

Chapter 1

2015 - Present Day

Ramana looked out the carriage window. The train was slowing down. The large yellow signboard, saying Bangalore Central in three languages, flashed by.

He glanced at the folder in his hand. In pink sketch-pen across the khakhi cardpaper cover was written SOWMYA LETTERS. The handwriting was Appa's. As usual with him, Appa had preserved all the letters she'd sent home from Bangalore. The last letter from her was dated more than two years ago.

Would Sowmya have bothered to save Appa's letters anywhere?

He doubted it. She had always been a little scatterbrained, always intending to do the right thing, but putting it off until there was a deadline, and then doing something stupid to get past the immediate crisis. Her wardrobe back home in Ananthapura had always been stuffed with dirty clothes that she'd forgotten to put in the washing machine. How many times he'd helped her finish her school projects on the last night before the submission date! Even the one time he'd come to visit her here, in Bangalore,

He thought of the argument they'd gotten into then, and winced. Better to focus on what he was here for, meeting her and making sure she was all right. His eyes strayed to the folder again. Appa had updated it, just today, with a new letter.

The new letter hadn't come from her.

He hoped he wouldn't have to refer to it at all. He would drop by her place, have a cup of tea, dinner maybe, and then take the first flight back to Delhi. Simple and clean. No sense staying longer and getting into arguments again.

He stood up and took his duffel bag off the top bunk. The folder went in, on top of his change of clothes. He didn't have much luggage - two sets of army fatigues, one of

which he was wearing now, a change of underclothes, his laptop, and a plastic bag with toiletries. He zipped up the bag and sat down, holding it in his lap.

The train was coming to a stop. The hubbub of the station platform came in to him. His mind went again to he'd gotten off at this station to talk to Sowmya. They'd hardly spoken after that fight - just a couple of Facebook likes and comments, until Sowmya had stopped updating her account.

He waited his turn and got out onto the platform. The place didn't look that different. But then he supposed all railway stations looked the same with the smell and the crowds and the constant clatter of trains and the garbled announcements.

His phone rang as he waded through the crowd towards the exit. It was Mukul, his team mate. "Hey, dude," he said as soon as Ramana answered the call. "We got clearance for the Weapons Lab project. They're giving us two days to test their cybersecurity setup, starting tomorrow."

"Good show. Don't know if I'll be able to make it, though."

"All OK? I saw your mail about the leave today. Are you out of town?"

"Yes, in Bangalore. Family stuff, long story. I hope to be done today, but it might take me a day or two more."

"All right. I'll let them know to wait a bit. Let me know if you need any help with anything."

"Sure. Thanks." He cut the call. He was walking past the exit now. The auto stand was off to the left, and he headed there.

A few minutes later, he was sitting in an auto, headed towards J. P. Nagar. An hour away according to Google Maps. An hour away from meeting Sowmya.

He wondered what he would tell her when he got to her. “Nothing special, you weren’t picking up the phone, so I wanted to make sure you were all right.”

Should he tell her about the letter? Probably just the gist of it.

He leaned back in his seat, watching the traffic go by. The stress of the day was finally getting to him. This had been a longer day than most.

It had started off like most others - waking up to the alarm in his phone, getting his usual set of floor exercises in his tiny flat, beginning to get ready for the office. The flat was located in the army quarters in South Delhi. Ramana dressed in his usual camouflage outfit, picked up his laptop bag, and headed towards the nearby Army Intelligence building. BISHOP was in the top floor of the building, a small office of less than a hundred people. But their work affected thousands of others - this was the ethical hacking wing of Army Intelligence, working to make sure the computer security setup in other departments and their websites was fine. Over the years, BISHOP had gathered some of the country’s best hackers and security analysts. Ramana felt somehow that he was less qualified than some of these people, but even he knew he was good at sniffing out where exactly a computer’s security was weak, and exploiting it. There were others, with different skills, usually formed into ‘Tiger Teams’ of two people each. Ramana’s Tiger Team partner was Mukul - social engineer extraordinaire, capable of selling not just refrigerators but also extended warranties on those refrigerators to eskimos.

Ramana had barely settled into his chair and started up his laptop when his mobile phone rang. It was Appa.

“Ramana, I need you to come down here immediately. Something’s happened to Sowmya.”

“Is she OK?”

Appa broke into a fit of coughing. He had been bedridden for the past couple of years, and very rarely had the energy to speak much. He sounded very agitated today.

“You come down here right now.” Around brief round of coughing. “ I can’t explain this over the phone, but you’ll see.”

Appa wouldn’t call him down unless something was serious. He’d better get down to Ananthapura fast. He sent out a mail for his leave for a couple of days, and booked a flight home. Appa would have told him to go to Bangalore, to Sowmya, if things were simple enough to sort out directly. He’d know more about it when he reached home.

At home in Ananthapura, the atmosphere was funereal. His mother had brightened for a moment when she saw him at the doorstep, but then anguish had returned to her eyes as she gestured him towards their bedroom, where Appa usually rested.

Appa lay on the bed. He patted the edge when he saw Ramana, asking him to sit down.

Ramana sat, feeling disquiet seep into his veins. What was going on? Amma sat on the far edge of the bed, picking up a bundle of papers from the side table there and passing on to Appa.

His father selected the topmost paper from the pile and handed it to Ramana. “We got this last night. Read it.”

The letter had been folded and reopened several times, he suspected, by his parents themselves. It was a printout with a signature at the bottom - someone named Praveen Shivakumar. He’d never heard the name before.

Dear Sir,

I have some information relating to your daughter Sowmya’s disappearance three years ago. If you are interested to know more, please come visit me at my house at the below address. It is critical that you do not contact the police, they will not be able to help you in this matter.

I am not trying to blackmail or threaten you. I want the truth to come out.

Regards,
Praveen Shivkumar

Below the letter was Praveen's address - not Bangalore but in Ramanagara, which was a smaller town near Bangalore.

Ramana looked up, troubled. "What does he mean, disappearance? Sowmya just got married, and she even wrote to us after that. Who is this man?"

Amma burst into fresh tears. His father coughed again. Finally he said, "I don't know, Ramana. This is some crackpot. But we looked up the phone number Sowmya had sent us in her older mails, and tried it, and it does not work at all. We've been worrying all night, but we wanted you to see the letter before explaining anything else.

"Can you go to Bangalore and make sure Sowmya is all right? Don't worry about this Praveen fellow, just make sure she's fine."

Ramana got to the station as fast as he could - there were no flights to Bangalore till the next morning, and a train would be faster.

Just in case, though, he had copied Praveen's address into his phone as well. In case he need to go there too. But hopefully he'd meet Sowmya at her home, she'd know why this Praveen had written this weird letter, and he'd call Appa.

Ramana looked around with a start. The rickshaw was weaving through narrow lanes. He opened up the Map application on his phone and made sure they were heading in the right direction. The area they were heading for looked exceptionally crowded in the Map screen - hundreds of houses all cramped together, with narrow roads. Sowmya hadn't been earning well, he knew, so this wouldn't be a very big house in any case.

They had to ask several people before they got to the right cross and main streets. The area was congested, with potholed lanes, and the houses crammed together with sunshades from one house almost touching the next. Every other house was multi-storeyed, some turned into PGs for students and working professionals.

The lane they were looking for had a car parked half on the gutter covers and hand on the roads, flagrantly blocking the way for all traffic. Ramana paid off the driver at the junction itself, and walked down, peering at the house numbers in the dim streetlights. He slung the duffel bag on his shoulder as he walked.

The road was riddled with potholes and loose stones; an overflowing gutter on one side was intermittently covered with cracked slabs. The stink of the gutter was bad enough; something had died on the road a little way down, maybe a dog or a cat, mangled beyond recognition and crushed into the surface of the road by passing vehicles. Five houses down, and he was at the place. "Sai Niwas" was the name, just as mentioned in Sowmya's mail. And instantly he knew that something was wrong. Apart from the name, no other detail seemed to match. Sowmya had described a two-storied house, with the landlord on the first floor and them on the ground (where the light was less and Sowmya had to cook with a tubelight on).

This building was a blocky hostel, with individual rooms lined up along corridor-balconies on each floor, from the first floor to the fourth. The ground floor was taken up by a lobby and what looked like a mess hall – he could see the lined-up aluminium tables, where a few girls were eating dinner. The sign on the front said, "Shri Sai P.G. Only for Girls."

Perhaps the house had been torn down and rebuilt? Or maybe Sowmya lived in a room here and had made up the story? He crossed the gutter on a pair of flagstones and walked into the building.

The 'reception' was a counter in the far corner of the lobby. The whole room looked old, worn out. A fish tank with a few overgrown goldfish was at the far wall. 5-watt CFL bulbs threw just enough light to see, and a wall-mounted fan above the reception stirred the curly oiled hair of a fat man. Telugu guy, if the paper he was reading was any indication. Ramana asked him in Telugu: "This is number 282, Sai Niwas?" The man looked up, took in the army uniform, then finally nodded.

Ramana put down the duffel bag. "I want to meet Sowmya Krishna."

The receptionist frowned for a moment. Then he opened up a tattered hardbound register to where a pen marked a place and ran his finger down the page. Finally he looked up. "No one like that here."

"She's married now, maybe she used a different surname?"

"No Sowmya here."

"Any muslim girls? She married a muslim."

"No married girls here, saar, this is only for working, single girls." The man's initial reluctance was by now solidifying into a sullen silence. He glanced back at his paper, waiting for this intruder to go away so he could go back to his reading.

Ramana tried one last time. There was a landlady's name written in the address too.

"What about Leena Desai? She was here too."

The man's head snapped up. He stared at Ramana with narrowed eyes. "Are you really in the army, or are you a reporter?"

Ramana blinked at this unexpected question. "No, I'm not. I just have her name on an address – see?" Ramana held up the letter from Sowmya, pointing at where Leena's name was written above the house number and name.

The receptionist looked unconvinced. "I don't know anything about it, and I don't know where she went either. I told that girl's parents and I told that policeman and the reporters. A year-old story and you idiot reporters are still writing about it?"

Ramana took a step back. "You mean this girl, Leena, disappeared? Was she a tenant here?"

"Why else do you think all those people came here to ask about it? Quiet girl, does her work, pays the rent, one day leaves, and everyone thinks someone at the PG killed her or something. Get lost!"

"OK, OK, going. But just tell me: Where did Leena work?"

In answer the clerk raised his voice. "Ganesh!" A middle-aged security guard came into the room from the mess hall, wiping his mouth. He looked at the visitor, trying to size him up.

The clerk turned back to Ramana. "Get out of here, we don't want you people raising a noise again. We didn't have anything to do with it, and we don't want you scaring away the girls. Out!" The security guard, now understanding why he'd been called, took a threatening step towards Ramana.

Ramana looked from one to the other. He'd probably want to come back here, once he'd made more sense of the whole thing. Best not to pick a fight now. "All right, going. I was just asking."

He stepped out and paused, looking around for a place to eat something. There was a bakery at the corner, with a couple of college students standing outside, smoking cigarettes and drinking little glasses of tea. He asked for a bun-and-butter and a tea. The tea was good if not that hot. While he drank, he thought of what to do next. It was clear that Sowmya wasn't here currently, and most likely hadn't been here for some time. The address she'd given was not of her landlady, but some acquaintance who lived in a PG – probably someone who could collect any letters and get them to her. But this acquaintance was gone as well – in some sort of suspicious way.

This felt wrong. Ramana was still not convinced the letter-writer was genuine, but it was true that Sowmya was not where she should have been. It would be useful to go meet this Praveen and see what he had to say.

The bun was stale. He threw it into the wastebin after a couple of bites, paid off the shopkeeper, and put his duffel bag down on the icecream freezer just outside. He needed to get the address of the letter writer.

Ramanagaram, according to his map, would be about an hour's drive from here. He needed to hire a taxi. He went back to the bakery counter.

"Is there a taxi office here?"

The man pointed towards another narrow lane. "Dead end, take left."

The shop was a seedy-looking, 10-by-10 shop that offered INNOVA, INDICA, TEMPO TRAVELER VEHICALS. Ramana asked for an Indica for 4 hours. "Pay the driver. Extra kilometres, 10 Rs. Cab coming in 15 mins." The man said as he picked up his mobile and called up a nearby cab driver.

The car was the standard-issue Indica that companies all over Bangalore hired to get their employees to work every day. The driver didn't show much emotion when Ramana told him he wanted to go to Ramanagaram. "Extra kilometer 10 Rs, extra time 100 Rs hour. Night time is after 10 PM, 200 Rs. extra."

They set off. The driver almost immediately asked him if he was fine with paying the toll for the shorter road. "30 Minutes saving."

"OK."

The car swung out onto Bannerghatta Road and towards the toll road leading to Ramanagaram. Ramana knew this route would take about 45 minutes, and he sat back and tried to think of what could happen. Once he'd talked, he would have to call home and tell them that Sowmya wasn't where she said she was. He felt a sinking feeling in his stomach. If only he'd called up his sister more frequently, come to Bangalore a couple of times, seen where she lived, made sure she was all right...

He'd just have to wait and see what this Praveen had to say. But in the meantime, it wouldn't hurt to do some hunting by himself. He pulled out his phone and called up Mukul. The phone rang for almost a minute before Mukul picked up.

"Hey, what's up?" Mukul asked him.

"Hi, man. I need some help. Are you still in the office?"

"Yes. Tell me."

"There's more stuff to tell - I'll talk about it when I call you back, but I need you to look up two people for me. I need you to look up the - you know, private systems, since they aren't accessible over an external network." They both knew he meant the government servers - police, passport offices, Income Tax. BISHOP wasn't technically supposed to have this access, but they'd worked on cybercrime cases before, and most government departments let them use their data for 'research'.

"OK, but where are you?"

"Bangalore. Can't talk now, am in public. I'm SMSing the names to you. Call me back after you've done the first round."

"OK."

Ramana broke the call, then typed in SOWMYA KRISHNAN S, ANANTHAPURA and LEENA DESAI, BANGALORE in a message for Mukul. For good measure, he added in PRAVEEN SHIVAKUMAR, RAMANAGARA.

The reply came back instantly. "gimme 5 min. wl cl u bck."

It took over 10 minutes, though. When Mukul did call, his voice sounded agitated. "What is going on? This Leena girl was a disappearance a year back. Did you meet her, or something?"

"No, I didn't. But it turns out my sister knew her, and probably asked her to receive mails on her behalf. Tell me what the reports say."

"Ordinary girl, worked in housekeeping in a company called Swallow Pharma, lived in an area called JP Nagar in a PG, left work one day and didn't reach her room. Roommate got worried, called up her parents in Surat. Parents came rushing down, filed a police complaint. Girl's mother knew someone in the press so they tried to make a noise about it. There were a couple of reports before it died down quickly. Never found her. The police records show a complaint was filed at the JP Nagar police station. A constable was sent to talk to the PG and the office. Nothing came of it. Want me to look further?"

"Not for now. Send me the parents' phone number just in case."

"OK. The other one's your sister, right? There's nothing in the news or police about her. Found a dozen names in college alumnus lists, but the name's not that uncommon. What happened? Did you meet her?"

"No. She wasn't at the address she'd given us last."

"Shit. OK, give me a call when you can. The third guy's seems nothing out of the ordinary - left his job at the same company, Swallow Pharma, a few months back, and since then been active posting photos of himself travelling around India. Probably a

sabbatical or something. I'll run the secondary checks - phone companies and all - in case it throws up more data. Oh, and send me the number your sister used last."

"Will do. I'll call you soon." The toll booth was coming up. "Bye for now."

* * *

There was another bakery near Praveen's address. Ramana stopped the taxi there and ate a relatively better-made bun and butter with tea. The taxi driver asked for money for dinner, and Ramana handed him a fifty-rupee note and told him to come back to the bakery when he got a missed call.

Praveen's house was in a lane off the main road. It was an old-looking place, the paint streaked with dark patches from successive rains. There was a narrow strip of earth a few feet wide, between the boundary wall and the house. Some raggedy-looking marigolds were planted there. The house itself small, all the rooms on the ground floor, except a single room on the first floor towards the back. Construction old-fashioned and low-budgeted, with wooden shutters on the windows, and sunshade ledges above them.

The house looked dark, though. There were no lights on in the ground floor, and perhaps a night light in the room on the first floor - he couldn't be sure because of the curtains. Was anyone home? He clanged the handle of the gate against the gate a couple of times, making a noise, hoping for some activity. Nothing happened.

Just then a gust of wind blew, shaking the trees. A faint thudding noise came from the house. Ramana looked for the source of the sound. The wooden front door was unlocked, and the wind had caused it to hit the door frame.

That was odd. Surely Praveen would have latched the door if he'd gone out? He looked around to see if there was anyone nearby, dropping off garbage or talking on a mobile phone. No one. On the other side of the road, a fire smouldered smokily. Garbage, probably, collected by a street sweeper.

It wouldn't hurt to walk in and look around. Maybe Praveen was inside and had forgotten to lock the door. He opened the gate and walked up to the front door. Taking a final look around the street, he entered the house.

It was dark inside. He did not want to turn on the light. But almost immediately he stumbled on something - something hard and sharp-edged. He turned on the torch in his mobile phone and looked. It was a cane centre-table, lying on its side. He moved the torch around. Several pieces of furniture were out of their places. A cupboard over by the far wall had been ransacked, its contents strewn around. The small drawer under the TV stand was open as well, a few DVDs lying on the floor around it.

The walls were bare, with a few perfunctory wall hangings and a small showcase over the TV. A framed photo of a narrow-faced man in sunglasses - presumably Praveen himself - stood in the showcase.

Ramana quickly walked through the other rooms. The kitchen was a mess (not that there was much there - the sign of a bachelor, or a divorcee). The bedroom had been turned upside down - even the mattress had been torn, and the cabinets emptied.

The funny thing was, in all this mess, there didn't seem to be a single piece of paper. Whoever had been searching through the house had been after all the paper - it was all gone.

Something clicked in his mind. He turned and ran out of the house, towards the smouldering pile of ashes. As he came closer, he saw the pile was almost all paper. Whoever it was, had done a thorough job of it, too. There didn't seem to be a single unburnt fragment left. A faint smell of kerosene came at this range, suggesting how the fire had been started.

He went back to the house. Towards the back of the hall, there was a staircase leading upwards. This would be the way to the room above. He climbed up cautiously, though he knew there would be no one there either. Praveen had cleared out, just ahead of someone who wanted something from him.

He was wrong. Praveen was in his study room. In a pool of blood, with the back of his head caved in.