO turned profitable.

But success also brought clarity: DILOYO no longer represented who we were.

The very name and logo carried the image of fruits—a legacy of the brand's origin. Legally too, we were registered as a fruits and allied products company with SECP. Yet what was happening on the ground was something else entirely. We had evolved into a café business.

The pivot demanded a new identity. And in entrepreneurship, identity is not cosmetic—it is strategy. A name, a logo, a color scheme: they signal what a brand stands for and where it belongs in the consumer’s mind.

Our traction was coming not from fruits but from Chai and Coffee. They were our true engines of growth. So I rebranded. From DILOYO, we became BREE—a name inspired by “brew,” the act of crafting Chai and Coffee.

With that, I stripped away the colorful fruit aesthetics and turned to black and white as our theme colors. Minimalist. Bold. Timeless. Black and white reflected clarity of purpose and the seriousness of a brand that had left experimentation behind and was now positioning itself as a café chain.

The transition was more than just a logo change—it was a declaration: we were no longer a fruit brand; we were a lifestyle café brand.

Rebranding wasn’t cosmetic—it was strategic repositioning. DILOYO was misaligned with our core revenue drivers, but BREE was customer–category fit. The transition taught me that brand equity isn’t about

color palettes; it's about narrative-market coherence. Timing, again, was the silent arbitrage—we weren't educating the market on chai, we were capturing a habit already scaled by culture itself.

With a new identity came a new strategy. I decided to sell franchises again.

This time, it was not only because of profitability. It was because I had learned deeper truths about entrepreneurship. Efficiency was no longer a mystery to me; I now knew how to build it into the system. More importantly, I had discovered the single greatest lesson about building organizations:

You don't just hire employees—you create **“People Like Us.”**

When common people begin to think and act like founders, when they adopt the culture of ownership, the system sustains itself. Once you build that alignment, expansion becomes scalable.

With this mindset, I called Farhan and Haider once again. I extended the offer to join BREE, and they accepted. Despite the betrayals and storms of the past, I knew the entrepreneurial game was bigger than egos. In

business, people come and go, but what matters is the mission.

We designed a lean franchise model—small outlets, smartly built. Each kiosk would serve as a kitchen with seating for sixteen people, four tables with four chairs each. Just enough to create a community vibe without burdening the franchisee with unnecessary overhead.

The total investment? Only \$9,000.

And that covered everything—construction, equipment, setup. A full café business at the cost of a small car.

Farhan and Haider started selling BREE franchises, and together we prepared to experiment with this evolved version of DILOYO.

This time, we weren't just opening cafés—we were building a brand movement.

Chapter 50: The Boy Who Looked Foreign

From the twilight of DILOYO to the dawn of BREE, I met a figure who deserves more than a mere mention. Like a quiet star appearing in a dark sky, this person would go on to illuminate my path in ways I could not yet imagine.

It was just another evening at DILOYO in Hostel City, or so I thought.

The air outside was fragrant with brewing chai and coffee. I stepped through the familiar entrance of DILOYO, not expecting anything out of the ordinary, when I noticed a striking figure standing by the LED screen, fiddling with its remote like it belonged to him.

He looked nothing like the rest of us—blonde-tinged hair, pale skin flushed slightly red, and features that made him seem like he'd walked straight out of an English summer and into our small café in Islamabad. I blinked in surprise.

Khizer, our spirited manager, grinned as he saw me notice the boy. “He’s Australian,” he said with mischief in his eyes. “Studying here. Lives in Hostel City.”

I was stunned. What in the world would bring an Australian student to a dusty hostel alley in the heart of Pakistan? Curiosity overtook formality. I approached, and the boy greeted me with an effortless smile and a perfectly authentic accent—something between Sydney and Southern California.

We began to talk.

His cadence, his confidence, his command of the language—everything about him screamed foreign. And for a while, I truly believed it.

When he found out I was into entrepreneurship, he immediately started throwing around quotes and random thoughts from Andrew Tate. Most of it didn’t make much sense—just surface-level talk, loud words without weight—but he was clearly trying to sound smart and cool, to look like he knew things. Strangely, I liked that. He was trying to connect.

Then he asked about my favorite Netflix series and movies. I named a few—mainstream stuff, the kind you

watch just to relax. He gave a half-smile, politely nodded, but I could sense it. Deep inside, he was quietly judging me, probably laughing at my basic taste.

Then he named his favorite shows—some obscure titles I had never even heard of. At that point, he felt a little smarter, maybe even a bit superior. But he didn't stop talking. He kept the conversation going.

Perhaps the only reason he considered me worth talking to was that I could speak better English than most people around him. That gave me a strange sort of pass into his world.

We kept talking until Khizer burst out laughing and revealed the prank. The boy was not from Melbourne or Miami—but from my own soil, from Parachinar. His name was **Danish**.

A local boy in borrowed tones.

He laughed too, and there was no bitterness in it. Only warmth. That was the first thing I noticed about Danish: his ease with being misunderstood.

From that day onward, he started showing up every evening. He would sit quietly in a corner of DILOYO,

sipping chai, sometimes talking, mostly observing. I watched him watch the world, and I saw something familiar in his eyes—something I knew from years ago when I sat in cafés dreaming of what I could become.

Over time, he began sharing pieces of his life. He came from a forgotten village in Parachinar, a place where muddy walls caged hopes, where opportunities didn't knock—they evaporated before arrival. And yet here he was, in Islamabad, sharper than most, alive with thought, speaking a language that opened doors for him even before he understood which doors he wanted to walk through.

His father, he told me one night in a voice both proud and pained, had sold his gun—his only possession of real worth—to pay his admission fee. That image stayed with me: a father laying down arms so his son could pick up books.

I won't share more of his personal story here. Some things are too sacred for the page. But I will say this—something inside me changed after meeting Danish. I felt, deep in my gut, that this boy deserved more. That it was now **my responsibility** to show him the mirror of his own brilliance.

I brought him into BREE.

He was raw, but not naïve. Observant. Bold. Far more attuned to the pulse of the brand than some of my older, more experienced teammates. Where others saw only tea and transactions, Danish saw energy, movement, *vision*.

So I kept him close. Not out of favoritism, but out of instinct.

Naturally, this caused some murmurs within the team. Jealousy began to slither through the ranks, subtle at first, then sharper. A few couldn't understand why a newcomer, barely in his early twenties, was given such importance, such proximity to the core.

But I let the chaos rise. Quietly. Intentionally.

Because I knew storms shake away the weak roots.

Danish had already proven he could weather much more than this. So I didn't flinch. I let the ripples move through the water until they settled.

I never compromised on one thing: keeping him where he belonged—at the core of BREE's beating heart.

In the stories of startups, people often talk about ideas and investments. Rarely do they speak of people—of how one unlikely meeting can change the course of a journey.

For me, Danish was one of those rare moments.

Not a partner yet. Not an executive.

But already—unmistakably—family.

Chapter 51: The Rise of BREE

The franchise sales plan was ready, and Haider had taken charge of pitching BREE to potential investors. During that hunt, we started getting leads—curious people who wanted to know more about the concept. I personally met them, explained the business model, and to my relief, one of them agreed to open a BREE franchise.

In that moment, my belief in the unseen hand of destiny grew stronger. It felt as if the universe itself was conspiring in my favor. I had lost, failed, and been betrayed in the past, yet here I was—standing on the edge of something new, something bigger.

I knew deep inside that God had redirected me. DILOYO was only a stepping stone. The real vision, the true design, was BREE. It was as if the heavens had already written this plan, and I was just walking the path laid out for me.

In August 2023, we began building the first tiny yet smart franchise of BREE at 6th Road, Rawalpindi. It was hardly more than a 10-square-meter container, but it was crafted with elegance and efficiency. The kitchen

and machinery were fitted neatly inside, while outside we placed just four tables—enough to seat sixteen customers at a time.

The model was intentionally designed for takeaway and delivery rather than heavy dine-in. The smaller the outlet, the more customers we could serve without adding unnecessary overhead.

Our philosophy was simple: serve the best products at the most affordable price. To deliver on that promise, operational efficiency was non-negotiable. Rent was the biggest burden in food retail, and we tackled it by choosing small, high-footfall spaces rather than oversized locations that drained margins.

This became our template. Soon, we started replicating the model in Islamabad—tiny, smart outlets where the covered area was reserved for the kitchen and the outdoor space held four tables. Each was a miniature BREE, designed to scale quickly without compromising quality or profitability.

As BREE began to expand, I knew that growth without structure is chaos. So we shifted our focus towards automation and technology. The backbone of this shift was the deployment of Odoo ERP—a system

that allowed us to gather authentic data, streamline operations, and manage the business with precision.

I believed one principle deeply: better data leads to better decisions. And ERP was the bridge between instinct and insight.

I personally trained every manager on how to use the system—teaching them not just to enter numbers, but to understand what those numbers meant. We appointed quality control managers and supply chain managers, each trained directly under my supervision.

We documented our recipes in detail, locked them into the ERP, and ensured that no outlet could deviate from the standard. This was the first step toward uniformity at scale—whether a cup of chai was served in Rawalpindi, Islamabad, or any future city, it had to taste exactly the same.

BREE was no longer just a café idea. It was becoming a replicable system, driven by discipline, data, and design.

Meanwhile, the expansion of the Hostel City branch became inevitable. The branch entrance was always jammed with customers—so much so that even our own staff struggled to enter. On top of that, we were

using the same branch to train new HR, which added more pressure to the already crowded outlet.

This is where a big conflict in BREE's model emerged. Our philosophy was to build tiny, smart branches—lean outlets with low costs and fast returns. Yet the Hostel City branch, the very heart of BREE, was outgrowing that model. The demand was so overwhelming that a small, smart outlet was no longer enough.

On one hand, we were scaling with tiny outlets across the city. On the other, our most successful outlet was demanding a massive expansion. I call it a conflict because both strategies contradicted each other—but instead of resolving it, we let the construction of small branches continue, while separately deciding to expand Hostel City.

To handle the crowd, we rented a 200 square meter empty plot right in front of our first Hostel City outlet. There, we built seating for 150 people. The architecture was minimal, but elegant, and true to BREE's aesthetic.

The small café had now transformed into a hub of hundreds of daily customers. Hostel City wasn't just a

branch anymore—it was a statement of what BREE could become.

Within a month, the construction of our new branches was complete, and one by one, they were inaugurated by their respective franchisees. Each outlet carried the same sharp, minimal design that had become BREE's identity. To anyone walking past, it looked less like a local café chain and more like a global brand making its entry into Pakistan.

Soon, the activity on the franchises began. From the very first days, our capacity was overwhelmed. During peak hours, the small outlets—built to seat just 16 people—would choke with customers. We received complaints of “no seating available.” On one hand, it was thrilling to see demand exceed capacity; on the other, it was a genuine problem that needed a solution.

But the most surprising—and inspiring—was Hostel City. Even after its massive expansion to 150 seats, the branch was bursting with people. The place was alive with energy: hundreds of laughing faces, students strumming guitars, groups of friends trading stories, others quietly reading or working. Outside, a line of people waited patiently for their turn to enter.

We had even created a small library and workstation within the café, and these became favorite corners for many regulars.

Hostel City was no longer just a café—it had become a phenomenon. A cultural hub. A place where stories were written every night. For us, it became more than just a branch; it became a university of entrepreneurship. Every day, we were learning in real time how a brand grows, adapts, and finds its meaning in the lives of its customers.

From the very beginning, a strategic conflict was embedded in BREE's growth model. On paper, the idea of tiny, smart outlets was perfect—low investment, low operating costs, and fast scalability through franchises. But the market was telling us a different story.

The Hostel City branch—our most successful outlet—was demanding more of everything. More seating, more space, more variety on the menu. Even after expanding to 150 seats, it was still over capacity, signaling that consumer demand was pulling us in a completely different direction.

This created a classic entrepreneurial dilemma: do we stick to the efficiency of our initial model, or pivot toward the larger format that the market was clearly validating?

The answer was obvious, but difficult. Admitting it meant losses, redesigning our franchise pitch, and explaining to our early partners that our original model was flawed. It meant admitting as a CEO that I had miscalculated.

Instead of addressing it head-on, we chose to keep operations running as they were. The tiny branches continued to open, while the Hostel City branch kept proving that scale and capacity were the real opportunity.

It was a lesson in entrepreneurship: sometimes the market speaks louder than your business plan. But at that moment, we weren't ready to act on it.

Entrepreneurs' Takeaway

We had built a lean, replicable model designed around unit economics: low rent, fast turnover, and scalability through standardization. It was a textbook version of

franchising. But then Hostel City challenged the entire thesis. The market was pulling us toward a different product–market fit than the one we had designed for. The clash between strategy and reality taught me a painful but priceless truth: growth models aren’t just built in boardrooms—they’re validated in the chaos of customer demand. ERP systems, SOPs, and standardized recipes gave us operational discipline, but they couldn’t protect us from the contradictions embedded in our own assumptions. Hostel City was screaming for scale while our franchises were suffocating in their “tiny smart outlet” format. It became clear that scalability is not just about replication, it’s about elasticity—about having the courage to pivot the model when the market signals louder than your spreadsheets. At that time, I didn’t act on it, but in hindsight, I know that every entrepreneur must learn this: the market doesn’t bend to your model; your model must bend to the market.

Chapter 52: Building Systems

Growth and scale always come with hidden challenges. The bigger a venture grows, the more it tests the depth of its people and systems. And in that crucial phase of BREE, one young boy became an unexpected pillar of strength.

Danish — the boy who always looked foreign because of his features — was still a college student when he joined BREE full-time. At first glance, he was just another employee. But very quickly, he began to stand out.

He wasn't just doing his job; he was absorbing everything around him — HR, finance, marketing, operations. He was falling in love with entrepreneurship itself, not just with BREE. That's rare. Most employees work for a salary. Danish worked for meaning.

At BREE, we had a culture we called "**People Like Us**" — people who carried the same fire, the same obsession, the same willingness to go beyond limits. Danish not only became one of "**us**," but he also

became the one who could train others into becoming “us.”

His fertile mind and sharp adaptability impressed me beyond measure. In a short time, he carved out a special place for himself in the story of BREE — not as a worker, but as a builder.

But growth also meant a clash of mindsets. On one side, we had fresh energy like Danish — young, adaptive, eager to build systems. On the other, we had the old guard, the boys who had been with us since the days of DILOYO.

They were loyal and honest. They loved BREE because to them it wasn’t just a workplace, it was a dream that had suddenly started looking like a global brand. They carried a sense of ownership — not because of shares, but because of emotion. And that was priceless.

But emotion alone doesn’t scale a business. They didn’t know the mechanics of authority and responsibility. Their minds were still stuck in the old single-branch culture, where everyone was everyone — the barista could handle customers, the manager could prepare chai in peak hours, and friendship was stronger than structure.

That system worked for one outlet. But now we were running a company with sixty-two people. Scaling required clarity — job descriptions, accountability, discipline, and a system where personal feelings didn't override professional duties.

This is where the conflict began. Danish, who had recently joined, was given the most important responsibility of all — to ensure the full implementation of BREE SOPs. He was driving the shift from chaos to system. But the old boys resisted him. Not out of malice, but out of habit. They couldn't digest orders coming from someone new, someone younger, someone who spoke in the language of systems and ERP dashboards instead of old camaraderie.

And yet, the ERP was non-negotiable. Without it, we couldn't scale. Without it, we were blind.

When Danish stepped onto the ground, reality hit hard. He was younger than most of the old boys, and in their eyes, he lacked the seniority to lead them. What started as passive resistance soon turned into open defiance. Some even crossed the line into violence, and for the first time in BREE, tension in the team threatened the spirit of the company.

It was a painful moment of leadership. We had to let go of some of the most experienced people — men who had been with us since the DILOYO days. Their exit hurt, but keeping them would have hurt more, because culture is heavier than competence.

In those turbulent months, Danish didn't just preach the system — he lived it. At times he even stepped in as branch manager himself, running outlets while we searched for replacements. He faced insults, pressure, and endless resistance, but he never broke.

Six months later, the storm had calmed. The SOPs were in place, the ERP was fully adopted, and discipline had quietly replaced chaos. Danish had earned not just authority, but respect. And in that process, BREE made an important transition: from a passionate startup running on energy, to a structured company running on systems.

Aamir, my younger brother, was officially the head of operations — but when the storm of resistance shook BREE, he found himself completely lost. He didn't know which lever to pull, which fire to put out first. Scale is brutal that way; it exposes gaps instantly.

So I had to step in. Together, we rolled up our sleeves, diving deep into the messy ground realities. I walked him through the mechanics of scale — how decisions must flow, how authority must be respected, and how discipline must be enforced without killing the spirit of the team.

The core team was burning 16-hour days, grinding endlessly just to keep the system from collapsing. But slowly, order began to return. The ERP started showing real numbers, SOPs were followed without question, and the chaos finally gave way to a steady rhythm.

When Aamir finally grasped the depth of his role, I handed the charge back to him. It was a defining moment for him as a leader and for BREE as a company. We were no longer just surviving scale — we were learning how to manage it.

Once the dust of operations had settled, Danish was assigned a role closer to his passion — marketing and brand building. He took it with the seriousness of a craftsman discovering his true tool. I guided him towards Seth Godin, the voice that had shaped much of my own understanding of branding. Marketing, I

told him, is not about shouting louder — it's about telling better stories.

We had no interest in spammy promotions or shallow advertising. What we wanted was resonance. We wanted customers to feel that BREE was not just a café but an experience that recognized them as individuals.

So we started paying attention to the people who kept coming back — the regulars who had quietly made BREE part of their lives. We studied their habits, their quirks, the small details that made them unique. And then, instead of offering them discounts or free drinks, we gave them something far more personal — framed compliments.

Each compliment carried their name, their story, and a lighthearted remark about the little habit that made them memorable. It wasn't a mass marketing campaign. It was intimate. Human. Real.

That little act created permanent loyalty. People weren't just customers anymore; they were part of the story of BREE. I am certain that even today, hundreds of those framed compliments still hang on walls or sit proudly on desks as a reminder of a moment when a café saw them, not just their money.

And if you, dear reader, happen to still have one of those compliments — I ask you to share a picture of it with the hashtags **#TheLastPitch** and **#BREE**. Because in the end, those stories are the real brand we built.

Entrepreneurs' Takeaway

Looking back, I realized that scaling is the ultimate stress test for any venture. It doesn't just stretch operations; it stretches systems, leadership capacity, and corporate culture. At BREE, we were forced to transition from a friendship-driven setup into a structured organization where ERP adoption, SOP enforcement, and accountability frameworks became non-negotiable. That shift was brutal, but it revealed a hard truth: loyalty is priceless, but loyalty without competence or adaptability creates bottlenecks.

Danish's journey taught me that leadership development is not a matter of age or title, but of consistency, resilience, and the courage to enforce change even when it meets resistance. At the same time, our approach to branding evolved from transactional tactics to storytelling marketing, where we focused on building customer loyalty by recognizing individuals

rather than pushing discounts. In that phase, BREE graduated from being a passionate startup to becoming a company with the foundations of scalability, where culture was aligned with systems and growth was powered by both discipline and meaning.

Chapter 53: When the Data Whispered

The business machinery was in motion. Every department was busy, every process ticking like gears in a system I had designed with both ambition and urgency. The ERP was humming silently in the background — recording every sale, every transaction, every inventory movement. Numbers were no longer abstract guesses; they were being captured, structured, and transformed into insights.

I was waiting for the first month's results.

From the Hostel City branch, I could already sense strong numbers. The crowds, the constant buzz, the overflowing seating — those signals were hard to ignore. But when it came to the tiny smart branches, I carried a quiet unease. Intuition whispered that things were not aligning with the original vision.

And yet, I left the results to God.

Or perhaps, to be brutally honest, it wasn't faith — it was a mask for uncertainty. Entrepreneurs often do this: when clarity is missing, we cover our doubts with

faith. It is easier to say “Insha’Allah” than to admit a flaw in the model. Maybe it is human psychology, maybe it is entrepreneurial psychology — when we are nuclear and fragile, we hide behind destiny.

But business is mathematics. God does not balance our accounts; numbers do.

Finally, the wait was over — the first month’s financial reports arrived.

The Hostel City branch performed exactly as expected, if not better. The numbers validated the obvious: hundreds of repeated customers, thousands of unique visitors, healthy margins, and clear profitability. It was breathing like a business should breathe — consistent, sustainable, alive.

But then came the reports from the tiny smart branches.

Despite complaints of capacity choke, despite full tables during peak hours, the financial sheets told a very different story. They had made no profits. Not even close.

The results hit me like a punch. How could an outlet filled with customers, with visible traction, not

produce profits? I immediately called for a core team meeting. The CFO, Mr. Ijaz, was put on the spot.

“Ijaz, is this theft? Did you conduct the audit properly?” I pressed.

He nodded with unsettling calm. *“I audited every figure, cross-checked every receipt. What the data is showing... is unfortunately true.”*

Silence fell across the table. It wasn’t just about numbers — it was about the credibility of the entire model. If the tiny branches weren’t profitable even at full throttle, something was fundamentally broken.

After a heated round of discussions and defensive arguments, we collectively decided to label it an **“exception.”**

It was the first month, after all. Systems take time to settle, costs stabilize, and customer behavior normalizes.

“Let’s wait for next month’s data,” I said. But deep inside, I already knew: the numbers never lie.

I instructed the CFO with clarity and precision:

“Make sure every transaction, every rupee, every cup served is recorded on ERP. Inventory must reconcile with sales. Customers’ data must be accurate. Every order must carry its timestamp so we can trace activity hour by hour. No gray areas. No loose ends.”

We doubled down on discipline. Because without data discipline, there is no truth in business.

But deep inside, I already knew what the problem could be. I just wasn’t ready to face it. Sometimes, as entrepreneurs, we choose to stay happy with the lies rather than sad with the truth. Lies protect hope; truth demands correction.

And perhaps I was guilty of leaning too much on hope. I believed in the kindness of the universe. I believed that even if something wasn’t right, some invisible hand would intervene, correct the course, and make it right. I had convinced myself that the universe would conspire in our favor — even without logic, without numbers, without correction.

It was faith versus reality. And faith is a dangerous comfort when the numbers are already whispering the truth.

The second month's financials arrived — and this time, I could no longer hide behind faith or excuses. This time, I had no choice but to listen to the numbers.

I went deeper, aligning the ERP data with ground realities. Line by line. Hour by hour. And then the truth stood naked in front of me:

We had committed yet another entrepreneurial mistake — even after so many experiments, even after so many failures. A mistake I had always sensed in some corner of my mind but never had the courage to admit.

We had underestimated consumer habits.

We had miscalculated peak business timings in Pakistan.

We had overestimated the efficiency of our workers.

The data, in its silent whispers, taught us what 60 days on the ground could not. It forced me to see reality, no matter how harsh, no matter how costly. And it gave me one of the most powerful lessons of entrepreneurship: data does not lie, but entrepreneurs often do — to themselves.

I realized this was the last mistake, because now the business equation was clear, almost mathematical. The model could work — but only if we corrected it.

And that was the real burden: rectification. Correction meant closures. Closures meant losses. Losses meant debt. The medicine was bitter, but without it, the patient would die.

I had reached that sharp edge of entrepreneurship where you must decide: save the vision, or save your pride.

Entrepreneurs' Takeaway

In that moment, I understood that scaling is not only about opening more outlets but about ensuring that each unit is economically viable, systemically efficient, and aligned with consumer behavior. The ERP adoption gave us transparency, but transparency alone does not fix broken assumptions — it only exposes them. What the data was whispering was not just about profits and losses, but about the flaws in our operational model, the mismatch between our capacity and Pakistan's unique consumer habits, and the

overestimation of our team's productivity curve. I learned that in business, hope is not a strategy, and faith cannot substitute data-driven decision-making. If culture is the heart of a company, then numbers are the pulse — ignore them and the organism collapses. The whispers of data were not just warnings; they were a call to pivot, to optimize systems, to refine customer-centric operations, and to reimagine the model not as I wished it to be, but as the market demanded it to be.

Chapter 54: The Mirror of Data

Here is what the data spoke. Here is what the main problem was.

After deeply studying the reports, we realized that we were running two completely different business models under a single brand, BREE.

On one side stood the Hostel City branch — a large, highly profitable outlet with a simultaneous seating capacity of 150 customers. On the other side, the tiny smart branches, struggling to make sense of their economics.

Let's first look at Hostel City.

Data-based observations from the big profitable branch:

There were just four peak hours in the day when the sales graph shot upward.

Hostel City maximized those hours because it had the seating capacity to absorb them. Even though the practical choke point was 100 customers (since a

two-person group could block a four-seat table), the scale still worked.

We were serving around 500 customers every single day.

The space was legally ours, with no external interruptions or closures.

Rent was so reasonable that we could maintain our affordable price strategy without pressure.

The branch sat at the heart of a student ecosystem — naturally formed tribes who spread word of mouth like wildfire. There was no need to spend on advertising; community was our marketing.

Hostel City was an untapped market. Students had no other place combining ambiance with affordability. We filled that gap perfectly.

Adding a few smart, value-added menu items could instantly increase the average bill size. The customer base was already strong; we just had to unlock more value per head.

The size of the branch gave us flexibility to expand the kitchen and experiment with new products.

In short, the strengths of the big branch were clear: scale, community, affordability, and product expansion potential.

On the other side, we had the tiny smart branches — 16-seat outlets that were either barely profitable or outright loss-making.

Here's what the data revealed about them:

Product quality and price were not the problem. Customers loved both. The issue was structural.

Just like Hostel City, there were only four peak hours of real business. But unlike Hostel City, these branches could not absorb the traffic.

Capacity choked quickly. Even with 16 seats, the choke point came at 10 customers, because in Pakistan nobody shares a table with strangers.

Customers spent long hours over a single cup of chai. In a culture where time is abundant, people treated our outlets as hangout spots rather than high-turnover

cafés. Each lingering guest meant lost revenue from those waiting outside.

Asking customers to free up space was not an option. In Pakistan, if you offend a customer's pride, you lose them forever.

Family customers avoided us. The small road-side seating was not family-friendly. Our model unintentionally limited itself to only students and individuals.

Legality was another trap. The seating space outside those shops was technically government land. Every few weeks authorities would confiscate our chairs, causing sudden breaks in operations.

Finally, there was the environmental factor. Sitting on the roadside exposed our customers to constant disturbance from beggars. Many of the more sophisticated clients simply stopped coming because of that experience.

In short, while Hostel City was scaling by community and capacity, the tiny branches were failing by design.

If we wanted to make the tiny branches profitable, we had only two levers: raise the prices or expand the space.

But both options carried their own trap. Raising prices meant losing the very audience that loved us — the everyday customer. And affordability was not just a pricing strategy; it was our core ideology.

Compromising it would mean betraying the essence of BREE.

The second option — hiring bigger spaces — meant higher fixed costs, heavier rents, and again a direct hit on affordability. The model would collapse under its own weight.

The data had spoken clearly. It wasn't just numbers; it was a mirror showing us the laws of our own business physics.

Affordability was our non-negotiable identity.

Capacity was the real engine of profitability.

And location selection was the ultimate variable that determined both.

From that moment, we knew we had to rewrite the BREE model. Not as a dream, not as an experiment, but as a mathematical equation — precise, replicable, and scalable.

But this clarity came at a price. A storm was already on the horizon. Because shifting to this refined ideology meant admitting mistakes, restructuring our operations, and perhaps even closing down branches we had just opened.

The change was inevitable. But entrepreneurship often teaches that inevitable clarity is the most painful kind of clarity.

Entrepreneurs' Takeaway

In the chapter above, revealed the brutal clarity of unit economics — Hostel City was profitable because its operating leverage, capacity utilization, and location strategy aligned perfectly with customer behavior, while the tiny smart branches failed due to structural flaws in throughput, customer turnover, and regulatory risk tied to illegal seating. The data showed

that affordability as a value proposition could not survive without scale, and that community-driven customer acquisition was far more sustainable than forced advertising spend. It also highlighted the importance of designing for cultural context — in Pakistan, where guests linger and families value privacy, micro-branches could never match the efficiency of large, student-driven ecosystems. The takeaway was clear: a business cannot scale on hope or ideology alone; it must scale on replicable unit models, capacity economics, and customer behavior analytics. Data became the mirror that forced us to stop experimenting blindly and start architecting a model that was both profitable and scalable.

Chapter 55: The Equation of BREE

By now, BREE had gone through enough fire to burn away its illusions. We had seen numbers whispering the truth, felt the sting of closures, and tasted both applause and embarrassment. But this time, we were no longer chasing survival alone — we were learning how to craft with maturity. We were no longer children in entrepreneurship; we were beginning to speak its language.

The first question that stood before us was positioning. It sounds like jargon, but in truth, positioning is destiny. It is the compass that answers: Who are you for? What makes you different from the crowd? Why should anyone choose you over a hundred others? And most importantly, what perception do people attach to your name the moment it's spoken?

Every failed experiment, every disappointing data sheet, every long night of observation was now pointing to this. We realized that startups don't just collapse because of bad products or poor execution — often, they collapse because they never defined their position in the first place. Without positioning, you are a café without a soul, a brand without a voice.

So we sat down, not with spreadsheets alone, but with questions as sharp as scalpels. What did BREE truly stand for? What did we want people to feel the moment they walked in? What was our place in the ecosystem of food and cafés? That brainstorming was more than strategy — it was surgery on our own dreams.

And as we wrestled with those questions, something shifted inside us. We weren't just chasing profits anymore; we were chasing clarity. And clarity, we discovered, was more valuable than capital.

As we peeled back the layers of data and consumer behavior, the truth became brutally clear: BREE was carrying two fundamental mistakes.

The first was straightforward — our menu lacked proper meal items. Chai and snacks could carry us only so far; to truly capture value, people needed food that could fill them, not just accompany conversation. That was fixable. A few smart additions to the kitchen could solve it.

But the second mistake was a monster — the kind of mistake that doesn't forgive. It was the size of our premises.

We had chosen spaces too small, too fragile for the weight of our own ambition. In reality, we needed at least 500 square meters to breathe, to serve, to grow. Anything less meant permanent suffocation. And unlike the menu problem, this mistake had no band-aid. Once committed, the only cure was closure — and closure is a slow, merciless kind of destruction.

Worse still, the size problem strangled every other correction. We couldn't even expand the menu, because meals demanded a bigger kitchen, and bigger kitchens demanded bigger spaces. Every road to growth was blocked by the same wall.

I often repeated one bitter line in front of my team: “Size matters.” It became an inside joke, one that made them laugh — though I wasn’t sure what they were really laughing at.

All I knew was that one wrong decision about size had triggered a chain reaction of destruction.

In entrepreneurship, some mistakes teach. Others punish. The size mistake did both.

This time, we rebuilt BREE not as a money machine but as a mission. The failures of the past had taught us

something priceless: when you chase only profits, you lose both people and purpose. But when you serve people with clarity and sincerity, money comes anyway — as a by-product.

So we rooted BREE in values.

Our new core ideology was sharp and simple:

“We’re not in the food business. We’re in the people business — and we serve food to them.”

That sentence became our compass. It shifted our entire lens. Food was no longer the end goal; it was simply the medium through which we built connection. At BREE, our real product was belonging. Our mission was to create spaces where people felt seen, welcomed, and connected.

That’s why we reimagined our cafés as community hubs — large, ambient spaces where people from every walk of life could gather. Students and professionals, dreamers and doers, friends and families — all under one roof, all equal in value.

And from that reimagination came the success formula of BREE: three non-negotiable values.

1. Affordability

We believed that good food and inspiring spaces should never be the privilege of the elite. Our prices had to remain accessible to students, workers, and families in suburban areas, without ever compromising on quality. Affordability wasn't just a strategy — it was our promise.

2. Community

BREE would be more than a café; it would be a hub of connection. We envisioned libraries tucked into corners, workstations buzzing with ideas, and even podcast studios where voices could be amplified. Our cafés were not meant to be places where people simply consumed; they were meant to be places where people created.

3. Inclusivity

Above all, BREE was for everyone. No class, no background, no identity could ever feel excluded within our walls. Whether you were a student sharing a single chai, or an entrepreneur running a meeting, you would always feel like you belonged.

In these values, we discovered the true formula of BREE. It was not a café chain, not even a business in the usual sense — it was a people's brand. A movement disguised as a menu.

And for the first time, I felt we were building not just a startup, but a story worth telling.

In a place where affordability and community are alive, inclusivity comes naturally. It means students, workers, families, and even those from the city's margins can call BREE their home. Every evening, our cafés would become a mirror of society itself — where classes dissolved, and chai cups were equalizers.

We designed libraries and workstations, turning our outlets into living rooms for the city. Readers, dreamers, freelancers, and students could all find a

corner to belong. That was the environment we imagined.

And so, the positioning of BREE crystallized into a single, simple sentence:

“The community café where great food meets affordability, inclusivity, and belonging.”

But like every great formula, this one revealed its own contradictions. Solving the puzzle was not just about ideals — it was about confronting ground realities.

The Problem of Affordability

Serving high-quality products at affordable prices wasn’t just a wish; it was an equation. And affordability, we realized, was less about price tags and more about fixed costs. In Islamabad, the math was brutal. Rents devoured affordability like a black hole. For the size we demanded — 500 square meters — the market rates made our vision nearly impossible. Worse, such large spaces rarely existed in the heart of trendy food streets, which were designed for quick consumption, not long conversations.

The Problem of Community

Communities aren't built in a vacuum. You cannot parachute into a random neighborhood and expect a tribe to form. Communities already exist — in colleges, in offices, in tightly knit neighborhoods. People are already bound by shared identities, shared struggles, and shared aspirations. What they lack is a place to sit, to connect, and to grow together. That was where BREE came in. But this insight also meant our outlets couldn't just be anywhere. They needed to be where tribes already lived, waiting for a home.

The Problem of Inclusivity

Inclusivity, we discovered, was not an independent goal. It was the offspring of affordability and community. If we failed at either, inclusivity would collapse. Without affordability, we'd only serve the elite. Without community, we'd only serve the isolated. But if we achieved both, we could gather all walks of life under one roof — a true reflection of society's diversity, united by chai and stories.

The puzzle was clear: affordability, community, and inclusivity were not three separate values, but three gears in the same engine. If one gear jammed, the entire machine would fail. And the fate of BREE would depend on how well we could make them turn together.

The Solution

In the end, the solution revealed itself with the simplicity of a truth that had always been there. It was not hidden in fancy strategies or costly experiments. It was in the untapped markets — the places others ignored.

When I walked through those areas — suburban towns, secondary cities, and busy metropolitan corners beyond the glamour of food streets — I saw everything we had been searching for. Huge spaces at reasonable rents. Rooftops waiting to be transformed. A local workforce ready to serve. Communities already formed, already waiting. And above all, a demand aching for a brand like BREE.

Economists say, “supply creates its own demand.”

But here, demand was already alive — it was only waiting for supply.

Rooftops became our revelation. They were unutilized real estate, often ambiance-friendly, breathing with light and openness. By turning rooftops into cafés, we could finally keep our promise of affordability, community, and inclusivity. Space was no longer a constraint. Rent was no longer a killer. The formula was finally balanced.

For marketing, we chose a path as human as our brand. Each café would have its own podcast studio, where members of the local community could sit, talk, and tell their stories. No celebrities, no forced campaigns — just real people sharing real moments. Because at BREE, our marketing was never about selling products; it was about celebrating people.

Our genre was simple, almost poetic:

“Every cup has a story.”

And this — this was the foundation of the new BREE.

Not just a café. Not just a business. But a community-driven brand, born out of mistakes,

refined by data, grounded in values, and designed for belonging.

As we stood at the edge of this new chapter, I felt the quiet thrill of anticipation. This was no longer about survival or experiments. It was about stepping into a journey crafted on truth, clarity, and vision.

I was excited — not just to see the results, but to see the stories unfold.

Chapter 56: Redefining the Deal

We had the ideology. The math worked. The clarity of values — affordability, community, inclusivity — gave us a compass we had never held before. The only question was: how do we package this vision into a deal that could scale without destroying us again?

This time, we refused to repeat the mistakes of the past. In the first wave of BREE, our agreements were too generous, too protective of franchisees, and too heavy on us. In trying to make the deal safe for them, we had unknowingly piled the weight of liabilities onto our own shoulders. And when the small branches failed, that burden nearly crushed us.

So this time, the rules of the game had to change. We crafted a new franchise agreement, one that was fair, transparent, and workable — but also one that safeguarded BREE from being dragged down by the failure of others.

There were three major changes.

First: In the old agreements, we had promised responsibility for failure. If a branch didn't work, the liability came back to us. It was a naive attempt to make

the offer attractive. But business does not forgive naivety. In the new agreement, we ended that practice. We charged a modest franchise fee of \$8,000, and from there, the cost of construction, machinery, and inventory became the responsibility of the franchisee. BREE would provide the architectural designs, the list of equipment, and even connect them with trusted contractors and vendors — but the financial commitment was theirs.

Second: In the old agreement, franchisees had no say in operations. They couldn't hire, couldn't fire, couldn't touch the day-to-day. It was meant to protect consistency, but in reality, it suffocated trust. In the new agreement, we loosened the reins. Franchisees were free to involve themselves in daily matters if they wished, or they could step back and leave it all to us. The choice was theirs.

Third: In the old model, operational losses fell back on BREE. That was the trap. This time, we corrected it. Any losses, any burn during operations, would be the responsibility of the franchisee. What we promised instead was absolute transparency. Through our ERP, every sale, every expense, every rupee would be visible to them in real-time, audited and undeniable.

Meanwhile, BREE would continue to do what it did best: run the business. We would provide the technology, assure quality, ensure timely supplies, and train and manage the human resource. In return, we would charge 20% of the net profit as royalty — nothing more, nothing less.

For the first time, the agreement felt balanced. It wasn't charity, it wasn't exploitation — it was partnership. A partnership where risk and reward were shared fairly, where clarity replaced confusion, and where BREE could finally grow without carrying the dead weight of every wrong decision.

This time, we marched into the most vibrant untapped markets and handpicked locations that checked every box of our new philosophy. These weren't just places with footfall; they were places with soul — spaces where affordability, community, and inclusivity could actually breathe.

Once the agreements were signed, we rolled out the architecture designs to our franchisees, and construction began. Walls rose, colors spread, and slowly, the new BREE spaces started taking shape.

Meanwhile, we shifted our focus to the menu — a battlefield we had delayed for far too long. Customers had always demanded meal items, and we knew they weren't just asking for food; they were asking for satisfaction, for completeness, for reasons to stay longer and spend more. Meal items were also the lever to increase the average bill size, which was critical to profitability.

But here lay the biggest challenge: food complicates everything. Skilled human resources are hard to retain, and complicated meals meant inconsistent quality across outlets. Uniformity, the lifeblood of a scalable franchise, could vanish with just one careless hand in the kitchen.

So we made a decision — and a declaration:

- We believe in a business system that can be run by anyone.
- We believe in businesses that cannot be destroyed by minor mismanagement. Because minor mismanagement always happens.

These values became our guardrails. They forced us to choose only a limited number of meal items — simple enough to train quickly, easy enough to automate, and consistent enough to replicate across every outlet without fear.

The operations department went to work, hiring chefs not as artisans of complexity, but as architects of simplicity. Their job was to master the selected items and design processes so streamlined that even a new boy on his first day could follow them without error.

While operations wrestled with food, the construction department was already turning blueprints into reality — building the most ambient community spaces that BREE had ever promised.

It was not just about cafés anymore. It was about creating an equation — where architecture, food, systems, and values aligned into one formula for scale.

Meanwhile, one of the hardest decisions of my entrepreneurial life stood waiting: the closure of the old tiny branches. For months, I had avoided it, hoping some miracle would turn them around. But deep down

I knew — keeping them alive was like chasing a rabbit hole, draining energy, time, and money without leading anywhere.

So we took the decision. We closed every single one of the small outlets. And with that decision came not just a sense of clarity, but also a mountain of debt.

The numbers were brutal. By the time the shutters went down, the accumulated debt had crossed \$200,000. It was enough to keep me awake at nights, enough to push me towards despair. Yet, the decision had to be made. Because holding onto a broken model only multiplies losses. Cutting it off hurts, but it is the only way forward.

This liability was not just financial. It was personal. It came from a promise — a promise we had made to our franchisees in the early days, when we told them that if the venture didn't work, we would pay them back in full. It was not a contractual clause alone; it was a token of gratitude for their trust in me. They hadn't invested in BREE — they had invested in me, in my conviction, in my ability to make something out of nothing. And that trust was priceless.

So I carried the weight. I made commitments of repayment, even though I didn't know how I would fulfill them. Every figure in that debt was a reminder of both my failure and my responsibility.

But despite the crushing burden, I never stopped moving forward. I walked with hope — the kind of hope that keeps an entrepreneur alive when numbers are against him, when logic says stop, but vision says continue.

I hoped that one day, BREE would rise on the strength of its new ideology — affordability, community, and inclusivity — and that I would stand tall not only as a founder of a brand but as a man who kept his promises.

Because in the end, startups are not just about ideas or profits. They are about trust. And trust is the only currency that never loses its value.

Chapter 57: The Day We Lost Our Home

And then came the most heartbreakng incident of all — the blow that almost shattered us completely. An incident that not only stripped away our hard work but also scarred us with the kind of pain only entrepreneurs in this part of the world can understand.

This chapter is not just about business. It is about how brutal the journey of entrepreneurship becomes in a country where systems fail you, where corruption overrules law, and where dreams are crushed under the weight of power and privilege.

There was a huge open space in F-10 Islamabad, one of the city's elite sectors and a buzzing food hub. The space had once been used by another café, which had closed down, leaving behind an empty ground with promise written all over it.

The property technically belonged to a government department, but a man who owned the adjacent building approached us. He claimed the right to rent it out, assuring us that he would secure the lease agreement from the CDA (Capital Development

Authority), which managed such properties. His words carried the confidence of someone who had influence. He said the rent would go through him, and since the space was adjacent to his building, he had the authority to grant it.

We believed him. A formal agreement was drafted and signed.

The franchise for this branch was purchased by a goldsmith who had been closely watching BREE's rise. He saw immense potential in that location — a prime area, huge space, and surprisingly low rent compared to other food outlets in Islamabad. For him, it looked like the perfect deal.

We were all thrilled. The F-10 branch carried the promise of being one of BREE's flagship outlets. Construction began swiftly, the space was transformed, and soon, the doors of our new branch were opened. The inauguration was filled with excitement and optimism. For a brief moment, we felt victorious.

But just one week later, the storm arrived.

CDA officials walked in with a notice. The property, they declared, was government-owned and not leasable

under any circumstance. “There is no provision for lease in CDA rules,” they said. The agreement we had signed was worthless. We had no right to be there.

It fell upon us like thunder. Millions had already been spent on construction. Advance rent had been paid. And yet, in one single notice, everything was declared illegal.

We rushed to the man who had rented us the space. But he shrugged. He could not, or rather, would not, secure a lease. His responsibility ended the moment he had taken our money.

And then came the real blow.

The franchisee — the goldsmith — upon hearing the news, stormed into our office. His demands were ruthless: “Give me my money back immediately or hand over the Hostel City branch.” He did not stop at words. He took the matter into his own hands, bribing corrupt police officers to put pressure on us.

One night, those officers came and dragged me, Farhan, and Danish to the police station. There were no warrants, no legal grounds. It was pure intimidation — an illegal detention meant to force us into surrender.

I was terrified. The weight of the situation crushed me. I had no money to return to him. The only way to escape the nightmare was to give up our Hostel City branch — the crown jewel of BREE, the one branch that was working, the one branch that kept our hope alive.

I surrendered it. With trembling hands and a broken heart, I let go of Hostel City.

As if that wasn't enough, the man who had rented us the space in F-10 didn't just wash his hands of the matter. He looted what was left. He took away the machinery and equipment as if it were his by right.

And in that moment, I realized a bitter truth about the land I was building in:

Here, money is power. Here, owning plazas in elite sectors is a license to commit injustice. Here, entrepreneurship is not killed by failure — it is murdered by corruption.

But the real heartbreak came not from losing the F-10 branch — it came when we surrendered our Hostel City branch.

That branch was more than a café. It was our classroom, our sanctuary, our heartbeat. Hostel City had taught us entrepreneurship in its rawest form. Every cup brewed there carried lessons; every customer we served was part of our story. Losing it was like tearing out the soul of BREE.

For Aamir, the pain cut deepest. He had lived and breathed Hostel City. He was not just a manager there — he was its barista, its caretaker, its face. The customers were not customers to him; they were friends, confidants, even family. When we lost the branch, it broke him from the inside. I often found him speaking wistfully about reopening it one day, telling me, “If we get funds or another franchisee, we must build a bigger, more beautiful branch here.” To protect his own dignity, and perhaps to shield the customers who loved him, he lied to them: he told them we had sold the branch because it wasn’t the best one, and that a more ambient, more vibrant Hostel City café was on the way. It was his way of keeping hope alive when reality had stolen it.

Farhan, too, was devastated. Hostel City had become more than a café for him; it was our office, our gathering place, our brainstorming hub, the place

where laughter, arguments, and dreams intertwined. With its loss, the very ground beneath his feet disappeared.

For Danish, the incident was unbearable. He had been an integral part of our team, but fear overtook loyalty. The corruption, the police intimidation, the way power crushed us — it was too much for him to endure. He quietly left, choosing survival over the storm.

Haider followed soon after. To him, without Hostel City, there was nothing left to hold onto.

And just like that, my team — the passionate comrades I had built BREE with — began to scatter. I was left standing amidst the ruins with only a handful of companions. No place to gather, no sanctuary to dream in, and no center to hold us together.

Hostel City had been our heart. And when it was ripped away, all of us bled.

On January 1st, 2025, the branch we once called our home wore a new name on its signboard. I saw it from a distance, and tears filled my eyes. It felt as if I had lost a loved one. Hostel City was not just a café to me; it

was an institution of entrepreneurship, a living testament to our struggle, our learning, our victories and defeats. Watching it reborn under another name was like being told that the story we had written there no longer belonged to us.

That day, I felt homeless. Not in the physical sense, but in spirit. Something inside me had been uprooted. I turned to my team, what little of it remained, and made them a promise: We will not accept defeat. We will rise again. I promised Aamir in particular that one day, we would bring BREE back to Hostel City, more vibrant, more beautiful, more alive than ever before.

From that day on, I never set foot near the old branch again. I could not bear to see the new signboard hanging on a place I once loved so deeply. Instead, I carried Hostel City inside me — in my thoughts, in my dreams. During those restless nights when sleep came in fragments, I often found myself back there, sitting at a familiar table in the café that no longer existed, hearing the echoes of conversations, laughter, and dreams we once nurtured there.

Our loyal customers felt it too. They wrote to us on social media, asking why BREE had left, why their favorite community café had vanished. Their messages

broke my heart, yet at the same time, they filled me with pride. It meant that we had built something real, something worth missing.

But life does not wait for grief to pass. And neither can entrepreneurs. We gathered what was left of our team, and I gave them the only thing I still had to offer: hope. Hope that our story was not ending but transforming. Hope that the new under-construction branches would carry the torch forward. Hope that BREE would rise again, not just as a café, but as a movement born from love, resilience, and the refusal to give up.

Because sometimes, entrepreneurship is not about profits or losses. Sometimes, it is about surviving heartbreak and still daring to dream.

Chapter 58: The Night of Two Fates

Amidst the devastating storm of losing our beloved Hostel City branch, construction of two new branches continued — both born from our newly defined values of Affordability, Community, and Inclusivity. One was being raised in the bustling heart of Dhoke Kala Khan, Rawalpindi, while the other was quietly shaping itself in the suburban sprawl of Bhara Kahu, Islamabad.

And then, the long-awaited day arrived. The Dhoke Kala Khan branch stood ready — machinery installed, equipment deployed, and every penny saved for the franchisee. Against all odds, the total cost had been squeezed to the minimum, a victory of discipline and resourcefulness. The date of inauguration was set: New Year's Eve, 2025.

The café itself was no ordinary space. It was vast, with room for 120 people at once, a library corner on one side, and an ambiance that could rival the most elite cafés of the city. It wasn't just a café — it was a place alive with energy, a space full of vibes and belonging.

But destiny has its own strange poetry. On that same night, as the shutters rose and Dhoke Kala Khan came

alive, the signboard of BREE at Hostel City was replaced with another name. One branch was born, another was buried — both on the very first night of the new year.

The wound of Hostel City was still raw, yet as I stood in the new café, I felt a strange kind of healing. For me, Dhoke Kala Khan was God's way of answering my pain — as if the universe was whispering: "You have lost one home, but here is another."

I don't know why, but my faith was unshakable that night. Maybe it was desperation, maybe divine guidance. I searched for meaning in every twist of fate, and perhaps that very search was the sword I carried into my darkest battles.

Yet beneath the celebrations, the truth was hard: by inauguration day, we had received neither the franchise fee nor the marketing budget promised in the agreement.

And then, as if scripted by fate, a familiar ghost returned — the pathetic psychology of investors. Despite every clause clearly written in our agreement, the franchisee refused to release even the marketing budget.

We had pleaded with him several times, asking that he at least fund the marketing before inauguration, because visibility was oxygen for a new branch. But every time, he offered nothing but hollow promises. His final stance was almost laughable: “I’ll start spending on marketing once the business grows.”

It was absurd. This wasn’t a matter of goodwill or charity — it was his own business, his own investment, and still he treated it as if we were asking for a personal favor. Yet, bound by circumstance, we had no choice but to agree to his terms.

And then something miraculous happened.

Without a single rupee spent on marketing, BREE began to breathe life on its own. From the very first day, people poured in — in groups, with friends, as couples, or alone, drawn by curiosity and the vibrant space. Conversations buzzed through the air. A small community was already taking shape before our eyes.

I watched young people gather at night, laughing and debating over tea. Others tucked themselves quietly in the library corner, lost in books. Some set up their laptops at the workstations, finally having a place that welcomed them.

For me, this was more than just business. This was proof of what we had always believed: BREE was never only about food; it was about people.

The proudest moment wasn't seeing the cash register ring — it was watching the happy faces of young boys and girls who, perhaps for the first time, felt they belonged to something greater. It was as though BREE had healed an unspoken inferiority complex. For the price of a cup, they had access to luxury, to belonging, to dreams.

And in their laughter and hope, I saw the very thing that kept me alive through all the heartbreak: a community being born.

The sales were climbing steadily, day after day — and this was before we had even introduced the value-added products we knew could easily double the numbers. Behind the scenes, our chefs were lining up their equipment, preparing to launch the long-awaited meal items that would complete BREE's offering.

We were monitoring everything closely through our ERP system. The first week's data came in, and it was nothing short of impressive. The numbers proved what

we had believed all along: the market was ready, and the model was working.

But while the data gave us hope, the reality of our finances pulled us back down. Salaries were due, and our HR — the very team responsible for the operational success of the franchise — desperately needed assurance. It was also the perfect time to activate marketing. With just a modest budget for social media campaigns, the branch could have gone from promising to unstoppable.

So I approached the franchisee, reminding him of the committed franchise fee and the marketing budget — both clearly written into the agreement. To my shock, he began manufacturing excuses. Petty, unnecessary reasons, all meant to stall payment.

I tried to reason with him: “The business is only seven days old, and it’s performing exceptionally. The franchise fee isn’t charity; it is the company’s due for building and running this operation. And marketing isn’t an expense — it’s an investment to multiply your customers.”

But instead of listening, he struck at our deepest wound.

He pointed to the loss of our Hostel City branch and used it as a weapon. According to him, without multiple outlets, BREE “wasn’t a brand.” And if we weren’t a brand, then the \$8,000 franchise fee was not justified. He twisted the very definition of value to suit his own convenience.

Finally, in a move that revealed his true intent, he terminated the contract altogether. He announced that he would run the café himself, under a new name, and that since he no longer carried the brand “BREE,” we had no right to demand a fee.

In one stroke, he hijacked not only a branch but the very spirit of the agreement.

The news crushed us. After the heartbreak of losing Hostel City, this betrayal hit like another knife in the wound. Once again, the team’s morale collapsed. The dream that had begun to shine in Dhoke Kala Khan dimmed under the shadow of greed.

This is how investors behave in this part of the world. Either the entire ecosystem is plagued with such short-sightedness, or perhaps fate had chosen us to repeatedly collide with the worst of them.

Within a week, he had embedded himself deep inside the operations. The staff we had trained — patiently, tirelessly — were now loyal to him because he controlled their day-to-day. And when he realized he could run the place without us, his logic was simple and brutal: “Why pay a franchise fee when I can just keep it all?”

That’s when we discovered the fatal flaw in our agreement. By allowing interference in day-to-day operations, we had opened the door for opportunism. The moment the business became self-sustaining, the franchise fee began to feel like an unnecessary burden in the franchisee’s eyes.

He took full control, renamed the café, and within seven days, BREE was erased from Dhoke Kala Khan.

But what followed was the truest proof of why BREE existed in the first place. After he took over, the standards collapsed. The best-quality raw materials we had sourced were replaced with cheaper, low-grade alternatives. Our carefully designed menu was altered. Our SOPs, quality benchmarks, HR systems, ERP tracking, and management practices — all vanished.

For a few days, he enjoyed the illusion of “savings” by avoiding the franchise fee. But within weeks, the damage surfaced. Customers stopped coming. The vibrant community we had sparked disappeared. Sales nosedived, and the café — once full of life and stories — turned into just another forgettable roadside eatery.

In the end, he hadn’t only destroyed his own business. He had destroyed our morale. The price of his shortcuts was not just financial; it was the erosion of trust, the betrayal of effort, and the silencing of a dream that had just begun to breathe.

Faith and belief were the only weapons we had left — invisible, yet powerful enough to keep us standing when everything else was breaking apart. Every setback, no matter how brutal, I tried to frame as a conspiracy of the universe working for us, not against us. Perhaps that’s what allowed me to keep walking when the ground itself felt like quicksand.

Even this betrayal could not stop us. Yes, we were bruised, and yes, the disappointment ran deep, but our story was not over. Another branch was already under construction in Bhara Kahu, Islamabad. And so we gathered whatever remained of our strength and tied all

our hopes to that place — a new beginning waiting to rise from the rubble of defeat.

Chapter 59: The Last Cafe

After surrendering the Dhone Kala Khan branch, all our eyes turned toward Bhara Kahu, Islamabad. It was not just another branch under construction — it was our last hope, the fragile thread on which we hung our dreams.

By the end of January 2025, the construction was complete. The franchisee purchased the machinery and equipment we had carefully suggested, and the branch was set for inauguration on February 9, 2025.

This was no ordinary café. It was a massive 500-square-meter space, designed to seat 200 customers at once. A perfect community hub with a library section, placed right in the heart of a bustling bazaar in a densely populated suburban pocket of Islamabad. And then there was the view — the majestic Margalla Hills rising in the backdrop, adding a quiet, natural magic to the ambiance of BREE Bhara Kahu.

But amidst this beauty, the ugly reality repeated itself. Just like in Dhone Kala Khan, we had not received our franchise fee nor the marketing budget. Instead, we were handed promises: the franchise fee would be paid

in “monthly installments,” and the marketing would be funded “later,” once the franchisee recovered from the expenses of construction.

The inauguration on February 9, 2025, was nothing short of magical. A vibrant evening filled with energy, laughter, and the hum of conversations. From the very first day, the power of community revealed itself. Hundreds of happy faces — from every walk of life, from every age group — filled the space. Inclusivity was no longer an idea on paper; it was alive, breathing in front of us.

Without a single rupee spent on marketing, massive traction poured in. Word of mouth traveled fast in suburban neighborhoods like Bhara Kahu, where people lived intertwined with each other. Affordability, community, and inclusivity — the three values we had carved — were working like a mathematical equation.

The very next day, the sales amazed us. By the end of February — with just 19 working days — the branch closed on numbers beyond our expectations. It was profitable from the first month. For the team, this was more than just relief; it was a surge of energy. It felt like validation, as if BREE had finally cracked the code of a value-driven business.

But what made us proudest was not the sales graph. It was the community that was forming inside those walls. A beautiful library and workstation stood filled with young readers, students, and dreamers. We watched as vegetable sellers' sons shared tables with boys from wealthier families, and as women and girls — whom we never expected in a conservative suburb — began to come, laugh, and form new connections.

BREE was changing the culture. It was healing the inferiority complex of those who had never experienced such an ambient, dignified space. It was rewriting the everyday lives of people who now dreamed bigger. Children ran freely around the café, finding joy with neighbors' kids, while parents sipped tea or coffee in peace.

For the first time, BREE felt like what it was always meant to be — not just a café, but a movement.

Soon after the euphoria of success, reality knocked again. We once more demanded the franchise fee and advertising budget, which were critical for sustaining growth and scaling. But just like the previous investor, this franchisee too claimed he had no money. Once again, we were left without our rightful dues — neither franchise fee nor marketing budget.

What made it worse was the hidden collusion. I had introduced this franchisee to the Dhoke Kala Khan one during the earlier inauguration, and now it was clear that the previous investor had already “trained” him on how to avoid paying us. He repeated the same hollow reasoning: “BREE has no brand value because you have no other running branches. No brand means no franchise fee.”

Ironically, this was happening right when the café was buzzing with traction and booming sales. The franchisee, emboldened by the success, grew overconfident and began interfering in day-to-day operations. The decision to allow interference in the agreement revealed itself as a strategic blunder.

The chain of command collapsed. The branch manager — who was meant to lead — was being ordered to wash dishes. Baristas, trained with discipline and values, were asked to leave their stations and go hang banners on the roadside. The culture we had nurtured was being dismantled by arbitrary orders.

Our employees, once motivated and proud to be part of BREE, felt disrespected. Many chose not to continue under such conditions. To make matters worse, the franchisee deployed his own inexperienced

management team, and in their hands, the essence of BREE was lost. The menu was altered, shortcuts were taken, and our core ideology of affordability, community, and inclusivity was compromised.

At that point, the choice was clear: either watch our vision die, or step away. We chose the latter.

In the end, we had no choice but to surrender. We handed over the franchise to him, with one final order: remove the name BREE from its walls and put up your own. If our values could not live there, then neither could our name.

And just like that, we were left with nothing. No café. No franchise. No tangible proof of the years of sweat, struggle, and sleepless nights we had poured into building a brand we believed in.

This time, something inside me shifted. Until now, I had always fought with the faith that the universe conspires in our favor — that even the darkest night was only preparing the ground for a brighter dawn. But here, that belief began to tremble. The conspiracy I once trusted felt more like cruelty. I was no longer seeing divine messages hidden in failures; I was beginning to accept the brutality of the universe itself.

It was a hard truth: we had given everything, and yet we were standing empty-handed.

Chapter 60: The Cost of a Dream

My failures weren't just mine.

My continuous failures disturbed not only me, but everyone around me. My father prayed for my success in every namaz, whispering my name to God with tears in his eyes. My mother and sisters worried endlessly, telling everyone they met to pray for me as if each whispered dua could change the course of my destiny. My brother carried the heavier burden — he feared for my safety, for the legal troubles that hovered over me, for the cracks that were widening in my life. In my home, there was no peace. Everyone was restless, waiting, hoping, fearing.

But what broke me most during this time was not their worries — it was the fading hope in Munazzah's eyes.

Every failure of mine robbed her of sleep. I hid the darkest details from her, choosing instead to tell her stories of great entrepreneurs — how they stumbled, struggled, suffered, and then rose again to greatness. I promised her the same ending: that one day I would build a unicorn, and people would remember her not just as my companion, but as the wife of a man who never gave up. She clung to that promise. She prayed

for me day and night, pouring all of herself into those unseen supplications. That was all she could do.

For five long years, she gave me her heart and her support. I was her favorite person in the world, and she never missed a chance to tell people I was the best man she knew. She believed in me even when my failures piled higher than my achievements. Her faith in my abilities was unshakable, but I kept failing her.

She had already suffered so much in her life since childhood — pain, struggles, trials that would break most people. I was supposed to be her ray of hope, her escape from sorrow. Instead, my madness for entrepreneurship stole that hope from her.

Dear Munazzah — you are one of the reasons I now deliver this last pitch to the world through my story in this book. I once heard a line: *“A winner is a loser who tried one more time.”* And so, I will not give up on you until my very last breath. I have not lost this war. I am still fighting. And perhaps, if God wills, I may still create a story with a happy ending.

My passion for entrepreneurship — and the failures that followed — did not just break me, it broke the lives of those who loved me. This is the wound that

worries me the most. My struggle was not mine alone; it spread like fire, scorching everyone who stood close to me.

In this journey, I lost many precious things. Dreams, relationships, trust — all were casualties. But the greatest loss, perhaps greater than any of these, was belief itself. I felt as though I had reached the very end of hope. Something inside me shattered, something I once thought unshakable.

I no longer believed that the universe conspired in favor of dreamers. I no longer believed that God would come to the aid of those who tried. My stance grew simple, cold, and brutal: the universe was born out of randomness, and in that randomness there was no mercy. No matter how talented you are, no matter how hard you work, if the dots of destiny do not connect, you will be crushed, forgotten, and turned to dust.

And so, I abandoned prayer. I stopped believing that kindness would return to me if I offered kindness to others. I stopped believing in the sweet notion that the world rewards goodness. The altar of hope, once lit brightly, now stood in silence before me.

I want to tell everyone this truth: happy endings belong to movies and novels. This — the real world — plays by no such script. Here, anything can happen. And often, it does.

Chapter 61: The Victories in War

By this time, the sectarian war in Parachinar had reached its most brutal stage. It began with a Sunni convoy ambushed on the road—thirteen innocent people killed, among them children and women.

Days later, a Shia convoy was attacked in return, and this time the bloodshed was far worse. Nearly one hundred innocent lives were lost—families torn apart in a single moment.

But revenge did not end there. In fury, Shia fighters stormed and burned an entire Sunni village near the road where the convoy had been attacked. Thousands of innocent men, women, and children were left without homes, wandering the ashes of what once had been their lives.

The violence did not just spill blood—it strangled survival itself. The main road to Parachinar was blocked. No food could come in, no medicine, no supplies. Ordinary people, who wanted nothing but to live in peace, were forced into hunger, fear, and despair.

And yet, in this chaos, the warlords became more relevant than ever. People began to treat them as

heroes. Their names carried weight, their words carried influence. But the most dangerous shift was not in the leaders—it was in the mindset of the youth.

I watched as young boys, who should have been dreaming of careers, families, and futures, began to glorify death. Instead of cherishing life, they celebrated martyrdom. Ignorant voices on social media bragged, mocked, and provoked. Their posts spread like wildfire, and to their followers, these reckless words became bravery.

Terrorists, once feared in silence, were now gaining recognition and prestige from their own sects. Violence had become a badge of honor. Death was no longer tragedy—it was currency.

But in the middle of all this darkness, the universe handed me a fragment of light. Naila cleared her USMLE and left for the United States to begin her medical practice. Watching her step into that world of opportunity gave us a sense of pride and relief—a reminder that Parachinar's story could also produce healers, not just fighters.

Saira too rose above the chaos. She passed her CSS exam and was appointed as a high-ranking officer. In

those days of despair, her success felt like a lifeline, a signal that our family could still carve its place in a future beyond violence.

Their journeys felt steady, structured, almost predictable—medicine and civil service, two professions that carried both respect and stability. They had ladders to climb, systems to navigate, and destinations already mapped.

And me? I was still inside the brutal arena of entrepreneurship—battered, restless, searching. My road was nothing like theirs. Entrepreneurship had no ladder, no map, no safety net. It was a battlefield where every step could be your breakthrough—or your downfall. Where the same people who praised you today could laugh at your ruin tomorrow.

And yet, I chose this battlefield. Not because it was easier, but because it was mine. Naila and Saira carried the pride of our family into the world through their achievements, while I carried its risks, its debts, and its untold possibilities.

In their success, I saw security. In my struggle, I searched for meaning. Together, we were all fighting different wars—some against systems, some against

scarcity, and me, against the odds of building something out of nothing.

Chapter 62: The Question of Surrender

It was the evening of May 24th, 2025 — a Saturday heavy with silence. I had called my team together for one agenda only: What next?

The question lay on the table like a final verdict waiting to be pronounced.

Do we surrender — and let BREE slip quietly into the archives of our past?

Or do we rise again — and continue the struggle to build BREE into the brand it was destined to be?

The dilemma was brutal. Because if there was ever a time when surrender seemed logical, it was now. We had lost branches, lost capital, lost years of sweat. Yet at the same time, walking away felt like betrayal — not just of ourselves, but of everything BREE had already proven.

The numbers had spoken. The mistakes of yesterday had been corrected. The model, refined and validated, was working like a mathematical equation. For the first

time, our ideology was no longer a dream — it was an operating system.

Affordability. Community. Inclusivity.

These were not just words on paper. They were alive, breathing in the lives of people who found a second home inside BREE. We had witnessed it with our own eyes: the happy faces of children running between tables, mothers soothing babies in their arms while sipping chai, students laughing over assignments, strangers becoming friends, even transgenders — long excluded by society — finding safety and dignity under our roof.

How could we surrender something that had already begun to heal?

How could we abandon the only place that gave voice to the voiceless, dignity to the neglected, and belonging to the forgotten?

The first option — surrender — was unanimously rejected.

The team, their eyes fierce with conviction, leaned forward with one demand:

“Let’s pitch BREE to investors. Let’s knock on every door. Let’s sell franchises — this time with terms so strong no one can exploit us again.”

I listened. Then I asked the question that had been haunting me for months:

“To whom?”

To those greedy investors who see nothing but profit?

To those who humiliated us by refusing even the rightful franchise fee?

To those who devalued our efforts, our services, our sleepless nights?

I shook my head.

“Our ideology is different now,” I told them. “When we say we are in people’s business, it means money is a byproduct. For them, money is the only product. They will never understand us. Maybe... maybe we were born in the wrong place.”

The room fell quiet.

But then one voice broke through.

“The world is too big. Somewhere out there, there must be people who understand us.”

Others nodded, their conviction unshaken. And in that moment, I realized what truly challenged me that day wasn’t the debt, the betrayal, or the fear of collapse. It was the fierce loyalty of my team. Their attachment to BREE wasn’t logical. It was romantic. They loved this startup not as a company, but as a cause — a living, breathing dream.

And dreams that are loved this deeply... refuse to die.

That evening, as the discussion unfolded, the air in the room shifted. What began as doubt and despair slowly transformed into a declaration of purpose. We understood something profound: this was no longer just about running cafés. This was about life’s mission.

We made a collective vow: BREE must reach every town where communities are alive.

Because the truth was clear. The so-called “elite” brands had already done their damage. They had sown deep seeds of inferiority in the hearts of our young people. Boys and girls from middle and lower-income families would walk past those polished glass doors but

never dare to step inside. Not because they didn't want to—but because they had been conditioned to believe they didn't belong.

This invisible wall was stronger than any chain or prison. It was psychological. And it explained why, in Pakistan, so many young people never rise above their socioeconomic class. They had been robbed of confidence before the journey even began.

That night, we swore to tear down that wall.

We dreamed of BREE as the antidote—community spaces where dignity was not defined by how much money you had in your pocket. Places where children could run and play freely with neighbors, where young boys and girls could sit across from each other without fear, exchanging dreams and ideas, and where elders could gather to discuss the futures of their families with pride instead of despair.

It was more than a café; it was a social equalizer.

By the end of the meeting, our path was clear: this was no longer just a business model. It was a mission. A revolution disguised as a teacup.

We would open hundreds of BREE branches in untapped towns and neighborhoods. Places where affordability met dignity, where inclusivity wasn't just a slogan but an everyday reality. We already knew how to keep operations lean, how to minimize expenses, and how to deliver world-class products without the burden of elite pricing.

And if we could do that, we wouldn't just be serving food.

We would be serving confidence.

We would be serving belonging.

We would be serving a new identity to a generation that had been told for too long that they didn't belong anywhere.

That night, we ended the meeting not with despair—but with a mission.

The meeting ended, but leadership does not end when the room falls silent. That night, as my team rested, I carried the weight of their faith on my shoulders. It was my duty to bring them not just hope, but a plan that worked.

I sat alone, replaying every failure, every betrayal, every disappointment. The pattern was painfully clear: partners and investors had always been the weakest link in our journey. No matter how strong our model, no matter how loyal our community, the wrong hands had pulled us down every time.

So one truth became non-negotiable: this time, the message had to reach the right people.

But how? How do you find the right people in a world full of short-sightedness and greed? How do you make sure that your pitch isn't lost in some dusty drawer, or dismissed in five minutes by someone who never understood your vision?

I knew this would be my last pitch. My final attempt. And if it was to be the last, it couldn't be delivered the traditional way. Not another pitch deck. Not another boardroom full of indifferent faces.

This time, the pitch had to be bigger than investors.

It had to be heard by millions.

It had to become a movement.

That's when the idea struck me—an idea so clear, it felt almost divine.

I would tell the story of BREE. Not as a business case. Not as a glossy brochure. But as it truly was: raw, brutal, honest. A story that began long before BREE itself—back in my childhood, back in the dust and the scars where this dream was first born.

Instead of a one-page pitch, I would write an entire book. A book that introduced me, my team, and our vision without the need for meetings, introductions, or handshakes. Whoever read it would know who we were—not because of numbers, but because of the truth we carried.

I know memoirs are usually written by celebrities, people already known to the world. And I am not one of them. I don't even know what genre this book belongs to—part memoir, part business, part entrepreneurship. But I also know it doesn't matter. The genre is not important. The impact is.

So let the readers decide what it is. My only goal is that it carries my last pitch—clear, unfiltered, unignorable.

And with that conviction, on the morning of May 25, 2025, I began to write.

I sat with nothing but a blank page in front of me. The cursor blinked like a challenge: Do you really have the courage to tell it all?

I wasn't sure where to begin. Should I start with BREE, with the branches, with the heartbreaks? Or should I go further back—to the child born in a tribal town, where dreams were too heavy for young shoulders?

I decided the only way was honesty. Brutal, unpolished honesty. Because investors may dismiss numbers, but the world cannot ignore truth.

And so, The Last Pitch was born. Not in a boardroom. Not in an accelerator program. But in the silence of my room, where words became my investors, memories became my slides, and the book itself became my final pitch deck.

This time, I was not pitching for money alone. I was pitching for belief, for community, for the kind of people who could carry BREE into the future without betraying its soul.

With that, I began to write—not as an entrepreneur, not as a failed founder, but as a storyteller who refused to surrender.

Chapter 63: A Seed in the Wind

So I wrote the first edition of this book and released it to the world as an independent author. A few readers found it, read it, and some even sent words of appreciation. Yet, even as those kind voices reached me, something inside remained restless — because there was no BREE.

At times, I would walk past the Hostel City branch, once the beating heart of my vision, and I could feel the pulse had weakened. The energy, the magic, the traction we had created was fading under new management. The tables were the same, the walls unchanged, but the soul of BREE was missing.

Someone from the management quietly confessed to me that the branch had been profitable only for the first two months after the transfer, and soon after, it began bleeding losses. I was not surprised. My own eyes had already seen the cracks widening: the chaos of mismanagement, the absence of entrepreneurial discipline, the erosion of the very values on which BREE had been built.

The menu had been stretched endlessly, selling everything and standing for nothing. Roles overlapped, responsibilities blurred, and conflict brewed. The staff — once alive with purpose — now moved in confusion, burdened by overstaffing that drove expenses high. Wastage grew, and in the desperate attempt to curb it, quality was mercilessly sacrificed. There was no proper ERP, no data-driven control, no system to protect the essence of the business.

And there I stood, watching all this unfold. The brand that had once been my passion, my romance, was now a hollow shell of itself. To see BREE — my dream, my heartbeat — stumble this way was not just painful. It was heartbreakin in the truest sense, like watching someone you love slowly fade before your eyes, while you are powerless to stop it.

Meanwhile, one of the men from their management quietly told me that the Hostel City branch was up for sale. The owner — the goldsmith — was tired, and he wanted out.

I asked the price. It was too high, absurd even, especially against the backdrop of declining sales and mismanagement. But deep inside, I already knew what was happening: food is a brutal business, and not

everyone has the stomach to handle it. Somewhere in the back of my mind, a thought took root — perhaps I could buy it back, but only if the price came down to half.

So I voiced it casually, almost carelessly, to that man: “If the offer drops to half, maybe I’ll think about it.

Otherwise, at this price, I could build another café — bigger, smarter, more beautiful than this.” I said it and walked away, not expecting anything, not even hoping. It was just a passing remark, a seed I left in the wind.

But truthfully, there were two deeper purposes stirring inside me at that time.

The first was BREE itself. Hostel City was never just a market to us — it was home. Those students, those young dreamers, they were not our customers; they were our fans. They lived BREE, breathed BREE, and they were missing it. I wanted to give it back to them, so they could once again walk into a place and proudly say, “This is our BREE.” And beyond that, I wanted a branch I could point to and show my potential franchisees, saying with conviction: “This is who we are.”

The second was this book — The Last Pitch. I wanted to push it into the world, to make sure the story was not just written but heard. My ambition was not to count revenue from sales but to reach at least one million souls. I wanted people to read it, to feel it, to see in it a reflection of their own struggles and dreams.

So I immersed myself in these plans, moving between the dream of reviving BREE and the mission of spreading my story. Life, in its strange way, kept moving forward — carrying me with it, even as I wondered which of these seeds, if any, would take root.

Chapter 64: When the Universe Conspired

And then, suddenly, it felt as though the universe had shifted — as though God Himself had finally listened.

In July 2025, the man from their management reached out to me with unexpected news: “Your offer can be considered.” Aamir, my brother, stepped forward with courage and conviction. He had a car and some cash, and together, after careful negotiations, the deal was struck — a car and some cash for what once was ours.

We signed the franchise agreement. It was not just business; it was blood. Aamir, who had once served as the head of operations, had a bond with this place no outsider could ever understand. He had raised BREE from its infancy, when it was only a tiny branch of DILOYO housed in the same walls. For him, it was not just a café; it was a memory, a legacy, a heartbeat. And now, it was his turn to carry it forward as BREE’s franchisee and, once again, as Chief Operating Officer.

The old signage came down, and in its place rose the name that had once lit up the hearts of students and dreamers: BREE. The space was renovated, not with

extravagance, but with the same careful spirit that once gave it soul. Slowly, the vibe returned. The air felt alive again, charged with the familiar hum of laughter and conversation.

It was as if my first wish had been granted. The place where the story of BREE began was once more ours. And then, on the 10th of August, 2025, BREE opened its doors again.

That day, I stood there watching faces light up, smiles returning as if nothing had changed. Fans walked in not as customers but as family, reclaiming a home they had lost. The vibe of BREE — that intangible energy that can never be copied — was alive again. And in that moment, my own spirit stirred. It felt like life had been breathed back into a body long dead.

The universe conspired once more, and another piece of my puzzle returned to me — Danish came back. Danish, the boy who looked foreign, the boy who had once carried the restless energy of BREE in his veins.

When I found him again, he was broken from the inside. Danish was working as a project lead in a U.S.-based firm in Pakistan, but the glow in him had dimmed. A toxic relationship had drained his spirit,

and the monotonous corporate routine had strangled his creativity. He had once thrived in the chaotic, vibrant culture of a startup, but now, in the rigid machinery of that company, he was a misfit.

I took him under my wing, not as a boss, but as a mentor and a brother. Slowly, we began piecing him back together. Somewhere in that process, I told him about the book. The first thing he did was search for himself within its pages. When he read the chapters that spoke of him, he wept. It was as if the words had held up a mirror to his soul, reminding him of who he truly was.

Then I shared with him the challenge: marketing. Writing the book was one thing, but making sure the story reached the world was another battle altogether. I asked him if I could count on him again, and without hesitation, he said yes.

So we began. Together, we stepped into the unfamiliar world of book marketing — a genre unlike any we had navigated before. We experimented, cracked codes, tested techniques, and slowly built a plan: to create social media content that could carry *The Last Pitch* into a million hearts. Our strategy was simple, almost raw in its essence — collect genuine reviews from

readers, and make the book accessible for free so it could spread.

And so we worked. Side by side, we started producing content, breathing life into a movement that was not just about sales, but about making sure this story — our story — was heard.

This new chapter of my life did not just make me feel alive again — it rekindled something far greater. Slowly, I began to believe once more in the old idea that the universe conspires in favor of dreamers. I looked back at my journey, at every fall and every rise, and for the first time in a long time, the dots seemed to connect. Perhaps God had been listening all along. Perhaps the silence was never indifference, but a plan unfolding in ways I could not yet see.

Maybe every failure had not been punishment, but polishing. Maybe every loss was part of a process designed to carve me into who I was meant to become. And maybe the only lesson was that trust — in God, in the process, in the unseen — was the real currency of this journey.

Or perhaps not. Perhaps the universe is as random, as brutal, as I once believed. Perhaps these dots of mine

are not cosmic design, but only the illusion of pattern in a storm of chaos — a trick of the mind, desperate to find meaning.

But let me be clear: I am not writing this book to motivate or to preach. I am not here to tell you fairy tales of positivity. I am writing from the arena itself — blood on my face, dust in my lungs, and hope still clinging to me despite it all.

What is actually true will only reveal itself in the parts of this story yet to be lived. And I will record them honestly, as they unfold, detail by detail, without painting them brighter than they are.

Until then, I remain at work — on my dream.

Chapter 65: The Last Pitch

At BREE, we always believed in the power of stories.

Not just because they inspire, but because they connect hearts across distances. That is why I chose to tell ours—not in a boardroom, not through a glossy pitch deck, but here, in these pages where truth breathes freely.

This book is my final pitch.

Not to a single investor, but to the world.

I don't know if it will work. Maybe it won't. Maybe this story, like so many in this part of the world, will end quietly—without applause, without justice. If that happens, so be it. I have come to terms with the cruelty of fate. But I still choose hope. I still believe that the universe conspires in favor of those who dare.

This story is not just a memoir of an entrepreneur.

It is the last chance of a dreamer who risked everything. It is a window into what entrepreneurship feels like in forgotten corners of the world—where startup journeys don't begin in Silicon Valley, but in tribal

towns scarred by sectarian wars, poverty, and displacement.

I want this book to reach every founder in San Francisco and every dreamer in Bangalore, London, Nairobi, Dubai, and beyond—so they can see what it truly takes to keep building when the world gives you no foundation.

So here we are: a small, battle-hardened team, hoping this story finds the right ears, the right eyes, and the right hearts.

We have only one goal:

to reignite the dream of BREE and bring it to every community where it belongs.

And for that, I ask for your help—yes, you, the one holding this book. You can support in three ways:

1. Buy a BREE franchise.

It's not just a business—it's a social revolution. BREE lifts communities, creates jobs, spreads inclusivity, and delivers profit with purpose. Fully managed with ERP systems, transparent practices, and values at its core, it

is unlike any franchise you've known—because it is built for the people.

2. Support through crowdfunding.

If you cannot own a franchise, you can still be part of the story. Contribute whatever you can—small or large—because every drop builds the ocean. Your support will help us create spaces where affordability, community, and inclusivity thrive.

3. Share our story.

If you cannot invest or contribute, then lend us your voice. Post a short video review, write about this book, or share our story on your social media. Use your influence, however small or large, to carry this message forward. Movements are not built on money alone—they are built on people who care enough to spread the word.

This is not charity. This is partnership. This is a chance to build something that outlives us all.

Writing this book forced me to open old wounds—to revisit childhood scars of poverty, trauma, and voicelessness in a tribal land forgotten by maps. I

emerged from a world where most dreams never survive past boyhood. And yet, here I am.

Despite the heartbreak, the debts, the tortures, and the betrayals—I am still standing. Still hoping. Still building.

If this story has touched you, if it moves even a fraction of the world to act, then perhaps one day you will hear of a revolutionary brand rising from Pakistan. Its name will be BREE.

And if you never hear of it again, it means we tried—and we were lost in the dust of forgotten stories.

But for now, you are reading this.

And that means there is still hope.

Thank you for listening.

Thank you for reading.

Thank you—for giving this dream one more chance.

— **Qamar Abbas**

To Support the Mission of BREE:

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