

TWILIGHT JUSTICE



A TALE OF SILENCE AND REVENGE

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Stories Matter

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To my wife, Rachna, for your patience and love—and to my daughter, Aadya, for the smiles that made this journey brighter.

By the time the truth finds its voice, justice has already chosen its path. And in that fading light between right and wrong, someone always has to become the consequence.

THE LAST SIGNAL

The road looked too peaceful for what it was about to witness.

On both sides, endless stretches of green swayed gently beneath the afternoon breeze. Tall trees stood like ancient guards, their shadows falling lazily across the narrow road. Birds sang without fear. Cows grazed quietly in distant fields. Somewhere nearby, children laughed faintly before their voices disappeared into the wind. Nature carried on innocently, unaware that within a few moments, this silence would become unforgettable.

Far from the noise of cities, this road had seen countless travellers pass through it.

But today... it was waiting.

Beneath a large banyan tree, a young man stood beside a girl, speaking softly, though his eyes seemed lost elsewhere. In one hand, he held a bunch of red lotus flowers—fresh, delicate, almost sacred. In the other, a small bundle of green leaves tied carefully with thread. To anyone passing by, it would have looked like an ordinary meeting in an ordinary village.

It was not.

There was something unsettling about the way he stood. His face remained calm, yet his fingers tightened repeatedly around the flowers, as though fighting a storm hidden deep inside him. The girl beside him continued

speaking, unaware that the silence growing inside him was more dangerous than anger.

A cyclist crossed the road slowly.

Two farmers worked in the distance.

And then... a white car appeared.

It emerged far away like a small moving shadow between the trees, approaching steadily through the narrow road. The moment the man saw it, something changed in his eyes. Not fear. Not surprise.

Recognition.

A strange tension spread across his face, as if the arrival of that car had awakened a decision he had been trying desperately to avoid. His breathing slowed. His grip weakened around the lotus flowers.

Inside the moving car, a young woman leaned slightly out of the window, letting the cool air brush across her face. Her smile was soft, peaceful—the kind that comes only when the heart feels safe. Sunlight danced through her hair as she looked absent mindedly at the endless greenery passing by.

Then she saw him. And everything inside her stopped.

Her smile disappeared instantly. Her eyes locked onto the young man standing beneath the tree beside another girl.

For a moment, disbelief froze her expression. She kept staring at him as the car moved closer, searching desperately for an explanation before her thoughts could

turn into pain. But the closer she came, the more real the scene became.

The flowers in his hand. The silence between them.

The girl standing beside him.

Her heart began breaking before she even understood why.

It was the beginning of something far darker.

From the opposite side of the road, hidden behind the curve of trees, a heavy truck moved forward at terrifying speed. Its engine roared against the unnatural silence of the afternoon. The driver's eyes remained fixed ahead—not on the road...

...but on the man beneath the tree.

Waiting.

Waiting for a signal.

The young man's hand trembled slightly.

Time itself seemed to slow.

Inside the car, the girl continued staring back at him, tears silently filling her eyes. Questions, fear, heartbreak—everything collided within her at once.

Then the man slowly lifted his hand.

The red lotus slipped from his fingers.

It fell onto the middle of the road.

And somewhere ahead, the truck driver noticed that signal for his next step.

The girl inside the car looked back one final time, tears rolling silently down her cheeks, never realizing that within seconds, her world—and many others—would change forever.

The peaceful green road remained silent as if it already knew what was coming next.



THE ROAD BEFORE DUSK

It was around four in the evening.

The sun tilted slowly toward rest, heavy and tired, as if the day itself had been stretched too far. From above, the place would have looked almost deserted—a forgotten ribbon of land lying quietly under the sky.

A long stretch of dark road cut through harvested fields and scattered trees. The crops were gone; only rough stubs of earth remained, carrying the dry scent of soil warming under the fading sun. The beauty was undeniable—raw, rural, untouched—yet it carried a strange weight.

It was scenic, yes but unbearably lonely.

And the silence—the silence pressed against the chest, heavy enough to make one uneasy.

Every now and then, a cyclist passed by, pedalling slowly. Some carried bundles of sugarcane tied behind their bicycles, longer than the cycle itself. Towels, folded like turbans, rested on their heads to shield them from the heat. Their faces were calm, resigned—as if this road and this sun were old companions.

There were no birds in sight, though evening was near. The heat had driven them away. A few goats and cows grazed lazily along the edges of the fields. Watching over

them stood a thin man, holding a stick taller than himself, its shadow stretching far beyond him. He looked less like a master and more like a quiet guardian of routine.

Then, suddenly, the stillness broke.

A car sped past the cyclists, slicing through the silence. Dust rose for a moment... then settled back into stillness.

Inside the car were four people.

A man at the wheel. Beside him, a woman in her thirties—calm, composed, her presence softening the space. At the back, two children: a girl of about fourteen and a boy around thirteen.

They were cheerful, bubbling with excitement—clearly on their way to something they had been waiting for. Laughter filled the car, light and careless.

But the man driving kept glancing at the sun, now sinking faster than he expected. A faint worry crept into his otherwise steady face.

The children, however, were lost in their joy.

“Mumma,” the boy called, leaning forward, “by when will we reach?”

The woman smiled, then turned gently toward her husband. “By when will we reach?”

He nodded, calculating.

“Hmmm... around two hours more. Maybe forty or fifty

kilometres.”

The girl clapped instantly. “Wow! We’ll meet our grandparents after a year!” Her eyes sparkled. “And I’m not touching books there. I’ll roam all over the village.”

The boy joined in, excited, “I’ll sit near the big tree... and the pond... and the river too! There is nothing in our city.”

They laughed, shared snacks, passed around cold drinks their mother had carefully packed. The journey itself felt like a small celebration.

Then—

A sharp, tearing screech.

The car jerked violently, swerving from left to right. The man gripped the steering wheel, struggling to control it. His hands moved quickly, almost desperately, trying to steady the vehicle.

For a moment, it felt like the road had slipped away beneath them.

Sweat rolled down his face.

With effort—and a stroke of luck—he managed to bring the car to a halt, though it brushed against a tree with a dull thud.

Silence.

The engine stuttered.

Then he jumped out, shouting for everyone to get down

quickly. Thick black smoke began rising from the bonnet.

One by one, they stepped out—shaken, frightened, but alive.

Minor injuries. Nothing serious. Relief came in uneven breaths.

The boy ran forward and hugged his father tightly. “Papa... thank God we are safe.”

“Yes,” he said, exhaling deeply. “At least we’re all fine. The tire ... it just burst. I don’t know how.”

The girl noticed a small cut on her brother’s arm.

“Aarav, you’re bleeding. I’ll put some medicine.”

“Leave it, Pooja Di,” he said lightly. “It’s nothing.”

But Roshni stood still.

The accident had shaken her more deeply than the others. The sun had almost disappeared now, leaving behind only a fading red glow—fragile, uncertain. She knew what darkness on such a road could mean.

She turned to her husband, her voice quieter now, edged with fear. “Nitin... how will we manage from here? I’m scared.”

“Don’t worry,” he replied, trying to sound steady. “We have a spare tyre. We’ll manage.”

He bent down and began changing it, slow and methodical.

Roshni and her daughter moved aside, standing near the tree. The evening breeze lifted the edge of her yellow sari slightly. Even in that moment, she carried a quiet grace—an elegance shaped not by display, but by strength. Her eyes held concern, resilience... and something unspoken that came from years of holding a family together.

Then—

Headlights appeared in the distance.

A large car, followed by a jeep, approached and stopped nearby.

For a brief second, it felt like help had arrived.

But something about it didn't sit right.

A man stepped out and asked, "Do you need help?"

Inside the car, a leader sat, speaking on his phone, irritation clear in his voice. "Don't waste time. Time is important. I have many responsibilities."

Before Nitin could even respond, the vehicle began to move forward slowly.

Aarav stood beside his father, holding a wrench in his small hands moved instinctively—trying to help, to fix, to steady a situation slipping out of control.

Then—

The leader glanced out of the window.

His gaze paused... and settled.

On the woman. And her daughter.

He noticed her—the quiet strength in her posture, the way her hair framed a face that carried both grace and resilience. More than that, it was the way she stood—almost unconsciously shielding her child, as if her very presence could guard her from the world.

The yellow sari she wore caught the fading light, glowing softly against the dimming evening, making her impossible to ignore.

Something shifted in his expression. A dark flicker passed through his eyes.

“Stop the car,” he ordered.

The vehicle came to an abrupt halt.

He stepped out slowly, unhurried, as though the moment belonged to him. Pulling out a bottle of imported wine, he took two quick sips, wiped his lips with the back of his hand, and began walking toward them.

There was confidence in his stride—no, not confidence. Ownership.

He turned briefly to Nitin, his tone casual, almost dismissive. “Let my team handle this. You should rest.”

From behind his SUV, two heavily built men emerged. Their movements were synchronized, their silence practiced. They didn’t need instructions; they understood their leader far too well.

“Come on, sir,” one of them urged Nitin, gesturing

toward the car. “You sit. We’ll take care of everything.”

But Nitin didn’t move.

Something felt... wrong.

The air had changed. It carried a sharpness now—a quiet, creeping danger that felt more suffocating than the smoke rising from his stalled engine.

Meanwhile, the leader continued forward.

He approached Roshni and her daughter, holding out a bottle of water as if performing an act of kindness.

“Water,” he said.

Roshni hesitated, then shook her head politely. “No, thank you.”

“Don’t worry,” he replied, a smile stretching across his face—but it didn’t reach his eyes. “I’m an MLA. Everything will be managed.”

The title hung in the air, heavy with implication.

Then, lowering his voice slightly, he added, “Your daughter is cute.”

The words were simple. But the tone wasn’t.

Roshni’s body reacted before her mind could process it. She pulled her daughter closer, her arm tightening protectively around the child.

“She’s just like her mother,” the leader continued, his gaze lingering longer than it should.

The sentence felt like a stain.

Anger rose within her—swift, sharp, and burning.

Without another word, she turned, intent on moving back toward Nitin... toward safety... toward something familiar.

But before she could take more than a step—

He moved. Stepping directly into her path.

Blocking her way.

A faint smirk curved his lips as he raised his hand slightly, as if stopping something trivial.

“Wait...” he said softly.

Then, with a chilling ease—“Dear lady”.



WHEN THE ROAD TURNED CRUEL

That sentence burned her.

The words scraped against her dignity, igniting something fierce and uncontrollable inside her. She turned instinctively, desperate to reach Nitin and her son—but the leader stepped forward, blocking her way again.

Before she could react, Nitin saw it all.

His voice tore through the air. “Hey! Behave yourself!”

He charged forward, rage and fear giving him strength beyond reason, and struck the leader with everything he had.

The man stumbled backward, flung several meters away, landing hard in the mud—his polished image smeared, exposed, as filthy as his intent.

Aarav ran to his father’s side without thinking.

By the time one of the bodyguards reached them, the damage was already done.

Then everything exploded at once.

A heavy blow struck Nitin. Another kick sent Aarav flying to the ground. He hit the earth hard, breath knocked out of him. Roshni screamed and ran toward them, Pooja following—but they were stopped abruptly by another guard.

A blade flashed.

The guard pressed it close to the girl and shouted, “Stop! One more step and she dies!”

They all froze.

Two men stood there—similar builds, thick moustaches, identical cruelty in their eyes.

Nitin struggled in their grip, watching helplessly, his heart pounding louder than his breath.

The leader rose slowly, wiping mud from his clothes, laughing softly. “I was only trying to help,” he said mockingly. “What’s wrong if I touched a little? She is so beautiful... no one can resist.”

He paused, then added coldly, “I guess even you couldn’t.”

Something snapped inside Nitin.

With a roar, he struck again, knocking one guard aside. He looked at his son and shouted through clenched teeth, “Aarav—run!”

Aarav shook his head wildly. “No!”

“Please,” Nitin begged, his voice breaking. “Go, Aarav, Go.... run to the police station. Only they can save us. Here, enemies are many.”

Tears streamed down Aarav’s face as he turned and ran.

The guards tried to grab him, but the boy slipped between them, small and fast, disappearing into the bushes.

Behind him, chaos raged.

The leader dragged Roshni toward a small, abandoned hut nearby. A few cattle scattered, sensing danger. She fought with every ounce of strength she had, crying out, but he was stronger, crueller, unstoppable.

Nitin fought like a man possessed—kicking, punching, refusing to fall. His family, his life, his love were slipping away.

He broke free and ran toward the hut—but was stopped again. A blade was raised, pointed toward his daughter.

Inside the hut, Roshni's cries echoed—please filled with terror and courage, fading under the weight of brutality.

Miles away, Aarav ran.

His body ached, bruised and bleeding. His shirt was torn, dust clinging to the streaks of sweat on his face. Every breath felt like fire in his chest, yet he forced his trembling legs forward. Fear chased him with every step, refusing to let go.

The narrow road ahead blurred before his eyes. More than once, he stumbled on loose stones, almost collapsing onto the roadside. His ears rang with distant noises—vehicles rushing past, dogs barking somewhere, his own heartbeat pounding wildly inside him.

For a terrifying moment, he thought he had lost his direction completely.

Then suddenly, through his fading vision, he spotted a

man riding slowly on a bicycle. Aarav gathered the last bit of strength left in him and shouted desperately for help.

“Police station?” he gasped, barely able to speak.

The man stopped, looked at him in shock, and silently pointed toward a lane ahead.

Hope surged through Aarav instantly. His eyes widened with relief, and for the first time since escaping, he felt he might actually survive. Clutching onto that tiny ray of hope, he ran again—this time knowing where to go. Aarav reached the police station and collapsed at the inspector’s feet.

A young officer rushed forward, gave him water, listened—then leapt up, grabbing his weapon.

“Move!” he shouted, racing for the jeep.

Back on the crime place, Nitin found a moment—one chance.

He struck again, flinging a guard aside, charging toward the hut with everything left in him.

He reached the doorway.

And then—

Pain exploded through his back.

A knife struck him from behind. His legs nearly gave way, but he forced himself forward, driven by love stronger than pain.

He grabbed the leader, dragging him back—but another

blow came. He was pulled away, thrown to the ground.

“Papa!” Pooja screamed.

Roshni, seeing Nitin collapse, stopped struggling.

Something inside her broke.

Same moment another vehicle by luck approached the road just as darkness deepened. A police officer stepped out. He saw the leader.

He understood immediately. Greed flickered across his face.

The leader spoke quietly to him. Promises were exchanged without words.

Before the police with Aarav could reach the area, the PA and the police officer followed their leader toward the lonely hut hidden deep inside the forest. What happened there was brutal beyond words—they were cruel, ruthless, and utterly merciless, showing no trace of humanity and brutally assaulted the lady.

From somewhere far within the dense trees, the faint cries of a lady pleading for help echoed through the forest, but her desperate voice had no impact on them at all, consumed by their intent, they remained unmoved. Just as they were about to step out of the hut and disappear into the shadows, another siren pierced the night air, rising suddenly from a short distance away, sharp and unavoidable, freezing them in place.

Sirens echoed in the distance.

The corrupt officer saw them approaching and fired his weapon into the air and shouted loudly when another police reached nearby,

The leader's vehicles sped off into the dark.

The young officer arrived moments later with Aarav. "They ran away! Fortunately I just arrived—I couldn't see their faces!"

Aarav jumped from police Jeep and ran.

"Nobody stopped him."

He reached his father.

Nitin lay still, life fading fast.

"Papa!" Aarav cried. "I brought the police. Don't worry."

Nitin opened his eyes one last time. He placed his hand on Aarav's head.

"I'm proud of you, my son. Take care of your sister... and your mother... and whispered few words which only Aarav heard"

And then—he was gone.

Pooja ran from behind the tree where she saved herself from these cruel people, sobbing, clinging to Aarav. "But where is Mom?"

Roshni lay nearby, broken, breathing shallowly.

She whispered something into Aarav's ear—words only a mother could give—then lost consciousness.

An ambulance arrived. They were taken away.

But the road had already taken too much.

Roshni and Nitin never returned.

Aarav and Pooja reached their grandparents' home with the bodies of parents, one evening had changed everything for them—two children carrying grief far heavier than their years. The old man wept silently, holding them close.

“You are not alone,” he said. “You will stay with us.”

The road behind them lay quiet again.

Silent. As if nothing had happened.



THE CITY, THE CAFE, THE GIRLS

The busy road pulsed like the heartbeat of the town's busiest market. Shops stood shoulder to shoulder on both sides, their colourful signboards fighting for attention beneath the afternoon sun. Familiar names glowed proudly—Reliance Trends, Bata, Titan, Cafe Coffee Day—while an old single-screen cinema lingered at the corner, its faded posters whispering memories of a different era.

Across the road, the scene was no calmer. Branded outlets mixed with tiny local stores, roadside carts, and blinking neon boards. Vendors shouted offers. Scooters squeezed through impossible gaps. People moved in every direction—some rushing, some wandering, some simply standing and watching the chaos unfold. The place was loud, crowded, restless... and completely alive.

Through this sea of noise and motion, a gleaming red car glided forward with effortless elegance. It looked like a BMW, its polished body reflecting the colours and confusion around it like flowing water. Behind the wheel sat a girl in a red dress, driving with the kind of confidence that made the chaos outside seem irrelevant.

A soft breeze slipped through the open window, teasing strands of her hair across her face. She brushed them aside absentmindedly, smiling as she continued talking on the phone through her earbuds.

She was laughing—light, carefree, untouched by the

world outside.

On the other end, another girl sounded equally excited, their conversation bouncing between teasing, complaints, and pointless little arguments only close friends could understand.

“You’re always late, I swear!”

“Arrey, relax! I was choosing earrings.”

“For twenty minutes?”

“They matter!”

Ria shook her head, smiling to herself.

The car slowed near a popular restaurant before coming to a smooth halt. Without hesitation, she parked perfectly beside the entrance, stepped out gracefully, and handed the keys to the valet—all while continuing her call.

“Listen,” she warned playfully, pointing a finger at the phone as if Avni could actually see her, “if you don’t reach in five minutes, I’m leaving.”

“You say that every time!”

“And one day I’ll mean it.”

“You’re too dramatic.”

“And you’re impossible.”

Still smiling, Ria walked toward the restaurant entrance with natural confidence. The moment she entered, a subtle shift passed through the room. A few

conversations paused. Heads turned instinctively.

Some silently judged her boldness. Some openly admired her. Most simply looked twice.

Because beauty alone attracts attention—but confidence makes people remember.

“We’ll go to college from here,” she said casually into the phone, as though every plan in life arranged itself naturally around her timing.

She chose the window seat she clearly preferred and settled into it comfortably, almost like she owned the place. A waiter noticed her immediately and walked over with a familiar smile.

“The usual, ma’am?”

Ria nodded lightly.

The waiter left and returned within minutes with her order, placing everything carefully on the table.

“Anything else, ma’am?” he asked politely.

Ria glanced toward the entrance.

“Wait for a while,” she said with a small smile. “Let Avni come first.”

The waiter said -oh Avni... She looked nodded and stepped away.

Outside, traffic roared endlessly. Inside, music floated softly through the cafe air.

And then—The restaurant door burst open.

A girl entered like a sudden storm of energy, scanning the cafe dramatically before shouting without hesitation,

“RIA! Are you here?”

Several customers turned instantly, startled.

Ria closed her eyes for a second, already embarrassed.

Then she smiled.

Avni stood at the entrance, breathing heavily as if she had run a marathon just to arrive on time. Her hair was slightly messy, one earring missing, and her expression carried the chaos of someone who lived permanently five minutes late.

“Ria!” she shouted again.

“I’m here,” Ria replied, laughing despite herself.

The moment Avni spotted her, her face lit up.

And just like that, amidst the noise of the cafe and the chaos of the city outside, the chapter finally found its spark.

“Where else would I be?” Ria’s voice came from behind her. “Right here.”

Avni turned sharply, startled. For a second, irritation flashed across her face... followed immediately by relief.

“I don’t know,” she said, placing a hand on her chest. “I didn’t even see you come in.”

Ria only shrugged, calm as ever. “Whatever.”

Something about her casual tone felt strange.

Avni narrowed her eyes slightly. “How did you get here?”

“How?” Ria lifted an eyebrow.

“Yeah,” Avni said slowly. “I didn’t see your car outside.”

“Oh.” A faint smile curved on Ria’s lips. “It’s parked on the left side. Same place as always.”

Avni frowned and instinctively glanced toward the glass window overlooking the parking area.

“That’s weird,” she murmured. “I looked there earlier. I didn’t see anything.”

For the briefest moment, Ria’s expression stiffened.

Then it disappeared.

“Come on,” she said lightly, pulling out a chair. “Forget all that. Let’s eat first. I’m starving.”

And just like that, the uneasiness dissolved—at least on the surface.

The cafe slowly filled with the soft hum of conversations, clinking cups, and the distant sound of old retro music playing overhead. Warm plates arrived one after another—toasted sandwiches dripping with butter, pancakes layered with syrup, sizzling hash browns, and steaming cups of coffee.

The rich aroma wrapped around them like comfort.

Soon laughter returned naturally between them.

They slipped back into old college memories—bunked lectures, impossible assignments, professors who terrified entire classrooms, silly crushes, hostel gossip, festival nights, and friendships that once felt eternal.

Every now and then, they burst into laughter loud enough for nearby tables to glance at them.

For a while, the world outside didn't exist.

No pressure. No fear. No shadows.

Just two friends reliving a simpler time.

But sometimes, calm moments arrive only to make the storm feel darker.

When brunch was over, they stepped outside through the cafe gates, still talking casually. The late morning sun had grown sharper now, reflecting off rows of parked vehicles. A warm breeze drifted across the almost quiet parking lot.

Then suddenly—

Ria stopped walking.

A strange seriousness entered her face.

“You know what?” she declared confidently. “Today I’m actually going to college. Full day. All lectures. No excuses.”

Avni laughed instantly. “Wow. Historic moment.”

Ria smirked proudly.

But then Avni's smile slowly faded.

She looked around once.

Then again.

A faint crease appeared on her forehead.

"But... how are you going?"

Ria blinked. "What do you mean?"

"Your car," Avni pointed ahead. "It's not here."

Silence.

Ria turned toward the parking lane.

Her smile disappeared.

She looked left.

Then right.

Then farther ahead.

"No..." she whispered.

Her footsteps quickened.

"That's not possible."

Avni tried to lighten the mood. "Maybe for once you came in an auto?" she joked with a grin.

Ria shot her a sharp look.

"My foot auto."

Now there was panic in her voice.

She moved rapidly across the parking area, scanning every row. Her heartbeat began pounding harder with each passing second. The air suddenly felt heavier.

The exact spot where her car should have been stood empty.

Completely empty.

A cold wave passed through her spine.

“But... where is my car?”

Nearby staff exchanged nervous glances. One of them hurried forward, confused and stammering. The floor manager soon arrived, sweating despite the cool air drifting from the cafe lobby.

“Ma’am, please calm down... maybe someone moved it... we are checking...”

But his words sounded hollow. Meaningless.

Then his hand pointed helplessly toward a small metallic board fixed near the entrance.

Parking at your own risk.

Ria stared at the line.

The words felt like mockery.

Her jaw tightened.

Frustration rose inside her chest like fire searching for air.

Without wasting another second, she pulled out her phone and dialed her father. The call connected.

“Dad,” she said, forcing herself to stay composed. “My car is gone. Someone stole it.”

On the other end, there was background noise... muffled voices... the sound of an ongoing meeting.

Her father sounded calm. Too calm.

“I’m in an important meeting right now,” he replied after a pause. “Come home in half an hour. I’ll call a police officer there as well.”

The call disconnected.

Ria slowly lowered the phone.

Around her, the city continued moving as if nothing had happened—cars honking, people walking, traffic roaring beyond the gates.

But for her, something felt wrong.

Breakfast was over.

The real day had just begun.



RE-UNION

The villa stood at the edge of the city like a silent declaration of power—vast, immaculate, and impossible to ignore. Its pristine white walls gleamed under the mellow afternoon sun, radiating an elegance that bordered on intimidation. Every corner of the estate seemed carefully designed to remind visitors that influence lived here, not merely wealth.

A massive lawn stretched outward from the mansion in smooth green waves, trimmed with such precision it looked unreal, like velvet spread across the earth. Wrought-iron chairs rested beneath large cream-coloured umbrellas, arranged neatly around a circular marble table where a porcelain teapot still released faint curls of steam. Even relaxation here appeared disciplined, scheduled, controlled.

Tall palm trees lined the boundary walls, swaying gently in the warm breeze. Their long shadows fell across the grounds like silent guards. Yet the real guards stood in plain sight.

Armed bodyguards were positioned everywhere—near the towering main gate, beside the driveway, along the pathways leading to the villa. Some wore dark sunglasses despite the fading sunlight, their faces unreadable. Others spoke quietly into wireless earpieces, scanning every movement with practiced caution. Their presence carried an unspoken warning: this was not merely a home; it was a fortress.

Near the entrance, four or five imported luxury cars stood parked in perfect alignment. Glossy black, metallic silver, deep navy blue—each vehicle reflected wealth so effortlessly that it no longer needed display. The engines were silent, but the status they represented roared loudly enough.

Inside the villa, however, the calm elegance had shattered completely.

“Someone stole it! My car!”

The sharp cry echoed through the enormous hall, bouncing off crystal chandeliers and polished marble walls.

A young woman stormed across the room, rage burning in her eyes. Tears threatened to gather, yet pride refused to let them fall. Her expensive bangles clinked violently with every movement of her hands.

“Papa, my car!” she shouted again, almost unable to believe the words herself. “Someone stole my car... in your own city! Your daughter’s car!”

Her voice carried more disbelief than fear.

The car had not merely been a possession. It had been freedom, identity, and prestige wrapped into one gleaming machine. A birthday gift from her father—a custom imported vehicle that had turned heads everywhere she drove. People recognized the car before they recognized her. Losing it felt less like theft and more like humiliation.

She paced the marble floor restlessly, like a flame trapped inside glass.

Servants stood silently near the walls, avoiding eye contact. No one dared interrupt her anger.

At the far end of the hall, seated on a wide leather sofa, her father remained calm.

Mani Choudhary. Member of Parliament. Cabinet minister.

Kingmaker in state politics. A man whose influence stretched from dusty village roads to the polished corridors of Delhi. He had spent decades mastering the art of power, and power had shaped him into someone who rarely allowed emotions to surface openly.

Dressed in a spotless white kurta-pyjama, he sat with one leg crossed over the other, fingers resting lightly on the armrest. His face showed neither panic nor irritation—only controlled patience.

He watched his daughter quietly for a few moments before speaking.

“Calm down,” he said in a low, steady voice.

But she stopped abruptly and turned toward him.

“How can I calm down?” she snapped. “Do you even understand what happened? Someone had the courage to steal my car! In broad daylight!”

Her breathing had grown uneven. Anger mixed with wounded pride.

Mani Choudhary leaned back slightly, studying her carefully.

“Things get lost,” he replied with unsettling calm. “And things get found.”

He paused for a moment, his eyes narrowing faintly.

“This city still listens to me.” She stopped and stared at him, disbelief etched across her face. “Papa, this is not some necklace. It’s my car.”

“And you are my daughter,” he replied, rising and placing a comforting hand on her shoulder. “No one touches what belongs to us without consequences. I’ve given assurances before, and I won’t break them now.”

His words worked like balm. Her breathing slowed, though anger still simmered beneath the surface. Outside, unseen by her, events were already in motion.

On the main road leading to the villa, a police jeep cut through traffic with controlled urgency. No siren blared, yet vehicles parted instinctively. The nameplate gleamed freshly corrected in black letters: DySP Akshay Patil.

DySP Patil sat in the front, his gaze fixed ahead. Years in uniform had trained his face into discipline, but his eyes betrayed memory—layers of it, heavy and unresolved. As the jeep slowed near the massive iron gate, his eyes caught another name, engraved in polished brass -

M.P. Mani Chaudhary.

A flicker passed through him. The past had a way of

resurfacing when least invited.

The guards noticed the jeep immediately. One stepped forward, sharp-eyed, scanning the insignia. Recognition followed. A quick call was made inside, hushed words exchanged. Moments later, the gates swung open with mechanical obedience, and the jeep rolled in.

DySP stepped out, straightening his uniform. The villa seemed even larger from within the compound, its silence heavier, more deliberate. A guard led him through the garden, past the chairs, the teapot, the lawn that looked too perfect to be real.

A laugh greeted him before words did.

“Hah! Welcome, S.P. How are you?” Mani Choudhary’s voice carried warmth—almost too much.

“All well, sir. Choudhary Saheb, I am DySP only” Akshay replied, returning the greeting with professional respect.

“Good to see you in my city in fact years after,” Mani said, smiling broadly.

To an outsider, it might have seemed like a cordial meeting between two respected men. But beneath the politeness lay a shared history, unspoken yet vivid. They had known each other long before titles and power had polished their edges. They had been partners—silent ones—in many shadows. And it had all begun with one infamous road incident, years ago, a moment neither of them had ever truly left behind.

“Wow,” Mani said, gesturing for DySP Patil to walk with

him toward the lawn. “It’s been a long time. I remember—we started from that road incident. And then, so many things followed.”

DySP Patil nodded, his jaw tightening almost imperceptibly. “Time moves fast,” he said.

“And you became DySP. from inspector,” Mani continued, clapping him lightly on the shoulder. “Good progress.”

DySP Patil allowed himself a thin smile. “You also became a Member of Parliament. And a minister at the Centre. Kudos to you, sir.”

They sat down on the lawn chairs. A servant silently poured tea, placing the cups between them. Akshay’s eyes wandered—noticing the symmetry, the security, the effortless display of control. Beauty, he thought, could be engineered just like silence.

Mani leaned back, relaxed. “So,” he said casually, “How do you feel about my home?”

DySP Patil looked around once more before answering. “Impressive,” he said truthfully. “Very impressive.”

Yet inside him, something stirred—uneasy, unresolved. The stolen car was a small matter, on the surface. But roads had memories. And some journeys, once begun, never truly ended.

The calm of the lawn shattered without warning.

Footsteps rushed across the grass, uneven and frantic,

and before either man could turn fully, a young woman stumbled into view. Her breath came in sharp sobs, her eyes swollen and red, her carefully styled hair falling loose around her face. She looked as though grief and anger had tangled together inside her and refused to let go.

“My car...!” she cried, her voice breaking mid-word. “Papa—my car!”

She crossed the lawn in hurried strides and collapsed beside Mani Choudhary, clutching his arm as if the ground itself might give way beneath her. For a moment, the power of the place—the guards, the luxury, the silence—meant nothing. She was only a daughter who had lost something precious.

Mani’s expression changed instantly. The calculating politician softened into a protective father. He placed a firm arm around her shoulders, drawing her close.

“It’s all right, Ria,” he said gently. “I’m here.”

He looked up at DySP Patil, pride and possessiveness mingling in his eyes. “She is my daughter—Ria. My love. My life.”

DySP Patil rose from his chair at once, instinctively formal, instinctively kind. He had seen grief in many forms—on roadsides, in police stations, in hospital corridors—but this was different. This grief was wrapped in privilege, yet no less real.

“Ah... welcome, dear,” he said, offering a small, respectful smile. “Nice to meet you, daughter.”

Ria barely acknowledged him, her fingers tightening around her father's sleeve.

Patil turned back to Mani, his tone shifting smoothly into duty. "Tell me, sir. Why did you call me?"

Mani guided Ria to sit, then straightened, the softness retreating just enough to make room for authority.

"The reason is simple," he said. "Her loving car was stolen. Taken from Hotel IBIP. I want you to ask your team to look into it. Personally."

DySP Patil nodded without hesitation. "Sure, sir. It will be done." He turned slightly toward Ria. "Don't worry. You go and rest. We'll handle this."

Ria looked up at him then, really looked—at the uniform, the insignia, the calm certainty in his eyes.

For a second, hope flickered through her tears. She nodded faintly and went back toward the villa.

As she disappeared inside, Mani exhaled slowly.

"Patil," he said, lowering his voice, "put some good men behind this."

Patil met his gaze. "Yes. Recently, a new guy joined the force. Sharp mind. Quiet. I'll ask him to search."

He paused, his fingers brushing the edge of his teacup, as though deciding how much of the thought inside him should be spoken aloud.

"You know," he added carefully, "this guy... he reminds

me of that same kid.”

Mani’s brow creased. “What kid?”

“That unforgettable night,” DySP Patil said softly. “The first time we met.”

The air between them shifted—almost imperceptibly, yet unmistakable. The lawn remained peaceful, but memory had a way of tightening its grip without warning.

“How?” Mani asked, his voice controlled but alert.

“He wears the same amulet,” DySP Patil replied.

Mani let out a short laugh, dismissive, practiced. “Come on. If you start noticing such things, you’ll find a thousand people wearing the same amulet.”

“Perhaps,” DySP Patil said, not arguing. But his eyes lingered on the thought longer than his words did.

Mani stood, brushing imaginary dust from his trousers. “Anyway—do it fast.”

DySP Patil rose as well. “Of course. And I also have a very good informer. He can help.”

Mani arched an eyebrow. “Informer? What will he do?”

“He’s helped me solve many cases,” DySP Patil said evenly.

“Hmm,” Mani murmured after a moment. “Okay.”

They exchanged a final nod—two men bound by old secrets, newer power, and a problem that seemed small

but felt oddly weighted. DySP Patil walked back toward the gate, his footsteps measured, his face unreadable.

As the jeep pulled away, he glanced once more at the villa in the rear-view mirror—the white walls, the green lawn, the guards standing still as statues. Somewhere inside, a young woman mourned a stolen car.

And somewhere else, far from this quiet luxury, the road was already beginning to remember.



THE GAME BEGINS AGAIN

The police station stood at the corner of a crowded market road, its pale yellow paint peeling in uneven patches, as if time itself had grown tired of maintaining appearances. A rusted board creaked above the entrance, the bold blue letters announcing the station's name barely visible beneath dust and years of neglect. Inside, the air carried a mix of sweat, old paper, and stale tobacco—an atmosphere that seemed permanently trapped within its cracked walls.

A few inspectors moved briskly across the corridor, files tucked under their arms. Their expressions were serious, brows furrowed as if they were on the verge of solving some great mystery. Papers shuffled constantly, chairs scraped against the cement floor, and typewriters clattered in rhythm. From a distance, it looked like a hive of relentless activity—like justice was only moments away from being delivered.

But beneath the surface, the rhythm was slower, heavier.

In one corner, a constable leaned against a wooden desk, carefully crushing tobacco between his palms. He mixed it with lime paste, rolled it with practiced fingers, and tucked a portion inside his cheek. With a casual grin, he passed the rest around to his friends. They laughed quietly, their red-stained lips curling in amusement as they chewed and exchanged gossip. The urgency of the

files lying before them did not quite match the ease in their movements.

The ceiling fans spun lazily overhead, struggling against the thick heat. A wall clock ticked loudly, every second echoing in the semi-chaotic silence.

Then—

A sudden screech of brakes tore through the stillness.

The sharp sound of a police jeep halting outside made heads turn instantly. Conversations stopped. Tobacco packets disappeared into pockets. Files were lifted with renewed seriousness.

The jeep door opened with a firm metallic thud.

DySP Patil stepped out.

From behind, his figure radiated authority. His boots struck the ground in bold, deliberate steps—each one echoing against the courtyard walls. His uniform was sharply pressed, stars gleaming on his shoulders. As he walked toward the entrance, every officer who crossed his path stiffened and saluted. Some salutes were crisp and genuine; others carried a subtle undertone of caution.

He acknowledged them with brief nods, his expression balanced between satisfaction and calculation.

There was something different about him today. A faint curve rested at the edge of his lips—almost a secret smile.

His eyes, however, were alert and restless. As he walked through the corridor, he murmured softly to himself, barely audible even to his own ears.

“Time to get promotion again... with the help of that leader.” The words slipped out like a promise—or perhaps a warning.

He had just met an old companion earlier that day. A partner from another chapter of life. A chapter neither of them would openly discuss. The memory of that infamous road incident still lingered in the shadows of his mind, though the world believed it long buried. Power had lifted them both—one to politics, the other to rank. And power, he knew, always came with opportunities.

Sometimes lawful.

Sometimes not.

He entered his cabin.

The room was modest yet carefully arranged. A heavy wooden desk occupied the centre. Files were stacked on one side; a service revolver rested inside its leather holster near the edge. Behind the desk hung framed photographs of the Prime Minister and Mahatma Gandhi. Their calm, resolute faces seemed to observe the room with silent judgment—as if truth itself resided within these walls.

Irony lingered there.

DySP Patil paused for a moment, looking at the portraits. For a brief second, something flickered across his face—perhaps reflection, perhaps mockery.

He stepped closer to his desk.

First, he cleaned his nameplate with a folded handkerchief: “DySP Akshay Patil.”

He adjusted it so it sat perfectly straight.

Then he aligned the files, corrected the position of the bell, repositioned the phone receiver, and carefully reholstered his small gun. Every movement was precise, controlled—like a man preparing for something bigger than routine duty.

Finally, he sat down, leaning back slightly in his chair.

He pressed the bell.

A moment later, his assistant entered, standing at attention.

“Yes, sir?”

“Send Anand.”

Within minutes, a young officer stepped in, knocked lightly, and saluted.

“Permission to enter, sir?”

“Come in, Anand.”

Anand walked forward confidently. There was sincerity in his posture—something unpolished yet steady.

“Yes, sir?”

“There’s a car theft case,” DySP. Patil said, his voice calm but deliberate. “A very important one. The daughter of a prominent leader. Look into it.”

Anand’s eyebrows lifted slightly.

“Sir... car theft? That too of such a big leader? Maybe this can be assigned to someone else. Perhaps to Aryan... your close informer.”

A faint smile touched the DySP’s lips.

“Hmmm... nice idea.”

Anand hesitated. “Sir... why do you trust Aryan so much?”

The question hung in the air for a moment.

DySP. Patil folded his hands on the desk and leaned forward.

“You know nothing about him,” he said quietly. “He is honest. Works part-time. Studies as well. Poor family... an orphan. Life hasn’t been kind to him.”

He paused.

“Let me remind you of something.”

His gaze drifted slightly, as if replaying a memory.

“It was about a year ago. I had just joined this place. New posting. New environment. And the very first week, a case came...”

His voice softened, yet there was tension beneath it.

“A case that could have ended my career before it even began.”

Anand listened carefully.

Outside, the ceiling fan creaked.

I met him on road side “Super Spy” small office and he promised to help. I gave him permission to come my office whenever you need me or want to share some information.



THE MISSING TRUCK

It was only the third night after DySP. Akshay Patil took charge of the district when the crisis arrived—swift, silent, and heavy with consequence.

The call came a little past midnight.

A transport truck carrying ammonium nitrate had vanished from the national highway.

Not delayed. Not hijacked in the usual way. Vanished.

The truck had crossed the first toll plaza at 11:42 p.m. Its number plate was clearly visible in the CCTV footage. The driver's face too. Everything normal. Routine.

But it never reached the second toll plaza.

Between two heavily monitored checkpoints, under a highway lit with sodium vapor lamps and guarded by patrol vehicles, a fourteen-ton truck had disappeared.

By morning, the news channels were screaming.

“Explosive Cargo Missing!” “Security Lapse in DySP First Week!”

Political opposition leaders demanded suspension. Senior officers from headquarters called every hour, their voices sharp and cold.

“Find it, Patil. Or be prepared for consequences.”

Pressure coiled tightly around his neck.

Ammonium nitrate. On paper, fertilizer. In the wrong hands, devastation. Enough to reduce an entire city block into rubble.

Inside the control room, officers replayed the CCTV footage again and again. Inspectors ran search teams across warehouses, godowns, scrap yards, and villages along the highway.

Nothing.

No skid marks. No distress call. No sign of forced diversion.

It was as if the road had swallowed the truck whole.

By the second day, exhaustion hung over the station like a storm cloud.

That was when Aryan walked in.

Aryan wasn't on payroll. He wore no uniform. No badge.

Just a faded backpack, dusty sneakers, and sharp eyes that missed little.

An orphan. College student. Part-time spy. And for the police—when convenient—a local informer.

He stood quietly near the back of the control room,

watching the officers argue over maps.

“CCTV glitch,” one inspector muttered.

“Driver must have diverted before entry,” another insisted.

Aryan didn’t speak immediately. Instead, he borrowed access to the local surveillance recordings. Not just from toll plazas—but from small shops and roadside cameras half a kilometre before the first toll.

He counted.

Seventy-two trucks entered the highway stretch that night.

At the second toll plaza—seventy-one exited.

He counted again. Seventy-two in. Seventy-one out.

His pulse quickened.

He rushed to DySP Patil’s cabin without waiting for formal permission.

“Sir.”

Patil looked up, irritation flashing across his face. “This is not the time, Aryan.”

“Sir, if the truck didn’t exit the highway... it didn’t leave the highway.”

Patil's eyes narrowed. "What does that even mean?"

Aryan stepped closer to the desk, spreading out printed still images.

"Seventy-two trucks entered. Seventy-one exited. That means one never came back to surface."

"Surface?"

"It went under it."

Silence fell.

Patil leaned back slowly.

"There's no underpass on that stretch."

"Not officially," Aryan replied. "But near the old quarry road... there's a drainage tunnel beneath the highway. Abandoned. Forgotten. It doesn't appear on updated maps."

Patil's jaw tightened.

"That tunnel is too narrow for heavy vehicles."

"It was," Aryan said calmly. "Three months ago, illegal sand operators widened it to move trucks at night. I repaired my vehicle there once."

The room went still.

Patil stared at him.

“You’re suggesting armed criminals diverted a truck carrying explosive chemicals into a hidden underground route?”

“Yes, sir.”

“And you’re basing this on counting trucks?”

Aryan’s voice did not waver. “Logic doesn’t lie.”

Patil stood abruptly. “If you’re wrong—”

Aryan interrupted softly, “If I’m wrong, give me no case forward. I don’t need reward. I just love solving what doesn’t fit.”

The simplicity of that statement unsettled Patil more than the theory.

Within minutes, a convoy of police jeeps roared toward the quarry stretch.

The road near the quarry was desolate, surrounded by jagged rocks and silent machinery abandoned years ago. Wind howled faintly through broken stone structures.

Patil stepped out of his jeep, scanning the terrain.

“Where?” he demanded.

Aryan pointed toward a cluster of wild bushes near the slope.

Behind them, partially concealed by scrap metal sheets,

was a dark opening.

The drainage tunnel.

Patil signalled his team.

Two armed constables moved forward cautiously.
Flashlights pierced the darkness.

Tyres marks.

Fresh.

Patil's heart pounded.

“Move!”

They entered the tunnel.

The air inside was damp and thick with dust. The passage was indeed widened—just enough for a truck to pass.

At the other end, the tunnel opened into an abandoned stone warehouse hidden behind quarry debris.

And there it was.

The missing truck.

Engine cold. Doors locked.

Three men inside the warehouse froze as police stormed in.

One reached for a weapon.

Gunshots cracked through the stone chamber.

Echoes exploded against the walls.

A constable tackled one suspect. Another tried to flee toward the back exit—only to find Patil blocking the path, revolver drawn steady.

“Game over.”

Within minutes, all three were arrested.

The ammonium nitrate was intact.

Later investigation revealed one suspect’s link to a cross-border illegal supply network. The chemicals were meant to be split and transported quietly to unknown buyers.

Had it succeeded, the consequences would have been catastrophic.

By evening, news channels changed their tone.

“Swift Police Action Prevents Major Disaster.”

“New DySP. Cracks High-Risk Case in 48 Hours.”

Patil’s phone buzzed with congratulations instead of threats.

His reputation—once teetering—was now solid.

But amid the flashing cameras and official statements, no one noticed what Aryan had done earlier that morning.

Before informing the police, Aryan had gone alone to confirm his theory. He had crawled halfway through that tunnel with nothing but a mobile torch. If the criminals had seen him—He would not have walked out alive.

That night, after the media left, Patil called Aryan .

The portraits of national leaders watched from the wall.

Patil stood up—an unusual gesture.

“You saved the department,” he said quietly. “And me.”

Aryan smiled, shy but satisfied. “Just doing my part, sir.”

Patil opened a drawer and pulled out an envelope.

“Take this.” Aryan stepped back. “No, sir. I don’t need money.”

“It’s a reward.” “I don’t want reward. I like solving crimes. That’s enough. Whenever there is a recruitment ,please consider me”

For a moment, Patil studied him carefully and pushed the money in his pocket.

Then, unexpectedly, he stepped forward and hugged the young man. “You’re my permanent informer from today,” he said.

“No more part-time.”

Aryan laughed softly. “As you say, sir.”

But as Aryan left the cabin, Patil remained standing.

His mind worked differently. A boy who counts trucks no one else counts.

A man who notices missing numbers. A man who finds hidden tunnels beneath highways. Such men are useful. Very useful.

Because someone who can detect a missing truck, can one day detect a missing truth.

And some truths—especially those buried beneath powerful leaders and old road incidents—are meant to stay underground.

Outside the station, sirens faded into the night.

Inside, DySP. Akshay Patil adjusted his nameplate again, ensuring it sat perfectly straight.



BENEATH THE GARBAGE MOON

Anand was genuinely impressed after hearing Aryan's earlier success stories.

"People like him should be in the police force," he said firmly. "But for now, at least give this car theft assignment." DySP Akshay Patil wasted no time. He called Aryan into his office and handed him the file. "Luxury BMW. Belongs to Ria Chaudhary. Stolen from parking in broad daylight. No exit record. No toll trace. No eyewitness. It's as if the car dissolved into air."

Aryan was reluctant at first. "I don't usually handle routine theft cases." The DySP leaned back, studying him. "If it were routine, I wouldn't have called you." After a long pause, Aryan nodded. "Okay."

At the parking slot, Aryan moved with quiet precision. He examined the exact position where the car had been parked. He traced the tire marks on the concrete. He walked every exit road leading out of the hotel compound, then stepped outside and checked the connecting lanes.

He identified all CCTV cameras—inside the parking area, at the gates, at the nearby intersections. Hours later, he sat before the surveillance system, replaying footage frame by frame. The car was clearly visible when Ria entered the hotel for brunch.

Guests moved in and out. Staff crossed the frame. Vehicles exited normally. But the luxury car—simply vanished. There was no clip showing it driving out. No barrier lifting for it. No gate opening.

Aryan replayed the timeline again. His jaw tightened. “Cars don’t disappear,” he murmured.

Meanwhile, DySP received a call from Ria’s father, his old friend. The man’s voice carried worry beneath forced calm. “Pail, that car is not the issue. I just don’t want this to become a headline.”

The DySP assured him confidently while sipping coffee, “Work is in progress”.

“The case is in Aryan’s hands.” He meant it. If anyone could untangle impossibility, it was Aryan.

Aryan drove to the toll plaza himself. He checked logs personally. No record. He verified nearby fuel stations. Nothing.

The theft had occurred in daylight when Ria and Avni were having brunch, not in the dark cover of night. That fact disturbed him the most. He was perplexed.

He sat in his car outside the hotel for nearly an hour, observing traffic flow, when suddenly his eyes paused on something in one of the side CCTV angles—a medium-sized lorry taking the narrow corner road leading toward the garbage dump area behind the hotel. The rear doors

were tightly shut.

It looked unusually clean for a garbage vehicle. “Hmm,” he said to himself. “Why would a closed lorry head toward the dump in the afternoon without visible garbage?” His instincts stirred.

That night, he drove toward the garbage dump. The road was desolate. It was pitch dark; even his hand was barely visible in front of him. The moon played hide and seek with restless clouds. Dogs barked intermittently, their howls echoing strangely. A bat flew low, brushing past his shoulder. For a moment, he wondered if he should return and come back with police backup. But instinct overruled caution.

He moved silently toward a faint light flickering near a small hut beyond the dump. Suddenly, headlights appeared on the narrow road. A car approached the hut. Aryan instantly hid behind a thick tree trunk. The car stopped. Three men stepped out. They scanned both sides suspiciously before opening the hut doors.

To Aryan’s astonishment, the car was driven straight inside the hut. “A car... inside that?” he whispered. He waited. One hour passed. Then another. No movement. The silence became suffocating. Finally, after two hours, the same car emerged and drove away into the darkness.

Aryan cautiously approached the hut. The dogs began barking aggressively as if sensing an intruder. He slowed

his steps. Suddenly, the hut door opened again and two men stepped outside, talking in low voices. Aryan had no time to think. He jumped sideways into a pile of garbage and flattened himself beneath torn plastic and rotting waste. The sound of his landing echoed faintly.

The men stopped mid-conversation. “Did you hear something?” one asked sharply.

They began walking toward the exact spot. Aryan’s heart pounded so violently he feared they would hear it. His hand instinctively gripped the small knife in his pocket. The men were barely ten feet away when a stray dog dashed across the heap, barking wildly and knocking over a metal drum.

The men cursed and laughed nervously. “Just a dog,” one muttered. They returned inside. Aryan lay motionless for several minutes, sweat mixing with filth, before slowly rising.

He entered the hut carefully. Inside, it looked almost abandoned—broken furniture, a lantern, scattered tools. No sign of any mechanism large enough to conceal a car. He circled the room twice, tapping walls lightly, scanning the floor. Nothing.

For a brief second, doubt crept in. Had he misjudged everything? Then his eyes caught something unusual in the corner—a metallic motor-like gear partially hidden under a wooden crate. Too clean. Too deliberate. He

pushed the crate aside and examined the lever. Industrial strength. Out of place.

His pulse quickened. He hesitated only a second before pushing it slightly to the right. A deep grinding noise echoed beneath the floor. The ground shifted. A concealed panel slid open with mechanical precision. Cold air rushed upward, carrying the smell of engine oil.

Aryan stepped back in disbelief. A staircase descended into darkness. He switched on his torch and peered inside. What he saw made his breath hitch.

A massive underground basement stretched below, illuminated by dim industrial lights. Rows of cars—luxury sedans, SUVs, high-end models—stood parked neatly. Some were partially dismantled. Number plates removed. Identification numbers scratched out. It was not a random theft ring; it was an organized network. As he descended two steps to get a clearer view, he suddenly heard distant voices and the metallic clang of tools. Someone was working below. A sudden beam of light swept across the staircase wall from inside. Aryan instantly froze, flattening himself against the edge.

The footsteps grew louder for a moment, then receded. He realized how dangerously close he was to being trapped underground with criminals who would not hesitate to eliminate a witness. Slowly, silently, he retreated upward, pulled the lever back to its original position, and restored the hut exactly as before.

He disappeared into the night, but his mind was racing. Now he understood the *modus operandi*. The car had been lifted directly from the parking lot—likely with the cooperation of someone inside. Loaded into the lorry discreetly. Transported to the hut under the cover of municipal movement. Lowered into the underground vault. Modified. Repainted. Re-identified. Then sold or transported elsewhere. It was a system built with chilling efficiency.

Back home, he washed off the grime but not the tension. He called DySP immediately. “The car never exited the hotel gates,” Aryan said calmly. “It was transported inside a lorry and hidden in an underground basement near the garbage dump. There are dozens of stolen cars there.”

There was silence on the other end. “Are you certain?” the DySP asked quietly.

“I saw it with my own eyes. This is organized crime. And they’re confident.”

The officer exhaled slowly. “Ria’s father called again. He’s anxious.”

Aryan looked out at the silent city skyline. “Tell him his car is probably still intact. But this isn’t about one car anymore.” He ended the call and leaned back.



THE GARBAGE EMPIRE

The first light of dawn had barely touched the horizon when DySP Akshay Patil's convoy rolled silently toward the city's largest garbage dumping yard on the outskirts of town. The air was thick with the stench of rot and smoke; stray dogs barked nervously as police jeeps cut through the mist. A few ragpickers paused mid-step, startled by the sudden arrival of uniformed officers armed and alert.

At the far end of the dump, partially hidden behind towering piles of scrap and waste, stood a cluster of temporary huts made of tin sheets and torn tarpaulin. A faded truck was parked nearby, and a handful of men were unloading sacks as though it were just another ordinary morning.

"Sir, what are we searching for in this garbage area?" one constable muttered under his breath, unable to mask his confusion.

DySP. Patil adjusted his cap and smiled faintly. "Gold," he replied, laughing softly. "We are searching for gold."

The team spread out, surrounding the huts. One of the men noticed the police presence and tried to slip away, but two constables blocked his path. The unloading stopped. Silence fell like a heavy curtain.

DySP. Patil walked straight toward the largest hut. His boots crunched over broken glass and discarded metal. Inside, four men were sitting on wooden stools, sipping tea as if they owned the world.

“Sir, please sit,” one of them said nervously, offering a plastic chair. “Tea?”

The DySP. looked at him coldly. “What is this? Your in-law’s house? You think I’ve come here for tea?”

His voice echoed sharply inside the hut. He turned toward his officers. “Arrest them.”

The men froze. Cups of tea slipped from trembling hands, shattering on the mud floor. Within seconds, handcuffs clicked into place. One of the accused began protesting, but the DySP gaze silenced him.

“Search everything,” he ordered.

The hut appeared ordinary—old bedding, rusted tools, empty crates—but Aryan’s clue had been precise: The car never left the city. Those words had echoed in Patil’s mind the entire night. If the stolen vehicles weren’t transported out, they had to be hidden somewhere nearby.

A young constable called out, “Sir! There’s something strange here.”

At the rear of the hut, beneath a thick plastic sheet and

piles of discarded cardboard, was a large iron trapdoor partially buried under garbage. It was cleverly camouflaged—impossible to notice without careful inspection.

DySP. Patil's pulse quickened.

“Open it.”

Two officers pulled the heavy lid aside. A foul odour escaped from below, mixed with dampness and petrol fumes. A narrow staircase descended into darkness.

“Torches on,” he commanded.

They moved down cautiously, guns drawn. As the beam of Patil's flashlight cut through the gloom, his breath caught in his throat.

Before him lay a hidden basement—massive, organized, and shockingly clean compared to the chaos above. And inside it...

Cars.

Not one or two.

Dozens.

Brand-new sedans, SUVs, hatchbacks—all neatly parked in rows like a secret showroom beneath the city's garbage. Some were half-painted, others stripped of number plates. Buckets of paint, spray machines,

duplicate chassis plates, and stacks of forged documents were arranged on a long wooden table.

For a moment, DySP Patil simply stood there, stunned.

“Sir...” whispered one constable, unable to believe his eyes.

Patil walked slowly between the vehicles, reading chassis numbers, inspecting details. And then he saw it—a sleek white luxury car with a small scratch near the rear bumper.

He smiled.

“Ria’s car,” he murmured.

The very vehicle reported stolen from Hotel IBIZ, the one that had shaken the pride of a powerful M.P., was standing right there, untouched except for minor preparation work to change its identity.

He immediately took out his phone and dialled Aryan.

On the other side, Aryan answered calmly, as though he already knew.

“It’s there, isn’t it?” Aryan asked.

DySP. Patil chuckled. “Yes. Beneath garbage. A whole empire.”

“I told you, sir,” Aryan replied. “They repaint and resell

within the city limits. No highway toll records. No interstate movement. They hide in plain sight.”

Patil’s voice grew warmer. “You should be in the force, Aryan. I will do something about that.”

There was a brief silence. Aryan responded quietly, “I just don’t like injustice, sir.”

After disconnecting, DySP. Patil stood still for a second, reflecting. He always makes my work easy, he thought to himself. Sharp mind. Fearless instinct.

Upstairs, the arrested men were now terrified. One of them began confessing under pressure. The gang had been operating for over two years. They targeted high-end vehicles from hotels, malls, and private residences. Within hours, cars were driven to the dump yard, hidden underground, repainted overnight, given forged engine and chassis numbers, and sold in neighbouring districts as refurbished second-hand vehicles.

The garbage yard was the perfect shield—no one voluntarily searched through filth.

“Seal the entire area,” Patil instructed. “Call forensic. Inform RTO officials. Every vehicle here will be verified.”

More police vans arrived. News began to leak. Local reporters caught wind of unusual activity and started gathering outside the dumping yard. By mid-morning,

flashing cameras were pointed at the scene.

DySP. Patil personally supervised as each recovered car was brought up from the basement. When Ria's car emerged, cleaned and intact, a murmur of relief passed through the officers.

He dialled the M.P.

“Sir, your daughter's car is intact.”

There was a pause on the other end. “Intact? You found it?”

“Yes. It was part of a larger racket. They were refurbishing stolen vehicles—changing colours, documents, everything. Your car hasn't been altered yet.”

The M.P.'s tone softened. “Excellent work, Patil ji. I knew you would handle it.”

Patil ended the call with a composed smile, though inside he felt a surge of triumph.

By afternoon, twenty-seven stolen vehicles had been recovered. The gang members were taken into custody. The hidden basement was photographed and documented. It was one of the biggest car theft rackets uncovered in recent years.

As the sun began to set, DySP. Patil stood beside the convoy of recovered cars lined up neatly outside the station. Officers congratulated him enthusiastically.

“Sir, this will be front-page news!”

Patil adjusted his uniform and allowed himself a brief grin. “Tomorrow’s newspaper... it’s again me.”

The constables laughed.

But deep inside, he knew the truth—this success was not his alone. It was built on Aryan’s sharp deduction, his refusal to believe that the car had crossed state lines, his ability to think like a criminal without becoming one.

As the flashing cameras captured images of the recovered vehicles, DySP. Patil glanced at the skyline.

Crime had hidden itself beneath garbage.

But truth had dug deeper.

And somewhere in the city, Aryan walked quietly through the evening crowd, unknown to the media, unseen by headlines—yet once again, he had changed the course of the story.

The garbage dump returned to its usual stillness.

But beneath the filth, an empire had fallen.

And this was only the beginning.



A VISITOR AT SUPER SPY

It was late afternoon, the busiest hour of the market. The sun was still strong, but it had begun to soften, spreading a golden glow over the crowded streets. Vehicles honked impatiently. Rickshaws squeezed themselves between bikes. Street vendors shouted their offers in rhythmic tones as if performing a daily play they had memorized for years.

This was not a rich mall area. It was a real market — alive, loud, imperfect, and vibrant.

On one side of the road stood a row of small shops packed closely together like books on a shelf. A mobile repair shop displayed cracked screens and blinking LED lights. Next to it, a stationery store had colourful files hanging outside, moving gently in the warm breeze. A tea stall stood at the corner, its aluminium kettle continuously releasing white steam into the air. Beside it, a vada pav vendor crushed green chilies and sprinkled masala with dramatic flair.

College students dominated the scene.

Some boys, wearing backpacks loosely over one shoulder, were laughing loudly over some private joke. One of them tried to balance a cutting chai glass on his notebook and failed miserably, spilling a few drops. A group of girls crossed the road carefully, holding their

dupattas tightly as bikes zoomed past. The smell of fried snacks, petrol fumes, and hot dust mixed together to create the unique scent of an Indian marketplace.

Life was moving at full speed.

And then, suddenly — it slowed.

A sleek, shining luxury car turned into the narrow market lane.

The engine purred smoothly, unlike the noisy autos and bikes around it. Heads turned. Conversations paused mid-sentence. The car moved with elegance, almost out of place in that ordinary street, and parked neatly beside the row of shops.

The door opened.

And she stepped out.

Ria.

She did not rush. She did not look around nervously. She stepped onto the street with calm confidence, as if the world naturally adjusted itself to her presence.

Her long hair flowed freely, dancing against the breeze. She wore stylish sunglasses resting casually on her head. Her heels clicked softly against the uneven pavement — each step controlled, graceful. She was dressed in a simple yet classy outfit that did not scream for attention — yet demanded it effortlessly.

She was not just beautiful.

She carried herself with elan — a natural elegance that cannot be taught.

Across the road, two men eating vada pav froze mid-bite. One of them absent-mindedly pushed the vada pav toward his friend's mouth instead of his own. The friend, equally stunned, took a bite without realizing what happened.

A middle-aged man walking with his wife stopped abruptly. His jaw slowly dropped open as he stared. His wife looked at him sharply, then gently pushed his chin upward to close his mouth, whispering something that probably wasn't very kind.

Even the college boys forgot their jokes.

But Ria noticed none of it — or perhaps she noticed and chose not to care.

Her eyes were scanning the shop boards carefully.

She was searching.

Her gaze moved from “Gupta Electronics” to “Sai Mobile World” to “Sharma Tailors.” She walked slowly, reading each signboard as if looking for a hidden treasure.

And then she stopped.

Her eyes fixed on a modest board placed slightly above a

narrow staircase.

It read: Super Spy.

The board was simple — black background, bold silver letters. No flashy design. No marketing slogans. Just two words.

Yet something about it carried weight.

Ria looked at it for a few seconds.

Then she walked inside. The staircase was narrow and slightly old, the paint peeling at the edges. At the top was a small glass door with the same name printed in smaller letters.

Inside was the headquarters of Super Spy.

The room was not luxurious. It was not high-tech like in movies. It was slightly messy — but not careless messy. It was the kind of room where real work happened.

A large wooden table stood at the centre. Two desktops were placed side by side, with cables loosely arranged but functional. A whiteboard hung on the wall filled with scribbled notes — phone numbers, vehicle numbers, timelines, arrows connecting names.

There was a steel cupboard in the corner with files stacked in no particular visible order, yet somehow Aryan always knew exactly where everything was.

Two supporting agents — Rohan and Kabir — were seated at the computers. Rohan was busy typing rapidly, probably tracing some transaction history. Kabir was speaking softly on the phone, noting down details of a missing person complaint.

A small queue of clients stood near the wall.

One elderly man was folding his hands gratefully toward Rohan, slipping some money into his hand. “Thank you beta... because of you, we found my son.”

Another young woman sat nervously, waiting for her turn.

This was not a glamorous detective office.

This was a problem-solving room.

And at the centre of it, slightly leaning forward toward his laptop, sat Aryan.

He wore a simple shirt with rolled-up sleeves. His focus was intense. His eyes scanned lines of data quickly. His fingers moved swiftly across the keyboard.

He did not notice Ria enter.

But something changed.

Maybe it was the sudden silence of the queue. Maybe it was instinct.

He looked up.

And time stopped.

For a second, he forgot where he was.

He saw her standing near the door, sunlight falling softly on her hair. The outside noise faded. Somewhere in his mind, a romantic background song began playing — completely imaginary, completely unstoppable.

Love at first sight?

Maybe.

Or maybe just shock.

Ria tilted her head slightly.

“Hello... Hello... Hello?”

Her voice sounded distant to him, as if coming through water.

Rohan nudged him lightly.

Kabir whispered slowly, “Sir... earth calling.”

Aryan blinked.

Reality returned.

He stood up quickly, almost too quickly.

“Yes... yes... please tell me. What can I do for you?” he

said, trying to regain his professional tone.

Kabir leaned closer and muttered softly in his ear, “Don’t know about her, but you certainly lost something.”

Aryan frowned slightly.

“What?”

“Your heart,” Kabir whispered with a grin.

Aryan ignored him.

Ria smiled.

“Hi. I am Ria.”

“Aryan... I mean Aryan here,” he replied, straightening himself. “Please sit... please wait... let me clean this chair... actually no, wait... I will replace it... this one is not proper... just one second...”

He hurriedly pulled the chair, wiped it with hand then by his handkerchief, then hesitated.

“Maybe this chair is better—”

Ria gently raised her hand.

“Wait. You wait. I am okay here. I’m perfectly fine with this chair.”

She sat down calmly.

Aryan nodded awkwardly and sat opposite her.

“Yes... please tell me... what brings you here?”

Ria looked at him directly.

“I have come to say thank you.”

“For what?” Aryan asked, genuinely confused.

“I know from DySP uncle that it was you who found my car. When everyone failed... when the police team had almost given up... you tracked it from nowhere. You did a splendid job.”

The missing car case.

Aryan remembered it clearly. It was not simple. The vehicle had number plate changed, GPS removed. It required pattern analysis, CCTV mapping, and understanding of a local theft gang's habits.

He had done his job.

“That was nothing,” he said modestly. “Just work.”

“Not just work,” she corrected softly. “It meant a lot to us.”

He nodded slowly.

“Welcome.”

A brief silence filled the room.

Rohan and Kabir pretended to work but were clearly listening.

“So... now tell me,” Aryan said, slightly nervous again, “what can I do for you?”

Ria smiled again.

“I have come to invite you.”

“Invite?” Aryan blinked.

“For a cup of coffee.”

He froze. “Coffee?”

“Yes. Tomorrow. At my home.”

He almost choked.

“My... home?”

“Yes. Papa wants to meet you.”

The word “Papa” echoed loudly in his mind.

Papa? Coffee with Papa?

His imagination instantly created ten dramatic scenarios — interrogation, background checks, silent judging father, protective questions.

“That is not needed,” he said quickly. “Really. It was just professional help.”

“No,” Ria said firmly. “You have to come.”

She took out a small card from her purse and placed it on the table.

“This is my address. You can scan it.

Tomorrow. 11 AM. Sharp.”

Her tone was polite — but decisive.

Before Aryan could protest further, she stood up.

“See you tomorrow, Mr. Super Spy.”

And she walked out.

Her heels echoed down the staircase.

The market noise slowly returned to normal.

Inside the Super Spy office, silence remained for three full seconds.

Then Kabir leaned back in his chair dramatically.

“Sir... coffee with Papa.”

Aryan laughed softly and looked at the address card in his hand.

It was a high-profile residential area. He swallowed.

This was not just coffee.

Something about this invitation felt important.

Outside, Ria got into her car. The engine started. The vehicle moved away from the busy market, leaving behind whispers, curiosity — and one young detective whose life had just shifted direction.

Aryan stood near the window, watching until the car disappeared.

He had solved many mysteries. But this one — the girl who walked into Super Spy — felt different. Very different.

And somewhere deep inside, he knew —

Tomorrow at 11 AM would not be an ordinary coffee meeting.



THE NUMBER PLATE

The police station was unusually quiet that evening.

Old ceiling fans rotated lazily above, making more noise than wind. They pushed the warm air around the room in slow circles, but the heat remained. A cracked wall clock ticked loudly, as if it was the only thing working seriously inside the building.

Behind the duty officer's desk hung a calendar — still showing last month's date. No one had bothered to flip the page. Files were stacked in uneven towers across the wooden tables. Some were tied neatly with red cloth. Others were half-open, papers slipping out like they had lost the will to stay organized. Dust covered everything.

It was 8:40 p.m. Most government offices were closing. The street outside had started to quiet down.

At that time, a poor man walked slowly into the station.

His shirt was faded. His sandals were worn out. His eyes were red — not from anger, but from fear and lack of sleep.

Behind him walked his wife. She held the edge of her saree tightly in her hand, as if holding it together would also hold her life together.

The man stopped near the desk.

“Sir... my daughter... she is missing,” he said in a trembling voice.

The constable sitting at the desk did not immediately look up. He continued writing something in a large register.

“Since when?” he asked casually.

“Since yesterday evening,” the father replied quickly. “She went for tuition. She did not return.”

The constable paused for a second.

“Boyfriend?” he asked without emotion.

The girl’s mother shook her head rapidly.

“No, sir. She is a good girl. She studies well. She wants to become a teacher,” she said, almost pleading.

The constable finally raised his head and looked at them properly.

His eyes scanned them from head to toe — simple clothes, nervous body language, no influence, no power.

He leaned back in his chair.

“It seems she ran away,” he said. “Maybe she went with someone. Wait for two days. She will come back.”

“Sir, her phone is switched off...” the father whispered. “We called many times. Her friends do not know

anything.”

The constable sighed as if this was an unnecessary burden.

“Fine,” he said. “Leave a written complaint.”

He pushed a blank paper across the desk. No urgency. No seriousness.

The father’s hands shook while writing. He was not educated much. He wrote slowly, carefully, afraid to make mistakes.

The mother stood beside him silently. Tears rolled down her cheeks, but she wiped them quickly. She did not want to look weak in front of the police.

After finishing, the father handed the paper back.

The constable glanced at it briefly and kept it aside, not even reading properly.

“We will see,” he said.

For him, it was just another complaint.

For the parents, it was their entire world.

They left the station with heavy steps.

Behind them, the ceiling fans kept rotating lazily.

The complaint paper lay under a pile of other files.

Forgotten.

At the same time, in the city police headquarters, the atmosphere was completely different. A high-level meeting was in progress. Senior officers sat around a large polished table. A projector displayed crime statistics on the screen.

DySP Patil sat on one side. Beside him was Inspector Anand.

At the head of the table stood the Chief Commissioner.

His face looked tense.

“Crime is rising,” he said firmly. “Especially human trafficking. Particularly young girls.”

The room was silent.

“And brown sugar cases are increasing too,” he continued. “Drug supply networks are expanding. Press is constantly questioning us.”

He changed the slide.

“Day before yesterday, two missing girl reports were registered. If you see the total count, it is twelve in the last few months.”

Murmurs spread in the room.

“Twelve,” he repeated. “And that is only reported cases.”

His eyes moved across the officers.

“We need to tighten our belts. This cannot continue.”

He looked directly at Anand.

“Inspector Anand, this case is for you. Take all files related to missing girls and drug movement. I want action. I need results.”

Anand felt a sudden rush of responsibility.

“Yes, sir,” he said confidently.

Inside, he felt proud.

This was not a small task. This was serious. And he had been chosen.

The meeting ended.

Officers gathered files and began discussing plans.

Anand collected the case documents carefully. He knew this was not just paperwork. Something bigger was hidden behind these numbers.

Later that evening, Anand left headquarters on his motorcycle. The cool air hit his face as he rode through the city roads. His mind was busy. Twelve missing girls. Brown sugar smuggling. Press pressure.

He felt something was connected. His instincts told him this was not random.

Suddenly—

A small dog ran across the road.

It was fluffy, white, almost like a toy.

Anand immediately pressed the brakes hard.

At the same time, he saw a young girl running behind the dog.

She did not look at the traffic. She did not care about the honking vehicles.

She just wanted to catch the dog.

A truck was approaching from the opposite side.

Fast.

Very fast.

“Hey!” Anand shouted.

Without thinking, he jumped off his bike and ran forward.

He grabbed the girl’s arm and pulled her back strongly.

The truck passed by with a loud horn, missing them by inches.

Wind from the truck pushed dust into the air.

The girl stood frozen.

Her heart was racing.

She looked at Anand in shock.

He bent down, picked up the small dog, and handed it to her.

“You should be careful,” he said firmly. “Road is not a playground.”

She nodded slowly.

“Thank you,” she said softly.

Just then, a yellow SUV stopped near them.

The driver quickly stepped out and opened the back door.

The girl walked toward the vehicle and sat inside.

Before the door closed, Anand noticed something.

He looked at the number plate.

His eyes widened slightly.

He knew that number.

Everyone in the department knew that number.

It belonged to a known criminal .

And now—

Why was this young girl sitting inside his car?

The SUV began to move.

Anand stood still, staring at it. His mind was working fast.

The car turned at the next signal and disappeared into traffic.

Anand picked up his bike slowly.

Something did not feel right.

But there was no immediate reason to stop that car.

No crime had happened.

Still, the number stayed in his mind.

As he rode home, the image of the truck, the girl, and that SUV kept replaying in his head.

He did not know it yet—But that small moment would later connect to something much bigger.

And somewhere in the city, a complaint about a missing girl was lying ignored under a pile of dusty files.



SOMEONE WAS LISTENING

Sub-Inspector Anand returned from the district review meeting with a serious expression. He was not the kind of officer who shouted to show authority. He believed discipline did not require noise. But he had one habit that made everyone alert — he read files. Every file. Even the ones others ignored.

He entered his cabin, removed his cap, placed it neatly on the desk, and sat down. A pile of pending complaints waited for him. He began scanning them one by one. Theft. Small fight. Land dispute. Routine matters. Then his eyes stopped at one file.

“Missing minor. No FIR registered.”

He read the line again carefully. His face became still. He called the duty constable inside.

“Who handled this?”

The constable stepped in, nervous.

“Sir... I took the complaint.”

“How old is the girl?”

“Sixteen, sir.”

Anand’s eyes hardened slightly.

“Then why was no FIR registered?”

The constable looked down.

“Sir... the family said maybe she went on her own. We thought to wait two days.”

“She is a minor.”

“Yes, sir.”

“Missing for more than twenty-four hours, phone switched off, and you decided to wait?”

Silence filled the room. The constable had no answer. Anand closed the file slowly and stood up.

“Call the family.”

Within an hour, the parents stood in front of him again. The father looked exhausted. The mother’s eyes were swollen from crying. But this time, someone was listening carefully. Anand asked them to sit. They hesitated, then slowly sat down.

“What is your daughter’s name?”

“Pallavi,” the mother replied softly.

“Full name?”

“Pallavi Sharma.”

Anand wrote it clearly in his notebook.

“When was she last seen?”

“Yesterday evening, sir. Tuition ended at six. She left after that.”

“Did she attend the class?”

“Yes sir, the teacher confirmed.”

“Who was with her?”

“She left with a friend but then walked away after receiving a phone call.”

“A phone call?”

“Yes sir.”

“From whom?”

“We don’t know.”

Anand paused and noted it down.

“Did she receive unknown calls recently?”

The father hesitated.

“One month ago someone used to call. She said wrong number. Then it stopped.”

“Did you save that number?”

“No sir.”

Anand nodded slowly. His mind was building a pattern — repeated unknown calls, sudden silence, then disappearance.

“Did she ever talk about job offers or modelling work?”

“No sir. She only wanted to become a teacher.”

“Did she seem worried recently?”

“She was quiet for a few days. We thought exam tension.”

Anand observed their expressions. There was fear, but no sign of hidden truth. He stood up and called his staff outside.

“Register FIR immediately.”

“Yes sir.”

“Missing minor. Treat it as suspicious disappearance.”

“Yes sir.”

“Collect her call detail records for last three months.”

“Yes sir.”

“Check CCTV near the tuition centre and surrounding roads.”

“Yes sir.”

The tone inside the station had changed. The case was no longer lying under dust. It had become active. Anand returned to his cabin and sat quietly for a moment. He remembered the meeting earlier — twelve missing girls in recent months, rising trafficking network, drug movement increasing.

He also remembered the black SUV and its number plate. The image flashed in his mind clearly. He did not yet have proof. But experience had taught him that small patterns often lead to big truths. He leaned forward, opened another drawer, and pulled out previous missing minor case files.

He flipped through them carefully. Different areas. Similar age group. Mostly from middle or lower-income families. Phone switched off in most cases. Delayed FIR in some. Weak follow-up in others. Anand closed the files slowly. This was not random. Somewhere, someone was choosing girls who would not be searched for strongly.

Poor families. Less influence. Less pressure. He picked up the phone again.

“Send me the complete list of missing minor girls in last six months.”

“Yes sir.”

Anand looked at Pallavi’s file once more. He wrote one line at the top in bold letters — Priority Case. Outside,

the old ceiling fans were still rotating lazily.

But inside Sub-Inspector Anand's mind, things had started moving fast. Somewhere in the city, someone believed this was just another ignored complaint. But now, someone serious was looking. And that could change everything.

Anand leaned back in his chair after reviewing the files once more. Pallavi's case was now officially registered, but something inside him said this was not a simple disappearance.

He needed information from outside regular police channels — information that moved faster than paperwork. He picked up his phone and scrolled to a familiar name. Aryan. An old friend, unofficial informant, and someone who knew the city's hidden layers better than most officers. Anand pressed call. The line connected after two rings.

“Aryan, can we meet tomorrow morning?”

There was a brief pause before Aryan replied casually.

“Tomorrow morning I'm going for coffee with a Member of Parliament. I recently solved one of his complicated matters.”

Anand smiled faintly. Aryan always had connections in unexpected places.

“Oh, that MP? If I’m not wrong, he has a very beautiful daughter as well.”

Aryan chuckled softly on the other end. “Is anything hidden from you in this world?”

Anand leaned forward, lowering his voice. “That’s exactly why I called you.”

Aryan sensed the change in tone. His voice became serious. “What happened?”

“Missing minor. Pattern feels wrong. I need background checks — unknown callers, small-time recruiters, modelling offers, drug runners, anyone operating quietly.”

There was silence for a second. Aryan understood when Anand used few words, the matter was important.

“Alright,” Aryan said firmly. “Send me details. I’ll start asking around.”

“As soon as you’re free tomorrow, join me at the police station.”

“I will. And Anand...”

“Yes?”

“If this connects to what I think it connects to, you’re stepping into deep water.”

Anand looked at Pallavi's file again.

"I know," he replied calmly.

He disconnected the call and placed the phone on the table. Outside, the station sounded ordinary — typewriters clicking, constables talking, a distant phone ringing.

But inside Anand's mind, pieces were slowly moving into place. Aryan's network could open doors that official channels could not. And if this case truly linked to something bigger — trafficking, organized movement, powerful protection — then tomorrow's meeting might be the first real step into a dangerous path.



A SMILE AFTER A LONG TIME

Aryan slowly entered the villa, his eyes pausing on the nameplate — M.C. Chaudhary.

The guard called inside to confirm and then allowed him to pass.

As Aryan walked further in, he was surprised by the sheer length and width of the property. The villa looked less like a house and more like a private estate. Long pathways, trimmed hedges, and a silent fountain in the centre gave the place an air of quiet luxury.

From a distance, Ria was waving her hand, excited to see him.

Behind her, Chaudhary appeared and looked at his daughter with a slight smile.

“Hmmm... after a long time I see you laughing like this,” he said. “What’s the matter?”

Ria smiled but avoided answering directly.

Meanwhile Aryan reached the lawn. It was lush green and beautifully maintained. Four white chairs surrounded a large table. A few newspapers were scattered on it. Around the lawn, guards stood quietly in different corners, watching everything.

Aryan sat down and casually started flipping through a

newspaper, though his sharp eyes were quietly observing the surroundings.

Just then Ria walked towards him.

He stood up.

“Nice house,” Aryan said with a faint smile. “And inside the house, that car... the one I recovered from the hut... it looks even better.”

Ria laughed softly. “Thank you. My father was more worried about the car than about the driver.”

“Cars are loyal,” Aryan said jokingly. “Drivers sometimes change sides.”

Ria chuckled. “You sound like someone who has seen too many cases.”

“Occupational hazard,” Aryan replied.

At that moment Chaudhary approached them. Aryan immediately stood up again.

For a moment Chaudhary simply looked at him, as if studying him carefully.

“Sit down, my child,” he said.

Aryan almost seemed to wake from his thoughts and slowly sat.

“You have done a tremendous job,” Chaudhary

continued. “Where the police failed, you succeeded. The car was not important... but the way you solved the issue... that was impressive.”

He paused and adjusted his watch.

“Tell me anytime if I can do anything for you. Maybe a new office for your... what do you call it... Super Spy?”

He looked at Ria.

“That is the correct name, right?”

Ria nodded with a smile.

“Good. You both talk. I have a meeting to attend. You know... busy man,” Chaudhary said, smiling as he walked away.

As he left, Aryan noticed two guards quietly following him at a distance. Aryan was still serious, but he smiled politely.

Ria sat down and started preparing coffee.

“How much sugar?” she asked.

“No sugar... if you are around,” Aryan replied.

Ria raised an eyebrow and smiled. “Hmmm... humour... or serious?”

“I am serious,” Aryan said.

Both burst into laughter.

Ria handed him the cup. “So Mr. Super Spy, do you always investigate garbage dumps and abandoned huts?”

“Only on special requests,” Aryan replied. “Normally my clients prefer lost documents, missing files... or cheating partners.”

Ria laughed again. “And today?”

“Today,” Anand said, taking a sip of coffee, “I recovered a car... and maybe made a new friend.”

Ria looked slightly amused but didn’t reply immediately.

They talked for a few minutes about small things — the city traffic, strange clients Aryan had met, and Ria’s love for photography.

After some time Aryan stood up.

“Time to go,” he said. “A few new assignments have come.”

“What assignment?” Ria asked curiously.

“Client secret,” Anand replied with a smile.

They both laughed again.

As Aryan reached the main gate near his car, he turned back and said,

“The next coffee is due from me. I would like to invite you next week... somewhere very cool.”

Ria crossed her arms playfully.

“And if the Super Spy forgets?”

Aryan smiled confidently.

“That’s one case I never fail.”

He waved once and drove away, while Ria stood near the lawn gate watching the car disappear down the long driveway.



THE CAMERA THAT SAW TOO LITTLE

That night, Anand visited the tuition centre.

The narrow lane leading to the building was poorly lit. A few flickering streetlights struggled to keep the darkness away. Rainwater from the previous day had collected in small potholes along the road.

A street dog slept near a broken drain cover, occasionally twitching its ears whenever a scooter passed by.

The tuition centre was on the first floor of an old building. A faded board hung outside:

“Bright Future Coaching Classes.”

Anand climbed the narrow staircase slowly, his footsteps echoing in the quiet corridor.

Inside, the tuition teacher looked nervous.

He was a thin man in his early forties, wiping sweat from his forehead even though the weather was cool. Papers and notebooks were scattered across the table.

“You are Pallavi’s teacher?” Anand asked calmly.

“Yes... yes sir,” the man replied quickly.

“When did she leave?”

“Around six, sir. Like every day.”

“Was anything unusual?”

The teacher shook his head repeatedly.

“No sir... nothing unusual at all. She attended the full class. She even answered questions. Everything was normal.”

Anand watched him carefully. Sometimes people lied. Sometimes they were simply scared.

“She left alone?”

“Yes sir. She packed her bag and said goodbye.”

“Did anyone come to pick her?”

“No sir. Students usually go by themselves.”

Anand walked slowly around the small classroom.

About twelve chairs were placed in two rows. The whiteboard still had half-erased mathematics formulas written across it.

He imagined Pallavi sitting here just a few hours ago, solving equations, laughing with classmates... unaware that something terrible was waiting outside.

“CCTV?” Anand asked.

The teacher pointed toward the staircase.

“There is one camera outside near the gate.”

Anand nodded.

“Show me.”

They walked downstairs to a small security room beside the building entrance. An old computer monitor was placed on a dusty table.

The teacher switched it on.

“Sir, the camera only records the front lane,” he explained nervously.

“That will do,” Anand said.

They started reviewing the footage.

The video showed students leaving in small groups. Some parents arrived on scooters. A few students walked away chatting.

Anand leaned closer to the screen.

“Fast forward.”

Minutes passed.

Then suddenly the timestamp caught his attention.

6:07 p.m.

“Stop,” Anand said.

The teacher paused the video.

On the screen, Pallavi appeared.

She stepped out of the gate, adjusting the strap of her bag. She looked normal, relaxed, unaware that someone might be watching her.

Anand studied every detail carefully.

Her hair was tied in a loose ponytail. She paused for a second near the gate, as if checking something in her bag.

Then she began walking toward the left side of the lane.

Anand's eyes shifted to the opposite side of the road.

A car was parked there.

It looked ordinary at first glance. Dark-coloured. Windows slightly tinted.

“Pause,” Anand said.

The teacher froze the frame.

“Zoom in.”

The image enlarged slightly but became grainy.

“Play.”

Pallavi continued walking.

She passed the parked car.

Then suddenly—

The car's door opened slightly.

The camera angle did not clearly show what happened next.

The door blocked the view for a moment.

A few seconds later the door closed.

The lane looked normal again.

But Pallavi never appeared on the other side of the frame.

Anand felt a cold silence settle in the room.

“Rewind,” he said quietly.

The teacher rewound the footage.

Again they watched the moment.

6:07 p.m.

Pallavi walking. The parked car. The door opening slightly. The blind spot. The door closing.

No Pallavi.

Anand replayed it again.

And again. Three times.

Each time he watched more carefully.

Something about the car felt familiar.

“Enhance the number plate,” Anand ordered.

The teacher tried adjusting the video software.

The image zoomed further, but the number plate was blurry. The camera resolution was too poor to capture the digits clearly.

“Can you sharpen it?” Anand asked.

“I will try, sir.”

The teacher increased contrast and brightness.

Still unclear.

Anand stared at the frozen frame.

If he couldn’t identify the number plate, he would need to identify something else.

Cars often carried their own fingerprints — scratches, dents, stickers.

His eyes slowly moved across the car’s body.

And then he noticed it.

A small dent on the left side of the rear door.

Right below it—

A yellow smiley sticker.

The sticker was slightly faded, but clearly visible even in

the poor footage.

Anand leaned closer.

His mind suddenly connected the pieces.

The dent. The yellow smiley. Where had he seen that before? He closed his eyes for a moment.

Then the memory came back clearly.

That afternoon. A girl standing near a roadside stall.

A dog barking beside her. And the same car parked nearby. The same dent !

The same yellow smiley sticker.

Anand straightened slowly.

“Oh...” he whispered under his breath.

The teacher looked confused.

“Sir?”

Anand did not answer immediately.

He rewound the footage once again and stared at the car.

Now he was certain.

“I have seen this car before,” he said quietly.

“Where, sir?” the teacher asked.

“Earlier today.”

The teacher looked shocked.

“Do you remember the area?” he asked nervously.

Anand’s eyes were still fixed on the screen.

“Yes.”

He remembered the exact moment now.

The girl had been talking to someone on the phone. A dog had been running around her. The car had been parked carelessly near the road.

At that time, it had looked like an ordinary car.

Now it was the last thing seen before Pallavi disappeared.

Anand took out his phone and clicked several pictures of the screen.

The dent. The sticker. The shape of the car.

Every detail mattered.

“Send me this footage,” he told the teacher.

“Yes sir... immediately.”

Anand turned toward the door.

The night outside had become darker.

The narrow lane felt quieter than before.

Somewhere in the distance a dog started barking.

Anand paused near the gate and looked once more at the road where Pallavi had walked.

Few hours ago she had stepped out of this gate, expecting to go home.

But instead she had vanished within seconds.

A car door had opened.

And the camera had seen just enough... but not enough.

Anand started his car slowly. Now he had his first real clue.

The car with the red smiley sticker.

And somewhere in the city, that car was still moving.

Probably with people who believed no one had noticed them. But Anand had. And now the hunt had begun.



A TABLE FOR TWO

The afternoon sun had begun to soften when Aryan looked at himself in the mirror for the third time.

“Too formal,” he muttered, removing the blazer.

Five minutes later he tried another shirt.

“Too casual.”

Then another.

Finally he stood still for a moment, staring at the pile of rejected clothes on the bed. Shirts, jackets, two pairs of jeans, even a perfume bottle lying sideways like a soldier who had lost the battle.

“Why am I behaving like a teenager?” he laughed at himself.

But deep inside he knew the answer.

Today he was inviting Ria.

And when it came to Ria, everything suddenly felt important.

After trying what felt like half his wardrobe, he finally chose a light blue shirt and dark jeans. Simple. Elegant. Comfortable.

He looked again in the mirror and smiled.

“Okay Aryan... this is it. Don’t overthink now.”

He sprayed perfume, combed his hair one last time, and suddenly started humming a song.

It wasn’t even a full song—just a random romantic tune.

That was a rare thing.

Aryan wasn’t someone who sang.

But today something inside him felt unusually light, almost like his soul had grown wings and was ready to fly straight into someone’s heart.

He grabbed his car keys and left.

Aryan reached Ria’s house earlier than expected.

Way earlier.

His car stood quietly outside her beautiful villa while he waited, pretending to check messages on his phone but actually looking again and again at the gate.

“Relax Aryan,” he whispered. “You’re just picking her up, not proposing.”

But the excitement refused to calm down.

He leaned back in the seat and smiled.

“Today will be fun.”

A few minutes later the gate opened.

And Ria stepped out.

As always—effortlessly beautiful.

She was wearing a simple pink dress, her hair slightly loose, walking with the same careless elegance that made people look at her twice.

She looked around and spotted Aryan.

Aryan stepped out of the car.

For a brief second both simply smiled at each other.

No words.

Just that comfortable, familiar smile.

“Hi,” Ria said.

“Hi,” Aryan replied.

They moved a little closer.

There was a half hug—one of those slightly awkward but warm greetings where neither person is fully sure how long to hold.

Then they both laughed.

“So...” Ria said while getting into the car. “Where are we going?”

Aryan started the engine and smiled mysteriously.

“Wait and see.”

Ria rolled her eyes.

“You know I hate suspense.”

“I know,” Aryan replied. “That’s exactly why I’m not telling.”

After about twenty minutes of driving, the city noise slowly faded behind them.

The road turned greener.

Tall trees lined both sides. Flowers bloomed along small pathways. A light artificial waterfall near a hill created a gentle mist in the air.

It looked like a small paradise hidden just outside the busy city.

Ria looked out the window, impressed.

“Wow.”

Aryan smiled proudly.

“You like it?”

“It’s beautiful,” she admitted.

They stepped out of the car and walked slowly through

the garden area. The place had a few small restaurants and one very charming coffee shop with glass walls.

Soft music floated through the air.

They spent some time outside walking along the pathways.

Ria touched flowers, laughed at a butterfly chasing another butterfly, and occasionally looked back at Aryan.

“Nice place,” she said finally.

Aryan placed a hand dramatically on his chest.

“Thank you. I worked very hard researching places where I could impress you.”

Ria laughed.

“Oh really? So this is a planned operation?”

“Highly strategic,” Aryan replied.

They walked a little more before Ria stopped.

“Okay,” she announced. “Now I need coffee.”

Aryan immediately nodded.

“Your wish is my first priority, madam.”

“Oh?” she teased. “That sounds dangerous. I might start asking for impossible things.”

Aryan grinned.

“Try me.”

They walked into the coffee shop.

And then Aryan froze.

The place was completely full.

Every table. Every chair. Couples everywhere.

Some holding hands, some talking quietly, some staring into each other's eyes as if time had stopped for them.

Ria looked around.

“No place?” she asked.

Aryan scanned again. Nothing.

Not even a single empty chair.

He stepped outside with a disappointed expression.

“Oh... it's houseful.”

Ria folded her arms and gave him a playful, mocking look.

“And you said you can do anything.”

Aryan sighed dramatically.

“Yes, but apparently not coffee.”

Ria shook her head.

“Great planning, Mr. Strategic.”

Aryan rubbed his forehead.

He looked genuinely puzzled. But then suddenly his eyes lit up. An idea. A mischievous one.

“Wait here,” he said.

“What are you doing?” Ria asked.

“Just trust me.” Aryan walked back into the cafe.

He took out his phone and pretended to be on a call.

He spoke softly but loud enough for people nearby to hear.

“Hello? Brother... I think I just saw your girlfriend here... sitting with someone.”

A couple at the corner table suddenly looked at each other.

Aryan continued walking slowly.

“Yes Yes ... I’m serious... she’s wearing a red dress... come fast.”

He moved to another corner.

Again pretending to whisper.

“Arre bhai... I might be wrong but I think your girlfriend is here with another guy... you should check quickly.”

A man at the next table suddenly sat straighter.

Aryan walked toward the centre of the cafe.

He repeated the act again.

This time even more convincingly.

“Yes Yes ... come immediately... they are sitting very close.”

He then calmly walked outside.

Ria was standing there, still slightly annoyed.

“What did you do?” she asked.

Aryan shrugged.

“Nothing.” He said.

“Nothing?” Ria asked again.

“Just reminded people that time is very precious.”

Ria frowned.

“I don’t understand.”

Suddenly the cafe door opened.

A girl rushed out looking irritated.

She grabbed her bag and walked quickly toward the parking area.

Ria blinked.

“Huh?”

A minute later another girl came out. This one looked angry. She got into a car and drove away.

Then another.

Then another.

Within a few minutes couples started leaving one after another. Some arguing. Some suspicious. Some checking their phones.

Ria stared in complete shock.

“What... is... happening?”

Aryan leaned against the car, pretending innocence.

“Maybe people suddenly remembered urgent work.”

Soon the once crowded cafe became almost empty.

Only two tables remained occupied.

Ria turned slowly toward Aryan.

Her eyes wide.

“What did you do!!!?”

Aryan smiled mischievously.

“Nothing.”

“ARYAN.”

“I simply reminded them that trust is very important in relationships.”

Ria burst into laughter.

“You are unbelievable!”

“Effective though,” Aryan said proudly.

They walked into the cafe.

This time it was peaceful and quiet.

They chose a corner table near the glass window where rainwater slowly trickled down the glass.

A waiter approached.

Coffee please,” Aryan said.

Ria leaned forward, still smiling.

“You know... if those people find out what you did, they might come back and kill you.”

Aryan shrugged.

“At least we’ll finish our coffee first.”

Ria laughed again.

“You are dangerous.”

“And yet you agreed to come out with me,” Aryan replied softly.

She looked at him for a moment.

Then said teasingly,

“That was before I realized you could destroy relationships just to get a cup of coffee.”

Aryan leaned closer.

“Relax. If I wanted to destroy relationships... I would start with yours.”

Ria raised an eyebrow. “Oh really?”

“Yes,” Aryan said with a playful smile.

“Because then you would have no option but to date me.”

Ria picked up the sugar packet and threw it at him.

“Shameless.”

Their coffee arrived.

They both lifted their cups.

Outside, the light rain continued falling gently over the

green gardens.

Inside, laughter filled their corner table.

And for Aryan, the coffee tasted better than any he had ever had.

For a few hours, they were not a politician's daughter and normal Spy.

They were just Aryan and Ria.

As they walked towards the car, a cool evening breeze passed by, carrying the faint smell of roasted coffee and wet earth from somewhere nearby. The city lights reflected softly on the road.

Ria looked at him and said quietly, "You know... this felt normal. I liked that."

Aryan opened the car door for her and smiled. "Then we should do normal more often."

Ria raised an eyebrow playfully. "Careful, Mr. Planner... you might get used to this."

They both laughed again as the car slowly pulled away from the cafe.

Behind them, the coffee house lights dimmed slightly, and the city continued its restless rhythm.

But inside the car, there was a calm silence—one filled

with the quiet happiness of two people who had just shared a simple, perfect evening... and successfully kept their little world hidden from everyone else.



THE TRAIL OF SHADOWS

The interrogation room was small, square, and dimly lit, the kind of place where time seemed to slow down and truth eventually surrendered under pressure. A single yellow bulb hung from the ceiling, casting long shadows across the metal table placed at the centre of the room.

The walls were painted in a faded grey that had long lost its freshness, stained with marks of age and perhaps the silent history of countless interrogations that had taken place within those four walls.

The air smelled faintly of stale coffee and sweat.

Across the table, there was a man whose confidence had clearly abandoned him hours ago. His shirt was crumpled, his hair dishevelled, and nervous beads of sweat rolled down his forehead despite the slow-moving ceiling fan above. His hands trembled slightly as they rested on the cold metal surface.

Inspector Anand watched him quietly.

Years of investigation had taught Anand that silence often worked better than threats. Criminals could endure shouting, intimidation, even fear—but prolonged silence forced them to face their own thoughts. And thoughts had a way of breaking even the strongest men.

The wall clock ticked steadily.

Tick. Tick. Tick.

Finally Anand leaned forward, resting his elbows on the table.

“Listen carefully,” he said in a calm but firm voice. “You have already told us many things. There is no point in hiding the last piece.”

The man avoided eye contact.

His gaze moved restlessly from the table to the wall and then toward the closed door behind Anand, as if searching for a miracle escape.

Anand noticed everything.

Fear had already taken control of the man’s mind.

“Tell me the name,” Anand continued, his voice low but commanding.

The suspect hesitated for several seconds. His lips moved but no sound came out. Then he finally muttered something so softly that Anand almost missed it.

“What?” Anand asked sharply.

The man swallowed.

“Saxena,” he said.

The name hung in the air like a sudden drop in temperature.

Anand's expression remained neutral, but inside his mind a new path had opened. A name meant a lead, and a lead meant the investigation had finally moved beyond speculation.

Without wasting time, Anand pulled out his phone and dialled the number that had been extracted from the suspect's call records earlier in the day.

The phone rang.

Once. Twice. Three times.

Then suddenly the call connected.

For a brief moment there was only silence on the other side of the line. Anand was about to speak when a calm but deep voice answered with just a single word.

“Saxena.”

Before Anand could respond, the call ended abruptly.

The line went dead.

Anand slowly lowered the phone and stared at the screen. Something about the conversation felt unnatural. Most criminals either denied their identity or demanded to know who was calling. This man had done neither. He had simply stated his name and disconnected instantly, as if he had already understood the danger.

It was a small interaction, but it left Anand with a strong

feeling.

This Saxena was not careless.

He was alert. Very alert.

Later that afternoon Anand reached the main investigation office where DySP Patil was reviewing files. The room buzzed with the usual activity of a police station—phones ringing, officers moving in and out, typewriters clicking in distant corners—but inside the cabin there was a calmer atmosphere.

Aryan was already there.

He leaned casually against the desk, scrolling through something on his phone. When Anand entered, Aryan looked up immediately.

“You look like you’ve found something interesting,” he said.

Anand placed the interrogation file on the table and took a seat.

“The suspect mentioned two things again and again,” he explained.

DySP Patil looked up with interest.

“Which are?”

“Saxena... and MC.”

For a brief moment both Aryan and DSP Patil stared at Anand.

Then suddenly both burst into laughter.

The sudden reaction caught Anand completely off guard.

Aryan bent forward, holding his stomach as he laughed, while DySP Patil tried unsuccessfully to control himself.

Anand frowned.

“What’s so funny?” he asked sharply. “This is a serious investigation.”

DySP Patil wiped tears from the corner of his eyes.

“Oh Anand... sometimes you surprise me.”

“Explain.”

Aryan finally managed to speak between laughs.

“He wasn’t giving you a name.”

Anand frowned deeper.

“Then what?”

DySP Patil chuckled again.

“He was abusing.”

“Abusing?”

“Yes. MC... BC... street slang.”

For a few seconds Anand simply stared at them, trying to process what they had just said. Then realization struck him and his face flushed with embarrassment and anger.

“You mean the entire time he wasn’t revealing a name?” he asked slowly. Aryan nodded.

“He was just cursing.” Anand clenched his fists.

“That idiot wasted hours of interrogation,” he muttered angrily. “Next time I see him, I’ll make sure he explains every word properly.”

DySP Patil smiled and placed a reassuring hand on his shoulder.

“Relax. Investigations are messy. But we are getting closer.”

Anand nodded slowly, though his thoughts were already shifting toward the mysterious name he had heard earlier.

Saxena.

The name refused to leave his mind.

Later that day Anand drove toward the same road where he had earlier spotted a suspicious yellow vehicle linked to the kidnapping case.

The road was part of an old market area where the city

never truly slowed down. Small shops lined both sides of the street, their colourful signboards faded by years of dust and sunlight. Fruit vendors sat behind wooden carts piled high with oranges, bananas, and guavas, calling out to customers in loud voices. Nearby, a tea stall released clouds of steam as boiling milk mixed with strong tea leaves, filling the air with a rich aroma.

Traffic crawled through the narrow street.

Scooters squeezed between cars.

Delivery vans blocked half the road.

Street dogs wandered lazily between pedestrians.

Amid this chaos Anand stood quietly, scanning the surroundings.

The yellow car he had seen earlier had a distinctive sticker and a small dent on the left side. Such details rarely escaped his memory.

A bike engine stopped behind him.

Aryan removed his helmet and followed Anand's gaze toward the intersection ahead, where four different roads diverged in separate directions.

“Well,” Aryan said thoughtfully, “that certainly complicates things.”

Anand nodded.

“I saw the car coming from here, but I don’t know which road it took afterward.”

Aryan observed the busy street for a moment and then began walking toward the nearby vendors.

“What are you doing?” Anand asked.

“Old-fashioned investigation,” Aryan replied.

He approached the first tea vendor and asked if he had seen a yellow car regularly passing through the street. The man shook his head. The next shopkeeper gave the same answer, as did several others.

Just as Anand began to feel that this lead might also fade away, Aryan suddenly stopped walking.

His eyes had fixed on a small CCTV camera mounted above the entrance of a grocery shop.

A slow smile appeared on his face.

Inside the shop, the owner looked nervous when the two men requested to see the CCTV recordings. However, the moment Anand showed his police identity card, the man quickly agreed and brought them to the computer system behind the counter.

The footage began playing.

At first the recordings looked ordinary—cars passing, pedestrians walking, occasional delivery trucks stopping

near shops.

Then suddenly Anand leaned closer.

“Pause that.”

The shopkeeper froze the frame.

A yellow car was visible on the screen.

The sticker.

The dent.

It was the same vehicle.

Aryan checked the timestamp.

“12:30 PM.”

Encouraged by the discovery, Aryan asked to see footage from previous days. As they watched recordings from earlier dates, a pattern slowly began to emerge. The same yellow car appeared almost every day around the same time, always moving in the same direction.

“This is not random,” Aryan said quietly.

“A routine.”

Anand checked his watch.

It was 12:30.

Both men rushed outside and positioned themselves near

the road, watching every passing vehicle carefully.

Five tense minutes passed.

Then suddenly the yellow car appeared again, speeding past the market exactly as expected.

Aryan immediately started his bike.

“Get on.”

They followed the car carefully through the city streets, maintaining enough distance to avoid being noticed. The crowded markets gradually gave way to quieter roads lined with tall trees and old houses.

After nearly five kilometres the car slowed down near a large villa surrounded by high compound walls and guarded gates.

The vehicle entered the property.

The gates closed.

Anand and Aryan watched silently from a distance.

Something about the place felt wrong.

After sending the location to the police station for backup, they decided to enter from the rear side of the property where thick trees provided cover.

Inside the compound they discovered a large storage hall filled with packets of illegal drugs.

Two men were discussing something nearby.

“Saxena sir will be pleased,” one of them said.

“And we now have two girls with us,” the other replied.

Anand’s heartbeat quickened.

Before the criminals could react, Aryan stepped forward while Anand drew his gun.

“Police,” Anand shouted.

Panic erupted immediately.

Gunshots echoed through the hall as the criminals attempted to escape. One of them was injured during the exchange, collapsing on the floor while the others fled into the darkness.

The injured man’s phone began ringing.

The screen displayed a single name.

Saxena.

Anand answered quickly.

Before he could speak, a calm voice said, “Leave that place. The police are coming.”

The call ended instantly.

The injured man whispered the same name with his final

breath.

Moments later police teams arrived and began searching the villa. Inside one locked room they discovered two frightened girls.

One of them was Pallavi.

Anand stepped out of the room and stood quietly in the corridor of the police station. The night had grown deeper outside, and the faint sound of traffic from the distant road echoed through the open windows. For a few seconds he simply stood there, collecting his thoughts.

Then he took out his phone.

He scrolled through the contact list until he found the number he was looking for—Pallavi's father.

For a moment Anand hesitated before pressing the call button. He knew that the last few days had been nothing less than a nightmare for the family. Every passing hour without news had probably felt like an entire lifetime.

The phone rang.

Once.

Twice.

Finally, the call connected.

“Hello?” a tired and anxious voice answered from the other side.

It was clear the man had not slept properly for days.

Anand spoke gently. “Mr. Sharma... this is Inspector Anand.”

There was a sudden pause on the line. The man immediately recognized the voice.

“Yes... yes, inspector... any news about my daughter?” he asked quickly, his voice trembling with hope and fear at the same time.

Anand allowed a small smile to form on his face.

“Yes,” he said softly. “I have good news.”

For a brief moment there was complete silence on the other end. Then Anand continued.

“Your daughter Pallavi is here. She is safe.”

The words had barely left his mouth when he heard a sharp gasp through the phone.

“Safe?” the man whispered, almost as if he was afraid to believe it.

“Yes,” Anand replied reassuringly. “She is absolutely fine. You can come to the police station and meet her.”

For a few seconds the man could not speak. Anand could

hear faint voices in the background, perhaps family members waiting anxiously for news.

Then suddenly the man's voice returned, but it was no longer steady.

It was shaking with overwhelming emotion.

"Inspector... I... I don't know how to thank you," he said. "You have given my daughter back to us... you have saved our life."

More voices appeared behind him now. Someone in the house must have realized what had happened because joyful cries filled the background.

"She's safe!" the man shouted to his family. "Pallavi is safe!"

The happiness in his voice was impossible to hide.

Anand felt something tighten in his chest as he listened.

For days he had seen only fear, panic, and helplessness in the eyes of the girl's parents. Now that same voice was filled with relief and gratitude.

"Please come to the station," Anand said quietly. "We will complete the formalities, and then you can take her home."

"Yes... yes, inspector. We are coming immediately."

Before ending the call, the man spoke again.

“May God bless you, sir. People like you are the reason families like ours still have hope.”

The call ended.

Anand lowered the phone slowly.

For a moment he remained standing in the corridor, staring silently at the dark window ahead.

A faint smile appeared on his face, but his eyes had grown slightly moist.

Hearing a father's happiness after days of fear was something that always touched him deeply. In moments like this, the long hours, the risks, and the sleepless nights of police work suddenly felt worthwhile.

But the satisfaction lasted only a few seconds.

Soon another thought returned to his mind like a shadow creeping back into the room.

Saxena.

The mysterious name echoed again inside his head.

Who was he? How had he known that the police were coming to the villa? Someone had warned him. Someone close.

The thought sent a chill through Anand's mind.

If Saxena already had information about police movements, it meant the network they were dealing with was far bigger than they had imagined.

Human trafficking. Drug smuggling. Missing girls.

Everything seemed connected somehow.

And yet the most important person behind it all remained invisible.

Questions began circling Anand's mind one after another.

Who was Saxena? Where was he hiding?

How deep did this network go?

And most importantly—

Where are the remaining girls?

The answers refused to appear.

Just then footsteps approached from behind.

Anand turned and saw DSP Patil walking toward him with a satisfied expression on his face.

“Well done, Inspector,” Patil said warmly. “You handled this operation very well.”

Anand straightened slightly.

“Thank you, sir.” Patil crossed his arms and looked at him with approval.

“Recovering Pallavi and exposing that drug warehouse in a single operation is not a small achievement. Your report has already reached senior officers.”

He paused and smiled. “If you continue like this, don’t be surprised if you receive a promotion soon.”

Under normal circumstances those words would have made any officer proud.

But Anand’s expression remained thoughtful.

“Thank you, sir,” he replied respectfully. “But right now I’m thinking about something else.”

Patil raised an eyebrow.

“What?”

Anand looked toward the investigation board on the wall where photographs of several missing girls were pinned in a row.

Pallavi’s picture had now been marked as “FOUND”.

But many others remained.

He spoke slowly.

“We found two missing girls today.”

He paused for a moment before continuing.

“But ten more are still missing.”

The room fell silent.

Patil followed Anand’s gaze toward the photographs.

The happiness of the successful operation suddenly felt incomplete.

Somewhere out there, more families were still waiting for the phone call Anand had just made.

And somewhere in the darkness, the man called Saxena was still watching the game unfold. Waiting for the next move.



MYSTERY BEGINS

Evening was slowly settling over the long highway that stretched along the outskirts of the town, where the noise of the city gradually faded into a quieter rhythm of life.

The sun had begun its slow descent toward the horizon, hanging low in the sky like a tired orange sphere, spreading a dull golden light that covered the dusty road, the scattered trees, and the small roadside structures in a warm but fading glow. The air felt calm, almost deceptively peaceful, as if the world was gently preparing to rest after a long day.

Birds flew overhead in loose formations, chirping as they returned to their nests hidden in the branches of tall trees along the fields.

Occasionally the distant roar of a truck engine disturbed the calm as heavy vehicles passed through the highway, their large wheels crushing gravel and raising clouds of dust behind them. But apart from these occasional movements, the road remained relatively quiet, far from the usual chaos of the city centre.

A few meters away from the bend stood a small roadside betel shop, the kind that had probably served travellers for decades. Its wooden counter was slightly worn out, and colourful tins of tobacco and spices hung from thin strings above the stall.

Next to the shop, a sleek dark-coloured car was parked beside the road, its polished surface reflecting the fading sunlight.

The rear door of the car opened slowly.

A man stepped out, adjusting the cuffs of his spotless white kurta as he moved toward the stall with the relaxed confidence of someone accustomed to respect and recognition. His black shoes were polished perfectly, and his posture carried the casual authority of a man who knew his presence mattered.

The shopkeeper immediately straightened when he saw him approaching.

“Namaste, Saab,” he greeted politely.

The man acknowledged the greeting with a brief nod and asked for a paan. The shopkeeper began preparing it with practiced ease, spreading lime paste across the betel leaf, adding crushed areca nut, spices, and sweet fillings before folding it carefully into a triangular shape.

The man took the paan and placed it in his mouth, chewing slowly as the sharp mixture of flavours spread across his tongue. Within moments the familiar deep red colour began appearing on his lips, giving his smile a slightly mischievous look.

He seemed relaxed and completely unaware of anything unusual around him.

A few people passing by recognized him and greeted him respectfully.

“Namaste, Saab.”

“Namaste.”

He responded casually, raising his hand slightly while continuing to chew the paan. After finishing it, he pulled out a cigarette from a silver case and lit it with a lighter, inhaling deeply while leaning against the shop counter.

The smoke rose slowly into the warm evening air.

Everything about the scene looked ordinary. Perhaps too ordinary.

Far down the road, almost two hundred meters away, a heavy truck had just appeared around the bend. At first glance it seemed like any other transport vehicle traveling through the highway, its engine rumbling steadily as it rolled forward across the dusty road. However, the truck was moving unusually slowly, almost as if the driver was waiting for something.

Inside the cabin, the driver leaned slightly forward over the steering wheel, his eyes fixed not only on the road ahead but also on something across the street.

Near a large banyan tree that stood a little distance away from the betel shop, a man was standing partly hidden in the shadow of the thick branches. He appeared calm and

unremarkable, dressed in ordinary clothes that would not attract attention in any crowd.

Yet there was something peculiar about him.

In one hand he held a lotus flower.

In the other he carried a bundle of leaves.

At first glance he could have been mistaken for a villager returning from a temple or perhaps someone waiting for a ride. However, his gaze remained fixed on the man standing near the betel shop, the one dressed in white who was leisurely smoking his cigarette.

For several seconds nothing happened. The truck continued rolling slowly forward, its heavy wheels crunching over the uneven surface of the road. The man near the shop remained relaxed, occasionally glancing toward his parked car while finishing his cigarette.

Then the man standing beneath the banyan tree made a small movement.

He lifted his hand.

The bundle of green leaves rose slightly in the air and then he dropped it, visible just enough for someone watching carefully.

It was a silent signal.

Inside the truck cabin, the driver saw it immediately.

His expression hardened.

Within the next moment the truck engine roared loudly as the driver pressed the accelerator with sudden force. The vehicle surged forward with unexpected speed, tearing through the quiet road as dust exploded behind its wheels.

At the same time the man in the white kurta finished his cigarette and casually began walking back toward his car. He stepped away from the betel shop and moved onto the road, still chewing the last of his paan.

He noticed the truck approaching.

But he didn't seem alarmed.

Perhaps he assumed the driver would steer away at the last moment, as drivers usually did on such roads.

What he did not realize was that the truck was not planning to avoid him.

The vehicle suddenly swerved.

Directly toward him.

The screech of tires shattered the evening calm.

For a brief fraction of a second the man froze, confusion flashing across his face as the massive vehicle closed the remaining distance.

Then the impact came with brutal force.

The truck struck him violently, lifting his body into the air like a rag doll. For an instant he seemed suspended against the burning sky before gravity pulled him down again, throwing him nearly thirty meters across the road.

His body hit the asphalt with a sickening thud.

The truck did not slow down.

It continued racing forward, disappearing into the long empty highway within seconds.

The driver of the parked car had witnessed the entire scene.

For a moment he remained frozen in disbelief, unable to process what had just happened. Then suddenly he jumped out and ran toward the fallen man.

“Saab!” he shouted desperately.

But as he reached the body and bent down, the terrible truth became clear almost immediately.

The man was no longer breathing.

The deep red colour of the paan that had stained his lips now mixed with blood spreading slowly across the road.

Within minutes people from nearby fields and houses began gathering around the scene. The betel shop owner

stepped forward nervously, staring at the lifeless body lying on the asphalt.

“What happened?”

“Was it an accident?”

“Who was he?”

Questions filled the air as confusion spread among the crowd.

Someone suddenly recognized the victim.

His voice rose above the murmurs.

“That’s Chaudhary Sahib’s PA!”

The reaction was immediate.

Everyone froze.

Chaudhary Sahib was not an ordinary man in the region. He was powerful, influential, and feared by many.

And now his personal assistant lay dead in the middle of the road.

Across the street, a broad-shouldered man in his mid-forties had watched everything carefully from beside his parked motorcycle.

His name was Mhatre.

Unlike the others, he had noticed something important.

He had seen the truck.

He had seen the signal with the green leaves bundle.

And he had seen the exact moment when the truck changed direction.

It did not look like an accident.

It looked deliberate.

Mhatre quietly took out his phone and dialled a number.

When the call connected, he spoke calmly.

“I just saw something strange.”

The voice on the other side asked, “What happened?”

Mhatre looked once more toward the empty road where the truck had vanished.

“A man was killed,” he said slowly.

There was a brief silence.

Then he added, “Before the truck disappeared, I noticed a name written on its side.”

“What name?”

Mhatre replied quietly.

“Saxena.”

He paused for a moment before continuing.

“And I think I also saw the signal that started everything. I will come tomorrow morning and explain everything in detail.”

He ended the call.

Behind him the crowd continued discussing the shocking event while distant police sirens began approaching.

But Mhatre already understood something that others had not yet realized.

The death of Chaudhary’s personal assistant was not an accident.

It was a carefully planned message.

And somewhere in the darkness beyond the highway,
Had a man named Saxena just made his move?



THE PRESSURE, AND THE ASSIGNMENT

The police station was unusually alive that evening, buzzing with a restless energy that refused to settle. Phones rang without pause, constables moved briskly between desks carrying files stacked high with urgency, and the constant murmur of overlapping voices filled the air like a storm waiting to break. The old ceiling fans rotated lazily above, doing little to ease the tension that had settled into the walls of the building.

Outside, the fading daylight struggled to seep through the dusty windows, casting a dull orange glow that mixed with the harsh white tube lights inside. It was that strange hour when day hadn't fully left and night hadn't fully arrived — a time when things often went unnoticed... or deliberately ignored.

Inside his cabin, Deputy Superintendent of Police Akshay Patil sat behind his desk, but his mind was far from the paperwork in front of him. His fingers tapped unconsciously against the wooden surface, his eyes fixed somewhere beyond the walls, as if trying to solve a puzzle that refused to align.

He looked worried.

Not the kind of worry that comes from routine cases or political pressure — this was deeper, sharper, personal in a way he didn't fully admit even to himself.

For the past few weeks, he had been consumed by a complex and dangerous drug and human trafficking case, one that stretched across cities, involving names that carried weight and shadows that ran deep. Every lead they chased seemed to dissolve just before reaching the truth. Every suspect appeared clean on paper but carried the scent of something darker.

And yet, Patil was close.

He could feel it.

The kind of instinct only experienced officers develop — that quiet certainty that the breakthrough was just one step away.

But before that step could be taken, chaos knocked again.

A constable rushed into the room, slightly breathless, holding a file that hadn't even been properly clipped together.

“Sir... new case,” he said, placing it carefully on the table.

Patil frowned, irritation flickering across his face. “What now?”

“Accident, sir... at least that's what it looked like initially. But... spectators are saying it could be murder.”

Patil leaned forward, his attention snapping back instantly.

“Details.”

The constable swallowed. “Victim is not ordinary, sir... he’s the personal assistant of a Member of Parliament... and also connected to a central ministry.”

For a brief moment, silence filled the room.

Patil leaned back slowly in his chair, exhaling deeply.

This was not just another case.

This was trouble.

Political pressure. Media noise. Administrative interference.

And worst of all — urgency without clarity.

He ran a hand through his hair, thinking rapidly.

Now what?

Assigning the wrong officer could either bury the truth... or create a storm he wouldn’t be able to control.

There was only one name that came to his mind.

“Call Anand,” he said firmly.

A few minutes later, Inspector Anand stepped into the cabin. Calm, composed, and observant, he carried himself with a quiet confidence that came not from arrogance, but from experience. His eyes briefly scanned

the room before settling on Patil.

“You called, sir?”

Patil gestured toward the chair. “Sit.”

Anand sat down, already sensing that something significant was coming.

“There’s a new case,” Patil began, sliding the file toward him. “Possible murder. High profile. MP’s personal assistant. Broad daylight incident.”

Anand didn’t immediately pick up the file. Instead, he looked straight at Patil.

“Sir... I am already deep into the drug trafficking case,” he said calmly. “And I’m very close to breaking it. We’re at the edge — just one solid lead away from identifying the main network.”

Patil remained silent, listening.

Anand continued, his voice steady but firm. “This new case... from what you’re saying, it still looks like an accident. Spectator assumptions don’t always mean murder. And honestly... who would want to kill a PA? Unless there’s something bigger hidden, it doesn’t add up.”

He paused for a moment before adding, “If it is a murder, it should be assigned to someone else. Pulling me out now might cost us the trafficking breakthrough.”

Patil stared at him, weighing the logic.

He knew Anand was right.

And that was exactly the problem.

After a long pause, Patil nodded slowly.

“Okay... you continue with your current assignment,” he said. “You’re doing good work there. Don’t lose focus.”

Anand gave a slight nod. “Yes, sir.”

Patil pressed the intercom. “Send Malhotra in.”

Inspector Malhotra entered shortly after — sharp, ambitious, and eager to prove himself, though often criticized for jumping to conclusions too quickly.

Patil handed him the file.

“Take this case,” he said. “Use your brain... if any,” he added dryly, without looking up. “And don’t come back with baseless theories.”

Malhotra forced a polite smile. “Yes, sir.”

He took the file and stepped out, walking to his desk in the main hall. Sitting down, he opened it carefully, his eyes scanning each line, each detail, trying to piece together what others might have missed.

There was something in the description... something that didn’t quite fit.

He leaned back slightly, tapping the file with his fingers.

“Let’s see...” he murmured to himself. “What are you hiding?”

Back inside the cabin, Patil leaned back in his chair again, but this time his thoughts were interrupted by the sharp ring of his phone.

He picked it up.

“DySP Patil speaking.”

The voice on the other end was heavy, authoritative, and filled with restrained anger.

“Patil... what is going on?”

Patil straightened immediately.

“Sir—”

“My assistant... who has been with me for twenty years... is dead. In broad daylight. And you are calling it an accident?”

It was MC Chaudhary.

A powerful name.

A dangerous one.

Patil chose his words carefully. “Sir, the investigation is ongoing. We are examining all angles—”

“Don’t give me textbook answers,” Chaudhary snapped.
“Give this case to the right person. Not some local officer playing detective like a spy car.”

Patil clenched his jaw slightly but kept his tone calm.
“Don’t worry, sir. We will find the truth. We already have some leads... the truck involved had ‘Saxena’ written on it.”

There was a brief pause.

“Do you know any Saxena, sir?” Patil asked cautiously.

Chaudhary’s response came sharp and dismissive.

“I don’t know any Saxena-Waxena. And stop chasing nonsense. If the truck had ‘Horn OK Please’ written on it, would you start searching for Horn and Please too?”

Patil fell silent.

“Use some sense, Dy SP,” Chaudhary added coldly before disconnecting.

The line went dead.

Patil slowly lowered the phone, his expression tightening.

“Giving me lessons...” he muttered under his breath.
“As if he’s some honest man.”

Across the room, Anand, who had been quietly going through another file, looked up.

“He’s not a good person, sir,” Anand said calmly.

Patil immediately responded, almost instinctively, “No, he is Squan...” but he stopped mid-sentence.

A flicker of something passed through his eyes.

“...Nothing,” he corrected himself. “I mean... he might not be a good person.”

Anand observed him for a moment but didn’t press further. Instead, he returned to his file, though his mind had already registered the hesitation.

Something was off.

Patil, however, had drifted elsewhere.

Memories. Dark, fragmented, and deeply unsettling. A case from years ago began to surface in his mind—blurred at the edges, yet painfully vivid at its core. A woman. A brutal crime. Two children left behind to face a merciless world. Patil’s jaw tightened as the weight of those memories pressed down on him. He remembered more than he ever allowed himself to admit—the role he had played alongside MC Chaudhary and his men, the silence that followed, and how every question that came too close to the truth was deliberately buried.

Files had disappeared under his watch, locked away in darkness where no one would think to look. Back then, he was young—less experienced, less powerful, and easily

pulled into a web he chose not to escape. A moment of weakness, a compromise for money, and a line crossed that could never be undone. The crime was not just something he had witnessed... it was something he had become a part of.

Even now, sitting in his cabin, he said nothing—to Anand, to his team, to anyone. But the thought lingered, heavy and unrelenting—was this just a coincidence, or was the past finally finding its way back to him? He exhaled slowly, trying to steady himself. Some truths, he knew, don't disappear... they wait.



BIRTHDAY

The grand hotel glowed under a cascade of warm golden lights, its glass façade reflecting the restless city outside. Inside, the ambiance felt like a perfect balance of elegance and comfort—soft jazz intertwined with a mellow electronic beat, wrapping the space in a cozy, almost dreamlike rhythm. The crowd was young, vibrant, unmistakably Gen Z—effortlessly stylish, laughing freely, capturing moments on their phones while living fully in them.

A reserved section near the dance floor carried a subtle charm—pastel balloons, a long table adorned with candles, and at the centre, a beautifully crafted chocolate cake that seemed almost too perfect to cut.

Avni stood beside it, glowing as it was her day.

Her eyes held something rare—not just beauty, but depth. There was a quiet mystery in them, a softness that drew people in, and yet a certain distance that made you wonder what she chose not to reveal. When she looked at someone, it felt as if she saw more than what was visible... and still kept something hidden.

Anand noticed.

He had walked in preoccupied, his mind cluttered with work and unfinished thoughts, but the moment his gaze

met Avni's, everything else faded into the background. The noise, the stress, the world beyond the hotel doors—it all dissolved, leaving only the present moment.

Aryan broke the silence with a grin, adjusting his blazer. “So this is the plan? Make us feel underdressed and emotionally unprepared?”

Ria smirked, folding her arms. “Speak for yourself. I came prepared.”

Anand chuckled, “Prepared? He looks like he's here for a job interview.”

“Better than looking like you're here to fall in love,” Aryan shot back.

“Too late for that,” Ria added, glancing knowingly at Avni.

Laughter spread across the group, light and effortless.

Avni turned toward them, smiling. “You guys are late.”

“Not late,” Aryan replied smoothly, “just fashionably delayed so the spotlight stays on you.”

The cake was brought forward as everyone gathered closer. Rich layers of chocolate shimmered under soft lighting, decorated with delicate gold accents. The faint aroma of cocoa and vanilla filled the air, blending seamlessly with the music.

“Make a wish,” someone called out.

Avni closed her eyes. For a fleeting second, her expression shifted—something more serious, almost burdened—but it vanished as she smiled again and cut the cake.

She picked up the first slice.

There was a brief pause, as if she was deciding something. Then she turned—not toward Ria as expected—but toward Anand.

“For you.”

Ria raised her eyebrows for a second, then smiled, clearly amused rather than surprised.

Aryan leaned closer to Ria and whispered, “I think I just got demoted.”

“Relax,” Ria whispered back, “you were never promoted.”

They both tried to suppress their laughter and failed.

The mood lifted quickly as cake turned into playful chaos—someone dabbed frosting on Aryan’s cheek, and he retaliated instantly, claiming it was “self-defence.” Even Avni laughed freely now, the earlier flicker in her eyes almost forgotten.

Music swelled, and the dance floor came alive. Lights

dimmed just enough to blur edges and soften reality. People moved freely, lost in rhythm and energy.

Anand found himself drawn toward Avni again and again. Their conversations were light, but something unspoken lingered beneath. At moments, their eyes met and held just a second longer than necessary.

Ria noticed. She leaned toward Aryan, watching them with a half-smile. “Something is definitely cooking between Anand and Avni... what do you think?”

Aryan exhaled dramatically. “What can I say? I don’t even know when my own meal will be ready. Mine’s still cooking... probably burnt by now.”

Ria turned to him, pretending to be annoyed. “What does that even mean?”

“It means,” he said with a grin, “I’m hungry. Emotionally and physically.”

She laughed, shaking her head. “Hopeless.”

“Realistic,” he corrected.

After a while, Aryan clapped lightly. “Alright, enough dancing. If I don’t eat soon, I might start imagining food.”

They began moving toward the dining area, but the music pulled a few of them back. Within moments, Aryan and Avni were on the dance floor, moving effortlessly, almost

in sync. There was a strange ease between them, as if something new had quietly taken shape—something neither of them had fully understood yet.

The night felt full, alive, complete.

And then—

Ria's phone rang.

The sound cut through the music like a sharp crack in glass. She glanced at the screen, and her expression changed instantly.

“Hello?”

“Where are you, Ria?” The voice on the other end was tense, hurried.

“I'm at Avni's birthday party.”

A brief silence followed, heavy and unsettling.

“Mishra ji ... our PA... he's no more.”

Her grip tightened around the phone. “What do you mean ‘no more’?”

“It's unclear. Could be an accident... but it doesn't look like one. And listen—Mhatre called me. He says he has a clue. He'll come tomorrow evening.”

The noise around her seemed to fade, as if the world had stepped back.

“Should I send someone? This might not be random. If Mishra ji was targeted...”

“I’m not alone,” she replied quickly, her voice steady but low. “Anand and Aryan are here. They’ll drop me.”

She ended the call, but her expression didn’t recover.

Aryan noticed immediately. “What happened?”

She told him everything—the words feeling heavier as they left her mouth. The laughter from minutes ago now felt distant, irrelevant.

“Mhatre has a clue...” Aryan repeated slowly, his eyes narrowing. Then he looked toward Anand. “He might already know something.”

They walked toward him.

Anand didn’t look surprised when they spoke. He listened quietly, then nodded. “Yes. I knew.”

Ria frowned. “You knew?”

“I didn’t want to ruin the evening,” he said calmly. “I thought I’d tell you later.”

Aryan’s tone hardened slightly. “This isn’t something to delay.”

“I know,” Anand replied, his voice steady, but there was something unreadable in his expression.

A brief silence passed between them.

“I’ll drop you home,” Aryan said to Ria.

She nodded. “Just give me a minute.”

She handed her bag to Anand and walked toward the washroom.

Aryan waited near the exit, his mind racing. The pieces didn’t fit, not yet—but something about this felt wrong. Not just the death. The timing. The silence. The way Anand had already known.

When Ria returned, they didn’t speak much. They went back briefly, wished Avni again, exchanged a quick hug, and left.

Outside, the city felt colder.

Aryan drove in silence, dropping Ria at her home. “Lock the doors,” he said quietly. “And call me if anything feels off.”

She nodded.

As he drove away, his phone rang.

He picked it up without checking the number. “Yes?”

A voice answered—low, unfamiliar.

The call disconnected. For a moment, there was only silence.

Then Aryan's phone lit up again.

A message. A location pin.



SHADOWS BEFORE THE STORM

MP Chaudhary had never been a man who lost control easily. Years in politics had taught him patience, restraint, and the art of hiding storms behind a composed face. But today, something was different. The calm had cracked.

He paced across the wide marble floor of his study, his footsteps echoing faintly against the high ceilings. The room, usually a symbol of authority and control, now felt suffocating. His fingers trembled slightly as he ran them through his greying hair, his mind circling the same question again and again like a predator that refused to rest.

Why would someone kill my PA?

The thought refused to settle.

“For twenty years...” he murmured under his breath, almost as if speaking aloud would make the answer appear. “Twenty years he was with me. Loyal. Silent. Invisible to the world.”

His PA had never been the kind of man who attracted trouble. He barely interacted with people beyond what was necessary. No enemies, no controversies, no reckless habits. He was, in every sense, ordinary—and perhaps that was what made his death so deeply unsettling.

Chaudhary stopped near the large window overlooking

his estate. The sun was setting, casting long shadows across the lawns, but instead of beauty, he saw distance.

“Forty kilometres away...” he whispered, his voice tightening. “Why there? What was he doing so far from here?”

Nothing made sense.

His eyes hardened slightly as another name surfaced in his mind.

“Mhatre...” he said, almost like a command to himself. “He said he had a clue.”

That was the only thread left. And Chaudhary held onto it desperately.

Miles away, Mhatre’s phone vibrated sharply in his hand, breaking the stillness of the late afternoon. He glanced at the screen, and for a moment, his eyes widened—not in fear, but in something closer to excitement. A spark. A breakthrough.

“This is it...” he muttered.

Without wasting another second, he grabbed his bike keys and rushed out. The engine roared to life, and he sped off in the direction mentioned in the message.

Mhatre was not an ordinary man. Tall, broad-shouldered, with a presence that could silence a room, he had once been Chaudhary’s trusted bodyguard. Life had taken him

down a quieter path now—fields, crops, and long days under the sun—but his instincts had never dulled. And neither had his loyalty.

Despite stepping away from the chaos, Chaudhary still ensured he was taken care of. A steady monthly amount. A silent understanding between two men who had seen too much together.

That loyalty was exactly why Mhatre couldn't ignore what he had discovered.

He had planned to go straight to Chaudhary, to deliver the information in person. But then the message came. A location. Urgent. Precise. It promised something bigger—something that might connect everything.

“Just one quick stop,” he told himself as the wind rushed past his face. “Then I’ll go to Saab.”

He didn't know that what's lie next..

At the same time, Anand sat in his dimly lit office, surrounded by files, maps, and half-finished notes. The air smelled faintly of stale coffee and tension. His eyes were fixed on a photograph of a truck—ordinary at first glance, but not to him.

“Saxena...” he whispered.

The name had surfaced again.

It wasn't the first time. During interrogations, whispers,

half-broken confessions, and frightened silences had all pointed toward this one shadowy figure. No face. No identity. Just a name that seemed to exist everywhere and nowhere at once.

Now it appeared again—painted faintly on the side of a seized truck involved in drug trafficking.

Coincidence?

Anand didn't believe in those anymore.

“There's a link...” he said slowly, leaning back in his chair. “Drugs... trafficking... missing girls...”

His mind tried to connect the dots, but the picture remained frustratingly incomplete.

“Who are you, Saxena?” he muttered, his gaze darkening.

The next morning began like any other at the police station, but beneath the routine, something uneasy lingered in the air.

A few constables shuffled in lazily, carrying cups of tea. Some detainees lay sprawled inside the makeshift lockup, half-asleep, half-aware. Papers were stacked carelessly across desks, fans creaked overhead, and phones rang intermittently—often ignored.

But today, the normal rhythm felt off.

Anand had already arrived, diving straight into the drug

trafficking case, his focus sharp and relentless. Across the room, Malhotra was busy gathering information about Mishra ji's death, flipping through reports with growing concern.

A phone rang loudly on one of the desks.

No one moved.

It rang again.

Still nothing.

Finally, Anand, who had just walked in, picked it up casually, unaware that the next few seconds would change everything.

"Hello?"

There was a brief pause. Then a voice, tense and authoritative.

"Where is Patil?" MC Chaudhary.

Anand straightened immediately. "Sir, he should be coming any moment."

"Listen carefully," Chaudhary said, his tone now colder, heavier. "Mhatre is dead."

Anand froze.

"What...?"

“His body was found in a drainage,” Chaudhary continued. “How is that possible? He was supposed to come to me. He had information.”

For a moment, Anand couldn’t respond.

“I... I’ll inform Malhotra, sir,” he finally managed.

Before he could say anything else, Patil entered the station. One look at Aryan’s face, and he knew something was wrong.

“What happened?”

Anand lowered the phone slowly. “Mhatre... is dead.”

The room seemed to shrink.

Patil’s expression turned blank. “When? How?”

“We don’t know.”

For a few seconds, silence dominated the space. Then, suddenly, Patil snapped into action.

“Malhotra!” he shouted, his voice echoing across the station. Malhotra rushed over.

“Two days. Two murders,” Patil said sharply. “And both connected to Chaudhary. Find out what’s going on. I don’t want theories—I want answers. And don’t come back with half-baked information.”

His frustration spilled over. “I don’t know what you

people are doing—busy with reels and social media while cases pile up?”

Malhotra nodded quickly and left, his usual confidence replaced by urgency.

But the question remained, hanging over everyone like a shadow.

Two murders in two days...Both connected...

Elsewhere, Ria sat in her room, her phone clutched tightly in her hand. She dialled Aryan, her heart racing.

He picked up almost instantly, his tone light, unaware of what she was about to say. “Hey... what’s up? Planning to meet?”

“Aryan...” her voice trembled. “Mhatre... he’s dead.”

The words hit like a sudden storm.

“What?” Aryan’s tone changed immediately. “How?”

“They found his body in a drain,” she said, struggling to keep her voice steady. “He was supposed to come here... he had some information.”

Ria’s mind was spinning. Mhatre wasn’t just another name—he was someone they knew, someone who had been part of their world.

“Who would do this?” she whispered. “And why him?”

Aryan's thoughts began racing. "How many people knew he was coming to meet you?" he asked sharply.

Ria paused. "I... I don't know. Not many."

"Think, Ria," Aryan insisted. "Was he a planned target? Or did someone find out he had information?"

The implication hung heavy between them.

"I'm coming home," Aryan said firmly. "Take care of your father. And yourself."

"Hmm..." she replied softly. "You too."

When Aryan reached home, the atmosphere was tense, almost suffocating. He greeted his father quietly and sat down across from him.

For a moment, neither spoke.

Then Aryan broke the silence. "Sir... may I look into this?"

Chaudhary's response was immediate.

"No."

Aryan was taken aback.

"Stay away from this," Chaudhary said firmly. "Whoever is behind this... they are dangerous. Let the police handle it. You're not equipped for this—not with guns, not with resources."

It wasn't just authority in his voice—it was fear.

Before Aryan could respond, Chaudhary called out, “Ria... coffee, please.”

“Okay, Papa,” her voice came from the kitchen.

A few minutes later, she walked in with a tray, placing the cups carefully on the table. Her hands were steady, but her eyes weren't. They carried the weight of everything unsaid.

The three of them sat together, the silence between them louder than any conversation.

Finally, Chaudhary spoke again, his voice quieter now. “This is not random.”

Aryan looked at him. “You think it's connected?”

Chaudhary nodded slowly. “First my PA. Now Mhatre. Both men who knew things. Both silenced.”

Ria's grip tightened around her cup.

“Saxena...” Aryan said, almost instinctively.

The name lingered in the air.

Chaudhary's expression darkened. “If this is him... then this is just the beginning.”

Outside, the night deepened, wrapping the city in shadows.

And somewhere within those shadows, unseen and untouched, someone was watching... waiting... and making the next move.



BURIED WHERE NO ONE GOES

The entire town seemed to be speaking in one voice.

Every newspaper stall, every roadside tea vendor, every crowded local train compartment—only one topic filled the air. The headlines screamed in bold black ink, splashed across the front pages like a stain that refused to fade.

“MP’s PA and Bodyguards Found Dead.”

It wasn’t just news anymore. It was fear. It was curiosity. It was something darker, creeping quietly into conversations.

Inside the dimly lit office, the television flickered silently, repeating the same visuals—blurred crime scenes, flashing sirens, reporters speaking with rehearsed urgency. The room smelled faintly of stale coffee and tension.

Anand stood near the window, arms crossed tightly, his jaw clenched. Outside, the city moved as usual—but something felt off. As if the rhythm had changed.

“I am worried about these murders...” he said, his voice low but strained. He turned abruptly, pacing now. “But at the same time, we can’t forget the drug and human trafficking case. This... this might not be separate.”

Patil, seated across the desk, nodded slowly. His eyes were sharp, observant, but there was a heaviness in them. “Did you get anything? Any clue at all?” he asked, leaning forward. “Who is behind all this?”

Anand exhaled sharply, running a hand through his hair. “We’re trying to find Saxena,” he said. “But he’s... slippery. Too careful.”

“How careful?”

“Every phone number linked to him?” Anand let out a dry, humourless laugh. “Dead. Switched off. And the ones that worked... they belong to slum dwellers. Disposable identities. Ghost numbers.” He paused, his voice dropping. “It’s like he exists... but only when he wants to.”

Patil frowned. “Location?”

“I tracked one number once,” Anand replied, his eyes narrowing as he recalled it. “It was active for a few minutes. Moving. Not stationary. Like he was on the road. Then—gone. Switched off before we could lock it.”

Silence settled in the room, thick and uncomfortable.

Patil picked up his phone and dialled quickly. The call connected after a few rings.

“Malhotra,” Patil said, his tone turning firm. “Status on the two murders.”

There was a crackle on the other end, followed by Malhotra's voice—tired, but alert. "I visited the site."

"And?"

A pause. Longer than necessary.

"The body... Mhatre's body," Malhotra continued, "was found in a drainage channel."

Anand stopped pacing.

Patil's grip on the phone tightened. "Go on."

"It's not just that," Malhotra said, his voice lowering. "The location... it's nearly impossible to reach. Narrow, unstable ground. Slippery. Even getting close requires support. I had difficulty myself."

A beat.

"I don't understand how he got there."

The room fell silent again—but this time, it felt colder.

Anand's eyes met Patil's. Something unspoken passed between them.

"Which means..." Anand murmured.

"...he didn't go there on his own," Patil finished.

On the other end, Malhotra exhaled. "Exactly. Either he was carried... or—" He stopped mid-sentence.

“Or?” Patil pressed.

“Or someone wanted him to be found there. To send a message.”

The words lingered, heavy and unsettling.

“Any other leads?” Anand asked, stepping closer.

“Nothing concrete,” Malhotra replied. “I picked up four or five suspects from nearby areas. They all claim ignorance. And honestly...” He hesitated. “They look like they’re telling the truth. Scared. Confused.”

Anand turned away, staring at the flickering television again. The reporter’s lips moved, but no sound came through. Just images. Repetition. Noise without answers.

Saxena.

The name echoed in his mind like a whisper in a dark corridor.

Invisible. Untouchable.

And somehow... always one step ahead.

Anand spoke again, softer this time, but with a chilling certainty. “This isn’t random,” he said. “The murders... the trafficking... the drugs... it’s all connected.”

Patil didn’t respond immediately. He was still holding the phone, but his attention had drifted—to something else.

Something deeper.

“Malhotra,” he said finally, “dig deeper into that drainage site. I want every inch checked. Footprints anything. Even if it seems useless.”

“Already on it,” Malhotra replied. “But sir... there’s something else.”

Patil’s eyes narrowed. “What?”

Another pause.

“When we pulled the body out...” Malhotra said slowly, “there was a mark on his wrist.

“What kind of mark?” he demanded.

Malhotra’s voice dropped to a whisper.

“A symbol. Seems symbol of night club based in centre of city”



THE INVISIBLE NETWORK

On the other side of the investigation, Anand had sunk deep into the tangled web of drug distribution and human trafficking, a world where every answer seemed to open three more questions, and every lead carried the faint, unsettling sense that he was only scratching the surface of something far more organized and far more dangerous than it appeared on paper.

The interrogation room reflected that very unease.

It was a cramped, windowless space where time seemed to stagnate, the walls carrying layers of faded paint and invisible histories, and the air, thick with the lingering smell of antiseptic mixed with sweat and anxiety, made it difficult to breathe without feeling the weight of all the confessions, lies, and broken silences that had filled this room over the years. The lone tube light above flickered intermittently—not enough to plunge the room into darkness, but just enough to strain the eyes and cast shifting shadows that made even still objects seem restless.

Anand sat across the metal table, composed yet intensely alert, his posture relaxed in a way that was almost deceptive, because beneath that stillness his mind was actively dissecting every twitch, every hesitation, every misplaced word from the man sitting opposite him.

Rafiq was already on edge.

He was not a seasoned criminal hardened by years of defiance, but rather a small player—one of those nameless couriers who exist in the margins of large operations, paid just enough to follow instructions blindly and trained, more by fear than loyalty, to never question the nature of what they carried or the consequences of their actions.

But tonight, something had gone wrong.

“You said you only deliver packages,” Anand said, his voice calm and measured, carrying neither accusation nor sympathy, which made it far more unsettling than anger ever could.

Rafiq shifted in his chair, the faint scraping sound echoing louder than it should have in the enclosed space, and for a brief moment, his eyes drifted toward the door as if calculating an escape that he himself knew did not exist.

“Yes, sir... I told you everything,” he replied, though the uncertainty in his tone betrayed him.

Anand did not respond immediately; instead, he allowed the silence to stretch deliberately, letting it settle into the room like an unseen pressure that forced discomfort into the open.

“So why,” he continued after a pause, leaning back

slightly, “does a small-time runner like you carry three sim cards and a panic alert application designed for emergencies?”

The question lingered, heavier than its words.

Rafiq swallowed, his throat dry, his fingers beginning to fidget despite his effort to appear composed.

“Sir... it’s just precaution... in this line of work, you never know when—”

Before he could complete the sentence, Anand slid a photograph across the table with controlled precision, the paper gliding to a stop directly in front of Rafiq, interrupting both his words and his thoughts.

The image was simple, yet deeply unsettling.

A young girl, no older than seventeen or eighteen, her face frozen in a moment of fear that seemed almost alive, her eyes carrying a silent plea that lingered far longer than the photograph itself.

She had been missing for five days.

Rafiq avoided looking at it at first, his gaze hovering uncertainly over the table, but when he finally allowed his eyes to settle on the image, something shifted within him—a fleeting but unmistakable reaction that Anand caught instantly.

It was not guilt.

It was recognition.

Leaning back slightly, Anand observed him with sharper focus now, choosing not to rush the moment, because he knew that truth often revealed itself more clearly in hesitation than in forced answers.

“Same route?” he asked quietly.

Rafiq’s response came too quickly, and yet not convincingly.

“No... no, sir... that... that is different work.”

The phrase hung in the air, heavy with implication.

Anand did not interrupt, nor did he challenge it immediately; instead, he let the silence return, allowing it to press against Rafiq until the weight of his own words began to suffocate him.

After a few tense moments, Rafiq spoke again, his voice lower now, stripped of whatever confidence he had been trying to maintain.

“There are two types of deliveries,” he admitted, his eyes fixed on the edge of the table as though avoiding direct contact might somehow shield him from the consequences of speaking.

“One involves white packets—powder, sealed and easy to handle, where the job begins and ends with movement, and no one asks questions because no one

wants to know the answers.”

“And the second?” Anand asked, his tone unchanged but his attention fully locked.

Rafiq hesitated, his fingers trembling slightly as the memory—or perhaps the fear—tightened its grip on him.

“The second... they call it ‘files’,” he said finally, the word sounding almost absurd until the weight behind it began to reveal itself.

Anand’s brow tightened subtly.

“Files?” he repeated.

Rafiq let out a dry, humourless breath, shaking his head as if even he found the term disturbingly ironic.

“They say things like ‘file ready,’ ‘file moved,’ ‘file closed,’” he continued slowly, each phrase sounding more sinister than the last, “but these files... they are not documents, sir... they are people.”

His voice faltered, and when he spoke again, it was barely audible.

“They cry.”

The room seemed to absorb the words.

For a brief moment, even the flickering light above

steadied, as if the atmosphere itself had tightened in response.

Anand remained outwardly composed, but a cold realization settled deep within him, aligning fragments of information that had until now remained disconnected.

“Who gives you the orders?” he asked, his voice quieter but far more deliberate.

Rafiq shook his head quickly, almost instinctively.

“I never see anyone... the instructions come through messages, always from different numbers, always changing... there is no face, no direct contact...” His breathing grew uneven as he spoke, his fear no longer concealed.

Then he stopped.

Anand leaned forward slightly, sensing the shift.

“But?” he prompted.

Rafiq hesitated before lowering his voice to a near whisper.

“There is one name... one name that everyone uses carefully, like it should not be spoken unless necessary.”

Anand’s gaze hardened.

“Saxena.”

The name entered the room quietly, yet it carried an undeniable authority, as if it belonged to something far larger than the man who had just spoken it.

Rafiq exhaled slowly, as though releasing a burden he had carried for too long.

“I have never seen him, sir... nobody has... but every major movement, every shipment, every change in route—everything important—it always comes with one line: ‘Saxena approved.’”

Anand’s thoughts moved rapidly now, connecting patterns—drug routes, missing persons, coded language, and an unseen figure orchestrating it all with precision.

“Any location? Any fixed point of contact?” he asked.

Rafiq nodded uncertainly, struggling to recall details through his fear.

“Sometimes the pickups happen near an NGO,” he said, frowning as he tried to remember the name. “It sounds respectable... something related to helping women and children... Seva... or Shakti... I am not sure...”

Anand’s jaw tightened.

An NGO—a perfect cover.

“Yes, sir, but not inside,” Rafiq added quickly. “Always around the back... near storage areas, service gates... vehicles come and go without drawing attention...” He

looked up, his fear now unmistakable. “Sir... that place is not what it looks like.”

The realization settled heavily.

Anand stood up abruptly, the sharp scrape of his chair cutting through the suffocating stillness of the room, signalling that the interrogation, at least for now, had given him what he needed.

As he moved toward the door, Rafiq’s voice followed him, strained and urgent.

“Sir... if Saxena finds out I spoke...”

Anand paused, his hand resting on the handle, his figure momentarily still against the harsh outline of the doorway.

Without turning back, he replied in a steady, unflinching tone—

“He already knows.”

The door opened, and the stark brightness of the corridor flooded in, a sharp contrast to the dim, oppressive atmosphere inside, yet offering no real sense of relief.

Outside, the station was alive with movement—voices overlapping, phones ringing, footsteps echoing—but Anand moved through it all with a singular focus, his mind already reconstructing the larger picture.

An NGO with a spotless reputation.

Drug shipments hidden in plain sight.

Human lives reduced to coded “files.”

And above it all, a man who remained invisible... yet whose presence controlled everything.

As Anand stepped forward, one thought settled firmly in his mind, clear and undeniable:

This was not just a crime.

It was a system—carefully built, deeply rooted, and designed to operate without ever being seen.



SHADOWS BY THE SHORE

The ceiling fan in DSP Patil's office rotated with a dull, uneven creak, pushing around warm air that smelled faintly of paper, dust, and stale tea. Outside, the police station buzzed like a disturbed hive—phones ringing, constables moving in hurried steps, reporters arguing at the gate, their voices rising and falling like waves crashing against stone. Inside, however, there was a heavy stillness.

Patil stood near the window, his hands clasped behind his back, staring at nothing in particular. Two murders. Both linked—directly or indirectly—to MP Chaudhary. And now the pressure was no longer just internal. It was public. Political. Dangerous.

He exhaled slowly.

“Sir?” Malhotra's voice broke the silence.

Patil turned, his eyes sharp but tired. “The press is getting restless. They're already building their own stories.” He paused, choosing his words carefully. “Go out there. Tell them we're close. Say we have strong leads.”

Malhotra straightened slightly. “Strong leads, sir?”

Patil held his gaze. “That's what they need to hear.”

A flicker of understanding—and ambition—passed

through Malhotra's eyes. "Yes, sir."

As he turned to leave, Patil added, quieter this time, "And Malhotra... be careful with what you promise."

Malhotra nodded, but there was a faint smile on his lips. This was his moment. A chance to step out of Anand's shadow.

Outside, the atmosphere was electric. Cameras flashed. Microphones were thrust forward like weapons. The media smelled weakness—and they were hungry.

Malhotra stepped into the chaos, adjusting his uniform. "We are actively pursuing multiple leads," he announced confidently. "Our team has identified strong clues. If our current direction proves correct, we expect significant progress very soon."

Questions erupted instantly.

"Is the MP involved?"

"Are the murders connected?"

"Why no arrests yet?"

Malhotra held his ground, repeating variations of the same controlled assurance. But beneath the polished words, a quiet frustration burned. Because the truth was far less impressive.

No truck had been identified. No CCTV footage had

captured the vehicle that killed Mishra. It was as if the accident had been swallowed by the city itself. And Mhatre—vanished. Not a trace.

Back inside, Patil closed his eyes for a moment. “Strong clues,” he murmured under his breath, almost bitterly.

On the other side of the city, morning unfolded with deceptive calm.

The sea stretched endlessly, its surface shimmering under the soft gold of the rising sun. A gentle breeze carried the salty scent of the ocean, mixed with the faint aroma of drying fish and wet sand. The promenade was alive in its usual rhythm—joggers pacing steadily, their breath forming quiet clouds; elderly men sitting on benches discussing politics; children chasing each other barefoot, their laughter ringing clear and careless.

Fishermen worked nearby, their hands rough and practiced as they untangled nets, speaking in low voices about tides and luck. A few tourists stood closer to the water, taking pictures, letting the waves touch their feet before retreating with delighted squeals.

It was an ordinary morning.

Until it wasn't.

At first, it was just a pause. A hesitation in movement. A man slowing down his jog, his eyes narrowing toward something near the rocks. Then another person stopped.

And another.

“What is that?”

“Something’s there...”

A small group began to gather, curiosity pulling them closer like a magnet. The laughter faded. The air shifted.

Within minutes, the circle grew tighter. Whispers replaced conversation.

A uniformed constable, patrolling the stretch lazily, noticed the crowd forming. He frowned, adjusting his cap as he walked toward it.

“What’s going on?” he called out casually to another policeman standing nearby.

The other shrugged, half-smirking. “Maybe a big fish washed up.”

They both moved closer.

But as the constable pushed through the crowd, the smell hit him first. Not strong, but unmistakable. Something metallic. Something wrong.

“Side, side... move aside,” he said, his tone sharpening.

The crowd parted reluctantly.

And then he saw it.

For a moment, he froze.

It wasn't a fish.

It was a body.

A man lay half-submerged near the shore, his clothes soaked and clinging, his face pale and distorted by water and time. His eyes were closed, but there was something unsettling about the stillness—as if the sea itself had rejected him.

The constable swallowed hard, his throat suddenly dry. His earlier casualness vanished.

“Call it in,” he said quickly, his voice low but urgent.

His hands fumbled slightly as he pulled out his phone. “Control, this is Constable Shinde from Sarine Drive stretch... we have a body. Yes... male. Unknown identity. Send a team immediately.”

Behind him, murmurs grew louder.

“Dead body?”

“Who is he?” “Did he drown?”

Someone tried to step closer, but the constable snapped, “Stay back! Everyone stay back!”

The sea continued its rhythm, waves brushing against the shore as if nothing had changed.

Within minutes, police vehicles arrived, their sirens cutting through the morning calm. The flashing lights reflected against the water, creating a surreal contrast—beauty and horror intertwined.

Officers moved efficiently, cordoning off the area. A small team approached the body, gloves on, expressions hardened by experience.

Still, there was something about this one.

“Careful,” one of them muttered as they pulled the body slightly away from the water.

“Any ID?” another asked.

The first officer shook his head. “Nothing visible.”

A senior officer arrived, his presence commanding immediate attention. He surveyed the scene briefly before stepping closer.

“From where did he come?” he asked, his tone calm but probing.

There was a slight hesitation before a lady officer spoke up. “Sir... there’s a bridge about two kilometres from here. In past cases, when someone jumps... the current brings the body here within a few hours.”

The officer nodded slowly, considering. “Hmm... possible.”

He crouched slightly, observing the face more carefully. There was no immediate sign of struggle. No obvious injury. Just... emptiness.

“But who is he?” he murmured.

He stood up, turning to the team. “Take photographs. Circulate his image immediately. Check all missing person complaints from the last two days.”

“Yes, sir.”

“And...” he paused, glancing once more at the body, “don’t assume it’s just another suicide. Not yet.”

The words lingered.

Because in a city already shaken by two mysterious murders, nothing was “just” anything anymore.

As the body was lifted onto the stretcher, a sudden wave crashed harder than the rest, splashing against the rocks—almost as if the sea was trying to speak, to reveal something it had swallowed.

But it said nothing.

And somewhere, unseen, the story was getting darker.



THE PATTERN DEEPENS

The bell had been ringing for too long—sharp, repetitive, and almost accusing, as if the silence of the police station had failed somewhere and was now being challenged. Inside, the atmosphere was thick with fatigue and tension. Files lay open like unfinished thoughts, tea cups sat forgotten with a thin layer of cream forming on top, and the slow-moving ceiling fans pushed around warm air that carried the scent of paper, ink, and unease.

A couple of constables murmured near the entrance, occasionally glancing toward the senior officers' desks, aware that something was building but unsure of its shape.

Anand pushed his chair back as soon as the ringing cut through again, his instincts reacting before his mind had fully processed it.

He stepped forward, but just as his hand reached out, DySP Patil moved past him with quiet urgency and picked up the receiver, his face already carrying a seriousness that suggested he had been expecting bad news.

“Patil here,” he said, his voice steady but low.

There was no small talk from the other end—only a clipped, official tone that carried weight. “Patil... another

body has been found in your jurisdiction. Unknown identity. You need to track it. Fast.”

For a brief moment, Patil did not respond. The words seemed to settle heavily in the room before he finally replied, “Yes, sir,” and placed the receiver back down with deliberate calm, as if controlling the situation externally might help him contain the storm rising within.

Anand stepped closer, searching his face. “What happened, sir?”

Patil walked a few slow steps, his mind clearly racing ahead of his words. “Another death,” he said, choosing each word carefully. “Initial report says suicide. Found near the seaside... most likely someone jumped from the bridge.” He paused, then added, almost to himself, “At least that’s what it looks like.”

The uncertainty in his tone did not go unnoticed. Anand’s eyes narrowed slightly, his thoughts immediately connecting this to the chain of events already unfolding around them.

Patil turned toward the room, his voice gaining authority again. “Get the image circulated everywhere—WhatsApp groups, internal systems, social media. I want identification as soon as possible. No delays.”

The station came alive with purpose. Phones were picked up, messages drafted, instructions relayed. Yet beneath the movement, there was a shared awareness—this was

not just another routine case.

Before the momentum could settle, another phone rang. This time, Anand picked it up.

“Police station,” he said.

On the other side, a woman’s voice trembled, fragile and breaking under its own weight. “My... my husband is missing since last night...”

The fear in her voice cut through the noise around him. Anand straightened, his tone softening but remaining precise. “Please tell me his name.”

“Suresh... Suresh Garg...”

“What was he wearing when you last saw him?”

There was a pause, filled with the sound of her trying to recall through panic. “Blue jeans... black T-shirt...”

Something shifted inside Anand. A quiet alarm.

He kept his voice controlled. “Madam, please send me a photograph of your husband immediately, and share your contact number. We will look into this.”

As the call ended, Anand remained still for a second, the receiver still in his hand. The description echoed in his mind—blue jeans, black T-shirt—the same as the unidentified body found at the shore. The coincidence felt too precise, too immediate.

When the photograph arrived moments later, Anand opened it with a hesitation he rarely allowed himself. The image showed a man alive, unaware, captured in an ordinary moment. But Anand's mind overlaid it instantly with the lifeless figure described from the beach. The match was undeniable.

A wave of quiet sorrow passed through him, quickly replaced by professional urgency. "Malhotra," he called out, his voice firm.

Malhotra looked up, slightly irritated at the interruption. "Yes?"

"Call this lady to the station. We need her to identify the body."

Malhotra studied Anand's expression for a second longer than usual. "You're sure?"

Anand didn't answer directly. "Just call her."

That was enough.

Anand entered Patil's cabin without formalities, his urgency overriding protocol. "Sir, we've identified the body. His wife is on her way to confirm. Name is Suresh Garg."

Patil leaned back, absorbing the information slowly, his face tightening as the implications began to form. Before he could respond, the phone on his desk rang again, this

time with a sharpness that seemed almost timed to the escalation of events.

He picked it up. “Yes?”

The voice on the other end was unmistakable—Chaudhary. Powerful, controlled, and carrying an edge that suggested he was already aware of more than he was saying.

“Chaudhary Saheb, we are trying to find the reason behind—” Patil began, but he was cut off.

“Wait,” Chaudhary said, his tone firm. “This is not about that.”

A pause followed, heavy and deliberate.

“One of my former bodyguards has been found dead at the beach,” he continued. “And don’t call it suicide. I know what I’m saying. This is murder.”

The certainty in his voice created a silence in the room that felt almost physical.

“I want this case handled by your best officer,” Chaudhary went on. “No excuses. I don’t want to send this to CBI... but I will if I don’t get answers. You have two days.”

The line disconnected.

Patil remained still for a moment, the weight of those

words settling deeply. Two days was not a timeline—it was a threat.

He looked at Anand. “This is connected,” he said quietly. “He was one of Chaudhary’s old bodyguards. Now he used to manage his agricultural land.”

The pattern was no longer abstract—it was beginning to take shape.

Patil called Malhotra in and instructed him to hand over the case to Anand. The decision was immediate and non-negotiable, but it carried visible friction. Malhotra’s expression hardened, though he said nothing beyond a reluctant acknowledgment.

Anand hesitated for a moment. “Sir, I’m very close to a breakthrough in the human trafficking case.”

Patil shook his head firmly. “Leave it for now. This is priority. No one goes home until we have answers. Malhotra, you assist Anand. The drug case comes second.”

The room absorbed the command. It was no longer just an investigation—it was a race against pressure, against expectation, against something unknown but rapidly approaching.

Malhotra dropped the files onto Anand’s desk with restrained frustration, the sound louder than necessary, reflecting emotions he chose not to voice.

Anand, however, was already elsewhere—inside the case.

Hours passed, marked only by the shifting light outside and the growing stillness inside the station. As evening set in, the world beyond continued its usual chaos, but within those walls, everything narrowed down to names, patterns, and unanswered questions.

Anand leaned over the files, his mind working through possibilities, rejecting them, rebuilding them. These were not random victims. They were all connected—bodyguards, once close to power, now living quieter lives, almost forgotten.

Which raised the most important question—why now?

He leaned back slightly, eyes fixed on nothing as the pieces rearranged themselves in his mind. “Why the bodyguards...” he murmured.

Malhotra looked up. “What?”

“They left the job years ago,” Anand said slowly. “Most of them are into agriculture now. They’re not even actively connected to Chaudhary anymore. So why target them?”

The question lingered, unanswered but growing.

Anand’s thoughts deepened, moving backward in time. “Unless... something happened when they were still bodyguards,” he said, his voice lower now, more focused.

“Something they were all part of. Something that didn’t come out.”

Malhotra leaned forward, his irritation replaced by curiosity. “Like what?”

Anand’s eyes sharpened. “An encounter. A cover-up. Maybe they eliminated someone they shouldn’t have.”

The idea hung in the air, dark and unsettling.

“And now,” Anand continued, “someone is coming back... finishing what was left incomplete.”

The room felt colder.

From the doorway, Patil adjusted his coat. “I’m going to meet Chaudhary,” he said. “Let’s see how he reacts.”

He paused, looking at both of them with quiet intensity. “Use all your brains. I need results.”

As he walked out, the sound of his footsteps echoed down the corridor, fading slowly but leaving behind a heavier silence.

Anand looked back at the files, at the names that were no longer just records but pieces of a larger, hidden truth.

Somewhere in those pages, the past was waiting.

And it was no longer willing to stay buried.

Aryan sat by the window of his apartment, the late

afternoon sun spilling in through half-drawn curtains and casting long, slanting shadows across his work desk. Outside, the city moved in its usual restless rhythm—cars honking, vendors calling out, the distant hum of life that never really paused. Inside, however, there was a strange stillness. His laptop screen glowed with unfinished work, but his attention kept drifting. The air felt heavy, as if something unseen was waiting to unfold.

Just then, his phone vibrated against the wooden table, breaking the silence. The name flashing on the screen—Anand—immediately sharpened his focus. Aryan picked up the call, leaning back slightly in his chair, trying to ease into what he assumed would be a routine conversation.

“Inspector Saab, long time,” Aryan said with a light tone.

Anand responded with a brief chuckle, but there was a tired edge in his voice. “Work doesn’t really give me that luxury anymore. Thought I’d check in—see if you’re still hiding behind your screens.”

They spoke casually for a moment, exchanging fragments of their busy lives, but the comfort didn’t last long. A subtle shift crept into Anand’s tone, the kind that Aryan had learned to recognize over time—something serious was coming.

“I’ve been assigned to a new case,” Anand said, his voice lowering slightly.

Aryan straightened, his fingers unconsciously tightening

around the phone. “What kind of case?”

“Murder,” Anand replied, without hesitation.

Aryan frowned, trying to recall what he had seen in the news. “Two victims, right?”

“No,” Anand said firmly, pausing just enough to let the weight of his words settle. “Three. A new body was found this morning... at the beach.”

For a moment, Aryan said nothing. The image formed in his mind uninvited—the vast shoreline, waves crashing endlessly, and somewhere between them, a lifeless body washed ashore. The calmness of the sea suddenly felt deceptive.

“All connected?” he finally asked.

“That’s what makes it complicated,” Anand replied. “All three victims seem to have some link to MP Chaudhary. Not direct, not obvious—but enough to raise questions.”

Aryan exhaled slowly, absorbing the implication. “That’s not just a case then... that’s pressure.”

Anand let out a faint, humourless laugh. “Exactly. And as if that wasn’t enough, my earlier case—the drug and trafficking one—has now taken a backseat. Dead bodies tend to rearrange priorities.”

The conversation lingered for a second before Aryan spoke again, his tone now more deliberate. “I might have

something that could help... about Saxena.”

Anand immediately picked up on the shift. “Go on.”

“You remember we couldn’t identify Saxena? No proper records, no background—almost like he exists only when he wants to,” Aryan began. He glanced at his laptop screen, where fragments of data still remained open, as if waiting to be revisited. “I reached out to a few contacts in telecom. Not officially—just enough to get some raw activity data.”

Anand didn’t interrupt, but Aryan could sense his full attention.

“I asked them to pull records of mobile devices that were active in the same locations where Saxena’s phone appeared. Even if his number was active for just a few minutes, I wanted to see what other devices were around at that exact time,” he explained. “At first, the data was overwhelming—hundreds, sometimes thousands of numbers. In some cases, barely ten. It looked random, almost useless.”

Aryan paused, recalling the long hours spent filtering through noise. “So I started narrowing it down. Removed the inconsistencies, tracked repeated overlaps, and then used an AI model to identify patterns—phones that appeared again and again, wherever Saxena’s signal showed up.”

And what did you find?” Anand asked, his voice now

steady but intense.

Aryan's gaze drifted toward the darkening sky outside. "Only three numbers," he said quietly. "Out of everything... just three phones kept appearing consistently."

There was a long silence on the other end.

"Three?" Anand repeated, as if confirming he had heard it right.

"Yes," Aryan replied. "And that's not the troubling part."

"Then what is?"

"Some of those numbers are registered to very well-known individuals," Aryan said, his voice lowering. "People who aren't supposed to be anywhere near something like this."

The weight of that statement lingered between them.

Anand finally spoke, slower this time. "Who are they?"

"I can share the details," Aryan said carefully, "but this isn't official data. If we act on it without proper validation, it could create more problems than solutions. You should request the same records through official channels. Once you have that, we can cross-check and narrow it down properly."

Anand exhaled deeply, processing everything. "You've

already done more than half the investigation,” he said, a hint of admiration in his tone. “I should’ve thought of this approach.”

Aryan allowed himself a faint smile. “Maybe. Or maybe you were busy dealing with things that don’t sit inside spreadsheets.”

For a brief moment, the tension eased, and both of them shared a quiet laugh. But it faded quickly, replaced again by the seriousness of what they were dealing with.

After a pause, Anand spoke again, this time with a different tone—less official, more personal. “You know, Aryan... you really should consider joining the police force. We need minds like yours—people who can see patterns where others see noise.”

Aryan leaned back in his chair, staring at the ceiling as the fan continued its slow, rhythmic motion. “I’ve thought about it,” he admitted. “Just waiting for the right opportunity.”

“When that opportunity comes,” Anand said, “I’ll make sure you’re on the list.”

There was a quiet understanding in that moment—something unspoken, yet firmly acknowledged.

They exchanged a few final words before ending the call, each carrying their own share of the conversation’s weight.

As the screen went dark, Aryan remained still for a few seconds, letting everything sink in. Three murders. Three phone numbers. A connection that didn't make sense yet felt too precise to ignore. Somewhere, beneath all the fragments, a pattern was beginning to take shape—and patterns, he knew, rarely lied.

His phone buzzed again, pulling him out of his thoughts.

This time, it was Ria.

Aryan answered, his voice softening almost instantly. "Hey."

"Hey," Ria replied, her tone light, almost teasing. "Still lost in your world of mysteries?"

"Something like that," he said.

"Let's take a break from that world," she suggested. "Coffee? Same place."

Aryan smiled, a sense of familiarity cutting through the heaviness of the evening. "Hope it's open this time... and we actually get a seat."

Ria laughed. "We'll manage. We always do."

"Alright," he said, grabbing his keys and standing up. "Give me thirty minutes."

As he stepped out of his apartment, the evening had settled in fully. The sky was darker now, and the city

lights had begun to flicker alive one by one. Somewhere in the distance, beyond the crowded streets and endless movement, lay the same beach where a body had been found that morning.

For a brief second, Aryan paused.

Then he walked on.

But the thought stayed with him—quiet, persistent, and unsettling.



LOVE AND DANGER

Aryan was in full investigation mode, firing questions one after another, his tone sharp and precise, more suited to an interrogation room than a quiet cafe.

Ria leaned forward, lowering her voice just enough to cut through his intensity. “Relax... this is a cafe, not your interrogation room.”

Aryan paused, the realization hitting him. A flicker of embarrassment crossed his face.

At that exact moment, the waiter appeared. “Sir, anything else?”

Ria didn’t miss a beat. “Yes,” she said with a straight face, “can you bring him a ‘normal human behaviour’ menu?”

Aryan tried to hold back, but a reluctant smile escaped him anyway.

The cafe had grown quieter now, the earlier laughter fading into a soft, lingering silence. Outside, the city moved as always—cars passing, people rushing—but inside, time seemed to slow, wrapping the two of them in a moment that felt separate from everything else.

Aryan looked at Ria—not as an officer analysing a case, but as a man trying to understand something far more complex... her.

Ria noticed the shift immediately. “Why are you looking at me like that?” she asked softly.

Aryan didn’t answer right away. His fingers, resting on the table, moved slowly toward hers—hesitant, uncertain, as if crossing an invisible line required more courage than any case he had handled.

“Because...” he finally said, his voice quieter than usual, “in my world, things don’t last. People don’t stay. Every day, I see something broken... something lost.”

Ria’s expression softened. She didn’t pull her hand away when his fingers gently touched hers.

“And yet,” she said gently, “you’re still here... still trying.”

Aryan exhaled, a faint smile appearing, though it carried the weight of everything he had seen. “I don’t want this to be another thing that fades away,” he admitted. “I don’t want you to become just another memory I couldn’t protect.”

There was no humour now, no lightness—only truth.

Ria intertwined her fingers with his, holding them firmly. “Then don’t let it,” she said, her voice steady with quiet strength. “Life is unpredictable, Aryan... but that doesn’t mean we stop choosing what matters.”

He looked at her—really looked this time—as if

committing every detail to memory. “What if I fail?” he asked, almost in a whisper.

Ria shook her head gently. “Then we fail together,” she replied. “And we stand up again... together.”

A long silence followed, but it wasn’t empty. It was filled with something deeper—understanding, acceptance, and a promise neither of them had fully spoken yet.

Aryan tightened his grip on her hand. “No matter what happens... no matter how complicated things get... I’m not walking away from this,” he said, his voice firm now. “From you.”

Ria held his gaze, unwavering. “Neither am I.”

Her voice softened further, like a confession she had carried for too long. “I love you, Aryan.”

For a brief second, everything else disappeared.

Aryan didn’t look away. “I love you too, Ria,” he replied, without hesitation.

The words weren’t rushed or dramatic—they felt inevitable, like something that had always existed, waiting for the right moment to surface.

Ria smiled faintly, her fingers still intertwined with his. “Then promise me,” she said gently, “no matter what happens... we stay together. Not just now... for life.”

Aryan nodded, his expression steady and sincere. “I promise. For life... together.” He paused, then added softly, “No matter what comes.”

Ria exhaled slowly, as if a quiet fear had finally settled within her.

After a moment, she tilted her head, a hint of her earlier playfulness returning. “So, Mr. Serious Officer... since we’ve made such a big decision, I think it deserves a proper next step.”

Aryan raised an eyebrow, a faint smile forming. “And what would that be?”

“Lunch,” Ria said. “With you.”

“At your place?”

She nodded. “Yes... and we’ll give this good news to Dad. And you’re coming—no excuses.”

Aryan smirked lightly. “Is that an invitation or an order?”

Ria leaned closer, her eyes glinting. “Consider it both. From today, whatever I say... it’s an order for you.”

He shook his head, smiling now. “Alright...”

Their hands remained together on the table—not

hesitant anymore, not uncertain— but steady... like a promise already sealed.



PROMISES IN THE DARK

The next afternoon, Aryan joined Ria for lunch at her home, just as she had insisted. What was meant to be a simple meal stretched into hours of conversation, laughter, and comfortable silences. They stayed longer than planned, talking about everything from childhood memories to future dreams.

Ria's father watched them quietly from time to time. The ease with which they looked at each other, the unspoken understanding between them, and the warmth in their conversations made it clear that they were no longer just friends. Though neither Aryan nor Ria said anything openly, he sensed that their bond had grown into something much deeper—something that might soon lead them toward a future together.

The night had grown quieter, but the tension between them had only deepened. Ria stood near the terrace railing, her gaze fixed far beyond the city lights, as if searching for answers hidden in the distance.

Aryan watched her for a moment before stepping closer, his presence calm yet grounding. “You’re thinking too far ahead,” he said softly.

Ria shook her head. “No... I’m trying not to.” She paused, then turned toward him, her eyes reflecting both fear and determination. “But every time I connect the dots, it somehow leads back to Papa. Not because he’s

done something wrong... but because everything seems to revolve around him.”

Aryan remained silent, letting her thoughts unfold.

“What if...” she continued slowly, “this isn’t about what Papa did... but about what someone wants him to do?”

Aryan’s expression shifted—this was a different direction.

Ria stepped closer, urgency building in her voice. “Think about it. The people being targeted—they were once close to him. Trusted. Known. If someone wanted to hurt him... truly hurt him... they wouldn’t attack him directly.”

“They’d go after the people around him,” Aryan completed.

Ria nodded. “Not just to scare him... but to send a message.”

Aryan folded his arms, thinking. “A message that says—‘you’re not untouchable.’ Or worse... ‘we can reach anyone connected to you.’”

Ria’s voice dropped. “And maybe the message isn’t complete yet.”

Silence followed, heavier this time.

Aryan stepped closer, his tone steady and reassuring.

“Ria... listen to me. If this is about pressuring your father, then he’s the target—not the cause.”

She searched his face for certainty.

“It changes everything,” Aryan continued. “We’re not looking for something he did wrong in the past. We’re looking for someone who needs something from him now... something big enough to kill for.”

Ria exhaled slowly. “A deal... a decision... a favour...”

“Or something he’s refusing to do,” Aryan added.

Her eyes widened slightly. “Papa has been very firm on some recent policies. He mentioned pressure from different sides... but never went into detail.”

Aryan nodded. “That fits. If someone powerful isn’t getting what they want, they escalate. First warnings... then consequences.”

Ria wrapped her arms around herself. “This isn’t just revenge... it’s strategy.”

“Exactly,” Aryan said. “Calculated. Cold. Each murder isn’t just an act—it’s a step.”

For a moment, she looked shaken. Then Aryan gently took her hand, grounding her again. “Hey,” he said softly. “Look at me.”

She did.

“We’re not going to let this spiral,” he continued. “We’ll break it down. Together. One step at a time.”

His calm steadiness eased the chaos in her thoughts.

“What if we’re already late?” she asked quietly. “What if the next step is already planned?”

“Then we get ahead of it,” Aryan replied without hesitation. “We find out who benefits from pressuring your father—who has the power, the reach... and the reason.”

Ria’s fingers tightened around his. “And if they come closer? Not just old associates...”

Aryan understood without her finishing.

“Then they’ll have to go through me first,” he said, his voice soft but resolute.

Ria looked at him, surprised—not by the words, but by how naturally he meant them. “Aryan...”

He gave a faint smile. “I mean it. You’re not facing this alone.”

For a moment, everything else faded—the investigation, the fear, the uncertainty. What remained was something stronger.

Trust.

Ria's eyes softened. "A few days ago, all of this felt distant... just news, just cases. And now..."

"And now it's personal," Aryan said gently.

She nodded. "And somehow... I'm less scared than I thought I'd be."

Aryan raised an eyebrow slightly. "That's surprising."

Ria smiled, small but genuine. "Because you're here."

The words lingered in the air—simple, yet full of meaning.

Aryan didn't respond immediately, but his grip on her hand tightened slightly. "Then I guess I'm not going anywhere."

They stood side by side, looking out at the city again—but this time, it didn't feel overwhelming.

After a pause, Aryan spoke, shifting back to focus, but gently. "We need to figure out who stands to gain by forcing your father's hand. Business rivals, political opponents... maybe even someone within the system."

Ria nodded. "And the people being killed—they could be signals. Each one marking a phase... or a warning ignored."

"Exactly," Aryan said. "Which means the next move won't be random."

Her expression hardened with resolve. “Then we don’t wait for it.”

Aryan glanced at her, a hint of approval in his eyes. “No. We don’t.”

She took a deep breath. “We find them before they make the next move.”

Aryan smiled faintly. “Now that sounds like a plan.”

And as their hands remained intertwined, there was an unspoken understanding between them—this was no longer just about solving a case.

It was about protecting what mattered.

Together.



SHADOWS AROUND POWER

The evening had settled into a quiet calm, but neither Aryan nor Ria felt at ease. They sat on the terrace of Ria's house, the city lights flickering in the distance like restless thoughts—alive, scattered, impossible to ignore. A soft breeze moved through the open space, brushing past them as if trying to carry away the tension, but it failed. The heaviness between them remained, thick and unspoken.

Ria held her cup of coffee untouched, her fingers wrapped around it more for comfort than warmth. The steam had long faded, leaving behind only the faint bitterness of something forgotten. Aryan leaned back in his chair, his gaze fixed on her—not intrusive, but observant. He had learned to read silences, and Ria's silence tonight was louder than words.

"Three murders..." Ria finally broke, her voice low but steady, as if carefully controlling the storm within. "All connected somehow... but no one can see how."

Aryan nodded slowly, his expression sharpening. "They're not random. That much is clear." He paused, choosing his words with precision. "The victims—your father's PA, the bodyguard, and now this unknown man—they all had proximity to power at some point."

Ria turned toward him sharply, her brows drawing

together. “At some point. Not now.” Her tone carried frustration. “That’s what doesn’t make sense. Why target people who are no longer relevant?”

Aryan leaned forward, resting his elbows on his knees, his voice lowering as if the answer itself demanded caution. “Maybe that’s exactly why. Old connections are easier to overlook. No one questions the past... unless they’re forced to.”

Ria’s eyes narrowed, her thoughts accelerating. “You mean... something from their past is coming back?”

Aryan held her gaze for a moment before stepping closer, his presence steadying the air between them. “You’re thinking too far ahead,” he said softly.

Ria shook her head, almost immediately. “No... I’m trying not to.” She paused, her composure slipping just slightly before she regained it. When she spoke again, her voice carried both fear and resolve. “But every time I connect the dots, it somehow leads back to Papa. Not because he’s done something wrong... but because everything revolves around him.”

“Possibly,” Aryan replied, thoughtful rather than dismissive. “Think about it. If someone wanted revenge—or to expose something buried—they wouldn’t go after the obvious targets first. They’d start with people connected... but less protected.”

Ria’s grip tightened around the cup, her knuckles

whitening. “But what could it be? My father... he’s been in politics for years, yes, but—” Her voice faltered for the first time. “He’s not... he wouldn’t...”

Aryan didn’t interrupt. When he spoke, it was measured. “Ria, I’m not saying your father did anything wrong. But politics... power... they cast long shadows. Sometimes decisions don’t look wrong in the moment. Later, they can become something else entirely.”

Ria stepped closer now, urgency overtaking hesitation. “Think about it. The people being targeted—they were once close to him. Trusted.” Her eyes locked onto his. “If someone wanted to hurt him—really hurt him—they wouldn’t attack him directly.”

“They’d go after the people around him,” Aryan completed quietly.

Ria nodded. “Not just to scare him... but to send a message.”

Aryan folded his arms, the pattern becoming clearer in his mind. “A message that says—‘you’re not untouchable.’” He paused. “Or worse... ‘we can reach anyone connected to you.’”

Ria’s voice dropped to almost a whisper. “And maybe the message isn’t complete yet.”

Silence followed—heavier this time, pressing in from all sides.

Aryan stepped closer, his tone grounding, deliberate. “Ria... listen to me. If this is about pressuring your father, then he’s the target—not the cause.”

She searched his face, looking for certainty, for something solid to hold onto.

“It changes everything,” he continued. “It means we’re not looking for something he did wrong in the past. We’re looking for someone who needs something from him now... something big enough to kill for.”

Ria exhaled slowly, the realization settling in layers. “A deal... a decision... a Favor...”

“Or something he’s refusing to do,” Aryan added.

Her eyes widened slightly. “Papa has been very firm on some recent policies... he mentioned pressure, but never details.”

Aryan nodded. “That fits. If someone powerful isn’t getting what they want, they escalate. First warnings... then consequences.”

Ria wrapped her arms around herself unconsciously. “This isn’t revenge... it’s strategy.”

“Exactly,” Aryan said. “Calculated. Cold. Each murder isn’t just violence—it’s communication.”

For a moment, she looked shaken—but Aryan reached out, gently taking her hand, anchoring her back to the

present.

“Hey,” he said softly. “Look at me.”

She did.

“We’re not going to let this spiral,” he said. “We break it down. Together. One step at a time.”

Something in his voice steadied her. The chaos didn’t disappear—but it softened, just enough.

“What if we’re already late?” she asked quietly. “What if the next step is already planned?”

“Then we get ahead of it,” Aryan replied without hesitation. “We figure out who benefits. Who has the power... the reach... and the motive.”

Ria’s fingers tightened around his. “And what if they come closer? Not just old associates...”

He understood.

“Then they’ll have to go through me first.”

She looked at him—not surprised by the words, but by the certainty behind them.

“Aryan...” she whispered.

He smiled faintly. “I mean it. You’re not alone in this.”

For a moment, everything else—the case, the fear, the

unanswered questions—faded into the background. What remained was quieter, stronger.

Trust.

Ria's eyes softened. "A few days ago, all of this felt distant... just news. And now..."

"And now it's personal," Aryan said gently.

She nodded. "And somehow... I'm less scared than I thought I'd be."

Aryan raised an eyebrow. "That's unexpected."

A small, genuine smile appeared on her lips. "Because you're here."

The simplicity of the words gave them weight.

Aryan didn't respond immediately, but his grip tightened slightly. "Then I'm not going anywhere."

They stood side by side, looking out at the city again—but now, it felt different. Not lighter, but shared.

After a pause, Aryan shifted gently back to focus. "We need to identify who gains the most by forcing your father's hand. Business rivals, political opponents... maybe even someone inside the system."

Ria nodded, her clarity returning. "And the victims—they're signals. Each one marking a phase... or a warning

ignored.”

“Which means the next move won’t be random,” Aryan said.

She took a deeper breath this time, stronger. “We find them before they act again.”

A faint smile crossed his face. “Now that sounds like a plan.”

Their hands remained intertwined, an unspoken agreement passing between them—this was no longer just an investigation.

It was personal. It was protection.

Aryan glanced at his watch and exhaled, the urgency returning. “I need to move.”

Ria tilted her head, a soft smile forming, though something quieter lingered beneath it. “Are you coming on Friday?” she asked, almost casually—but not quite.

Aryan paused mid-step, turning back with curiosity. “Friday? Your birthday’s on Sunday,” he teased lightly. “Early celebration? Or should I assume you’re expecting advance gifts now?”

Ria shook her head, her smile softening. “No... nothing like that. Just something simple.” She hesitated briefly. “Avni and Anand will be there... a few close friends.”

She stepped closer, her voice lowering, more personal now. “Please come on Friday... if you’re not busy.” Her eyes met his. “I could really use your help.”

Aryan held her gaze for a moment longer than usual. He understood—it wasn’t just an invitation. It was trust, extended quietly.

A faint smile formed as he nodded. “Sure.”

But this time, it wasn’t casual.

It was a promise.



THE GHOST NUMBER

Anand leaned back in his chair, his eyes fixed on the slow, steady rotation of the ceiling fan above him. The dull mechanical hum filled the silence of his cabin, but his thoughts refused to settle. Aryan's words echoed in fragments—unfinished, yet sharp enough to disturb his clarity. There was something wrong with the pattern they were seeing, something deeper than coincidence.

He straightened suddenly, the realization not fully formed but impossible to ignore.

“No... not yet,” he murmured to himself. “Not until I’m sure.”

This wasn’t something he could risk sharing—not even within the department. If he turned out to be wrong, it would damage his credibility. But if he was right, the implications would go far beyond embarrassment.

He reached for his phone and dialled with quiet urgency.

“Get me the telecom team. Urgent.”

The telecom office was alive with movement and sound. Screens flickered with streams of data, keyboards clicked in rapid succession, and analysts exchanged short, technical instructions without looking up. Call records, signal maps, and device traces formed a constantly shifting web across multiple monitors.

Anand stepped into the middle of the room, and despite the ongoing activity, his presence drew attention. Conversations softened, and a few heads turned in his direction.

He placed a slip of paper on the desk in front of the nearest officer.

“I need a deep trace on this number,” he said, his tone controlled but firm. “Full activity for the last six months.”

The officer glanced at it and hesitated. “Sir, that will take—”

“I need it fast,” Anand interrupted, not raising his voice but leaving no room for negotiation. “And I need complete data.”

He paused briefly before adding, “This number stays active only for a few minutes at a time. I want exact timestamps—precise ones.”

The officer nodded, now fully attentive.

“Also track all devices active in the same vicinity during those time windows,” Anand continued. “Every network, every overlap. Coordinate across providers if needed.”

“Sir, that would require higher permissions—”

“Permissions are granted,” Anand said immediately. “I’ll

take responsibility. Just get me the results.”

The room shifted almost instantly, the energy sharpening into focused urgency.

Two days later, rain lashed against the windows of the police station, blurring the city outside into streaks of grey. Thunder rolled faintly in the distance as Anand sat alone in his cabin, staring at the report on his screen.

For a moment, he didn’t open it. His fingers hovered over the keyboard as if he already sensed what he might find. Then he exhaled and began scrolling.

Rows of numbers filled the screen—timestamps, coordinates, device IDs. He scanned through them carefully, his attention narrowing with each passing second.

“Forty-two instances,” he whispered.

The number had been active exactly forty-two times in the last six months. Each activation lasted only a few minutes, never longer, never irregular.

He began mapping the locations.

Most of them pointed to crowded areas—markets, busy intersections, public spaces where hundreds of devices operated simultaneously. In such places, any signal would easily blend into the background noise.

It was a deliberate cover.

Then one entry broke the pattern.

Anand leaned closer, his focus sharpening.

The location was on the outskirts of the city, far from the usual crowd density. The number of active devices there was minimal—barely four or five.

That wasn't random.

He stared at the screen for a few seconds longer, the significance settling in.

Hours passed as the station gradually quieted. The noise faded, lights dimmed in distant corridors, and the outside rain softened into a steady rhythm. Anand remained at his desk, his attention fixed.

Finally, he uploaded the dataset into the department's AI analysis system. It was a tool he had only recently begun to rely on, but this case demanded deeper pattern recognition.

He typed in the instructions carefully—correlate numbers, identify recurring proximity, highlight consistent overlaps—and initiated the analysis.

The system processed quickly, but the wait still felt stretched.

When the result appeared, Anand leaned forward.

Seven numbers.

He studied them in silence before speaking under his breath, “These are always present.”

There was no randomness left in the pattern now.

He picked up his phone and began calling the numbers one by one.

The first led nowhere—a labourer who seemed genuinely confused. The second belonged to a factory worker with no relevant connection. The third was a driver who sounded irritated at being interrupted.

Each call ruled out possibilities, but none weakened Anand’s focus.

Then he reached the next number.

He paused for a moment before dialling, a faint unease creeping in.

As the call initiated, the name flashed on the screen.

Anand froze.

He stared at it, his expression tightening as the implications began to unfold.

“No... that’s not possible,” he said quietly.

His mind began connecting the pieces at a speed that left no room for denial.

Why would this number appear every single time? Why

only during those precise windows? And why in locations tied so closely to the earlier data?

A thought formed—unsettling, but impossible to dismiss.

“What if there is no Saxena?” he said slowly.

The idea settled heavily in the room.

“What if Saxena is just a name... a cover?”

His eyes dropped back to the screen, locking onto the identity displayed.

MP M. C. Chaudhary.

The phone rang twice before being answered.

“Yes... Inspector. Tell me.”

The voice was calm, composed, and entirely in control.

Anand steadied himself. “I need to meet you.”

There was a brief pause, as if the response had already been anticipated.

“Alright. Come on Friday evening.”

The call ended.

Anand lowered the phone slowly, his thoughts no longer scattered but sharply aligned.

The cabin door opened abruptly.

“Inspector Anand!”

DySP Patil entered, his expression already tense.

“I’ve been told you’re planning to visit the MP’s residence,” he said. “Why? Did you take permission?”

Anand stood up, aware of the weight of what he was about to say.

“Sir... I believe there is no Saxena.”

Patil frowned. “Explain.”

Anand stepped closer, his tone steady.

“I believe Saxena is not a separate person. I believe that identity is being used by MP Chaudhary.”

The room fell silent.

Patil looked at him for a long moment, disbelief evident. “That’s a serious claim.”

“I understand,” Anand replied. “But the data supports it.”

He turned the screen toward Patil and pointed to the pattern.

“Every time Saxena’s number is active, this number appears in the same location and within the same time

window. There's also one more constant—his driver.”

Patil leaned in, studying the information more carefully now.

“The activity is limited to specific locations,” Anand continued. “The MP’s residence, his office, and controlled environments. In crowded places, the signal blends in. But in isolated areas, only these devices remain.”

Patil’s expression shifted slightly as the pattern became clearer.

“This isn’t coincidence,” Anand said quietly.

He paused before adding, with firm certainty,

“This is control.”



SHADOWS WITHIN THE WALLS

The evening unfolded with a deceptive calm, as if the world had chosen to slow down just enough to let moments breathe. A soft golden light spread across the city, gradually fading into the quiet onset of night. For Aryan, however, the evening carried a different energy—one of anticipation, a rare lightness that had been missing from his otherwise intense routine.

He was going to meet Ria.

Not for work, not for a case discussion, but for something personal—her birthday plan. That thought alone brought a faint, genuine smile to his face.

Before leaving, he stood in his office, glancing once around his team. The environment inside was still focused—screens glowing, low conversations continuing, work moving at its usual pace. Aryan's voice cut through with calm authority.

"I'll be out for some time. If anything urgent comes up, call me immediately."

There were nods of understanding. No one questioned further.

He opened his drawer, picked up a few essential gadgets—more out of habit than need—and slipped them into his pocket. With one last glance at his phone,

he stepped out, leaving behind the structured world of responsibilities and stepping into something far more unpredictable.

On his way, the city greeted him with its usual evening rhythm. Shops were lit, streets were active, and a gentle breeze carried a mix of scents—flowers, dust, and distant food stalls. Aryan slowed near a florist shop, its glass front glowing warmly under soft yellow lights.

Inside, rows of fresh flowers were arranged with care—roses, lilies, orchids—each carrying its own quiet presence. Aryan observed them for a moment before selecting a bouquet that felt just right: elegant, composed, and meaningful without being overwhelming.

From there, he moved to a nearby jewellery store. The contrast was immediate—cool lighting, polished counters, and a calm silence that made every movement feel deliberate. Aryan wasn't someone who usually spent time choosing gifts, yet today he found himself pausing, considering.

Finally, he chose a delicate necklace—simple, refined, something that would complement rather than dominate.

As he stepped out, he carefully kept both the bouquet and the necklace with him. There was a quiet satisfaction in the choice, and for a brief moment, everything felt perfectly aligned.

Anand leaned forward, reviewing the file again, his mind

connecting threads that refused to settle easily. There was something incomplete, something hidden beneath layers of influence and control.

He gathered the files carefully, stacking them with precision. This visit was not casual. It carried intent, questions, and a quiet determination to uncover what lay beneath the surface.

As he stood up and prepared to leave, his expression reflected clarity—but also urgency.

Ria's villa stood as a reflection of power wrapped in elegance. Spread across a vast area, the property was surrounded by high walls, monitored gates, and disciplined security. Yet, despite its protective structure, the villa did not feel imposing. Instead, it carried a refined calm—well-maintained gardens, subtle lighting along pathways, and architecture that balanced luxury with warmth.

As Aryan's car approached, the gates opened smoothly. The guards recognized him instantly.

Inside, the pathway curved gently through landscaped greenery. Soft garden lights illuminated trimmed hedges and stone pathways, while tall trees cast long shadows that moved slightly with the evening breeze. The villa itself stood illuminated in warm tones, its large windows revealing glimpses of tastefully designed interiors.

As Aryan stepped out and approached the entrance, the

door opened almost immediately.

Ria stood there, her face lighting up the moment she saw him.

“Aryan!”

Her voice carried genuine excitement, unfiltered and warm.

She was dressed simply, yet gracefully, her presence natural and effortless. There was no formality in her expression—only happiness.

“You were waiting,” Aryan said with a soft smile.

“Of course,” she replied. “Come in. We have a lot to plan.”

The drawing room reflected the personality of the house—elegant yet comfortable. A large chandelier cast a soft glow across the space, while carefully chosen furniture created an atmosphere that felt both formal and inviting. Paintings adorned the walls, each adding depth to the room, and a faint fragrance lingered in the air, subtle but noticeable.

Large windows overlooked the garden, their curtains partially drawn, allowing the outside lights to blend gently with the interior.

“Sit,” Ria said, guiding Aryan toward a plush sofa. “We need to plan everything properly.”

“We?” Aryan asked lightly, settling in.

“Yes, we,” she replied, already thinking ahead. “We’ll surprise Anand and Avni. And this time, everything should go perfectly.”

Their conversation flowed easily, filled with small details, shared understanding, and occasional teasing. There was a comfort between them that didn’t need effort—a natural ease built over time.

The atmosphere shifted slightly when M.C. Chaudhary entered the room.

His presence was calm but authoritative, the kind that subtly commanded attention without demanding it. Dressed in crisp attire, he carried himself with confidence, his gaze observant and measured.

“Aryan,” he said, extending his hand.

“Sir,” Aryan replied respectfully.

A brief formal exchange followed, polite but layered with unspoken evaluation.

“I need to speak with Anand when he arrives,” Chaudhary said, turning slightly toward Ria.

“He should be here soon,” she replied.

Chaudhary nodded, then added, “We’ll all sit together. I also wanted to plan something... a bigger celebration.

There's something I would like to announce."

Ria's expression softened into a shy smile, her thoughts briefly drifting toward Aryan.

"Sure, Papa," she said. "You continue. I'll prepare something for everyone."

With that, she moved toward the kitchen.

The kitchen contrasted the formality of the drawing room with warmth and liveliness. It was well-organized, spacious, and filled with the comforting sounds of preparation—utensils, soft movements, and the aroma of brewing coffee beginning to rise.

Meanwhile, the doorbell rang again.

The new PA of M.C. Chaudhary arrived and was seated in the drawing room. His demeanour was polite but slightly tense, as if he carried something unresolved within him.

Ria greeted him briefly. "Welcome, Uncle. Something important?"

"Just a final deal to close," he replied, offering a restrained smile.

She nodded and continued to the kitchen.

Soon, Chaudhary called him inside. He introduced Aryan, mentioning that he was close to the family. They

exchanged greetings, though the PA's eyes lacked steadiness, shifting subtly as if avoiding prolonged contact.

Aryan excused himself shortly after and moved toward the kitchen.

Inside the room, the conversation between Chaudhary and the PA turned sharper.

“What took so long?” Chaudhary asked, his tone controlled but firm.

“There were delays,” the PA replied.

“I don't tolerate delays,” Chaudhary said, his voice lowering slightly, carrying a quiet intensity.

The PA nodded, but the tension between them was evident.

In the kitchen, however, the atmosphere was entirely different.

Ria was focused on preparing coffee, her movements calm but thoughtful. She didn't notice Aryan enter until he spoke from behind.

“So... looks like your dad's PA has given us some time,” he said lightly. “He's busy there, which means I can be busy here.”

Ria turned, smiling. “And what exactly does that mean?”

Aryan leaned casually against the counter. “It means I get to ask—are you making something only for your dad, or do I get something too?”

She laughed softly. “You’ll get something.”

They moved closer naturally, the space between them shrinking without effort. Aryan gently brushed a strand of hair away from her face, his touch slow, deliberate.

There was a pause. A moment that lingered.

Then he pulled her slightly closer.

“Close your eyes,” he said softly.

Ria looked at him with curiosity. “Why?”

“Just do it.”

She hesitated, then smiled. “Okay.”

As she closed her eyes, Aryan carefully took out the necklace and placed it around her neck with quiet precision.

“Now open.”

Ria opened her eyes, her fingers instinctively touching the necklace. Her expression changed instantly—surprise, emotion, and warmth all at once.

“Aryan... it’s beautiful.”

“Happy Birthday,” he said softly.

Her eyes filled slightly with tears. “Thank you.”

She stepped closer, drawn by the moment, as if about to express something deeper.

But the moment broke.

“Ria!” her father’s voice called out.

She paused.

“I have to go,” she said quickly.

Aryan held her gently. “He can wait, but I can’t...”

But she shook her head, smiling faintly.

Again the voice came. “Ria, coffee!”

“Coming!” she replied.

They shared a brief, warm hug before she moved away.

Ria arranged the coffee carefully on a tray—four cups, steady hands trying to maintain balance as her mind still lingered on the moment she had just left behind.

At the same time, Anand arrived.

The guards allowed him inside without hesitation. As he walked through the dimly lit pathway, his focus remained sharp.

Near the entrance, someone suddenly collided with him.

It was the PA.

The man seemed tense, almost hurried.

“Sorry,” he said quickly and moved past.

Anand paused briefly, observing him, sensing something unusual—but continued inside.

As he entered, he saw Ria approaching with the tray.

“Anand,” she said, “why are you waiting outside? You don’t need permission.”

“I already took permission on the phone,” he replied.

She smiled. “Good. Aryan is here too.”

They walked into the room together.

The moment they entered, something changed.

Ria’s hands began to tremble.

The tray shook.

The cups slipped.

They crashed onto the floor, the sound sharp and jarring against the silence.

Her eyes widened in horror.

“NOOOOO!”

Her scream echoed through the villa.

Her body gave way, collapsing instantly.

Aryan heard the sound from the kitchen and rushed toward the room, his heartbeat rising with sudden fear.

“Ria!” As he entered, he saw Anand standing still.

And then he saw everything.

The room was disturbed—objects misplaced, cupboard items scattered, the bed sheet stained deep red. The air felt heavy, suffocating.

On the bed lay M.C. Chaudhary.

Motionless.

A gun in his hand. A single bullet wound.

Too precise. Too close.

Aryan rushed forward, shaking him desperately. “Sir... sir, please wake up!”

No response.

Anand stepped forward, his voice firm despite the gravity.

“Aryan... don’t touch anything.”

Aryan looked at him, shaken.

“He’s no more.”

Ria regained partial consciousness, her voice breaking.

“Papa...”

Aryan pulled her close, trying to steady her as she broke down completely.

Anand called the police immediately.

Within minutes, the villa transformed—from calm elegance to controlled chaos. Police vehicles arrived, forensic teams entered, and the silence outside turned into murmurs of shock.

Security confirmed no intrusion.

No forced entry.

Which made everything more disturbing.

DySP Patil arrived, his expression sharp.

“Who could do this?” he asked.

No one answered.

“Interrogate everyone present,” he ordered.

Malhotra nodded, but his eyes briefly shifted toward Anand—with suspicion, calculation.

The next morning, the news spread everywhere.

A powerful MP dead.

Murder or suicide?

Inside job? Political conspiracy? Personal betrayal?

The headlines changed.

The questions didn't.

Inside the villa, grief settled deeply.

Ria sat shattered, unable to process the loss. Her father's words echoed in her mind—about the celebration, the announcement that would now never happen.

Avni tried to console her, but some losses create a silence that no words can fill.

Near the window, Aryan stood still, staring outside. The world continued as if nothing had changed. But inside him, something had. The image of that room replayed again and again. The timing. The silence. The impossibility.

And one question refused to leave Ria's mind—

If no one entered... then who was already inside?



THE PROBE BEGINS

The entire town seemed to be consumed by a single, unsettling question—the mysterious death of the MP. At every street corner, inside small tea stalls thick with the smell of boiling chai, among car drivers stuck in slow-moving traffic, and even within office spaces where work had taken a backseat, the same discussion echoed endlessly.

Television screens played nonstop coverage, anchors raising sharp questions while looping visuals of the MP's residence and the crime scene. Headlines spoke of not one, but four deaths somehow connected to him, adding layers of fear and curiosity.

People speculated freely, some convinced it was a calculated move by the opposition, while others whispered about a much larger, possibly international conspiracy. The uncertainty was spreading faster than facts, turning the town restless and tense.

Inside the police headquarters, the situation was equally intense, but far more controlled on the surface. The DySP moved quickly between rooms, constantly engaged in discussions with Anand and Malhotra, trying to bring structure to the chaos outside. His face showed signs of pressure, but his voice remained steady as he issued instructions. He ordered immediate interrogation of everyone even remotely connected to the MP. Turning

specifically to Anand, he gave a more sensitive task—visit the MP’s house and speak to Ria, not as an officer, but as someone she could trust. She needed reassurance, protection, and clarity in the middle of all this confusion. Frustrated by the rising criticism, he picked up a newspaper and threw it on the table.

“Inability of Police,”

the bold headline screamed, amplifying the pressure already building inside the room.

The tension escalated further when the Commissioner called. It wasn’t a conversation—it was a warning wrapped in authority. The DySP listened in silence, absorbing every word before responding with controlled restraint. Once the call ended, he stood still for a moment, then turned back to his team with sharper focus.

“First, we need clarity—is this a murder or a suicide?”

“No assumptions, no speculation.”

“Is it someone from inside?”

Each line was deliberate, cutting through the noise of theories and forcing the team to stay grounded in facts.

He immediately instructed the forensic department to send their reports without delay and ordered his team to thoroughly search every corner of the MP’s house. Every

device, every personal belonging, every unnoticed detail had to be collected and examined. Nothing was insignificant anymore. The urgency in his voice made it clear that time was not on their side.

“Whatever it is—inside involvement, political angle, or even suicide—I need results as soon as possible.”

“No one relaxes until we have answers.”

Then, shifting his attention back to Anand, he introduced a thought that changed the direction of the investigation.

“Is this Saxena even real?”

“What if someone bigger is behind this... someone who knew you were going to interrogate the MP?”

“Check every possibility.”

Anand was momentarily taken aback. The idea sounded far-reaching, yet in a case filled with unknowns, it couldn't be ignored. He nodded quietly, realizing that the investigation had just entered a deeper, more dangerous territory where every assumption could either solve the case—or complicate it further.



THE LAST TEN MINUTES

Anand reached Ria's villa just as the late afternoon light began to fade into a dull, dry evening. The air outside felt heavy, almost lifeless, as if the place itself was holding its breath after the tragedy.

The villa, once known for its quiet elegance, now stood wrapped in an unusual stillness. There were no birds chirping in the surrounding trees, only an occasional distant cry of a peacock that echoed across the dry landscape, breaking the silence for a moment before everything sank back into quiet again.

The gates were guarded, but the security personnel looked weary and detached. Their presence felt more like a formality than protection, as if they themselves had lost faith in their purpose.

Still, they remained stationed there because the government had ordered them to stay until the culprit behind MP Chaudhary's death was found.

Inside the premises, a few workers moved slowly, whispering among themselves. Their conversations were hushed, filled with speculation and fear, but no one dared to speak loudly. The entire villa seemed to be mourning.

As Anand entered, the atmosphere inside felt even heavier. Everything was perfectly arranged—furniture

aligned, curtains drawn neatly, surfaces spotless—yet the order only amplified the emptiness. People moved quietly, most of them dressed in white, their faces carrying the weight of grief. It didn't feel like a home anymore; it felt like a place frozen in sorrow.

Ria was in the drawing room, standing near a large window and staring outside with a distant stillness. When she turned and saw Anand, she walked toward him slowly. She welcomed him, but her smile was gone.

Her face, once lively and expressive, now looked drained of emotion, as if years had passed since her father's demise instead of just days. Anand paused for a moment, absorbing the change, then stepped closer and gently consoled her. The moment his words reached her, the fragile control she had been holding onto broke, and she started crying.

Anand instinctively pulled her into a gentle embrace, letting her cry without interruption. He didn't rush her or try to stop her tears, knowing that sometimes silence offered more comfort than words. After a few moments, he guided her toward the sofa and asked her to sit. He signalled an attendant to bring water.

The attendant arrived quickly, placed a glass on the table, and left quietly. Anand picked up the glass and handed it to Ria. She took a small sip and then placed it back on the glass table in front of her, her hands trembling slightly.

For a brief moment, neither of them spoke. The silence lingered, filled only with the faint movement of air inside the room. Then Ria looked at him, her voice soft but urgent.

“Any update...?” “Who did this...?” “I need justice.”

Anand met her eyes, his expression steady but thoughtful.

“I will put in all my efforts.” “I promise you...” “The case will be resolved soon.”

He paused briefly before continuing. “Can I ask you a few questions?”

Ria didn’t speak but nodded her head in agreement. Anand leaned slightly forward, his investigative instincts taking over, though his tone remained calm and controlled. “Where were you...?” “What happened at that time...?”

Ria took a slow breath, trying to steady herself before answering. “I was in the kitchen...” “Just ten minutes before everything happened, I had spoken to my dad.” Everything was more than normal. He even promised me...That he was going to announce something big... for me.

A faint, painful smile appeared and faded quickly. “I was happy...” “I went to the kitchen to make some snacks for him.”

She looked down at her hands, gathering her thoughts.

“So... I was there.”

Anand listened carefully, observing every detail and every pause in her narration. “In a few minutes, the PA came.” “He went to meet Papa.” “Aryan was there...” “As soon as the PA entered, Aryan left the room...” “And came into the kitchen.”

Her voice softened slightly as she continued. “We were chatting...” “Then Papa called my name.” “I was about to go...”

She stopped, her eyes filling with tears again. “But Aryan...” “He just wanted more time with me.” “He held me back.”

Her voice broke as regret took over. “If I had gone there...”

She couldn’t continue. Tears rolled down her face again. Anand remained silent, giving her time to regain composure. After a few seconds, she wiped her tears and continued.

“When the coffee was ready...” “I went outside.” “Aryan was still in the kitchen, finishing the snacks.” “And then...” “I saw you.”

“The PA had already left.” “I came to know that when I reached Papa’s room.”

Anand's expression tightened slightly as he processed the timeline. He leaned forward again, his tone still calm but more focused. "Was anyone else present inside the room?"

Ria shook her head slowly. "No." "Not even the caretaker."

She paused, thinking carefully before adding more detail. "There were two gardeners..." "They were outside." "They never come inside the premises." "And even if they want to..." "They need permission from security."

Her voice remained steady, though sadness lingered beneath every word. Anand nodded, mentally noting each detail.

"And you were there..." she added softly, looking at him.

Anand exhaled slowly before responding. "Yes, Ria "You can doubt me as well." "I was at the gate." "I entered the room with you." "But at the same time..." "I am being questioned from DySP and he asked me for all details—where I was, why I came here..."

Ria looked at him for a moment and then shook her head gently. "I don't doubt you." "But you asked..." "So I answered."

There was sincerity in her voice. Anand acknowledged it with a slight nod, but his expression sharpened again as he returned to the investigation.

“But your PA...” “He was hiding something.” “I need to question him as well.”

Ria reacted immediately, though she kept her composure. “I doubt that he could do something like this.” “But...” “You are free to ask.”

The room fell silent again. The faint sound of wind brushing against the windows and a distant peacock call filled the space. Anand looked around once more—the spotless arrangement, the grieving faces moving quietly in the background, and the weight of absence that filled every corner. He knew something didn’t fit.

After completing the discussion and ensuring everything was recorded, he stood up slowly. Ria remained seated, staring at the table, lost in her thoughts. Anand gave her one last reassuring look before turning to leave.

Outside, he spoke briefly with the gardeners, who confirmed they had not seen anything unusual. He questioned the security guards as well, but their answers were mechanical and offered no real insight.

As he walked back toward his vehicle, his mind raced with unanswered questions. There was no one he could clearly doubt except the PA, yet Ria trusted him completely. The possibility of suicide didn’t sit right with him either. Four deaths, all connected to MP Chaudhary, and still no clear direction—this thought weighed heavily on him.

The dry wind brushed past as he started the car and drove toward the police station, replaying every word, every expression, and every gap in the story. By the time he reached the station, his mind was still searching for answers.

DySP Patil was waiting outside, his face reflecting the same urgency.

“Any clue?”

“No, sir.”

“Any forensic results?”

Patil shook his head.

A brief silence followed before Patil spoke again. “We need to find out... fast.”

Anand nodded, but his thoughts were already shifting. Something was missing—something small but crucial. As he walked inside the station, a sudden idea struck him. He paused for a fraction of a second, his eyes sharpening with realization. Without wasting another moment, he turned and headed straight toward the file room. An idea had just begun to take shape.



THE FIRST CLUE

Anand sat motionless in his chair, but his mind refused to slow down. The murders circled endlessly inside his head like an unsolved equation—precise, calculated, and disturbingly flawless. Four deaths. No witnesses. No usable evidence. No visible pattern that the department could officially acknowledge.

Yet deep within, he knew they were connected. The feeling was too strong to ignore, to deliberate to dismiss as coincidence.

Senior police officers had investigated the case and failed. Private detectives had entered with confidence, only to leave frustrated and empty-handed. Reporters, hungry for headlines and television debates, had chased the story relentlessly for weeks. But in the end, every road had led to silence.

That silence was now beginning to suffocate him.

Who could be behind all this?

Anand leaned back slowly in his worn-out chair. It let out a faint creak, almost drowned beneath the constant noise of the police station. The heat outside had seeped into everything—the walls, the desks, the files, even the stale air trapped inside the station. Nothing moved freely. Everything felt heavy, exhausted, stuck in place.

His desk was buried under files. Old brown folders with curled edges lay stacked carelessly on top of one another. Some were tied with fading red strings, while others remained half-open, as if someone had abandoned them in the middle of a search for truth. Loose papers peeked out from between the files like fragments of unfinished stories waiting to be completed. Dust had gathered over untouched corners, silently accusing those responsible for uncovering answers.

For a brief moment, Anand felt as though the files themselves were staring at him.

Asking questions.

Demanding answers.

What are you missing?

Why haven't you solved this yet?

His fingers rested on one of the folders, but he made no attempt to open it. Instead, his eyes drifted across the room.

The station carried on in its usual rhythm of organized chaos. A constable nearby sat hunched over a file, reading every page with deep concentration. Another officer was busy writing an FIR, his pen moving rapidly across the paper with mechanical familiarity, like a routine he had repeated thousands of times before.

Near the lock-up, a sudden metallic sound broke the monotony. A stick struck against the iron bars with a harsh clang.

Anand's eyes shifted instinctively in that direction.

Inside the cell, a man gripped the bars tightly, desperation trembling in his voice.

“Sir, I haven’t done anything wrong in the last fifteen years... why are you hitting me?”

The constable standing outside the lock-up did not stop.

“Someone complained,” he replied coldly. “Seventeen years ago, you did something very bad. They reported it now. I checked... it’s correct.”

The man inside the cell let out a hollow laugh, broken and bitter.

“Correct...”

The word lingered strangely in the corridor.

Anand remained expressionless, but something inside him stirred. That single word echoed in his mind again and again, colliding with scattered thoughts that had refused to settle for days.

Correct...

Suddenly, his posture straightened.

The disconnected pieces inside his mind began aligning with terrifying clarity. Slowly at first, then all at once.

All four murders.

Not random.

Connected.

His fingers tightened slightly over the file as his thoughts accelerated.

All four victims...

Same place.

Same circle.

Worked together.

The realization did not arrive like a shock. It came quietly, creeping into his mind with the certainty of truth.

Had they done something together?

Had they buried a crime somewhere deep in the past?

And now... was someone taking revenge?

The exhaustion in his eyes began to fade. In its place appeared a sharp spark of focus. His breathing steadied as confusion slowly transformed into direction.

This is not random.

This is planned.

This is revenge.

“Must be...” he whispered unconsciously.

But the thought brought another question immediately behind it.

If this was revenge... then it wasn't over yet.

Who is next?

A subtle chill ran through him despite the oppressive heat around him.

Anand stood up abruptly, his chair scraping lightly against the floor. A nearby constable glanced at him for a second before returning to work, but Anand barely noticed. His mind was already racing ahead.

We need their history.

Their early lives.

Where they came from.

What they were hiding.

He began gathering files quickly, flipping through pages with renewed urgency. Names, addresses, dates—his eyes scanned everything, searching for the missing thread that could hold the entire case together.

Then he paused.

MP Chaudhary.

The name immediately caught his attention.

His native place...

He has been here for years.

Too clean.

Too stable.

Almost as if someone had erased the past deliberately.

Anand's jaw tightened.

I need every file connected to him.

Any complaint.

Any hidden report.

Anything that was buried quietly.

The instinct inside him had grown stronger now. This was no longer a vague suspicion. It was a direction—solid, dangerous, and real. Years of experience had taught him to trust this feeling.

He was close.

Very close.

Then another thought entered his mind.

The DySP.

They had all been close once.

Too close.

And in investigations like these, trust itself could become a weakness.

If there was even the slightest chance of someone inside the department being involved, he could not afford to expose his lead too early.

I won't tell him yet.

I'll investigate this myself.

For a moment, he considered informing the DySP anyway, just to follow protocol. His hand moved toward his phone, hesitated briefly, then stopped.

No.

Not yet.

Instead, he opened his contacts and dialled another number.

Aryan.

The call connected after two rings.

Anand wasted no time. He explained everything—the connection between the victims, the possibility of a crime buried in the past, and the theory that revenge was driving the murders. His voice remained controlled, but the urgency beneath it was impossible to miss.

There was silence on the other end for a few seconds.

Then Aryan spoke calmly.

“You’re on the right track... I think.”

Anand kept his eyes fixed on the files spread across the desk.

“Search for old records,” Aryan continued. “If you don’t find anything there, check nearby police stations too. Old complaints, missing reports, closed cases... anything that connects them.”

Anand nodded slightly.

“But be careful,” Aryan added, his tone turning serious. “There may be a mole inside. Don’t share this with everyone. Keep it limited.”

Anand’s grip around the phone tightened subtly.

Hope you finally get somewhere now.

A faint smile appeared on Anand’s face—not relief, but determination. For the first time in days, his thoughts no longer felt lost.

They felt clear.

“Thanks, Aryan, my dear friend,” he said quietly. “You always help me. I just hope I can bring justice to this case... and to Ria.”

He ended the call slowly and lowered the phone.

For a moment, he simply stood there, absorbing the weight of everything he had just realized.

Then his eyes drifted toward the window.

Outside, the world remained dry, noisy, and unchanged. But somewhere far away from the chaos of the station stood the villa—silent, disciplined, and drowning in grief.

Inside its massive walls, people moved quietly in white clothes, their faces burdened with loss. Workers spoke in hushed whispers, careful not to disturb the oppressive silence hanging over the house. Security guards stood alert at every entrance, not merely out of duty, but because they had been ordered to protect Ria until the truth finally emerged.

Anand exhaled slowly.

This was no longer just another murder investigation.

It was a buried story waiting to be uncovered.

And for the first time since the killings began, he felt he had finally found the first real clue.



BENEATH THE TREE

The road stretched quietly through the countryside, dry and pale under the afternoon sun, as if time itself had slowed down in that moment. A thin layer of dust hovered above the surface, occasionally rising with the passing of vehicles and then settling back into silence. On either side, vast green paddy fields spread endlessly, their gentle swaying forming a calm contrast to the stillness of the air.

In the distance stood a large, old tree with wide branches, its shadow dark and heavy on the ground beneath, offering a rare patch of relief in the otherwise dry landscape. The weather felt harsh, almost unforgiving, and yet everything appeared deceptively peaceful.

Aryan had parked his car at the edge of the road, slightly away from the main flow, as if he didn't want attention. The car stood still, its presence quiet but noticeable against the empty stretch.

He stepped out holding a small box of sweets, pausing briefly as his eyes scanned the surroundings, ensuring something only he understood. Then, without wasting time, he closed the door and moved ahead, leaving the road behind. His steps were steady as he took a narrow footpath cutting between the two sides of the paddy fields, the greenery brushing lightly against him as he walked deeper toward the distant tree. There was purpose

in his movement, something controlled and deliberate, as if this path was not new to him.

At that very moment, another car was passing by on the same road. Inside, Avni sat near the window, her gaze drifting lazily across the fields without any particular focus. The calmness outside seemed to match her initial state of mind until something suddenly caught her attention. Her eyes paused, then sharpened. There was a flicker of recognition, subtle yet immediate. She leaned slightly forward, her curiosity awakening in an instant as her expression shifted from passive observation to alert interest.

“Stop... stop!”

Her voice came out more urgently than she intended, breaking the quiet rhythm inside the car. The driver, startled, applied the brakes, bringing the vehicle to a halt just ahead of Aryan’s parked car. Avni’s eyes remained fixed, not blinking, as if afraid the moment might slip away if she looked elsewhere. Without waiting, she opened the door and stepped out, the dry air hitting her face, grounding her in the reality of what she was seeing.

“Aryan!” she called out, her voice carrying across the open fields.

“Aryan!”

But there was no response. Whether he didn’t hear her or chose not to, she couldn’t tell. That uncertainty

lingered, adding a quiet layer of tension. Avni stood still for a brief moment, her brows drawing slightly closer as she watched him continue walking without turning back. Something about it didn't sit right. It wasn't just that he hadn't responded—it was the way he moved, as if completely focused on something ahead, something more important than anything behind him.

Her curiosity deepened, not impulsive but thoughtful. She didn't rush after him. Instead, she took a few measured steps forward and stopped again, choosing to observe rather than interrupt.

Her eyes followed his figure as he moved farther along the narrow path, and then instinctively, her gaze shifted ahead, trying to understand his destination. That was when she noticed the tree more clearly, its wide shadow standing out in the otherwise open field. Beneath it, there was someone sitting—a girl.

Avni's eyes narrowed slightly, adjusting to the distance as she tried to make sense of the scene. She tilted her head just a little, her expression not shocked but quietly inquisitive.

Her mind began connecting pieces, not jumping to conclusions but exploring possibilities. Her fingers moved almost automatically toward her phone, unlocking it with practiced ease. Ria's name appeared on the screen, familiar and immediate. For a moment, Avni's thumb hovered over it, her thoughts shifting direction.

Ria.

The name alone carried weight. She pictured her friend, already fragile from loss, already carrying more than she could handle. The timing felt wrong—too wrong. Avni’s grip tightened slightly around the phone as conflict flickered across her face. Her eyes returned to Aryan, now closer to the tree, and then back to the phone. The decision came quietly but firmly.

“No... not now,” she whispered to herself, locking the screen.

Her attention sharpened again, fully returning to what was unfolding in front of her.

Aryan had reached the tree, stepping into its shadow where the light dimmed slightly, creating a contrast that made the scene feel more secluded, more private. For a brief moment, both figures remained still. The girl sat under the tree, her posture slightly slumped, as if weighed down by something unseen. Aryan moved closer, his actions slow and careful, almost protective. Avni leaned forward unconsciously, trying to capture every small detail despite the distance.

She saw him bend slightly, his hand reaching out toward the girl’s face. The gesture was gentle, deliberate. He wiped away her tears. That single action shifted something within Avni’s understanding. It wasn’t just a meeting—it was emotional, intimate in a way that raised

more questions than answers. And then, without hesitation, Aryan pulled the girl into a hug.

Avni's breath paused, not dramatically but enough for her to feel the change within herself. Her eyes didn't widen in shock; instead, they searched more deeply, trying to interpret what she was witnessing. She wasn't someone who reacted without thought. She observed, processed, and only then formed conclusions. But this moment made that process heavier.

Was this comfort?

Or something more?

The question lingered, unresolved yet persistent. The image in front of her stayed fixed—Aryan, away from everyone, holding another girl under a tree, hidden within the quiet stretch of fields. It didn't align easily with what she knew, and that misalignment created unease.

Her thoughts slowly turned toward Ria again, not out of habit but out of concern.

“My Ria...”

The words formed silently in her mind, carrying a weight of protectiveness. She imagined telling her, imagined the impact, the already fragile state breaking further. The idea didn't sit well with her. It felt rushed, incomplete, unfair without understanding the full truth.

Avni took a slow step back, her eyes still fixed on the scene but her mind now carefully balancing emotion and reason. She wasn't ready to decide. Not yet. Curiosity still guided her, stronger than judgment. She wanted to understand before she spoke, to see beyond what was visible, to question what seemed obvious.

"This is not right..." she murmured softly, more to herself than anyone else.

But even as she said it, there was hesitation, a pause that reflected her nature—curious, observant, and unwilling to accept things at face value.

She remained there for a few moments longer, watching, thinking, absorbing every detail, knowing that whatever she had just seen was not simple and certainly not something to be taken lightly. And somewhere within that quiet observation, a decision began to form—not immediate, not impulsive, but careful.

She would wait.

She would understand.

And then, only then, she would decide what needed to be done.



BURIED TRUTHS

Anand started his investigating, and this time there was a quiet stubbornness in him that refused to bend. He had seen too many cases fade into silence, too many files pushed into corners where dust slowly erased urgency. He had made up his mind that this case would not become one of them. Not this one. Not when something about it felt so deliberate, so carefully constructed that it almost challenged him personally.

He wanted to put all of his efforts into it, not just the routine work that filled daily reports and satisfied procedure, but something deeper. Something that would allow him to connect fragments that did not want to connect.

The case wasn't just complex—it was evasive. Every lead appeared promising for a moment and then slipped away, leaving behind only more confusion.

Two days and two nights passed like this, with Anand barely aware of time. Sleep became optional, food an afterthought. The ticking of the clock blended with the slow creaking of the ceiling fan above him, both forming a rhythm that matched the restlessness in his mind. Files lay open across his desk, notes scribbled in margins, photographs scattered without order, yet none of it formed a complete picture. It was as if every piece belonged to a puzzle that refused to exist.

Still, there was no clue.

Before he could even begin to shape a conclusion around the drug and trafficking angle, the case took another turn. MP Chaudhary had gone. Not in a way that closed questions, but in a way that multiplied them. His absence felt less like an event and more like an interruption—something that had been deliberately timed.

It didn't feel like coincidence anymore. It felt planned.

As if someone was removing pieces from the board before Anand could study them properly.

One thing, however, had become clear in the process. MP Chaudhary was not the man he appeared to be. The public image—polished speeches, charitable gestures, carefully staged photographs—felt like a constructed mask. Beneath it, Anand sensed something darker, something hidden long enough to grow roots.

He leaned back in his chair, rubbing his tired eyes, but his mind refused to slow down. It kept moving, searching, questioning. And then, almost suddenly, a thought flickered. It wasn't complete, not even fully formed, but it was enough to disturb his stillness.

A possibility.

Something old.

Something ignored.

Anand straightened instantly. The chair scraped loudly against the floor, breaking the heavy silence of the room. Without wasting time, he moved toward the inner section of the station, where records from years ago had been pushed aside and forgotten.

He entered the file storage area, and the moment he stepped in, a wave of stale, dusty air greeted him. The smell was thick, almost physical, carrying years of neglect within it. Thin rays of sunlight filtered through a cracked window, cutting across the room and revealing particles of dust floating endlessly in the air.

The place didn't look like a record room. It looked like a graveyard of stories.

Files were stacked everywhere—on racks, on the floor, leaning against walls. Some were tied with worn-out strings, others lay half-open, their pages curling with age. The racks themselves seemed tired, slightly bent under the weight they had carried for years.

Before Anand could move further, a constable stepped forward and raised his hand.

“Sir, not allowed.”

Anand looked at him, his expression calm but firm. “Why?”

“Order of Dy. SP Patil, sir. No one is supposed to check these files without permission.”

For a moment, Anand just stood there. Rules. Always present when least needed.

He nodded slowly, as if accepting it, but his mind had already moved past the objection. He wasn't here by accident. He couldn't walk away now.

Without making it obvious, he stepped forward, speaking casually, distracting the constable just enough. The man hesitated, unsure, scratching his head, and eventually stepped aside with visible confusion.

Inside, the condition was even worse.

Dust rose slightly with every step Anand took. Cobwebs stretched across corners like silent observers. Labels on files had faded or disappeared completely. Nothing was in order. Nothing was traceable.

Anand looked around and muttered under his breath, "It's like finding a needle in the sea... oh my God... help."

He picked up a file, blew off a layer of dust, and immediately coughed. The dryness in the air hit his throat sharply.

"Great... investigation or suicide mission," he added quietly, half to himself.

A constable followed him in, watching him with curiosity, clearly unsure what Anand expected to find in

this chaos.

Anand turned toward him. “Nothing is alphabetical here?”

The constable frowned, genuinely confused. “What is alphabetical?”

For a second, Anand just stared at him, unsure whether to respond or laugh. “You don’t know alphabetical?”

The constable shook his head confidently. “I don’t know any person of such name.”

Anand pressed his lips together, controlling a reaction, then tried again. “I mean sorting. Have you ever sorted the files here?”

The constable scratched his chin thoughtfully. “I don’t know even sorting... was he also in police service?”

For a moment, Anand said nothing.

Then, unexpectedly, he laughed. A tired, quiet laugh, but real.

“Wonderful... absolutely wonderful.”

Another constable entered, holding a cup of tea, overhearing the conversation. “Sir, if you find that alphabetical person, tell us also... maybe he is hiding in these files.”

Both constables chuckled, and despite everything, Anand couldn't help but smile. The absurdity of the moment cut through the tension, if only briefly.

But beneath that lightness, his focus remained sharp.

Because somewhere in this mess, something mattered.

He stepped out of the room, brushing dust from his shirt, realizing that searching like this would lead nowhere.

He needed order.

He took out his phone and called Dy. SP Patil. "Sir, it's too much mess inside our file room. Will you please give an order to clean it?"

There was a pause.

Anand added carefully, "As you know, dust is too bad for our health... especially for those who are in retirement age."

There was another pause, slightly longer this time.

"Okay... ask a few constables to do it," came the reply.

Anand allowed himself a small smile.

"But why are you suddenly asking to clean it?" the voice questioned.

"My doctor said to me to avoid dust," Anand replied without hesitation.

A brief “hmmm” followed, and the call ended.

Step one was done.

He turned to the constables and called them closer. They gathered around, one still sipping tea, another adjusting his uniform lazily.

“Clean and organize the files,” Anand said, pointing toward the room.

They exchanged uncertain looks. “Sir... all files?”

“All files,” Anand confirmed.

He continued, explaining patiently, “Read the file names. Make racks like A, B, C... keep files accordingly.”

They listened, trying to process.

One constable raised his hand again. “Sir... if name starts with number?”

Anand paused, then replied dryly, “Then you create a rack for numbers... welcome to advanced training.”

Laughter followed again, light and easy.

But Anand had already shifted back into thought.

He looked once more toward the dusty room. To others, it was chaos. To him, it was possibility.

Because sometimes, truth doesn't disappear.

It just gets buried under neglect.

And now, for the first time in two days, Anand felt something move inside him—not clarity, not certainty, but direction. A small shift. A beginning. A clue... waiting to be uncovered.



A PROMISE WITHOUT WORDS

The villa stood tall and composed, its pale stone exterior glowing faintly under the muted afternoon light. It was the kind of house that usually carried warmth and quiet elegance, with its wide veranda, carved wooden doors, and carefully arranged plants lining the entrance. Today, however, it felt different.

The gates were open, yet there was no sense of welcome—only a steady flow of visitors moving in and out with subdued expressions. White fabric draped along the boundary walls fluttered slightly in the still air, marking the house as a place of mourning.

As Aryan stepped through the gates, the gravel beneath his shoes made a soft crunch that seemed louder than usual in the silence that surrounded everything. A few cars were parked outside in an unorganized line, their presence hinting at the number of people inside. He paused for a brief second before approaching the entrance, taking in the atmosphere, as if preparing himself for what lay within.

The main door was wide open. Inside, the transition was immediate and heavy.

The drawing room, once designed for gatherings and conversations, had been transformed into a space of grief. White sheets covered the furniture, their plainness

replacing the richness that usually defined the room. Curtains were drawn halfway, allowing only a soft, diffused light to filter in, giving the space a dim, almost suspended feeling. Incense sticks burned quietly in a corner, their thin trails of smoke curling upward and blending into the still air. The faint fragrance lingered, not overpowering, but constant enough to settle into the senses.

People filled the room, yet it felt unbearably empty.

Murmurs of condolences floated through the air, repetitive and restrained. Words like “stay strong” and “he’s in a better place” were exchanged in low voices, carrying more habit than meaning. Some sat in silence, their eyes lowered. Others spoke briefly before moving aside for the next person.

No one stayed too long, and no one seemed to know what to say beyond the expected.

Aryan acknowledged a few familiar faces with a slight nod as he stepped in, but his attention was already elsewhere. His eyes moved across the room, searching, restless yet controlled. It didn’t take long for him to find her.

Ria sat near the large window that overlooked the courtyard. The same courtyard where, just hours ago, the final rites had been performed. The sunlight outside was brighter, but it did nothing to reach her. She sat still,

almost too still, her posture straight yet lifeless. Her hands rested in her lap, unmoving, while her gaze remained fixed somewhere beyond the visible, as if she was looking at something only she could see.

Her face was pale, drained of expression. The kind of stillness that comes not from calm, but from exhaustion—the kind that follows after too many tears have already been shed.

Something in Aryan's expression tightened the moment he saw her.

He began to walk toward her, his steps measured, slower with each passing second. The noise of the room faded into the background as he moved, until it felt like there was only that quiet corner where she sat. When he finally reached her, he stopped just beside her.

For a moment, he didn't speak.

He stood close enough for his presence to be felt, but careful not to intrude upon the fragile space she seemed to be holding around herself.

“Ria...”

His voice was low, careful, carrying a softness that contrasted with the heaviness of the room.

She didn't respond immediately.

Her gaze remained fixed ahead, as if the sound had taken

time to reach her. Then, slowly, almost hesitantly, she turned her head. The moment her eyes met his, something shifted. The fragile wall she had been holding up all day began to crack.

Aryan..." she whispered, her voice barely audible.

The moment she saw him, the walls she had built around herself crumbled. She broke down completely, crying uncontrollably as she rushed into his arms and held him tightly, as if that embrace was the only place in the world where she could finally find comfort. Her fingers clutched his shirt, refusing to let go, while the weight of everything she had endured poured out in silent sobs and broken breaths.

She continued to cry for several minutes, unable to speak a single word. Aryan wrapped his arms around her protectively, gently stroking her hair and whispering soft words of reassurance. He didn't ask any questions. He knew this wasn't the moment for answers—it was the moment for her to let her pain out.

His own eyes filled with tears as he held her close. Seeing her shattered like this broke something inside him. All he could do was stay by her side, silently promising that she would never have to face her pain alone again.

There was a pause that followed, long and heavy, stretching between them in a way that words couldn't fill. It was the kind of silence that carried everything—shock,

denial, pain, and the unspoken need for something to hold on to.

“I kept thinking...” she began, her voice uneven, each word struggling to find its place, “he’ll walk in again... like nothing happened. He always did that... no matter how late, no matter how tired...”

Her lips trembled slightly, and for a brief second, a faint, broken smile appeared—more memory than emotion.

“But this time...”

The words faded before they could complete themselves.

Aryan slowly lowered himself into the seat beside her. He didn’t sit too close, nor did he keep a distance that would feel cold. He positioned himself just enough to be there, present, steady.

“He was proud of you,” Aryan said quietly.

Ria let out a shaky breath, her eyes lowering for a moment. “You know that”

“I do,” he replied, his tone calm but certain. “The way he spoke about you... the way he trusted you. It wasn’t hidden.”

She looked at him then, really looked at him, as if searching for something—truth, reassurance, or perhaps permission to believe what he was saying. For a second, it seemed like she might hold herself together.

But she didn't.

"I didn't even get to say anything," she said, her voice breaking under the weight of everything she had been holding back. "There was so much... I thought I had time. I thought... I thought he'd always be there."

The tears came again, this time without resistance. Raw, unfiltered, and unstoppable.

Aryan didn't interrupt her.

He didn't offer immediate reassurances or try to silence her pain with words that would only feel empty. He simply stayed there, allowing her grief to exist without trying to control it.

After a moment, with a hesitation that showed he understood the weight of even the smallest gesture, he placed his hand gently over hers. The touch was light at first, tentative, as if he was giving her the choice to pull away.

She didn't.

Instead, her fingers tightened around his, holding on—not out of habit, but out of need. As if in that moment, she had found something steady amidst the chaos that surrounded her.

"Everything feels... empty," she whispered, her voice barely holding together. "Like there's no one left now."

Aryan's grip softened slightly, but it didn't loosen.

"You're not alone, Ria."

She shook her head faintly, her tears continuing to fall, her voice dropping even lower.

"You don't understand... Now... no one is there to trust..."

Her words trailed off as her gaze fell to their joined hands.

"...except you."

The words settled between them, heavy and unguarded. There was no hesitation in them, no attempt to soften their meaning. They were as honest as they were fragile.

A few feet away, Avni stood beside the edge of the room, her eyes fixed on Aryan. She had seen him before—seen something she hadn't yet spoken about, something that lingered in her thoughts. For a moment, it seemed like she might step forward, might say something, might break the moment.

But she didn't.

Her gaze shifted to Ria, taking in her shattered state, the way she held on as if letting go would mean falling apart completely. The words Avni carried remained unspoken. This was not the moment. Not now.

Aryan didn't react immediately to what Ria had said, but something in his eyes changed—something deeper, more resolute. The weight of her trust was not lost on him.

Ria continued, her voice fragile yet certain, "You are like my family now."

This time, Aryan turned fully toward her. There was no surprise in his expression, no hesitation—only a quiet acceptance of what those words meant.

He tightened his hold on her hand, just enough to reassure her of his presence, careful not to overwhelm.

"Then I won't let you feel alone," he said, his voice firm yet gentle.

There was no drama in the way he said it, no attempt to make it sound bigger than it was.

It was simply a promise.

Ria closed her eyes for a brief moment, letting those words settle within her. Her breathing, though still uneven, began to slow, finding a rhythm that had been missing since the morning.

Without thinking, she leaned slightly toward him. It wasn't a complete movement, not something openly acknowledged, but enough to show that the distance she had kept from the world all day had begun to change.

Aryan didn't move away.

He allowed it, remaining steady, offering support without making it feel like dependence.

Outside, the quiet sounds of people continued—the soft shuffle of feet, the low hum of voices, the rituals that carried on regardless of personal grief. Life, in its own way, continued moving forward.

But in that corner of the room, time seemed to slow.

The light filtering through the window softened around them, the world beyond fading into something distant and unimportant.

Grief was still there, heavy and undeniable.

Loss had not lessened.

But alongside it, something else had taken shape—something quiet, something grounding.

Trust.

And in that fragile moment, when everything else had been taken from her, Ria found herself holding on to the one thing that remained steady.

Him.



THE FORGOTTEN FILES

Anand reached the police station early the next morning, carrying with him a quiet sense of anticipation that had stayed awake through the night. The sun had only begun to rise, spreading a soft golden light across the old colonial building. The station stood with tired authority, its weathered walls holding decades of secrets, unfinished investigations, and forgotten truths. The iron gate creaked lightly as he pushed it open and stepped into the courtyard, where a few constables had already settled into their morning routines.

The familiar smell of dust, old paper, and stale tea lingered in the air. For most people, it would have felt unpleasant, but for Anand, it was strangely comforting. He had spent years chasing answers within these walls. Yet today, the atmosphere felt different—charged with possibility.

He paused briefly near the entrance and looked ahead.

The long corridor stretched deep into the station, lined with faded notices, peeling paint, and heavy wooden doors worn down by time. Tube lights flickered faintly despite the daylight filtering in through the windows. Somewhere above, an old ceiling fan rotated lazily, its rhythmic creak blending into the slow awakening of the station.

Almost instinctively, Anand's gaze drifted toward the far

end of the corridor.

The file room.

That room held more than documents. It held forgotten connections, hidden patterns, and perhaps the missing thread he had been searching for all this time.

A quiet excitement settled into his steps as he walked forward. Throughout the night, he had convinced himself that the room might still be untouched—dusty, disorganized, and neglected. If that was true, then there was a chance something important had been overlooked. Sometimes answers did not hide in plain sight; they hid beneath neglect.

His curiosity was not impatient. It was measured and deliberate, shaped by years of investigation and instinct.

But as he moved closer, he noticed a familiar figure standing near one of the desks.

DySP.

The officer's presence carried natural authority, steady and commanding without effort. Anand immediately adjusted his expression, masking the eagerness that had been visible moments earlier. He slowed his pace and casually diverted toward a nearby desk, picking up a random file as though he had arrived for routine work.

The pages rustled softly as he flipped through them

without truly reading.

His mind remained fixed elsewhere.

The DySP glanced at him briefly before speaking.

“I’m stepping out for a few hours,” he said in a measured tone. “Going to brief the Commissioner about these murders. The case has become high-profile now. Several officers have been called in.”

Anand looked up and nodded calmly. The pressure from higher authorities was beginning to shape every movement within the department. The officer continued, his voice carrying quiet expectation.

“Hope you find something... something we can answer with.”

The words lingered for a second, placing responsibility squarely on Anand’s shoulders.

“Sure, sir,” Anand replied steadily, though beneath the calmness was a confidence driven more by instinct than certainty.

The DySP gave a slight nod and walked away. His footsteps echoed through the corridor before slowly fading into silence.

Anand remained still for a moment longer, listening carefully.

Only when he was certain no one was watching did he move.

The instant the silence settled, his restraint disappeared.

He walked quickly toward the file room, his pace now driven by urgency and determination. As he reached the door, he pushed it open without hesitation.

Then he stopped.

His eyes widened in complete surprise.

The room was immaculate.

Gone was the chaos he had expected—the scattered files, dusty shelves, and forgotten piles of paperwork. Everything had been transformed with astonishing precision. Racks stood neatly aligned, each clearly labelled in bold lettering. Files were arranged methodically, categorized with care and discipline.

For a moment, Anand wondered if he had entered the wrong room.

Sunlight filtered softly through a high window, falling across the shelves in warm streaks. The familiar smell of old paper still lingered, but now it mixed with the freshness of a space that had been restored with purpose. Even the silence inside the room felt different. It was no longer heavy and neglected.

It felt alive with possibility.

Anand stood there quietly, absorbing the transformation.

Then a slow smile spread across his face.

Relief washed over him first, followed immediately by gratitude. This was far better than the disorder he had imagined. Order meant clarity. Clarity meant speed. And speed, right now, could change everything.

Without wasting another moment, he stepped back into the corridor and called out to his colleagues. His voice carried genuine excitement that instantly drew attention. Within seconds, a few officers gathered near the doorway, curious about his reaction.

Anand walked toward them and, in a rare moment of emotion, pulled them into a spontaneous group hug.

“Thank you... all of you,” he said warmly. “You made my day.”

Laughter followed. Someone made a light-hearted remark, and for a brief moment, the tension inside the station eased. There was pride in the room—not spoken openly, but understood by everyone present.

But Anand’s focus quickly returned to the task ahead.

He turned back toward the shelves, his expression sharpening almost instantly.

The neatly arranged racks now felt like a map waiting to be decoded.

He stepped deeper into the room, his fingers gliding lightly across file labels as he scanned each category carefully. Then he began searching.

Methodically.

Deliberately.

He pulled out one file after another, checking names, dates, and case summaries with growing speed. This was no random search anymore. His instincts had already formed a direction; now he was following it.

Finally, he reached the section marked with the letter “M.”

Even within that category, dozens of files filled the shelves. Years of forgotten histories rested quietly in front of him.

Anand crouched slightly and began sorting through them.

One file.

Then another.

Minutes passed, but his concentration never broke.

And then suddenly—

His hand froze.

A file had caught his attention.

He pulled it out carefully, his eyes narrowing as he read the label. It was an old narcotics case from nearly twenty years ago.

A faint spark appeared in his eyes.

He opened the file and flipped through the pages quickly, his mind already connecting fragments together.

Without wasting time, he reached for another nearby file.

This one involved a violent assault case.

The details were disturbing, but Anand remained focused. He was no longer reacting emotionally to the crimes themselves. He was tracing patterns, identifying recurring names, aligning timelines.

One by one, he continued pulling out files.

The intensity in his movements grew stronger with every discovery.

The room remained silent, yet the tension inside it seemed to rise alongside him, as though these forgotten records had been waiting years for someone to finally notice what they contained.

Soon, several files lay stacked in his hands.

Nine in total.

And every single one carried a name that now stood out

with unsettling clarity.

MC Chaudhary.

Anand's expression slowly changed.

The excitement he had felt earlier deepened into something far more serious.

This was not coincidence.

The connection stretched across decades, hidden quietly inside separate investigations, buried beneath time and negligence.

But now it had surfaced.

He gathered the files carefully and carried them back to his desk. Around him, the station continued functioning in its usual rhythm, unaware that something important had just shifted.

For Anand, the world had narrowed down to those nine files.

He placed them on the desk one by one, arranging them with deliberate care.

The anticipation inside him returned, heavier now, filled with meaning.

He was close.

Very close.

He opened the first file, ready to dive deeper into the truth.

And then his phone rang.

The sharp sound cut through his concentration instantly.

Anand picked it up, his eyes still fixed on the files spread before him.

It was the DySP.

He straightened slightly.

“Yes, sir.”

The voice on the other end was firm. He was instructed to report to the Commissioner’s office immediately.

For a brief moment, Anand said nothing.

His eyes drifted back toward the files. The answers he had been searching for suddenly felt within reach. Leaving now was the last thing he wanted.

Every instinct told him he was standing at the edge of a breakthrough.

But duty came first.

“Alright, sir,” he replied finally, masking the reluctance beneath his calm tone.

He ended the call slowly, his hand resting on the table for

a second longer than usual.

Then he took a deep breath and gathered himself.

With one final look at the files, Anand stepped away from the desk. The momentum inside him had paused, but it had not disappeared.

As he walked out of the station, the sunlight outside seemed brighter than before.

And somewhere deep inside his mind, the scattered pieces of the puzzle had already begun moving into place.



BURIED SINS

The DySP walked into the office with his usual composed stride, his presence commanding attention without needing to announce itself. By then, the station had fully awakened into its daily rhythm. Constables moved hurriedly through the corridors, files shifted from one desk to another, phones rang intermittently, and low conversations blended into a constant background hum.

Yet amidst that familiar chaos, something unusual caught his eye.

A thick bundle of files rested on Anand's desk.

Not routine paperwork. Not random reports waiting for signatures.

These files had been arranged carefully, deliberately, as though someone had gathered them with a specific purpose in mind.

The DySP slowed slightly.

His eyes remained fixed on the stack for a moment longer than necessary.

Something about them unsettled him.

He stepped closer, his face calm but observant.

"Which files are these?" he asked casually, though a faint undercurrent of curiosity hid beneath the question.

One of the officers nearby replied without hesitation.
“Sir, Anand searched them from the file room.”

The DySP gave a small nod.

“Hmm...”

A simple response.

But inside him, something shifted.

His gaze lingered briefly over the files before he turned away and walked toward his chamber. His movements remained measured, controlled, giving away nothing. Yet the stillness inside him had already begun to crack.

Inside his chamber, the atmosphere was entirely different from the busy station outside. The room carried an air of order and discipline. A polished wooden desk stood neatly arranged at the centre. Files were stacked with precision, a nameplate rested perfectly aligned near the edge, and soft daylight filtered through the large window behind him.

On the side table sat a cup of freshly prepared coffee, untouched.

The DySP closed the door behind him and picked up his phone.

“Bring all those files to my desk,” he instructed quietly.

No explanation followed.

No questions were invited.

Within minutes, the files were placed before him.

The same bundle that had rested on Anand's desk now sat directly in front of him like buried memories waiting to be reopened.

He leaned back slightly in his chair, picked up the coffee cup, and took a slow sip as he opened the first file.

At first, his expression remained unchanged.

He turned one page.

Then another.

The room stayed silent except for the faint rustle of paper and the distant murmur of activity outside his chamber.

He opened the second file.

Then the third.

Gradually, his attention sharpened.

The calm rhythm of his movements began to slow.

His eyes narrowed slightly as he returned to the first file again, this time reading every detail carefully. Names. Dates. Statements. Locations.

He picked up another file and cross-checked it against the previous one.

Then another.

And suddenly—

Everything stopped.

His eyes widened.

The coffee cup froze midway in his hand. A small drop spilled over the edge unnoticed as his entire focus locked onto the files spread before him.

He wasn't merely surprised.

He was stunned.

Anand had found them.

Exactly those files.

The same files he had spent years keeping buried inside the system. Scattered intentionally across departments and records so no clear connection could ever emerge. Old cases closed quietly. Complaints redirected. Evidence diluted. Incidents buried beneath bureaucracy and time.

Cases that were never supposed to stand together.

And yet now, they were aligned neatly before him.

Connected.

For a brief moment, disbelief overwhelmed him.

How had Anand managed to trace them?

This wasn't luck.

It was instinct. Persistence.

And dangerously close to the truth.

A slow tension crept into his face.

Beneath the calm exterior of the respected officer, panic had begun to rise quietly.

Then came the realization.

And with it, a decision.

He placed the coffee cup down slowly, his fingers tightening around the edge of the table. His breathing had changed—slightly heavier now, less controlled.

There was no time left for hesitation.

The DySP stood abruptly.

Without wasting another second, he walked out of his chamber, his pace noticeably faster. Around him, the station continued functioning normally, unaware that something dangerous had just shifted beneath the surface.

He moved straight toward the exit. Outside, he entered his vehicle and shut the door firmly behind him.

Before starting the engine, he opened the glove compartment.

Inside lay his service revolver.

He checked it carefully, his movements precise and practiced. Once satisfied, he closed the compartment sharply.

The engine roared to life.

Moments later, the vehicle sped out of the station.

He drove fast.

Faster than usual.

The city blurred past him in fragments—traffic signals, crowded roads, pedestrians, shops—but none of it truly registered in his mind. His focus remained fixed on a single destination.

His grip on the steering wheel tightened.

A thin layer of sweat had formed on his forehead despite the cool air flowing through the vehicle.

He looked restless.

Driven.

Haunted by something much deeper than fear.

He wanted to finish it.

Once and for all.

As the vehicle moved farther away from the city, the surroundings slowly changed. Concrete structures gave way to empty roads and open land. The noise of urban life faded behind him, replaced by an eerie silence that grew heavier with every passing kilometre.

Then suddenly—

He hit the brakes.

The vehicle came to a sharp halt.

For a few seconds, he remained seated, staring ahead through the windshield.

Then he stepped out slowly.

The place stood before him like a ghost from another life.

The same hut.

Now broken and deteriorated by time.

Its walls were cracked, portions of the roof had collapsed, and dry weeds had grown wildly around it. The structure looked abandoned, forgotten by the world.

But not by him.

The silence surrounding it felt unnatural, almost sacred in its stillness.

And then the memories returned.

Not in fragments.

In full. Faces. Voices. Screams.

One by one, they appeared before him.

The first bodyguard. Then the second. The PA. The minister.

And finally—Himself.

All of them. Culprits.

The memory sharpened mercilessly.

A terrified woman. Her helplessness.

The brutality inflicted upon her.

Her husband lying dead.

Her daughter crying desperately for help.

And her son...Arriving later with the police.

Too late.

Far too late to save anyone.

The weight of those memories settled heavily upon him, crushing the fragile composure he had maintained for years.

His breathing slowed.

Then deepened.

Without realizing it, his hand moved toward his gun.

His movements were slower now.

More deliberate.

As though he already knew what had to happen next.

After a long silence, he turned away from the ruined hut and walked back toward the vehicle.

But he did not leave immediately.

Instead, he pulled out one of the FIR reports from beside him and looked at an address written inside.

A different location.

Another unfinished thread.

He started the engine once again and began driving.

The road ahead stretched endlessly through quiet surroundings, carrying him farther away from everything familiar.

Nearly two hours later, he finally arrived.

The house stood open.

The gate creaked softly in the breeze, half-closed but

unlocked. A rope had been tied between a tree and a rusted pole nearby, with freshly washed clothes drying beneath the afternoon sun.

The atmosphere felt calm.

Too calm.

The kind of silence where even falling leaves could be heard clearly.

The DySP stepped inside slowly.

Nearby, a woman stood drying grains under the sunlight. An elderly man sat quietly on a wooden chair, his posture relaxed but his eyes observant.

As soon as he noticed the visitor, the old man spoke warmly.

“Who are you? Please come... have some water.”

There was no fear in his voice.

Only simple hospitality.

“Any reason for coming here?” he asked gently.

The DySP paused briefly before replying in a casual tone.

“No particular reason. I was passing nearby... thought I would meet you.”

But even while speaking, his eyes continued scanning the

surroundings carefully.

Then his gaze settled on a wall displaying framed photographs.

He stepped closer.

“If you remember,” he said quietly, “I came here years ago... after your son and daughter-in-law died in that incident.”

The old man nodded slowly.

A shadow of sadness crossed his face.

“Yes...”

The DySP looked closely at the photographs.

One showed the couple smiling.

Another showed them standing with two small children.

A complete family.

Before everything had been destroyed.

“And the children?” he asked steadily.

“The girl is here,” the old man replied. “She has gone outside. The boy is in town. He comes once every week. Preparing for a government job now... hoping life improves.”

There was quiet hope in his voice.

“Do you have recent photographs of them?” the DySP asked.

The old man pointed toward the wall.

“Only these.”

“No... recent ones,” the DySP clarified.

The old man shook his head gently.

“No.”

For a few moments, silence lingered between them.

Then the DySP nodded slightly.

“Alright.”

He turned and walked toward the gate.

Just as he stepped outside, a phone rang behind him. The old man answered slowly.

“Okay, son... come whenever you wish,” he said warmly into the phone.

The words lingered strangely in the air.

The DySP paused for the briefest moment.

“Sure...” he murmured softly to himself.

Then he walked back to his vehicle and drove away, his face unreadable.

But inside him, the storm had only grown darker.



THE EDGE OF TRUTH

DySP Patil had not intended to stop there again.

The road curved naturally past the spot, a narrow strip carved between the rising shoulder of the mountain on one side and a deep valley on the other.

Yet as his vehicle approached that familiar stretch, something inside him tightened unexpectedly. Almost against his own will, he slowed the jeep and finally brought it to a halt at the exact place where everything had once begun to unravel.

The air felt different there. It always had.

The mountain stood tall and indifferent, its rugged surface streaked with dark lines where years of rain had carved silent paths into the stone.

Beside it, the valley opened into an endless drop covered in dense greenery that appeared almost black beneath the fading evening light. A faint mist drifted lazily below, as though guarding secrets that refused to rise to the surface.

The wind moved steadily through the cliffs—not violent, but constant—carrying with it the smell of damp soil and distant foliage.

A weathered bench stood a few feet away from the edge. It had once been placed there for tourists who came to admire the panoramic view, but now it looked

abandoned. The wooden slats were cracked in places, the metal frame rusted by years of rain and neglect. Whatever paint had once covered it had long since faded beneath harsh sunlight and mountain storms.

From that bench, the valley stretched endlessly into the horizon. On clear days, one could see the thin silver ribbon of a river winding through the distant land below. But today, the sky remained pale and clouded, casting a dull grey shadow over everything.

DySP stepped out of the jeep slowly.

His shoes pressed against the gravel, the crunching sound unusually loud in the surrounding silence. He walked toward the bench but stopped midway, his eyes drifting toward the ground where invisible traces of the past still seemed to linger.

His mind did not need evidence anymore.

It reconstructed everything on its own.

The scene returned in fragments.

Voices. Chaos. Screams.

And then the terrible stillness that followed.

The memories did not come gently. They struck him sharply, one after another.

He closed his eyes briefly.

But now there was something else mixed with those memories—not merely the burden of the case or the constant pressure from the Commissioner demanding answers for the unresolved murders.

This was personal. Uncomfortably personal.

A trace of shame had begun creeping into him, slow and unavoidable.

He exhaled deeply, trying to steady himself.

What had happened could never be undone.

But perhaps what remained—what still existed in forgotten records and buried files—could be erased.

Or at least hidden forever.

The thought had entered his mind uninvited, yet it refused to leave.

Had Anand seen those files?

The possibility disturbed him deeply.

Anand was intelligent, meticulous, and relentless once he found a lead. If he had connected those records, things could spiral beyond control.

And then there was Aryan.

Could he ask Aryan for help?

The thought lingered far longer than it should have.

By the time DySP returned home that evening, the question had grown heavier inside him. He barely spoke to anyone. The night stretched endlessly, each passing hour feeding his unease.

Sleep never came.

He lay awake staring at the ceiling, replaying the same thoughts again and again until they blurred into anxiety.

Morning brought no peace.

Only a decision.

Without wasting time, he got ready and drove out of the city toward Lion Point, nearly twenty kilometres away. It was not tourist season, and the roads remained mostly empty as the vehicle climbed gradually along the mountainside.

As he neared the point, the surroundings opened dramatically.

Lion Point was famous for its view. On one side stood the mountain, steep and imposing, covered with thick patches of green vegetation. On the other side, the land simply vanished into a vast valley whose depth seemed impossible to measure from above.

The wind was stronger there, moving continuously with a low hollow sound.

A few roadside stalls stood closed with their shutters pulled down. The usual crowd of tourists and vendors was missing, leaving behind a silence that felt strangely unnatural.

DySP parked the jeep near the edge and walked toward a long bench facing the valley.

He sat down slowly, leaning slightly forward with his hands clasped together.

The horizon stretched endlessly before him.

But his thoughts remained trapped elsewhere.

After a long pause, he took out his phone and dialled a number.

“Aryan,” he said once the call connected, his voice calm but firm, “I need your help.”

“Anytime, sir. Tell me,” Aryan replied immediately.

“Can you come to Lion Point?” There was a brief pause.

“Lion Point? It’s around twenty kilometres, sir. I’ll come, but it may take half an hour. Please wait.”

“Thanks,” DySP replied quietly before ending the call.

He placed the phone beside him and stared toward the valley again. The mist below seemed darker now, as though the landscape itself had absorbed the tension

building inside him.

True to his word, Aryan arrived within half an hour.

The sound of his bike broke through the silence as he approached and slowed near the parked jeep. He glanced around briefly before spotting DySP seated on the bench.

Aryan parked the bike and walked toward him.

His steps were steady, but there was curiosity in his eyes.

“Ah, Aryan. I was waiting for you,” DySP said, standing slightly as they shook hands.

Both of them sat down on the bench.

Behind them, the narrow mountain road remained almost empty, with only the occasional vehicle passing in the distance. The place felt isolated, detached from the rest of the world.

For a few moments, neither of them spoke.

Then DySP exhaled quietly.

“I don’t know how to begin,” he admitted.

“Tell me honestly, sir. I’m listening,” Aryan replied, turning slightly toward him.

“You know the pressure we’re under,” DySP began slowly. “The Commissioner wants all four murder cases solved immediately. Everyone is demanding answers, but

so far we have nothing concrete.”

He paused before continuing.

“Yesterday, I came across some old files connected to MC Chaudhary. Inside them, I found references to an old case. Nothing direct... but there were indications involving his bodyguards, his PA, and people close to him.”

Aryan listened silently.

“The file also mentioned an address,” DySP continued. “A remote village about forty kilometres away.”

“Do you want me to investigate it?” Aryan asked immediately.

“No,” DySP replied quietly. “I already went there.”

He leaned back slightly, remembering.

“There was an old couple. Weak. Fragile. They could barely move. There was also a girl... innocent, from what they said. And a grandson who wasn’t home. He had gone out to work and support the family.”

Aryan nodded thoughtfully.

“Do you want me to keep an eye on him?” he asked instinctively.

Before DySP could answer, Aryan stood up.

“I’ll get some water first.”

“You can take it from my jeep,” DySP said.

Aryan walked toward the vehicle and checked the back but found nothing. DySP gestured toward the front compartment instead.

Aryan opened it, took out the bottle, and drank deeply before standing quietly near the edge of the valley for a moment.

When he returned, he handed the bottle back.

“Thanks, sir. The water’s still cold.”

DySP nodded faintly.

Then both of them sat down again.

The silence between them felt heavier now.

Finally, DySP spoke.

“What I think,” he said carefully, “is that there’s one person connected directly or indirectly to all these murders—past and present.”

Aryan’s eyes sharpened slightly.

“Who?”

“Earlier,” DySP replied slowly, “I suspected Anand. He wears an amulet similar to the one worn by someone

involved in the old crime.”

Aryan immediately shook his head.

“No, sir. It can’t be him.”

“Yes,” DySP admitted. “It can’t. I investigated his background thoroughly. The amulet is common.”

He paused.

“But when I visited that house today, I saw the same amulet in girl’s photograph.”

Aryan remained silent.

“Then something else happened,” DySP continued quietly. “As I was leaving, the old man received a phone call. And when he looked at the screen...”

He turned toward Aryan.

“Your profile photo appeared.”

The words settled heavily between them.

DySP’s gaze remained fixed on him.

“So now I’m certain,” he said. “It’s you. If it had been anyone else, I would’ve arrested him already. I would’ve done whatever necessary to get the truth.”

His tone hardened slightly.

“I called you here because I want to hear it from you directly.”

Aryan did not answer immediately.

He stared toward the valley, his jaw tightening slowly. His fists clenched against the edge of the bench, the pressure visible in his knuckles. A thin layer of sweat appeared across his forehead despite the cold mountain wind.

His eyes had turned red—not from fear, but from something buried far deeper.

When he finally spoke, his voice was barely above a whisper.

“Yes, sir... it’s me.”

Even though DySP had suspected it, hearing the confession struck him harder than expected.

“Who helped you?” he asked quickly. “You couldn’t have done all this alone. Your friends? Colleagues? Inspector Anand?”

“No, sir,” Aryan replied firmly. “Please don’t involve Anand. He’s honest. Whatever progress you’ve made today is because of his sincerity, not because he’s involved.”

DySP studied him carefully.

“Then tell me,” he said, “how did you do it? How did you

carry out these murders?”

Aryan leaned back against the bench slowly.

He stretched his legs slightly, crossed them, and tilted his head upward toward the pale sky before shifting his gaze toward the distant horizon where the valley disappeared into mist.

For several moments, he remained completely silent.

The wind moved around them, carrying a tension neither man interrupted.

Then Aryan finally turned back.

His eyes were filled with tears—not tears of helplessness, but of grief that had lived too long inside him.

“DySP Patil,” he said deliberately, no longer using the word ‘sir,’ “the people you met today... they are my grandparents.”

He paused.

“The photograph you saw... that was my sister.”

His voice tightened.

“And the woman who was brutally assaulted before being murdered that day...”

He swallowed hard.

“She was my mother.”

The words landed like blows.

“The man who tried to stop them,” Aryan continued, his voice trembling with restrained rage, “was my father. They stabbed him repeatedly... and he died in my arms.”

DySP remained still, absorbing every word in silence.

“The file you read,” Aryan added quietly, “was filed by me years ago. Then it was buried inside that room so nobody would ever reopen it again.”

His face now carried everything at once—rage that had never faded, grief that never healed, regret without escape, and a strange calmness born from revenge already completed.

DySP’s voice, when it finally came, was steady but firm.

“So tell me,” he said quietly, “how exactly did you carry out these murders?”

Aryan’s eyes hardened.

“Please don’t try to be clever,” DySP added sharply.

He pulled out his phone and made a brief call.

“Commissioner,” he said, “the case is solved. I’ll present everything tomorrow.”

He ended the call and looked back at Aryan.

Aryan gave a faint nod.

“Alright,” he said slowly. “Then listen carefully, DySP.”

The missing ‘sir’ did not go unnoticed this time.

But DySP chose not to react.



THE PERFECT ACCIDENT

The road had emptied long before the truth arrived.

Aryan stood near the edge, his steps unsteady at first, then firming as he moved forward. His hands were clenched so tightly that the veins along his wrists stood out, his fists trembling not from fear but from the weight of everything he was about to say.

Dust clung to his creased shirt, as though the day itself had tried to restrain him, to hold him back from this moment. He paused, crossing one leg slightly over the other, then uncrossed it again, restless, unable to find stillness. His breath came unevenly, rising and falling in sharp bursts, his jaw tightening as he stared ahead without really seeing anything.

A few steps away, the DySP remained still.

He didn't interrupt, didn't shift his stance. His posture was composed, almost unnervingly so, hands relaxed at his sides, his gaze fixed on Aryan with a precision that felt surgical. He watched him the way he studied evidence—not with emotion, but with certainty, as if the truth had already formed in his mind and he was simply waiting for Aryan to catch up to it.

“Let's start with the first case...” Aryan's voice broke the silence, rough but controlled. “The one where the PA

was murdered... made to look like an accident. You couldn't find anything then. Maybe you still can't prove it. Maybe it would take you years." He let out a faint, humourless breath, his lips tightening. "But I can end that wait now. It's time. My goals... almost all of them are complete. And I take full ownership."

The DySP said nothing. He simply watched, letting the words settle, waiting for the ice to fully break.

Aryan took a few steps forward, then stopped again, his shoulders stiffening as memories resurfaced. "I had been tracking him for days... MC Chaudhary's PA. He wasn't innocent. He was one of them—one of the people responsible for my parents death." His fingers curled tighter, his nails pressing into his palm. "I studied his routine. Twice a week, same time. He would park his car, cross the road, go to that general store, and return."

He swallowed, his gaze drifting for a second before snapping back. "Three kilometres ahead... there's a Dhaba. I went there one afternoon.

Sat quietly. Listened. A group of truck drivers were talking. One of them... he said he had just come out on parole. Said jail was safer for him... that he'd go back in a week." Aryan's expression hardened, his lips forming a thin line. "That was enough for me."

"I followed him. Spoke to him. Slowly gained his trust. Told him I'd pay him. He was already a proven

criminal—this wasn't new to him. He agreed. 'The condition was simple... he would make it look like a truck accident. And I wasn't to ask his name, his address... nothing.' Aryan let out a quiet, almost bitter exhale. "I agreed immediately. It suited me perfectly. Even he said he wouldn't disclose anything. We both understood the arrangement."

He shifted his stance again, pacing a step to the side, then back, as if reliving every movement. "He needed a truck. I arranged one on rent... but not just that. I had it modified. A mechanism where, at the press of a button, the back structure could change... and even the truck's colour could be altered."

The DySP's eyes narrowed slightly, but he remained silent.

"I also contacted a food wholesaler," Aryan continued, his voice steadier now, almost methodical. "They needed apples delivered to another city. It gave us a reason... a route... legitimacy." He glanced down at his hands for a moment before lifting them slightly, as if demonstrating the memory. "I made one thing clear to him—I didn't want anyone else harmed. He would act only on my signal. Without it, the plan wouldn't be executed."

A brief pause followed, heavy and suffocating.

"Then the day arrived."

Aryan's chest rose deeply, his fists tightening again as his

body leaned forward slightly. “The driver was ready. I positioned myself between the truck and the PA. He had just stepped out of the shop... was about to cross the road.” Aryan lifted his hands unconsciously, reenacting the moment. “In one hand, I held a lotus flower. In the other... a small bundle of leaves.”

His voice dropped, quieter now, but sharper.

“The signal was simple. The green bundle of leaves meant—execute.”

His fingers curled inward as if crushing the invisible flower. “The moment came. I showed it.” His jaw clenched hard, his eyes darkening. “Within seconds... the truck surged forward. It hit him with full force... flung him... and it was over. Just like that.”

Silence followed, thick and unmoving.

The DySP finally spoke, his tone calm but edged with curiosity. “If I believe you... where did the truck go? It disappeared.”

Aryan turned slightly toward him, his expression no longer conflicted but steady, almost cold. “It was already modified. I had installed a false wall mechanism. I knew there were no CCTV cameras in that stretch.” He took a slow step forward, his voice gaining clarity. “As soon as the truck reached near the tunnel... under a tree... the mechanism was activated. The structure changed. The colour changed. By the time it passed the toll CCTV... it

was a completely different truck.”

He held the DySP’s gaze now, unflinching.

“It delivered the apples. Just another routine vehicle. That’s why it never came under scrutiny.”

A faint pause.

The DySP nodded slightly, a faint trace of acknowledgment in his eyes. “Hmm... very smart move. But even then... someone must have seen it. Someone should have reported it.”

Aryan’s expression didn’t change, but something in his eyes settled—something final.

“Yes,” he said quietly. “Someone did.”

He paused, his fists tightening once more, his shoulders stiffening as if bracing against the weight of what came next.

“He was the bodyguard.”



THE DRAIN OF JUSTICE

“The second was Mhatre.” DySP’s gaze sharpened instantly as he studied Aryan’s face. “Do you also take ownership of this crime?”

Aryan stood still for a moment, shoulders squared, his breathing controlled but heavy, as if holding back something volatile.

Then he nodded faintly, his jaw tightening. “He wasn’t just a bodyguard,” he said, his voice low but firm. “He was running smuggling operations—using agricultural transport as a cover. Every illegal consignment, every movement... it all went through Saxena alias M.C. Chaudhary.”

DySP stepped closer, his tone steady but authoritative. “That still doesn’t justify murder. It’s the police’s job to arrest. The law is handled by the courts.” Aryan’s eyes flickered, then hardened.

“No,” he said sharply. “You’re talking about law... I’m talking about what he did.”

He paused, and when he spoke again, his voice carried weight. “He didn’t just see me signal the truck driver to kill Mishra... he was there the night my father died. He held him... pinned him down... while bodyguards stabbed him in the back.” His fists clenched tightly, veins

rising under his skin. “I still remember my father struggling... looking at me... and I couldn’t do anything.

That man... Mhatre... stood there like it was nothing.” His face turned cold, almost expressionless. “He should have died first,” he muttered, a harsh slang slipping under his breath. “And then I heard Mhatre had identified the man behind Mishra’s murder... and he was going to report everything to Chaudhary the next day. That’s when I knew I had no time left.”

“I took his number from Ria’s phone and gave it to my sister, Pooja. A new SIM, a new voice, no traces. She called him pretending to be Ria’s friend, told him Ria had urgent information about the murderer, asked him to come alone and not inform anyone at home.

He didn’t doubt it. I knew he wouldn’t. The way he looked at Ria... it was never right. Ria had told me everything. And the chance to meet her alone... that was enough to blind him.”

Aryan’s eyes drifted, as if replaying the moment. “He reached the spot near that broken bridge—a deserted place, the faint smell of sewage in the air, a flickering streetlight far away, silence stretching in every direction. I was already there, sitting inside my car, watching him. He kept looking around, restless... almost eager. Then Pooja appeared.”

“He started questioning her immediately—who she was,

where Ria was, why she called him. Pooja stayed calm, told him she was Ria's friend, that there was new information about the PA murder, and that involving him would help catch the killer. His ego did the rest."

A faint, cold smirk crossed Aryan's face. "Before moving, she told him Ria had asked to mark him so she could recognize him easily in the dark. She took out a small stamp—the kind you get at clubs, neon ink—and pressed it onto his wrist. He didn't question it. In fact, he seemed pleased."

"She asked him to follow her. The path ahead was narrow, uneven, leading towards an old drainage line. Dark, silent... the kind of place where even your own footsteps feel too loud. At one point, Pooja suddenly jumped across a broken patch and said, 'Careful, watch your step.'

But by then, it was too late. Mhatre stepped forward, and the rusted manhole cover beneath him cracked open. In a second, he vanished. There was a dull thud, then a splash. His voice echoed from inside—'Help! I'm down here!'

The pit was deep, filled with filthy water that was rising slowly. It wasn't just a hole, it was a long drainage pipeline, nearly two hundred meters, leading to the main sewer."

"Pooja leaned over, pretending panic, then called me. I

walked to the edge slowly and looked down at him. 'The water had already reached his chest, climbing higher. He was slipping, struggling, trying to hold onto the slimy walls, but there was nothing to hold. I asked him, 'Do you remember me?'

He looked up, confused, terrified, and said, 'You... you're here? You're the same person who was signaling that day... You're Ria's friend as well... and... you're the culprit!'"

I told him, 'I'm also the same person you threw down before my father was stabbed. That night... you didn't just watch... you helped.'

Recognition hit him instantly, and then he broke. He started shouting, begging, promising anything—'Help! Please! I'll tell everything! I made a mistake!' He tried to climb, nails scraping, slipping again and again into the rising water. Then, in desperation, he screamed, 'Ria! Riaaa!'"

"Aryan's face didn't change. 'Ria isn't here,' he said quietly. 'No one is. And no one is coming for you.' He kept begging... crying... fear had completely taken over him. For a moment, he thought I might help him. But I wanted him to feel it—the fear, the helplessness, every second of it." Aryan exhaled slowly. "I closed the manhole... and then I opened the main drainage valve. The water pressure surged instantly. His screams changed—from loud cries to choking gasps, to broken,

gurgling sounds.

He tried one last time to push himself up, his hand reaching toward the opening, the stamp on his wrist still faintly glowing in the dark... and then the water pulled him back. By the time he was dragged through the pipeline and thrown into the open drainage, he was already gone.”

“The stamp on his wrist misled the investigation, pointing it toward a nightclub connection, taking the focus away from us. The phone Pooja used was stolen, untraceable. For a while... it felt like we had done something, like we had taken a step toward justice. But even then, it wasn’t enough.”

Aryan looked at DySP, his expression calm but carrying a quiet storm beneath. “There was one more bodyguard ... apart from these two.”



THE LAST PUSH

The wind did not stay still in the valley; it moved in long, cold breaths, brushing against the mountainside and circling back as if it carried whispers from the past. The old iron bench, rusted and slightly bent with age, stood at the edge, overlooking a steep drop into darkness.

Aryan sat there, leaning forward, his elbows resting on his knees, while the DySP stood a few steps away, his shoes pressing against the gravel, his eyes fixed on the man who spoke as if he had already lived through judgment.

“Why did you kill him?” the DySP asked again, his voice firm but not as certain as before. “He was already in the fourth stage of cancer... a man who barely had weeks left.”

Aryan let the wind pass before he answered, his gaze lost somewhere beyond the valley. “Yes... that is what you knew,” he said slowly. “That is what all of you chose to believe.”

The officer’s face tightened slightly, resisting the shift in tone. “We didn’t just assume,” he replied. “We verified it. Reports were collected from his house. They were submitted to the Commissioner. His family agreed. It was concluded as suicide... a man who knew he was dying, unable to bear the pain.”

Aryan turned his head then, his eyes meeting the officer's with a sharp stillness that made the air feel heavier. "No," he said, his voice steady but cold. "He was not suffering from any disease. He was as fit as any man his age could be... stronger, in fact."

The DySP frowned, the lines on his forehead deepening as doubt tried to find space within his certainty. "That doesn't make sense," he said, almost to himself. "Then what is your story?"

Aryan leaned back slightly against the cold iron of the bench, the faint creak of metal blending with the wind. "I killed him," he said. "Because he was one of them."

The words did not echo, but they settled.

"He was part of the same gang," Aryan continued, his voice lowering, "the same men who murdered my father... in front of my family. My mother... my sister... they watched everything."

His fingers tightened slowly, the knuckles whitening. "My father fought till his last breath. He tried to protect us. But they were not men... they were merciless, ruthless... something worse."

The DySP did not interrupt this time. His face had changed; the authority in it was still there, but now it carried something else—attention, perhaps even unease.

"And what I did," Aryan said, looking straight ahead into

the vast emptiness of the valley, “was justice.”

The wind grew sharper for a moment, pulling at his shirt, as if trying to break his composure, but he continued without pause.

“He wasn’t just a bodyguard,” Aryan said. “Agriculture was a cover. Behind it—party drugs, illegal consignments, hidden routes... all under Saxena, the man you know as MC Chaudhary.”

A flicker crossed the DySP’s eyes at the name, but he remained silent.

“I followed him,” Aryan went on. “Watched him closely. Understood him. And like most men in that world... he had only one weakness.”

He paused just long enough.

“Money.”

“I approached him as someone else,” Aryan said, his tone turning precise, controlled. “An agent... connected to powerful people, someone who could bring him bigger deals for party drugs. At first, he ignored me. But when I offered him three times the market rate... he began to listen.”

The DySP shifted his weight slightly, his attention now fully captured.

“I set the rules,” Aryan continued. “Isolated delivery

points. Changing locations every time. No patterns. He agreed quicker than he should have.”

A faint, almost distant expression crossed Aryan’s face. “I asked for a sample first. Minimum quantity. He delivered it near the railway station. I told him I would check the quality with my clients before placing a bigger order.”

He exhaled softly. “He left happy.”

Aryan’s eyes darkened. “I threw the drugs into the drain.”

The officer’s gaze sharpened, but he did not interrupt.

“That was the moment he stepped into my trap,” Aryan said. “He wanted more. He needed more. He called me himself... asking for the next deal.”

“I ignored him for a few days,” he continued. “Built anticipation. Then came back with a bigger order. Something he couldn’t refuse.”

Aryan’s voice remained calm, but the precision in it made every step feel deliberate. “I sold a piece of my village land to arrange money. Not just to make him believe... but to move something larger.”

The DySP’s eyes narrowed. “You fed information to us.”

Aryan gave a slight nod. “Just enough. Enough to lead you toward the network... toward Saxena.”

The realization sat heavily between them, carried away only slightly by the restless wind.

“The next deal made him richer,” Aryan said. “More confident. He began pushing for larger volumes. So I gave him what he wanted. I told him the next order would be fifty million.”

“He hesitated,” Aryan admitted. “But greed has its own logic. He agreed... on the condition that I would pay within a week.”

Aryan’s gaze drifted toward the distant line where the sky met the mountains. “I called him to the Sorli-Link bridge.”

The DySP stood still now, completely absorbed.

“He came with the drugs,” Aryan said. “Handed them over. Turned to leave. I stopped him... told him the money was too large, that someone was waiting below on a boat.”

A faint trace of something unreadable passed over his face. “He was excited... already counting what he would earn.”

“I asked him if he could swim,” Aryan continued. “He said no. Said it was the only thing he never learned.”

The wind howled briefly, then softened.

“I asked him to come closer to the edge,” Aryan said.

“He didn’t hesitate.”

A pause stretched between the words.

“I asked him if his courage came from MC Chaudhary,” Aryan added. “He was confused... surprised.”

His voice dropped.

“And before he understood... I pushed him.”

The DySP’s breath slowed, almost unconsciously.

“He held onto an iron rod,” Aryan said. “Strong man. He tried to pull himself up. Begged me to help him.”

Aryan’s face hardened, every trace of softness gone. “I reminded him of that night. That road. When he held my father... while his master destroyed my family.”

Silence followed, thick and suffocating.

“He begged,” Aryan continued. “Apologised. Promised anything.”

Another pause.

“I poured the drugs on him,” he said quietly. “And then... I let him fall.”

The valley seemed deeper after that, as if it had absorbed the weight of his words.

“But the cancer...” the DySP said finally, his voice no

longer as firm.

Aryan looked at him, calm, composed. “That was never real.”

He straightened slightly against the bench. “I went to an NGO that same day. Found patients in their last stage. Choose one whose age matched his. Convinced him to take the tests. Filled the forms myself... used the bodyguard’s name and address.”

The DySP stared at him, disbelief now fully visible.

“The reports reached his house,” Aryan said. “And by the time questions could be asked... the story had already been accepted.”

The officer let out a slow breath, his eyes wandered briefly to the valley stretching beneath them below before returning to Aryan.

“You planned everything,” he said quietly. “Every detail... every move... you walked into our system, used it, and walked out without leaving a doubt, and now you sit here as if the end was always part of your design, as if confession itself is just another step you had already calculated.”

Aryan did not react to the weight of those words; he simply looked ahead, his voice calm, almost distant, as he replied, “Some endings are not choices, Officer... they are the only way a story like mine can ever be completed,

and if truth is the last thing left, then I have no reason left to hold it back.”



THE SOUND THAT LIED

DySP sat across from Aryan, his posture controlled yet intent, as if he did not want to miss even the slightest shift in expression. He wanted everything—every truth, every crime—and he masked that hunger behind a composed face. In his hand, his mobile rested naturally, but the recorder was already running, silently capturing each word that Aryan was about to surrender as evidence.

Aryan sat with his legs crossed, fingers interlocked, his shoulders relaxed in a way that did not belong to a man confessing to murder. There was no visible fear in his eyes, no hesitation—only a strange calmness, as if he had already lived through the storm and was now merely describing it.

DySP finally broke the silence. “Then tell me about the murder of MP Chaudhary...was my friend.” His voice was steady, but his eyes sharpened. “That day, you were with Ria. You expect me to believe you could be in two places at once? That’s not possible.

So someone must have helped you.” He paused slightly, watching Aryan carefully. “Someone from the police... Anand, perhaps?”

Aryan lifted his gaze slowly and shook his head. “No... no one assisted me.”

His voice was soft but firm, leaving no room for doubt.

“When Ria heard his voice calling for coffee,” Aryan continued, “I was in the kitchen. She took the coffee to him. I stayed there... and when she screamed, I came running from the kitchen. That is what everyone saw.”

DySP leaned back slightly, his fingers tightening against his armrest. “If that is true,” he said, his tone now edged with disbelief, “then who killed him? His house is more secure than any place I know. What are you suggesting... that someone just appeared and vanished?”

Aryan didn’t answer immediately. His face remained still, almost peaceful, and that calmness unsettled DySP far more than any denial could have.

Then, slowly, Aryan spoke.

“I agree with your logic... but the person who killed Chaudhary was no one else but me.” His eyes met DySP’s directly. “I did it. I killed him.”

He was a wolf in the guise of a man. He should have died that very day years ago... but I was hapless then. So I waited. I spent years finding a way to reach him... even if it meant helping you solve cases, staying close to the system. My only intention was to reach him.”

He paused slightly, his voice lowering. “And that was not possible without you... because you were his closest friend... perhaps more than just a friend.”

For a moment, the colour drained slightly from DySP's face. His jaw tightened, but he held his silence. The shock was there, but stronger than that was his need to understand how.

Aryan shifted slightly, his gaze drifting into memory.

"I had visited Ria's house many times before. We would sit on the lawn, have coffee together. And every single time, he followed the same pattern—he would call Ria to bring him coffee. Never from anyone else. Only her. It was a habit... predictable, consistent."

He exhaled slowly.

"That day, we were planning Ria's birthday. She was happy—her face carried a kind of brightness that only comes from hope. She believed something good was about to happen, maybe about us. Even Chaudhary seemed unusually pleasant. He said he would make an announcement that day."

Aryan's lips tightened faintly. "But I knew him. He would never accept me. And I wasn't there for that. I was there for something else... my justice, my revenge... a promise I had made to myself."

He clenched his fist briefly, then relaxed it.

"That day was perfect. There were more people around. More movement, more noise... more confusion. Suspicion would scatter."

He continued, his voice steady.

“When Ria went into the kitchen to prepare snacks, he called me inside. The moment I stepped in, his expression changed. He looked at me with that same arrogance.” Aryan’s eyes hardened slightly as he recalled. ““Where do you live? What do you do? Do you even know who Ria is? What is your status?””

“I responded calmly, but before I could finish, his PA entered. I stepped out. When the PA left, I noticed he had delivered something and taken something. Around the same time, I saw Anand’s vehicle entering the compound.”

DySP’s eyes flickered at the detail, but he remained silent.

“I went back in,” Aryan said. “And before speaking, I moved near the table where a Bluetooth speaker was placed. I switched it on. It was a standard wireless audio device operating on short-range radio frequency—2.4 GHz spectrum, using frequency-hopping spread spectrum to maintain a stable connection. Once powered, it entered pairing mode, waiting for a previously bonded device.”

He paused briefly, letting the detail settle.

“He looked at me and said it was time to throw me out... that I didn’t know who I was dealing with, that he could make me disappear overnight.”

Aryan's expression changed, the calmness now carrying a trace of buried anger.

"I told him... 'You don't know me. I am the one whose parents are no more because of you.'"

A silence followed.

"I reminded him of that deserted place... the crime he thought no one would ever trace back. The moment he let his inner demon take control... and ordered my father to be killed."

Aryan's jaw tightened.

"He remembered. And he smiled." A faint bitterness crossed his face. "'That... was a mistake,' he said. 'What do you want now?'"

Aryan's fist clenched again.

"'Mistake?'" His voice dropped, filled with restrained rage. "'That 'mistake' destroyed everything. My family... my sister's life... my existence.'"

He looked directly at DySP.

"He tried to reach for his gun... but it wasn't there. I had already taken it."

The room felt heavier.

"Before he could react, I pressed a pillow against his

face... and from point-blank range, I fired.”

Aryan’s voice returned to calm.

“I walked out slowly... controlled. I went to the kitchen and told Ria he seemed angry with the PA.”

A faint shadow crossed his face.

“She wanted to go to him. I stopped her... held her for a moment. And during that moment, I connected my phone to the Bluetooth speaker. The paired device established a secure link using its stored MAC address, automatically syncing without delay. The audio buffer triggered instantly.”

He continued, almost mechanically.

“The speaker turned on... ‘Ria... Ria...’ his recorded voice echoed.”

“Ria responded immediately, ‘Yes, Papa...’ and started moving. Then within seconds—‘Coffee beta...’ played.”

Aryan made a slight gesture.

“And I disconnected.”

He looked down briefly.

“That single moment fixed everything in her mind. When he called her... I was with her. Which meant I could not be the killer.”

A pause followed.

“For her... I am sorry,” Aryan said quietly. “She did not deserve this. But when power and money protect monsters... someone has to act. I didn’t do it for the world. I did it so I could stand in front of my sister... my grandfather... and say that the man who destroyed us is gone.”

Aryan leaned back, his body finally relaxing as if a weight had been released. He moved to sit on the bench, his face calm again.

DySP slowly stepped closer, still absorbing the precision of what he had just heard.

“So when Anand and Ria met near the gate... you were in the kitchen,” he said, almost to himself. “Chaudhary was already dead. Everyone suspected each other... except you.”

He looked at Aryan.

“Very smart.” A brief silence passed.

“Will you accept all the charges?”

Aryan looked at him without resistance. “I already have.”

DySP took out the handcuffs, fastening one around Aryan’s wrist, then securing the other as he led him toward the jeep. Aryan walked without struggle, his face still carrying that same unsettling peace.

He was seated inside, the other end of the handcuff locked to the metal rod, ensuring he could not move. DySP walked around, sat in the driver's seat, and for a brief moment, allowed himself a faint smile—mixed with anger and something close to reluctant admiration.

He picked up his phone and called Anand

"I've got the culprit," he said. "And believe me, if you knew who it was, you'd be surprised."

Anand's voice came over the line, tinged with confusion.

"Why would I be surprised, sir?"

He paused for a moment before adding, a hint of satisfaction creeping into his voice.

"But there's good news for you as well, sir. I interrogated the MP's PA and got every detail about their so-called NGO. Our police teams have already been dispatched to rescue all the girls and conduct simultaneous raids to recover the drugs. As per the latest updates, the operation has been almost entirely successful."

DySP glanced once at Aryan, then started the engine.

"You will be," he said quietly. "Wait for an hour." And the jeep moved forward, cutting through the silence, carrying with it a truth that had waited years to be spoken.



TWILIGHT JUSTIC

The jeep sped along the deserted road, its headlights cutting through the darkness like a blade. Inside, silence pressed heavily between them.

DySP Patil's face was tense, jaw clenched, eyes fixed ahead—but restless. There was urgency in him. A need to reach the station, to speak, to declare—to finally put a name to the nightmare.

Beside him, Aryan sat unnaturally still.

His posture was relaxed, almost detached. His face carried no anger, no panic—only a strange, quiet calm. His eyes... distant, as if they had already crossed into a place beyond consequence. There was a stillness in them that didn't belong to the living.

“I never doubted you, Aryan...” Patil said, breaking the silence. His voice tried to stay firm but carried a trace of unease.

“Why did you do this? You could have come to me. I would have helped you.”

Aryan didn't look at him.

Patil glanced sideways. “It's not over. Fourteen... maybe sixteen years. You're young. You can still rebuild your life.”

A faint curve touched Aryan's lips—but it wasn't a smile.

Then, softly—"What if I deny everything?"

Patil's grip tightened slightly on the steering wheel.
"What?"

Aryan turned his head slowly, his eyes now meeting Patil's.

"There's no one who knows," he said evenly. "Except you. Anand is still waiting. Your Commissioner is waiting for a name."

A pause.

"You'll give them mine... won't you?"

Patil's expression hardened, but something flickered behind his eyes.

"You think you solved the case?" Aryan continued. "No, Mr. Patil... I brought you to it." Yes "I brought you to it."

A brief silence.

"I called you about the files. I made sure Anand reached them. When you came to my house, I showed you my face—deliberately. Through my grandfather's phone. I wanted you to recognize me."

Patil's brows tightened. His confidence began to thin.

“You had no real evidence,” Aryan said. “Only doubt... and my silence about my past made it easier for you to believe.”

Patil exhaled sharply. “Even then... I can prove it. It may take time, but I will.”

Aryan leaned back, his eyes returning to the darkness outside.

“You missed something,” he said. “I told you I had finished almost everything” - almost everything not everything.

Patil frowned.

“And what do you think?” he snapped. “You’ll escape? Do something while you’re locked in my jeep?”

Aryan turned again.

“I’m not escaping,” he said quietly. “Why would I run... when the real culprit is sitting right beside me?”

Patil’s eyes widened slightly. “What nonsense—”

“You were there,” Aryan cut in.

His voice changed—colder, sharper.

“That day. Before the honest inspector arrived. You helped them escape.”

Patil’s breathing shifted.

“And not just that...” Aryan’s eyes burned now, but his face remained calm. “You were one of them.”

The words landed like a blow.

“My father told me,” Aryan whispered. “Your face... stayed with me.”

Patil’s face turned pale. Sweat gathered at his temples. His eyes, once authoritative, now flickered with something raw—fear.

“No one will believe you,” he said, but his voice had lost its weight.

Aryan didn’t respond immediately.

Instead, he looked ahead... and said quietly—

“There are no brakes.”

For a second, the words didn’t register.

Then Patil’s eyes widened in shock.

“What?”

“There are no brakes,” Aryan repeated, his tone almost serene.

Panic exploded across Patil’s face. He slammed his foot down.

The jeep jolted violently as he tried to control it, his

hands gripping the wheel, eyes wide, breath erratic. He pumped the brake again and again—

The vehicle screeched—

—and then suddenly... stopped.

Silence.

Patil froze.

His chest heaved as he looked around in disbelief... then slowly turned toward Aryan.

Aryan was watching him.

Calm. Composed.

Almost... peaceful.

“I just wanted you to feel it,” Aryan said softly.

Before Patil could react, Aryan pulled his hand free.

“The handle,” he added, glancing briefly at it. “While I was getting the water, I loosened the screw holding it in place. I knew you’d tie me there—I’d seen you use the same method on many criminals before.” Patil’s hand shot toward his revolver—

Empty.

“It’s with me.”

Aryan now held the gun steadily, his grip firm, his eyes unwavering.

“When you panicked, hit the brakes, and lost control of your balance, I seized the opportunity and took it,” he said

Patil stared at him, fear now fully visible—his eyes wide, lips slightly parted, breath shallow. The authority was gone. What remained was a man trying to survive.

“Aryan... listen to me...”

“Send a message,” Aryan interrupted.

“What?”

“To me, Anand and Commissioner ,” Aryan said.

Patil hesitated.

“Type,” Aryan said coldly, “that you have found the culprit. The killer. And that they’ll be surprised to know who it is.”

His voice didn’t rise—but it allowed no refusal.

Hands trembling, Patil typed.

Aryan watched every movement.

“Good,” Aryan said.

A faint smile crossed his face—quiet, controlled.

“Now... there’s no confusion left.”

“I’ll still tell the truth,” Patil said suddenly, forcing strength into his voice.

Aryan stepped closer.

His eyes, calm until now, hardened—not with rage, but with something far more final.

“You should have remembered the truth,” he said, “before you destroyed my family... before you became part of something so inhuman.”

His voice dropped.

“You were given power to protect.”

A pause.

“You chose to violate it.”

Patil suddenly lunged.

The gun fired.

The sound tore through the night.

The bullet struck him instantly. He stumbled back, losing balance, slipping over the rocky edge. His hands caught a jagged stone—his body hanging over the dark abyss below.

His eyes—now filled with pure terror—locked onto

Aryan. “Aryan... please...” he begged, his voice breaking.

Aryan walked to the edge and looked down.

His face was still. His eyes... quiet.

“Say sorry to my parents,” he said.

Patil shook, tears mixing with fear. “I’m sorry... I’m sorry...”

He raised the gun.

“This... is Twilight Justice.”

The second shot echoed.

Patil’s fingers slipped.

And he vanished into the darkness below.

Aryan stood there, unmoving, the silence swallowing everything. Then, without emotion, he pushed the jeep.

It rolled forward... tipped... and disappeared into the gorge.

Aryan took the phone, looked at it once... and threw it after.

No trace.

No truth.

Only silence.

He turned back, his face once again calm—almost at peace—and walked toward his vehicle, disappearing into the night.

Aryan started his bike and drove into the endless darkness of the highway.

Behind him, the gorge had swallowed the truth, the screams, the guilt... and the men who had buried justice years ago.

Ahead of him, the night remained silent.

But for the first time in years, the storm inside him had stopped.

Some crimes are punished by law.

Some are buried by power.

And some...

wait quietly in the shadows for a different kind of justice.

Twilight Justice.



CRACKS IN TRUST

Avni reached Ria's home carrying a sense of urgency that refused to settle inside her. The drive to the villa had felt longer than usual—not because of traffic, but because of the burden of what she had decided to reveal. Even after arriving, she hesitated briefly at the entrance, questioning whether she was doing the right thing.

But once the door closed behind her, the words came out all at once.

She told Ria everything.

Every detail she had noticed over the past few weeks. Every doubt that had slowly taken shape inside her mind.

Aryan. Meeting another girl.

Not once. Not by coincidence. Repeatedly.

Ria stood motionless as she listened, her expression tightening with disbelief. Her eyes searched Avni's face carefully, almost desperately, hoping to find uncertainty there—some hint of misunderstanding that would allow her to dismiss everything she was hearing.

“No... that's not possible,” Ria said finally, her voice steady but carrying a faint tremor beneath it. “I trust him. He's the only person I can truly trust right now.”

The words sounded convincing, yet even she could hear

the hesitation hidden underneath them.

Avni remained calm. She had expected resistance.

“This isn’t the first time, Ria,” she said quietly. “I’ve seen him before. More than once.”

Ria’s eyes narrowed slightly.

“Every Tuesday,” Avni continued. “Same place. Same timing. Same girl.”

Silence settled heavily between them.

The room suddenly felt smaller, as though the air itself had tightened around the conversation. Outside the villa, evening light faded slowly across the lawn, but inside, tension spread like an invisible crack.

Ria folded her arms instinctively.

“You’re sure it was Aryan?”

“Yes.”

The answer came immediately. Without hesitation. Without doubt.

And somehow, Avni’s certainty disturbed her more than the accusation itself.

“You don’t have to believe me,” Avni added softly. “But go tomorrow. See it yourself.”

Ria looked away.

Her mind had already begun fighting itself—trust against suspicion, love against fear, certainty against the possibility that her entire world was beginning to break apart.

“I’ll send you the location,” Avni continued gently. “And the exact time.”

Several seconds passed before Ria finally nodded.

“Okay...”

The word left her lips quietly, carrying the weight of reluctant acceptance.

Avni turned toward the door, ready to leave, but paused midway. There was still something she had not said.

“I’ve known for a few days,” she admitted softly. “But I didn’t tell you earlier because of your father’s death. You were already shattered. I thought... you needed time before hearing something like this.”

Ria looked at her again.

This time, the disbelief in her eyes had faded slightly, replaced by confusion and unease.

“After all,” Avni said gently, “you’ve always been my friend.”

A faint sadness crossed Ria's face.

"You too," she replied quietly. "Whether this turns out to be true... or not."

For a brief moment, neither of them spoke.

Then Avni gave a small nod and walked out of the villa.

As she stepped toward the gate, she glanced unconsciously at her watch.

Twenty hours. That was all.

Twenty hours before the truth revealed itself one way or another.

Inside the villa, Ria remained standing alone in silence.

The house suddenly felt unfamiliar.

Too quiet. Too heavy.

Her thoughts spiralled uncontrollably. Images flashed through her mind—Aryan comforting her after her father's death, standing beside her during the investigation, speaking with calm certainty whenever she was close to breaking down.

Could all of that have been false?

No.

The thought itself felt impossible.

And yet...

Avni had not sounded uncertain.

Ria's fingers moved instinctively toward her phone. She wanted to call Aryan immediately. She wanted to hear his voice, confront him directly, demand an explanation before these doubts consumed her completely.

But something stopped her. Fear.

Not of losing him.

But of discovering the truth too soon.

If there was even the slightest chance that Avni was right, she did not want excuses or carefully prepared lies.

She wanted certainty.

She wanted to see it herself.

Slowly, she lowered the phone back onto the table.

Outside, darkness settled fully over the villa.

And somewhere deep inside her, trust cracked for the very first time.

The next morning arrived heavier than usual.

Ria barely slept. The same question echoed through her mind again and again.

What if it's true?

Still, she got ready mechanically and stepped outside. The location Avni had shared replayed constantly in her thoughts. As she sat inside the car, she felt an unfamiliar emptiness, as though happiness had quietly slipped out of her life overnight.

“Drive this way,” she told the driver softly.

The car moved forward, but her mind remained restless.

Far away from the storm building inside her, Aryan stood beneath a large tree beside Pooja. The place around them was calm—almost unnaturally calm.

“Don’t hurt her anymore,” Pooja said softly but firmly. “If we become like them... then what difference is there between us and them?”

Aryan remained silent.

“We are not monsters,” she continued. “You’ve already punished the people responsible. Isn’t that enough? Now just live a normal life... with her.”

Her words lingered in the air, waiting for a response that never came.

Meanwhile, Ria’s car moved closer.

The road stretched ahead like a painting—green fields on both sides, wrapped in peaceful silence. Tall trees stood

like silent witnesses while birds chirped freely above them. Farmers worked in the distance, cows grazed lazily, and life moved with quiet simplicity.

It was the kind of place where nothing bad ever seemed possible.

And yet, beneath the shade of a wide tree stood Aryan... with another girl.

Pooja.

In Aryan's hand was a fresh red lotus, impossible to ignore. In his other hand rested a small bundle of green grass.

His posture remained still, but his eyes betrayed him. There was conflict there. Something unresolved. Something dangerous.

The road remained quiet.

A cyclist crossed the road slowly.

Two farmers worked in the distance.

And then... a white car appeared.

Aryan noticed it immediately.

His expression changed.

Inside the car, Ria leaned slightly toward the open window, allowing the breeze to brush against her face.

For a brief second, she almost felt calm again.

Then she saw him.

Her smile disappeared instantly.

Her eyes locked onto Aryan standing beside another girl, the red lotus burning into her vision like a wound.

Shock. Disbelief. Pain.

As the car moved past him, her gaze refused to break away, as though staring longer could somehow change what she was seeing.

But it didn't.

From the opposite direction, a truck sped forward.

Time slowed.

Aryan slowly raised his hand.

The red lotus slipped from his fingers and fell onto the road.

The truck driver noticed immediately. His eyes flickered between Aryan's raised hand and the falling flower. Instinctively, he slammed the brakes.

The truck screeched violently, slowing just enough...

...to avoid the white car.

A signal given. A signal understood.

Lotus — no. Grass — yes.

But today, the choice had changed.

Inside the car, Ria sat frozen as tears slid silently down her cheeks. She didn't fully understand what had just happened... but deep inside, she felt it.

Something wasn't right.

As the car moved ahead, she turned back for one final look.

Aryan stood there in the distance, unreadable.

The road returned to silence once more.

But within that silence, something had already changed forever.



THE BEGINNING AFTER THE END

When Ria returned home, she felt hollow.

Every step inside the house felt heavier than the last.

She immediately called Avni.

“Come... please,” was all she said.

Avni didn’t ask questions. She simply left for the villa.

Not long after, Aryan and Pooja arrived as well.

The door opened.

Ria stood there without a smile, without warmth—only silence.

Before Ria could speak, Pooja stepped forward gently.

“My brother,” she said softly, glancing at Aryan, “can’t live without you. But he’ll never say it himself. So I came to tell you.”

Ria frowned slightly.

“Brother?” she repeated slowly. “Aryan is your brother? Wow... Aryan never told me that.”

A faint, almost bitter smile touched her lips.

“So today I got everything, right? A new sister too.”

The words sounded light, but the pain beneath them was impossible to miss.

Aryan stepped closer carefully.

“Would you like to meet my grandparents?” he asked.

Ria looked at him for several long seconds.

Then unexpectedly, she nodded.

“Sure,” she said softly. “I’d love to.”

At that moment, the doorbell rang.

Ria opened the door.

Avni stepped inside—and immediately froze.

Ria was smiling.

Not pretending.

Actually smiling.

“What happened?” Avni asked, confused. “Why are you happy?”

Instead of answering, Ria gently held her hand and pulled her inside.

“Come,” she said. “Let me introduce you to someone... Pooja.”

Avni’s eyes shifted toward her.

The moment she recognized the girl, she leaned toward Ria and whispered urgently,

“This is the same girl... the one I told you about.”

Ria smiled softly.

“She’s Aryan’s sister.”

For a second, Avni simply stared at her, processing everything.

Then both girls suddenly smiled and hugged each other.

Across the room, Aryan and Pooja exchanged a confused glance.

What just happened?

Before anyone could say anything else, the doorbell rang again.

This time, it was Anand.

“Anand!” Aryan’s face brightened instantly as he hugged him warmly. “Come in.”

Then he turned toward Pooja.

“This is my sister.”

“Nice to meet you,” Anand replied politely.

Nearby, Avni noticed him and smiled.

“Will you drop me home?” she asked playfully.

Anand nodded with a faint smile.

Everyone settled into the drawing room, the atmosphere finally beginning to lighten.

After a few moments, Anand spoke.

“DySP called me. Said he has a surprise for us.”

Aryan looked up.

“Yeah... he messaged me too.”

“Really?”

Aryan took out his phone and showed him the message.

Anand’s expression changed slightly.

“Yesterday,” he said slowly, “he took the case file home while everyone was busy with some function. My father happened to see it.”

He paused.

“He said... ‘Never let these culprits escape.’”

The room grew quieter.

“This is the only case I couldn’t solve,” Anand added softly. “That’s what he said.”

Something in those words struck Aryan deeply.

“Can I meet him once?” Aryan asked quietly.

He remembered that day—the crime scene... and the man standing beside the police jeep. A presence he had never forgotten.

“Of course,” Anand replied. “A few days later, when I go home, you come with me.”

Aryan nodded.

As Anand stood to leave, he turned toward Avni.

“Shall we?”

“Which home?” Avni replied innocently.

For a moment, silence filled the room.

Then everyone burst into laughter.

Aryan walked Anand outside.

They hugged again—longer this time.

“Bye!” Ria called from behind.

Pooja smiled cheerfully. “Aarav brother, let’s go home!”

Anand froze.

“Aarav...?”

The name echoed inside his mind like a forgotten memory returning to life.

A crying boy. That same name. His father's words. The unsolved case.

Everything aligned in a single instant. Slowly, he looked down at the case files in his hand.

And without speaking, he tore them apart.

Piece by piece. Then dropped them quietly into the dustbin nearby.

He walked back toward Aryan calmly.

“Oh,” he said casually, “I forgot to give you something.”

He held out a watch. “Your watch. You left it at my place.”

Aryan stared at it. For a brief second, confusion crossed his face.

He had never been to Anand's house. Then the memory struck him. The broken watch near the roadside.

That day. Near the DySP jeep.

Aryan slowly looked up at Anand.

No words were exchanged. But everything was understood.

You know. And you're letting it go.

Anand gave a faint smile.

“Let’s end this case here,” he said quietly.

Then he turned and walked away. Inside, Ria called out playfully,

“You both meet secretly and don’t even invite us for a party! Next time, we’re all coming.”

Aryan glanced once more at Anand’s retreating figure.

Then at the watch resting in his hand.

Some truths didn’t need words.

And some endings were better left in silence.

Ria, Pooja, and Aryan were soon on their way to his grandparents’ house.

The car moved steadily along the quiet road, the earlier chaos finally settling into an uneasy peace. No one spoke much, yet the silence between them felt lighter now—as though something heavy had finally been left behind.

At one point, the car slowed slightly. Anand stood by the roadside.

Without saying a word, he looked up at the sky and gently tossed a flower into the air.

It rose for a moment...

...then seemed to pause, as though caught by unseen hands and in that fleeting instant, he saw them.

His mother and beside her, his father. Both looking at him with quiet pride.

No pain. No regret. Only peace. Anand's eyes softened.

For the first time in years, the weight inside him disappeared.

It felt as though they were finally free.

And somehow... so was he. The vision faded, but the feeling remained.

He took a deep breath and stepped back as the car moved ahead. Inside the car, unaware of what had just passed behind them, Ria leaned her head gently against the window. Pooja sat quietly, watching Aryan, while Aryan kept his eyes fixed on the road ahead—calm, silent, yet forever changed.

The journey continued. Toward his grandparents' house.

Toward something new.

The road stretched endlessly before them—not as an ending.....but as a beginning.



❧ THE END ❧

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Brajesh Singh is an Indian author, technology leader, and creative storyteller with over two decades of international experience in the IT industry, including several years working across Europe with leading multinational organizations. He holds a Master of Computer Applications and an Executive MBA from the Indian Institute of Management Lucknow .

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Twilight Justice is his debut novel — a gripping psychological thriller that reflects his fascination with human emotions, hidden truths, and the fine line between justice and revenge.

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