JUSTICE

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NewDelhi • London

CONTENTS

CHAPTER 1

The Shadow in the Storm

It was a stormy night with torrential rain. The thunder rumbled as a girl, wearing headphones and carrying an umbrella, walked slowly through the rain. She gripped her umbrella tightly because of the strong wind. Her phone rang. She answered the call.

"Hello, mom."

"Maanvi, where are you? It's raining so heavily. When will you be back?"

"Yes, mom, don't worry, I'm on my way. Just 15 more minutes."

"Okay, come carefully."

"Okay, mom. Bye."

She ended the call and then…

She heard loud footsteps behind her. Turning around, she saw no one. She murmured to herself, "Maybe it was just a cat," relief in her voice, and continued walking. But again, she heard the footsteps, louder this time. Feeling like someone was following her, she quickened her pace. She saw a shadow—pitch black—following her.

Panicking, she reached into her bag for something to defend herself but found nothing. Fear washed over her. Her hands started to tremble. She pulled out her phone to call for help, but it died, leaving her stranded and terrified. Her entire body shook with fear as the person continued to follow her. She started to run, and the figure chased her. Without looking back, she found a car and hid behind it.

Peering through the car window, she saw the dark figure searching for her. Sweat poured down her face, and tears filled her eyes. Suddenly, the man turned towards the window. Her eyes widened, and she instantly ducked down. He saw nothing and began to walk away.

It was still drizzling as she crouched down to check if he had gone by looking under the car. He had large shoes with a star-shaped mark on them. He paced near the car. She tried to move quietly, but she accidentally stepped on a steel can, which made a loud noise. The man turned and walked behind the car, finding her.

She freaked out, eyes wide with terror. Before she could scream, the man covered her mouth with a handkerchief soaked in chloroform. She quickly fell unconscious. He dragged her by her legs, shoved her into the trunk of his car, and drove off to his hideout.

The place was cluttered with tools, ropes, dust, plastic sheets, and rusted objects. The front door had several locks, making escape impossible. The windows

were broken. He tied her to a pillar with rope, grabbed a chair, and sat down. Slowly, he began eating a bun, waiting for her to wake up.

Back at home, the front doorbell rang. Smiti ran to the door, hoping her daughter had arrived. She opened it to find her husband. She hugged him, crying.

"What happened? Why are you crying?"

"Maanvi hasn't come home yet. Her phone is switched off, and it's raining. I don't know what to do. I'm so scared."

"Why didn't you tell me earlier? Call the police now. I'll go out and search for her. Don't worry; she's probably just waiting for the rain to stop somewhere."

"She took an umbrella, why would she stop? I'm really scared. Please, go find her, Amit."

"Okay, call the police." He grabbed his umbrella and rushed out. "Maanvi, where are you? Dad's here! I'll take you home. Maanvi!"

He walked through every street and alley, shouting her name. Meanwhile, Smiti called the police.

"Hello, sir, I'm calling from Nilaya House. My... my daughter is missing. Can you please help us find her?"

"Hello, ma'am? I can't hear you clearly. Please come to the police station to file a report and provide a description."

"Okay, I'm coming."

Maanvi's mom grabbed her phone, locked the front door, and headed to the police station.

Maanvi slowly opened her eyes. The room was dim and gloomy.

"Oh, you're finally awake," the man said in a raspy voice.

She tried to speak, but her mouth was gagged with a cloth.

"What are you saying? I can't hear you at all. Oh, sorry, one second."

He walked slowly towards her. She shook her head and tried to move back, but the pillar behind her prevented her escape. He knelt beside her, brushed her hair back, and grabbed it tightly. He removed the cloth from her mouth.

"Aaah," she cried.

"Pl... pl..." she tried to plead.

"What? Speak louder; I can't hear you."

Only half-conscious, she struggled to speak but managed to say, "Please, leave me. What did I do? Please, I won't tell anyone. Just let me go. My parents are waiting for me. Please."

He laughed darkly. "I've been waiting for this moment for a long time, and you think I'll let you go so

easily? You're my first victim. You should feel lucky. Don't worry—I won't hurt you much. I'll just kill you."

Smirking, he added, "Now shut your mouth."

"Please, no," she cried, tears streaming down her face.

"I'm not going to waste much more time. Say goodbye to this world," he said coldly.

He stood up, grabbed a long, thick iron rod, and dragged it across the floor, creating a loud, unsettling sound. Maanvi's eyes widened in fear. She squirmed in desperation, tears falling uncontrollably. He lifted the rod and struck her head, causing it to bleed.

Next, he took a pair of scissors and began to shave her head as she writhed in pain. "Are you in pain? Oops, sorry, can't help you there. You need to suffer." He laughed again.

He raised the rod once more time and struck her head even harder. Her head was now completely battered, and blood streamed down her face. One of her eyes was severely injured, and she could barely keep it open.

He then grabbed her legs, pinned her down, and strangled her with both hands. She tried to fight back, but her strength faded. Her eyes rolled back, and she died.

Satisfied, he stood up. "Not enough," he muttered. He took a sharp knife and carved the letter **'J'** into her forehead. Then, heating the knife, he made random cuts on her arms and legs. Blood flowed over her entire body.

He looked at her body with twisted satisfaction. "I'm done," he said. "Now, it's time to get rid of you."

He dragged her body upstairs, leaving a trail of blood. "Because of you, I'll have to clean up this mess," he growled, stabbing her dead body out of frustration. He stuffed her into a sack and loaded it into his car trunk.

He drove to her house, parked, and looked around to make sure no one was watching. He opened the trunk, pulled out the sack, and dumped her body in front of the house. He waited for five minutes, head down, before getting back into his car and driving away.

CHAPTER 2

The Search is On

At the police station...

"Sir, my daughter Maanvi hasn't come home yet. Her phone is also switched off. Please find her, sir."

"Ma'am, don't panic. We will find her. Give me her number, and we'll track her phone."

"Yes, sir, her number is 987*******," Smiti says.

"Gajendra, come here," calls Gautham, the senior inspector. "Take this number and tell cyber security to track it. And also call Dhruv here."

"Okay," replies Gajendra.

Dhruv arrives. "Yes, sir, you called me?"

"Dhruv, take your team immediately and search for Maanvi. Keep me updated on all the details, no matter how small."

"Ma'am," Dhruv asks, "can you please give us a description of her?"

"Sir, she was wearing a yellow skirt and a white top. She has short hair and..." (after a pause) "...she was wearing a swan pendant around her neck."

"Okay, ma'am, don't worry. Our team will find her as soon as possible."

Dhruv takes down the details and leaves the office.

Gautham hands a glass of water to Smiti. "Drink this. The police team is already searching for Maanvi."

Meanwhile, Maanvi's father, exhausted from searching for her, goes to the police station. There, he sees his wife crying and pleading with the police to find their daughter. When she sees her husband, she runs towards him, grabs his hand, and asks, "Did you find her? Is she home?"

He stands still, unable to speak, lacking the courage to tell her that he hasn't found their daughter.

"Can you at least say something? I'm terrified." Slowly, she collapses at his feet, sobbing uncontrollably.

"Don't worry," he says, "we will find her, and the police are helping us."

The police inspector approaches Maanvi's mother. "Don't worry, ma'am. Our team is searching, and we will find her."

Dhruv instructs the driver to take them to the library, as Maanvi was last seen there. When they arrive, they find the library closed. Disappointed, Dhruv asks the driver to take them along the route to her house. On the way, they search for her but find nothing. Finally,

they reach near her house and see a sack lying in front of the gate.

Dhruv walks towards the sack and catches the smell of blood. Since it's night, he can't see clearly. He takes out his phone and turns on the flashlight, directing it toward the sack. He freezes in shock. Another inspector steps closer. The sack is soaked with blood, and blood is dripping from it.

"Wait. Put on gloves and masks first," Dhruv instructs.

Both inspectors put on gloves and masks. They carefully approach the sack. Slowly, they open it.

Dhruv and the other inspector are horrified. Dhruv's eyes widen. His face drenched in sweat, hands trembling. He has never seen anything like this. Inside the sack is a girl's face, covered in blood, making it impossible to recognize her. Dhruv looks at the inspector. "Get her out of the sack."

The other inspector, with the help of the driver, pulls the girl out of the sack. They cover her body with a white cloth. Dhruv dials Gautham's number.

In a shaky voice, Dhruv says, "Hello? Hello, sir."

"Yes, Dhruv, did you find any clues?" Gautham asks, hopeful.

"Sir... we found a sack in front of Mr. Amit's house. There's a girl's body inside. It's difficult to identify her because her face is covered in blood."

"WHAT?!" Gautham exclaims in shock. "Okay, wait, I'm coming. Call the forensic team immediately."

"Okay, sir," Dhruv replies.

Gautham, along with two other inspectors, leaves the police station.

At the station, Amit approaches Gautham. "Sir, did you find my daughter?"

Gautham replies, "We've found a clue, and I'm going to investigate. Please stay here with your wife. We will return soon. Can you send me a photo of your daughter?"

"Okay, sir," replies Amit, sending Maanvi's photo to Gautham.

Gajendra updates Gautham, "Sir, we tracked her phone. It's showing as being near Nilaya House."

"Let's head to Nilaya House right away," Gautham responds.

Gautham and the other inspectors leave the police station.

Back at the station, Gajendra brings a glass of water to Amit and his wife. "Please drink this, sir. We've tracked her phone, and we'll find her soon."

Gautham reaches the crime scene. The forensic team is already there, working on the body. They clean the bloodstains from the face, making it slightly recognizable. Gautham enters the scene, glancing at the heavily damaged body. He remains silent, numb.

He hands Maanvi's photo to the forensic team. "Please check if this is her."

One of the forensic members takes the photo. "We'll take the body to the lab for further identification. Give us some time."

The forensic team takes the body to the lab. Gautham calls Gajendra, "We found a body near Amit's house. The description matches but not sure. Bring the family here."

"Okay, sir," Gajendra replies.

CHAPTER 3

The Unbearable Loss of Maanvi

Many people gathered at Mr. Amit's house. Everyone was scared. The neighbours felt very bad, and some of them were even crying because Maanvi was really a sweet and innocent girl. She always respected and helped everyone. Everyone was fond of her. Another police car arrived, and in it were Maanvi's parents. They got out of the car, confused about what had happened and why people had gathered there. Smiti's friend ran toward her and hugged her tightly.

"What happened, Archana? Why are you hugging me? Is something wrong? Why is everyone gathered here?" Smiti asked, concerned.

Archana only cried.

Gautham said, "Please, let's get inside and talk," and took both of them inside.

"Sir, please tell us what has happened," Amit asked with worry.

Just then, Gautham received a call. "Sir, I'm calling from the forensic team. We have the results. The picture of the girl you sent matches the body. She is also wearing the swan pendant you mentioned."

"Oh my God, what will I tell the parents?" Gautham asked.

"Sir, you can bring the parents for body verification and confirm it."

"Okay, fine," Gautham said, cutting the call in sorrow.

"Mr. Amit, I'm sorry to inform you, but before you arrived, we found a girl's body," Gautham explained.

"Sir, don't tell me it's Maanvi, please no!" cried Smiti.

"The forensic team has confirmed that it is Maanvi. Please cooperate with us and come to the forensic lab."

Both of them broke down. Smiti cried out loud, "This is not possible! You're lying. My daughter will come back. You'll see."

"Ma'am, I'm sorry for your loss, but this is the truth. Please cooperate," Gautham said gently.

"What nonsense are you talking about? Why should we cooperate when that girl isn't our daughter? Just stop and leave! My daughter will come back!" Amit shouted with tears in his eyes.

Gautham softly intervened, "Please, sir."

He led both of them out of the house and seated them in the car, taking them to the forensic lab. Smiti felt helpless and lacked the courage to face what was

coming. When they entered the lab, the forensic team brought out the body of the girl, covered in a white cloth.

"Sir, we found this around her neck," they said, showing them the swan pendant Amit had gifted his daughter on her last birthday.

Amit lost all his courage. Tears rolled down his cheeks.

"Sir, I don't think you'll be able to see her face; it's completely damaged."

"No, I still don't believe it. Open the cloth. I will believe it only when I see her myself," Amit insisted.

"Okay, sir," the forensic scientist replied, and uncovered her face.

"Maanvi!" Amit shouted in sorrow.

"Maanvi, please get up! Let's go back home. Please wake up. See, Mama and Papa are here. Please get up," Smiti cried out loudly.

Gautham, filled with regret, said, "I'm very sorry."

Amit and Smiti collapsed to the floor, crying uncontrollably.

The forensic scientist spoke softly, "Sir, we are sorry for your loss. We have run the tests, so you can take the body now."

"How dare you call my child a 'body'? She has a beautiful name. Call her by it!" Amit shouted in anguish.

"I'm sorry, sir. You can take her now," the scientist apologized.

Amit and his wife left the lab and returned to their house. Soon after, the ambulance arrived, and they brought Maanvi's body inside. The night passed, and all their relatives arrived at Amit's house, mourning the loss of Maanvi. Smiti sat in a corner, crying. The house was filled with people, and everyone were speaking only good things about Maanvi. No one could believe she was truly gone. Smiti and Amit's friends tried to console them. Gautham and Dhruv also came to bid Maanvi a final goodbye.

After two hours, it was time to say their last farewell.

Smiti begged, "Please don't take her. Please, we can't live without her. Please."

Amit consoled her, "Please don't cry. I know it's going to be very hard for us, but I'm here for you. You're not alone. Even Maanvi will feel bad if you cry, so please don't."

Although Amit's heart was shattered, he tried to stay strong. They got ready to take her away. Smiti became completely numb, clutching a photograph of Maanvi with her eyes closed. They took Maanvi,

performed all the rituals, and finally, Amit said one last goodbye to his daughter before leaving the graveyard. He returned home.

He wiped his tears and bravely entered the house. He told Smiti, "Come, let's have some food. We need energy to live, even to cry." He brought a plate of food and started feeding his wife.

"Why did this happen to our daughter? Why was she punished? Why our daughter?" Smiti cried.

Amit had no answer. He took Smiti to their room, and after helping her fall asleep, he went to Maanvi's room. As he entered, he could almost see Smiti sitting there. He could hear her singing and feel his daughter's presence. He sat on the bed and started crying. He loved Maanvi very much and still couldn't believe she was gone. Eventually, he lay down on her bed and fell asleep there.

CHAPTER 4

A Clue in the Shadows

The next morning, Gautham gets a call. "Hello sir, I'm speaking from the forensic team. The report is ready, and you can collect it. I also need to talk to you."

"Okay, I'll be there," Gautham replies, then ends the call.

He leaves his cabin and says, "Dhruv, join me." Together, they head to the lab.

"Hello, sir. My name is Anvi," the forensic scientist introduces herself. "Sir, here is the report, and I have to tell you, in my five years of experience, this is the first time I've come across such a case."

She shows a picture from the scan and explains to Gautham, "Sir, you see this part? This section of the skull is completely damaged. It shows that she was hit twice, with significant force. You can also see that her left eye is damaged."

Dhruv takes notes as Anvi speaks. She then takes out another picture from the file, an X-ray of the neck. "You see these red lines? She was choked to death. The force was so severe that her neck bones were broken. And you see these marks on her hands and legs? They

were inflicted after she was already dead, just for satisfaction."

"How can someone be so cruel, sir?" Dhruv asks, disturbed.

"There are psychos in this world who do such things," Gautham replies.

"But sir, I didn't understand why the letter **'J'** was carved on her forehead," Anvi adds.

"I think he's leaving us a clue. Every psycho killer has a signature," Gautham speculates.

"Sir, we need to find this guy as soon as possible," Dhruv says with anger.

"Let's go now," Gautham says. They collect all the reports from Anvi and start to leave when she calls after them, "Sir, one more thing—I think this was a planned and well-executed murder, motivated by revenge."

"Revenge?" Dhruv asks.

"Yes," Anvi replies.

"Thank you for the report," Gautham says, and they leave the lab.

They head directly to Amit's house for interrogation. Gautham rings the doorbell. When Amit opens the door and sees them, he slams it shut.

"Mr. Amit, please open the door. We need to talk to you," Gautham calls out.

"I don't want to talk to you, and neither does my wife! You couldn't save my child. We don't need your help. I'll find the murderer myself, and I'll give him his punishment."

"Amit, the police are here for that. I know this is a difficult time, but if you don't help us, there might be another girl who gets murdered. Another family will suffer, just like you are now. Please, we need your help," Dhruv pleads.

There's silence from the other side. Gautham and Dhruv exchange looks and begin to leave, but then the door opens behind them.

"Come in," Amit says.

Gautham and Dhruv enter and sit on the sofa.

Amit speaks first, "Yes, what do you want to ask?"

"We're really sorry for your loss," Dhruv says with a sorrowful voice. "Did Maanvi have any enemies, anyone who would try to harm her?"

Amit shakes his head. "She was just a college student. She loved helping people. She was simple and soft-spoken. Nobody hated her. Why would they do this?"

"Okay, sir, but the forensic report suggests that this was an act of revenge," Gautham points out.

"Anyway, we'll investigate and find the culprit as soon as possible. We'll leave now," Gautham says as they get up to go.

As they leave Amit's house, Gautham says to Dhruv, "Let's check the alleys and see if there are any CCTV cameras nearby."

"Okay, sir," Dhruv replies.

Dhruv walks down the alley, asking people if they noticed anything suspicious. Meanwhile, Gautham spots a grocery store with a CCTV camera installed outside. He enters the store and introduces himself, "Hello, I'm Senior Inspector Gautham. I'd like to ask about a case. Can I get the footage from this camera?" he asks, pointing to the camera.

"Sir, I'm sorry, but that camera is just for show. It doesn't work," the shopkeeper replies.

"WHAT? Why have a camera if it doesn't work?" Gautham responds in frustration. "Have you noticed anything suspicious?" he asks.

"No, sir," the shopkeeper replies.

Feeling disappointed, Gautham leaves. Dhruv spots a street camera on a pole and contacts the cyber team.

"Hello, this is Inspector Dhruv. I'm in Lane 2, Vidyapur Road. Can you send me the CCTV footage from here?"

"Sir, can you give me the pole and camera numbers?" the cyber officer asks.

"The camera is on pole number 6, camera number 8," Dhruv replies.

"Give me two minutes, sir," the officer says.

After two minutes, the officer gets back to him. "Sir, the camera is under repair. It hasn't been working for a week. I'm sorry, we can't provide any data."

Dhruv, now angry, says, "What nonsense are you talking about? You're an officer, and it's your responsibility to ensure the cameras work! This is the only camera in the lane, and we're investigating a case. This is unacceptable! I'll inform the senior cyber branch. Get it repaired as soon as possible." He hangs up and continues his investigation.

After half an hour, both Dhruv and Gautham meet, their faces showing clear disappointment. They had found no clues and returned to the police station.

Dhruv sits at his desk, going over all the reports, trying desperately to find a clue, but keeps coming up short. Frustrated, he slams the reports on the desk. "What am I missing? How can I solve this? How, how, how?" he shouts. Other officers glance at him, and he glares at them before storming out of the station.

"Sir, don't worry. You'll solve this case. I've been working here for 10 years, and I've seen cases like this.

You'll figure it out," Gajendra says to Dhruv, trying to console him.

Dhruv looks at Gajendra and replies, "Yes, I'll find the culprit as soon as possible."

As Dhruv walks outside, he notices a man washing his car while the man's son plays with the car's dash camera. The boy throws the camera, and it lands near Dhruv. Bending down to pick it up, Dhruv pauses. He realizes something. "Why didn't I think of this? Amit's car was parked outside, and Maanvi's body was found near it. There could be something captured on the dash camera."

Dhruv quickly hands the camera back to the boy, then rushes to the police station, grabs his bike, and heads straight to Amit's house. He looks at the car and rings the doorbell.

"Mr. Amit, can I get the dash camera footage from your car?" Dhruv asks.

Amit rushes to the car, removes the camera chip, and hands it to Dhruv.

"Thank you, this will be very helpful," Dhruv says, filled with hope, and leaves.

CHAPTER 5

The Black Mask

He goes directly to the station, steps into his cabin, takes his laptop, and inserts the chip. He begins searching for the video from that night. He finds it. It was a pitch-black night, and it had been raining heavily. The video is a bit blurry because of the rain. For the first few minutes, he doesn't notice anything unusual.

"This is my last chance to find a clue," he mutters to himself, almost closing the laptop. But then… he hears the sound of a car approaching from the video. Quickly, he reopens the laptop, increases the brightness and volume, and sees a car approaching. Dhruv zooms in. The car's window rolls down, and a man's head appears. His face is covered with a black mask. Then the car door opens, and the man steps out.

It's so dark that it's hard to make out the man's physique, but Dhruv starts taking notes. He observes that the man is very tall and is wearing a long black coat. The man walks to the back of the car, opens the trunk, and drags a heavy sack all the way to the gate of Mr. Amit's house. The man stands there for five minutes, staring at the sack, and then bows his head.

Dhruv finds this behaviour odd—why would he bow his head if he had just killed someone? The man gets back into the car, and Dhruv zooms in further to check the license plate, but there is no number plate at all. The man then drives away, disappearing into the darkness.

With a deep breath, he closes the laptop. He knows that this case isn't going to be easy, but he's not about to give up.

Dhruv grabs the notes and pen drive and rushes out. "Gautham sir, I've found a clue! I went to Amit's house, and from the dashcam of his car, I found footage of the killer. And here is the proof," he says, pointing to the pen drive. "You need to check out this video."

"Good job, Dhruv. Play the video. Let me see it," Gautham responds. Dhruv plays the video, and Gautham watches, his expression turning to shock as he sees the killer bowing toward the body. He looks at Dhruv with disbelief. "What is this behaviour? Ridiculous!"

"Sir, based on this video, I've made these notes. The suspect is tall, but to determine his exact height, we need to send this video to the cyber team."

"Do it quickly, Dhruv," Gautham instructs.

"Yes, sir," Dhruv replies, handing the footage to the cyber officer.

Dhruv sits on a chair, waiting patiently for the report. After 10 minutes, the officer returns.

"Sir, here is the report. Let me explain the details. The suspect

has broad shoulders. From his build, it seems he is quite young—maybe in his 30s. Also, he looks very strong," the officer explains thoroughly.

Dhruv is pleased with the information. "Thank you. I'll get back to you if I need anything else."

He leaves the cyber team and returns to the police station, gathering all the clues. Dhruv pins everything onto the whiteboard in Gautham's office.

"Sir, the first victim is Maanvi. She was a college student, and her father is a teacher. The most suspicious detail is the mark on her forehead—it looks like the letter 'J'. What that means is still a mystery, and we need to figure it out. As for the killer, his appearance indicates he's very strong. This is all I've discovered so far, sir."

"Good, Dhruv. Keep digging for more clues and update me," Gautham says.

"Yes, sir," Dhruv replies with determination in his voice and leaves the room.

Dhruv looks at the whiteboard and tries to find a clue. Gautham says, "Dhruv, come, let's go to my home for dinner."

"No, sir, I'll go back home and eat," Dhruv replies.

"Wait, let me call my wife. You'll come only if she scolds you," Gautham insists.

"No, no, sir! Ma'am would feel bad if I didn't join. Okay, fine, let's go," Dhruv agrees, and they both laugh as they head to Gautham's house.

At Gautham's house, they are greeted by his wife, Anjali. "So, Dhruv, I heard you didn't want to come over. Is there a problem with coming to our home?" Anjali asks with a teasing tone.

"No, Anjali ma'am, it's nothing like that. I was just a bit preoccupied with the case," Dhruv explains.

"Which case, Dhruv?" Anjali inquires.

Dhruv starts to answer, "Ma'am, it's about that ser"

But Gautham interrupts him. "Anjali, don't worry about these things. We police officers handle all that. Go ahead and set up dinner. And Dhruv, remember not to discuss case details outside the station, understood?"

"Yes, sir," Dhruv replies softly.

Anjali rolls her eyes playfully. "Okay, okay, I'm not interested in all that anyway. Come on, let's eat."

They all gather around the dinner table. "Wow, Anjali ma'am, this food is incredible! Could you pack some of this paneer masala for me? It's so good!" Dhruv says with enthusiasm.

"Of course, feel free to take some," Anjali replies warmly. "See, Gautham? He appreciates my cooking. You never seem to like what I make," she says with a giggle.

After dinner, Dhruv and Gautham sit in the lawn to get some fresh air. Suddenly, Diya opens the gate, looking exhausted, but when she spots Dhruv, her face lights up. She runs toward him. "Brother! When did you get here? I think the last time you came over was my birthday, and that was two months ago. I'm so happy to see you!" She gives him a tight hug. "By the way, did you already have dinner?"

"I'm good, Diya. How have you been?" Dhruv asks with a smile.

"I'm good, bro," she replies.

Gautham interrupts, "Diya, why are you so late? You know it's dangerous outside at this hour. Next time, call me, and I'll pick you up."

"Uff, Dad, I was at the library. My exams are coming up," Diya explains.

"Oh, finally you're studying!" Dhruv teases.

Diya playfully picks up a pillow lying nearby and swings it at Dhruv, who dodges with a laugh.

Anjali steps out of the house, calling to them, "It's getting dark. Let's all go to bed now. Diya, I've warmed up some food for you, go eat. Dhruv, it's already late,

and it looks like it's about to rain. Why don't you just stay here tonight?"

"No, ma'am, it's okay. I have some work to do at home. Thank you for the lovely dinner," Dhruv says. He bids goodbye to everyone and heads out. Diya goes back to the kitchen to have her dinner.

As she sits down, she notices a package on the counter. "Mom, what's in this bag?"

"Oh, how did I forget that! Diya, go catch up with Dhruv and give it to him. Hurry!" Anjali urges.

Diya rushes outside, but as she runs down the driveway, she sees a car approaching. She stops and waves it down. The car slows, and she walks up to the window. "Bro?" she calls out, knocking on the tinted glass. The car window rolls down, revealing darkness inside. Diya switches on her flashlight, shining it toward the driver. She startles for a second when she sees a man wearing a black mask. Then she relaxes, giggling.

"What, bro? Are you trying to scare me? You know I'm not that easily frightened!" she says, laughing.

She reaches her hand inside the car to playfully tug off the mask, but the masked figure suddenly grabs her wrist tightly, his grip cold and firm.

Meanwhile, the gate to Diya's house opens. "Diya, what are you doing over there?" Dhruv shouts. Diya freezes, realizing she thought it was Dhruv inside the car.

"Bro, how come you're outside? Didn't you leave?" she asks, confused.

"Yes, I was about to leave, but I had to use the washroom before heading out. I'm leaving now," Dhruv explains. "But who's in the car? Who were you talking to?"

"I... I thought it was you in the car," Diya says, her hand still inside the vehicle.

Dhruv's eyes narrow with suspicion as he slowly walks toward the car. The masked man suddenly releases Diya's hand, and she quickly pulls it back. The man in the black mask adjusts it on his face.

Dhruv steps up to the car, the man looked weird wearing a mask which covered his whole face. Awkwardly, he says, "I'm sorry, sir. She thought it was... well, we're sorry for the confusion." Without a word, the masked man starts the car and drives away.

Dhruv turns to Diya with a frown. "What are you doing out here? Go inside! And why would you knock on someone else's car window? That's dangerous. I'm just using my motorbike, remember?" he teases.

Diya snaps back, "I came out to give you this parcel! And hey, when are you going to buy a car?" Dhruv teases her back, "Very soon, but I will never allow you in my car." He takes the parcel, says goodbye, and walks towards his bike.

"But, bro, I think that guy was weird. He was wearing a black mask. Who does that?" Diya asks, still a bit uneasy.

Dhruv laughs. "Maybe it's just some new trend. Don't worry about it so much. Bye, my champ," he says with a smile.

"Bye, my superhero," Diya replies, grinning.

Dhruv starts his motorbike and rides off, leaving Gautham's house behind.

CHAPTER 6

Shadows of Vidyapur

The next morning at the police station, the landline rings. Gajendra picks up and answers the call, "Hello, sir. There's a sack fallen in front of my house. A very unpleasant smell is coming from it, and there are a lot of bloodstains. Can you please come and check?"

Gajendra runs to inform Gautham, who finds it suspicious. "Go to the place and call Dhruv," Gautham instructs.

Gajendra hurries to the location. Upon arriving, he is shocked because it looks exactly like the first murder case. Terrified, he immediately calls Dhruv.

Dhruv's phone rings. "Hello, sir," Gajendra says. "Yes, Gajendra, tell me," Dhruv replies.

"Sir, I'll send you the location. Please come here quickly."

"Yes, but what happened?"

"Sir, you'll understand when you get here."

Dhruv starts his bike and heads to the location. Upon arrival, he sees a crowd of people gathered. He

pushes his way through the crowd and, when he sees the sack, he is stunned.

He looks at Gajendra and says, "Open the sack." Gajendra hesitantly opens it and discovers a girl's body inside. He looks at Dhruv and says, "Sir, it's the same killer."

Dhruv calls the forensic team. Then he addresses the crowd, "Everyone, please leave the area. The police are here now." His voice is firm but calm. Slowly, the crowd disperses.

"Who reported this?" Dhruv asks.

"Sir, my name is Chirag. I was out for a morning walk when I saw it. I didn't touch the sack. He looks nervous. "But I don't understand why someone would put it in front of my house."

Dhruv immediately suspects the worst and asks, "Who lives in your house?"

"Sir, it's me, my wife, and my only daughter."

"Okay. Is your daughter at home?"

"No, sir. She's on a trekking trip with her friends. She'll be back tonight." Dhruv feels relieved as Chirag explains.

"Did you notice anything strange? Anyone passing by?" Dhruv presses.

"Sir, I'm a doctor. I just returned from a conference in London last evening. I was away for a week and I was completely exhausted, so I ate and went straight to bed. My wife wasn't home either—she went to her mother's house the same day I left."

"Thank you, Chirag. If I need more information, I'll contact you."

"Okay, sir. By the way, when will this mess be cleaned up? My wife is on her way back, and if she sees this, she'll surely kill me!" Chirag tries to laugh, but his nervousness is obvious.

"Yes, the forensic team will arrive shortly to handle everything," Dhruv assures him.

"Sir, what's your name?" Chirag asks.

"I'm Dhruv, the inspector at Vidyapur Police Station."

"I see. I haven't seen you before."

"That's because I was recently appointed here."

The forensic team arrives and looks for evidence. They take pictures from every angle and collect samples. Finally, they take the sack and body with them.

Dhruv returns to the police station feeling completely demotivated. It's already the second murder, and he feels helpless. He sits in the station, waiting for the forensic report, anxiety growing as time passes.

Meanwhile, Chirag tries calling his daughter Aarohi, but her phone is switched off. Feeling uneasy, he calls her friend Rita.

"Hello, Rita? This is Aarohi's father. Her phone is switched off. Can you pass the phone to her?"

"Uncle, Aarohi isn't with us," Rita replies, her voice trembling.

"What do you mean, 'not with you'?!" Chirag demands, panic rising.

"She left yesterday morning, Uncle. We're coming back today."

"Why did she leave early? How could you not inform me? Where should I search for her?" His voice is frantic.

"I'm really sorry, Uncle. Things were tense, and I didn't have your number," Rita apologizes.

"Keep your apology to yourself!" Chirag shouts before hanging up.

Time drags on, and Chirag grows more worried. Finally, unable to wait any longer, he decides to search for her himself. He gets into his car and drives around frantically, looking everywhere. Meanwhile, Rita calls all her friends, but no one has seen Aarohi.

Desperate, Chirag heads to the police station, where he finds Dhruv. Running up to him, he says, "Sir, you asked me about my daughter. She hasn't come

home. I called her friends, but they said she left early. Please, help me find her."

Dhruv's heart sinks. The worst has come true. The girl in the sack was Aarohi. Pushing aside his own horror, he says, "Sir, don't worry. We'll find your daughter. Please, calm down and send me her picture."

Chirag quickly sends a photo of Aarohi. Dhruv compares it to the picture of the body, and the resemblance is undeniable—it's her.

Dhruv doesn't know how to break the news to Chirag. He excuses himself and goes to Gautham, his face heavy with sorrow.

"Yes, Dhruv? What happened?" Gautham asks with concern.

"Sir, look at this." Dhruv shows him both photos.

Gautham's expression darkens as he compares them. "Let's not jump to conclusions. Send the photo to forensics and wait for the official report. In the meantime, send Chirag home. Tell him we'll find her by tomorrow," Gautham says calmly.

Dhruv returns to Chirag and reassures him, "Our team is searching for Aarohi. We'll find her. Please, go home."

Trusting Dhruv's words, Chirag leaves.

Back at the station, Dhruv turns to Gautham and says, "Sir, we need to catch this killer. I don't know who

his next victim will be." The desperation in his voice is clear.

"We will. We have to," Gautham replies. "But it's late. Let's continue tomorrow." With that, they both leave for the night.

CHAPTER 7

A Trek into Darkness

It was a very gloomy morning. Dhruv arrived at the police station. Before he got there, Chirag was already waiting.

"Did you find my daughter? Where is she?" Chirag asked urgently.

Dhruv, still waiting for the forensic report, couldn't give him any definite answers. "Our team is working on this. We are searching, and we will find her. Don't worry. Can I get the number of one of her friends?" Dhruv asked.

Chirag handed him a number. "Take this, sir," he said, giving him Rita's contact.

Dhruv called Rita. "Hello, Rita, this is Inspector Dhruv speaking. You need to come to the police station. I need to talk to you about Aarohi."

"Sir, didn't you find her yet?" Rita asked, her voice full of worry.

"No, not yet. Please come to the station," Dhruv replied.

"Okay, sir. I'll come right away," Rita answered, clearly anxious.

At the same time, Chirag received a call. Hesitating, he picked up.

"Hello, Chirag? Where are you? Why is nobody at home, and why is Aarohi's phone switched off? Did she call you by any chance?" asked Meena, his wife, in a worried voice.

Chirag couldn't bring himself to answer her questions. He was terrified of how she would react when she learned that their daughter was missing. "Meena, I think Aarohi is at Rita's house. I'm on my way home. I'll come, wait for me," Chirag replied, trying to manage the situation.

Chirag went to Dhruv and pleaded, "Sir, please, I beg you, find my daughter. I just got a call from my wife, and I don't know how I'll tell her. I managed to calm her down for now, but I trust you, sir. Please find her." The worry on Chirag's face was evident.

"Please wait, sir. We will find her," Dhruv reassured him, though he hoped the body they'd found wasn't Aarohi's.

Chirag left the station.

Ten minutes later, Rita arrived at the police station. She approached Gajendra, an officer.

"Sir, can I meet Inspector Dhruv?" Rita asked.

"If you want to register a complaint, you can tell me, and I'll write it down. You can't meet the inspector directly. What's your name?" Gajendra responded.

"My name is Rita. I need to speak to Dhruv sir. He asked me to come, and it's about my friend Aarohi."

"Oh, I'm very sorry, madam. Please wait, I'll inform him right away," Gajendra said before quickly heading to Dhruv's cabin. He opened the door to find Dhruv having lunch.

Dhruv looked up. "Yes, Gajendra, what happened?"

Gajendra hesitated, not wanting to disturb Dhruv, who hadn't been eating properly since the case began. "Sir, finish your lunch. I'll tell you afterward."

"It's okay. Tell me now," Dhruv insisted.

"Sir, a girl named Rita is here to meet you," Gajendra replied.

Dhruv immediately closed his tiffin box. "Gajendra, send her in."

"Sir, please finish your lunch first. You've already been skipping meals."

"For me, ending this case and catching the criminal is more important," Dhruv said firmly.

"Okay, sir," Gajendra replied and went to bring Rita.

Rita was scared and worried about her friend. She entered the room and took a seat. Dhruv questioned her, "Tell me, why did Aarohi leave the group before the others?"

"Sir, because..." she paused.

Dhruv spoke gently, "Listen, you need to tell me everything. This is about your friend Aarohi. I heard you were very close to her."

Rita started sobbing. "Sir, she was my best friend. I should've stopped her from leaving that day. Please find her, sir," she pleaded as tears rolled down her face. Dhruv offered her some tissues.

"If you want us to find your friend, you have to tell me what happened," Dhruv said.

"Yes, sir. I'll tell you everything," Rita replied.

At the Trip

"I'm so tired! How much farther do we have to walk?" Aarohi complained, struggling to catch her breath as they trekked uphill.

Rohit teased her, "Aarohi, you were the one who planned this trek, and now you're tired?"

Aarohi laughed, "I didn't know we'd be walking so much!"

"Just 5 kilometres more," Rohit said.

"WHAT?!" Aarohi shouted. After a pause, she said, "Sorry guys, I'm not coming with you. Please exclude me."

Rita tried to convince her. "Come on, Aarohi, remember we promised to see the sunrise together."

Their other friends, Vaibhav, Shreya, and Rahul, encouraged her to continue. Eventually, after much talking, giggling, and joking, they all reached the top of the hill, exhausted. It was past 8:00 PM. They found a beautiful spot, and the boys started putting up tents while the girls prepared Maggi for dinner. They made a bonfire, ate, and then retreated to their respective tents, exhausted.

The next morning, Aarohi woke up early and was amazed by the sight of the sunrise. Excited, she shouted, "Guys, wake up! Look at the sunrise!"

Everyone rushed out of their tents to enjoy the view. They took pictures and relaxed, watching the sunrise. Time passed, and it was time for breakfast. Rahul, known for his pranks, decided to play one on Aarohi, who was terrified of lizards. He found a plastic lizard in his bag and slipped it into her sandwich while preparing breakfast.

When Aarohi took a few bites of her sandwich, she suddenly felt something odd. She opened it and screamed, "AAHHH! Lizard!"

"What happened?" Rita asked.

"A l-l-lizard!" Aarohi stammered.

Rahul burst out laughing. "I finally pranked you! Look at your face! You're sweating!"

Everyone except Rita laughed along. Aarohi, feeling humiliated, slapped Rahul. "You have no idea how I'm feeling right now. All of you are idiots! I should never have come on this trip. I'm done with all of you."

She stormed off to her tent, packed her bags, and left. Rita scolded Rahul, "That wasn't funny. Aarohi has been terrified of lizards since childhood."

"I'm sorry, I didn't mean to hurt her," Rahul replied.

"Go apologize to her," Rita said. But by the time they reached Aarohi's tent, she had already gone.

Back to the Present

"This is what happened, sir. We thought she had already left when we didn't find her at the tent," Rita finished her story.

"You shouldn't have played with someone's fear like that," Dhruv said sternly.

"Sorry, sir," Rita replied.

"Okay, we will find her. You may leave now," Dhruv said.

"Please, sir, find her," Rita pleaded before leaving.

Dhruv thought hard about what could've happened to Aarohi. Just then, his phone rang.

"Hello, Dhruv sir, the forensic reports are out. You may come," said Anvi from the lab.

"Okay," Dhruv replied and headed to the forensic lab.

CHAPTER 8

Into the Trap

At the camp when Aarohi had left.

"These people have no respect for feelings, especially that Rahul," murmurs Aarohi to herself as she walks down the hill. "I am never going to talk to them." Aarohi was very angry and hurt that her own friends had made fun of her fears. Her phone rings; it's Rita. She looks at the phone and declines the call. Again, Rita calls. Aarohi declines it once more. "Rita is my best friend—how could she do this to me? I'm so done." Aarohi was so upset that she turned off her phone, determined not to take any more calls from them.

It was getting darker and darker as she moved. The darkness deepened, and she could barely see anything. Suddenly, she slipped. "Aahh!" she cried out, falling into a pit. "What the hell is this now? Where am I?" she muttered to herself. She pulled out a flashlight from her bag, looked around, and saw that she was surrounded by mud. Panic began to set in. "How will I get out of here? Who is going to help me?" She looked around for something to grab but found nothing and felt a wave of disappointment wash over her. She sat down, disheartened. Then she heard footsteps.

Sudden hope filled her mind. She stood up and started shouting, "Hello? Is anyone here? Can you please help me? I'm stuck in this pit! Please, can you hear me?" The footsteps grew louder as they approached the pit, and she shouted again, more desperately, "Please help me. I need your help, please!"

A tall, built man approached the pit. "Do you need my help?" he asked with concern. "Yes, please," Aarohi replied, shining her flashlight upwards. The man was wearing a long black coat, and she couldn't see him clearly. He threw a rope down. "Hold onto this tightly. I'll pull you up," he instructed. "Okay," Aarohi said, grabbing the rope firmly. The man slowly pulled her up, and she was finally out of the pit. "Thank you, sir, for helping me," she said gratefully. He nodded and began to walk away. "Sir, could you please guide me on how to get down the hill? I have no idea where to go."

The man responded, "Go down and take a left; you'll find the main road there, and you can probably get a ride." "Thank you," she said and began walking. It was dark, and she was very scared. She could hear monkeys chittering and dogs howling, which made her more fearful. She followed the path down the hill, but the slope seemed endless. Feeling tired, she stopped, and just then, it began to drizzle. "Oh no, not again! When will I be free from this nightmare?" She angrily muttered to herself. Reaching into her bag for an umbrella, she realized she had left it behind. "God, I left

my umbrella up there!" She hurried to a nearby tree and stood under it for shelter.

She picked up her phone and turned it on to call her dad for help, but there was no network. Feeling more afraid as the rain intensified, she once again heard footsteps. Looking into the distance, she saw it was the same man who had helped her earlier. She called out to him, "Excuse me, I'm so sorry, but could you please help me find a place to stay for the night?"

The man replied, "Ma'am, this is a forest. I've been here for ages, and there are no hotels or even a single hut around. If you want, you can stay at my place and leave in the morning."

Aarohi hesitated, "No, thank you, sir. I don't want to trouble you. You've already helped me." The man said, "Look, it's up to you, but it's raining heavily, and there's nowhere else to go. The cold will get worse, and the animals are out. You can hear them clearly." He walked ahead. Aarohi, scared and realizing she had no other option, decided it was safer to follow him. The man glanced at her, pulled out an umbrella, and handed it to her. They reached a small hut.

The hut was dilapidated, with holes in the roof and water leaking everywhere. The floor was dirty and cluttered with junk. It barely had doors or windows. As she entered, she noticed the floor was soaked from the rain. The old man said, "Ma'am, there's a small room inside that's clean and has a bed. You can stay there for

tonight." He guided her to the room, which, in comparison, was in better condition. The man brought in a small fire and placed it nearby. "For now, you can warm up with this," he said. Aarohi felt grateful. "Thank you so much, sir."

"I'll get something for you to eat; you might be hungry," he said, then left. Aarohi looked around. Soon, the man returned with a bowl of soup. "Drink this before it gets cold." Aarohi started drinking, but before she could finish, she felt drowsy, dropped the bowl, and fell asleep. The man smirked. "Target number two is in my trap now," he muttered.

Knowing forest officers would be coming for an inspection the next day, he tied Aarohi's hands and legs, gagged her, and dragged her to the back of the hut where his car was parked. He cleared away the leaves and branches hiding the car, loaded her into the trunk, and drove off. The road was bumpy, and as Aarohi jolted awake slightly, she began to stir. The man drove quickly, but his face fell when he saw forest officers had set up a checkpoint ahead.

An officer called out, "Hey, you in the black car, pull over!" The man nervously slowed down and rolled down his window. "Yes, sir? What's the matter?" he asked. "We've received a report of someone transporting a deer illegally. We need to check every car." The man responded, "Really, sir? But I'm just coming from Mumbai." The officer replied, "Sorry, sir, orders are

orders. Please open your trunk." The man panicked, sweat rolling down his face, as he feared being caught.

Just as the officer was about to open the trunk, another officer shouted, "Sir, we found the car with the deer! We've got the guy." The officer handed back the keys. "Alright, you're free to go," he said, moving away. The man sighed in relief, wiping his sweat as he got back into his car and sped toward his hideout.

At his hideout, he ties Aarohi tightly to a wooden chair, binding her wrists and ankles with coarse ropes that dig into her skin. He stands over her with a twisted smile, holding a large bucket brimming with icy water. Without hesitation, he heaves the bucket and splashes the freezing water across her face. Aarohi gasps, sputtering awake, her body jerking against the restraints. She squints, struggling to open her eyes.

"Wake up, madam," he sneers, his voice dripping with menace. "I've been waiting for this moment far too long."

Aarohi's pulse races, "S-sir... sir..." she mumbles.

He reaches down, removing the cloth from her mouth, and she coughs, gasping. "W-water... please," she pleads weakly.

"Oh, you want more water?" His grin widens. He fills another bucket and splashes at her again, harder this time, until she's left choking. "More?" he taunts.

"No, no! Please!" she cries, shivering violently. "Who are you? What do you want from me?"

"Who am I?" He tilts his head, pretending to think. "Call me whatever you like. Knowing my name won't help you now." He glances at his watch and adds, "You'll be leaving this world in exactly one hour."

Aarohi's heart sinks. Her eyes widen with terror. "Why... why are you doing this?" she stammers. "If it's money, I'll give you everything I have! Just let me go!"

He shakes his head, "Money? No, darling. I'm after your life."

Tears stream down Aarohi's face as her desperation mounts. "Then why did you help me back there?" she asks, her voice trembling.

He chuckles darkly. "Because I needed to lure you in. To make sure you'd walk right into my trap, where no one can hear you scream. I even dug that pit myself so that you'd fall right in. Every step of this was very well planned."

Aarohi's mouth drops open, horror etched into her features. "You... you planned all this?" she whispers.

He nods, his eyes glinting with satisfaction. "Executed with precision. And if you cooperate, I'll even make it quick."

"No! Please, I beg you! My parents... they'll be waiting for me! Take my money, take my jewellery... my

necklace—it's diamond! Just don't kill me!" She sobs, clutching onto the faint hope of mercy.

"Shut up!" he barks, his patience snapping. He stuffs the cloth back into her mouth, muffling her cries. Picking up a sharp pair of scissors, he grabs a fistful of her hair and roughly snips it off, throwing the strands onto the ground with a smirk. Aarohi writhes, kicking desperately, landing a hard kick against his leg.

Fury blazes in his eyes. "You dare to kick me?" he growls, grabbing a hammer. Enraged, he struck her legs with a hammer, breaking her bones. "Oh, you want to fight?" he jeers, leaning in close. "Let's see you try again." He raises the hammer and smashes it against her head with brutal force. Blood trickles from her eyes as she slumps forward, her consciousness slipping. Her breaths come shallow and faint.

But he isn't finished. With a twisted smile, he takes a knife and plunges it into her stomach, twisting the blade cruelly. Her body spasms, her life draining with every passing second. When she finally falls silent, he carves a deep "U" into her forehead, his "signature," before etching random slashes across her lifeless body.

"I would've killed you simply, but you forced my hand," he hisses. He stuffs her body into a sack, lifting it up to avoid leaving a blood trail. He loads her into the trunk, drives to her house, and unloads the sack near the gate under the cover of night.

With a final glance, he smirks and drives away, vanishing into the shadows, leaving her remains to be discovered at dawn.

CHAPTER 9

The Last Descent

Present Day

As Dhruv enters the lab, he asks for the report. Anvi hands it over. "Here is the report. I have to tell you this—she was killed ruthlessly."

Dhruv's face falls. "Can you please give me the details?"

Anvi picks up an X-ray scan and begins to explain, showing him the report on the legs. "Look at these legs, sir   . The bones are completely shattered. When we opened her up, all we found was bone powder. He hit her so many times and so hard that even these bones, which are very difficult to break, were reduced to powder."

As she explains, Dhruv starts visualizing what had happened. He is in complete shock, his eyes filling with tears. "How can he be so ruthless, Anvi?" he asks, his voice heavy with sadness.

"This is again the first time I've seen something like this," Anvi responds. She opens another X-ray from the file. "Look at this—her head is damaged so badly that it caused bleeding from her eyes. He stabbed her, then

choked her. And see these marks? They were made after she was already dead. And here, on her forehead, he marked the letter **'U'**. I don't know what it means."

As Anvi finishes explaining, Dhruv is still in shock. "One more thing I found suspicious," she continues, "is that we found mud and leaves on her hands and legs. It shows she was either dragged through a place with a lot of greenery or brought from there."

"Yes, Anvi, she had gone for trekking. He might have followed her there. I think if I go to the hill, I can find some evidence," Dhruv replies. "One more thing, Anvi—is this the same girl whose photo I sent?"

Anvi looks at the photo and nods. "Yes, it's 100 percent her."

"You can take the body now," she adds before leaving.

Dhruv calls Gautham. "Hello, sir, I have the forensic report. I'll come to the station and explain it to you."

"Okay, Dhruv," Gautham replies.

"One more thing, sir. This body is Aarohi's. We'll be taking it to Mr. Chirag's house."

Gautham's face saddens. "Okay, Dhruv. I'll come there too." He grabs his car keys and leaves the station.

At Chirag's House

An ambulance and a police car arrive. Chirag opens the door, initially confused as to why an ambulance is there. As he approaches, he sees Dhruv.

"Hello, sir. Did you find my daughter?" Chirag asks, hope in his voice. Dhruv remains silent as the ambulance door opens, and the attendants bring out a stretcher with a body covered by a white cloth.

Chirag's wife, Meena, steps out. "Chirag, what's going on? Why is there an ambulance and the police here?" she asks, confused.

Gautham steps forward. "We're sorry," he says, lifting his head to look at them. "Aarohi is no longer with us. The body we found yesterday is hers. We're truly sorry we couldn't save her."

Meena cries out, devastated. "What? How is this possible?" She grabs Chirag by the collar. "You said she was at Rita's house! Why did you lie to me?" She breaks down, then turns to Dhruv, gripping his hands. "Please, sir, please tell me this isn't true. She went on a trip. How can she be gone?" Tears flow as she speaks.

Chirag goes over and pulls back the cloth from the body. He's numb with shock, his legs giving out as he collapses. "Aarohi!" he cries out. Meena rushes to the body, calling, "Aarohi, wake up, baby. See, Mom and Dad are here. Please wake up!" Unable to believe her eyes, she breaks down.

They take Aarohi's body inside the house. Neighbours gather, offering their condolences. Rita arrives, and as soon as Meena sees her, she slaps her hard. "I trusted you with my daughter's life, and this is what happened? You killed her! How could you?"

Though Rita is innocent, she sobs and apologizes. "I'm so sorry, aunty. I should have saved her. I'm so sorry." Meena's friends take her away to console her.

Aarohi's other friends arrive to say their final goodbyes, all of them in tears. Rahul feels deep guilt, thinking that if he hadn't pranked her that day, she might still be alive. But nothing could change what happened.

Dhruv and Gautham exchange a glance, deciding it would be best to return the next day for the interrogation. They walk away.

At the Graveyard

Chirag takes Aarohi to the graveyard, saying his final goodbye, his eyes full of tears. His heart was shattered into pieces, seeing his very young child dying so early and miserbely.From there, he goes straight to the police station.

At the Police Station

Chirag barges into Dhruv's office, furious. "Sir, I trusted you! When you knew that the sack in front of my house had Aarohi inside, why did you lie to me, saying you would find her? Now, because of you, I've lost

both my daughter and my wife. This is just not right!" His voice trembles, tears streaming down his face.

Dhruv can barely look him in the eyes, feeling deeply guilty. "Sir, I'm really sorry. Please, trust me one more time. I will find her killer very soon."

Chirag, his voice choked, says, "What's the point of finding the killer? I won't get my daughter back. She was such a beautiful soul. What did she ever do to deserve this?"

Just then, Gautham arrives. "Sir, we will find the killer soon. Please, cooperate with us. This is the only thing you can do for your daughter."

Though shattered, Chirag agrees. "Okay, Dhruv, for my daughter's sake. But you have to promise me you'll find the killer and make him pay for his sins."

"Thank you, Chirag sir," Dhruv replies, patting him on the back.

Later that night back at his house, Chirag sees his wife, completely broken. He gathers his strength and tells her, "Aarohi is still with us in spirit. She would feel terrible seeing us like this. I know it's hard, but we need to stay strong." He consoles her, and they both try to get some rest.

At the Police Station

Anvi calls Dhruv. "Hello, sir. I forgot to mention this—Aarohi was killed on July 7th."

"Thanks, Anvi," Dhruv replies. He sits back, scrolling through his phone, when he notices a photo of himself and Diya taken on that day—July 7th. Realization hits him, and his phone slips from his hand. Closing his eyes, he recalls that day. The masked man in the car, whom Diya saw, was none other than the killer. Dhruv was close to him but couldn't act in time.

Angry with himself, he goes straight to Gautham and reports everything. "Dhruv, how did this happen? You were so close to him!" Gautham exclaims.

"Yes, sir, he slipped right through my fingers."

Gautham responds with determination. "Dhruv, we have to be careful. We can't let another murder happen. Tomorrow morning, take the forensic team to the forest where they went trekking. Look for any clues."

"Okay, sir," Dhruv replies, and they both head home for the night.

CHAPTER 10

The Mark of Death

The next morning, it was bright and sunny. Dhruv climbed up the hill with two other police inspectors, Akash and Suraj, as well as Anvi. On their way up, they searched for evidence. Dhruv instructed, "Everyone, wear gloves and masks. If you find anything suspicious, please bring it to me or Anvi." They all spread out to search. While investigating, Suraj spotted something shiny on the ground. He bent down and picked it up—it was an earring. Suraj took it to Anvi, who looked at it and then retrieved a photograph of Aarohi's accessories from her bag. When Aarohi's body was found, one of her earrings was missing. Anvi immediately recognized it as Aarohi's.

"Where did you find this, Suraj?" she asked with curiosity.

"I found it near that big tree," he replied, pointing at a large tree.

Anvi suggested, "Let's go over there; maybe we'll find more evidence." Both headed toward the tree. Anvi examined the tree bark while Suraj searched around the bushes. Anvi noticed something stuck to the bark. Carefully, she used her tools to remove it—it was a small

piece of cloth. She ran a quick test and confirmed that both the cloth and earring belonged to Aarohi. This suggested Aarohi had stood there.

"Sir," she called to Dhruv. He walked over. "Yes, Anvi, tell me."

"Look at this piece of cloth and the earring. They belonged to Aarohi. She might have been standing here."

"Good. Did you find anything that might indicate the killer?" he asked with interest.

"Not yet, but we will soon," she replied confidently.

Meanwhile, Akash discovered faint footprints. Unsure of whom they belonged to, he followed them down the hill. Eventually, the footprints ended. He pushed aside some bushes and stepped over small stones, finding a hut in the distance. Akash approached the hut cautiously, gun and torch in hand. The floor was damp from the rain. Entering the room where Aarohi was believed to be held, he noticed a bowl with faint lipstick stains on it. Immediately, he called Dhruv.

"Hello, sir, come down the hill. On the right, there's a hut. Something feels very off here. You need to see this," he said with urgency.

"Okay, stay there. We're coming," Dhruv replied.

The team hurried down the hill to join Akash at the hut. Akash showed them the bowl, and Anvi

carefully removed the lipstick stain with her tools, placing it in her evidence bag. Dhruv concluded, "This shows Aarohi was lured here and given something to make her fall asleep."

"Suraj, Akash—search every inch of this place. We'll find something," Dhruv instructed.

Akash found an empty bottle labelled " sleeping pills" and realized Aarohi had likely been given this. He also found a medical slip, but it was wet, making the name of the medical centre difficult to read. Carefully, he bagged it and brought it to Anvi.

"So, she was given sleeping pills here, then moved. There aren't any bloodstains here, so she must have been taken away," he observed.

Dhruv and Suraj went behind the hut. Dhruv noticed several fallen branches and grass.

"Why are these tree branches cut? I don't think the forest department would have done this," Dhruv wondered aloud.

"Sir, look at this!" Suraj shouted.

"What is it, Suraj?" Dhruv asked, feeling a sense of urgency.

"Sir, it looks like tire marks leading down the hill."

"Yes, Suraj, that means the killer hid the car behind the hut to avoid detection by the forest team. That's why the branches are cut here," Dhruv concluded. "Suraj,

take photos of these marks and make note of the tire pattern."

Suraj quickly followed the instructions. "This killer is very sharp. We need to find them as soon as possible," Dhruv said with determination.

"Yes, sir, definitely," Suraj replied confidently.

As the sun began to set, dark clouds gathered in the sky. Dhruv gathered the team. "Guys, let's wrap up. We've found enough evidence. Let's head out." He turned to Anvi, "Now it's all up to you." Anvi smiled, sensing Dhruv's confidence in her. Just as they left the hut, it started raining.

"We're stuck now!" Anvi laughed. The rest chuckled along with her.

Dhruv tried to call Gautham, "Hello, sir—can you hear me? We're on the hill, at the hut, and need some help getting down." However, the network was weak, and their conversation cut off. Dhruv checked his phone. "My phone's dead. Looks like we're stuck here," he laughed, lightening the mood.

Gautham, realizing Dhruv's phone was dead, contacted the forest department for help. "Hello, this is Inspector Gautham. My team is stuck on the hill in the rain. Could you assist them and arrange a room and dinner for them, please?"

"Certainly, sir. We'll get them down," an officer replied.

Two officers from the forest department arrived at the hill and spotted the police car. They walked up to the hut and called, "Dhruv, sir!"

Dhruv and the team came out to meet them. "It's going to rain heavily soon, so we've arranged rooms and dinner for you. Let's get down quickly," one of the officers advised.

"Thank you," Dhruv replied gratefully. The team donned raincoats provided by the officers and made their way down the hill.

At the hotel, they ate dinner and then retired to their rooms, exhausted. Past midnight, Dhruv, unable to sleep, wandered onto the balcony, reflecting on the case. There, he noticed Anvi sitting on a couch nearby. He approached her.

"What happened, sir? Can't sleep?" Anvi smiled at him.

"No, just feeling restless. You should rest—you've been working hard all day," Dhruv replied.

"Just fifteen more minutes, and I'll head to bed," she replied.

Dhruv sat beside her. "Anvi, stop calling me 'sir.' You can call me Dhruv."

Anvi looked surprised. "But... that seems unprofessional," she stammered.

"I thought we could be friends, Anvi, especially since we're working on this case together."

"Alright, Dhruv," she replied with a chuckle.

Dhruv noticed she looked tired. "You seem down, Anvi. Is something wrong?"

After hesitating, she finally spoke. "This case reminds me of my dad." She paused, fighting back tears. "He was killed by his business partners, but the forensic and police teams ruled it a suicide. I knew him well; he would never give up. They took money from the killers, and that's why I decided to become a forensic scientist—to fight for the truth."

"I'm so sorry, Anvi," Dhruv said, gently placing a hand on hers. Anvi looked at him, wiping her tears. The atmosphere was heavy yet comforting.

Anvi glanced at their hands, and Dhruv quickly pulled his hand away. "Alright, let's get some sleep. Don't worry," he said reassuringly. Both then headed to their rooms for the night.

CHAPTER 11

The Hill's Dark Secret

The next morning, Anvi heads back to the lab, while the others return to the police station. Anvi begins analysing the samples she collected. She also goes through evidence from another case, noticing both similarities and differences. When she examines a particular bowl, she is stunned for a moment—she finds another fingerprint.

"This could definitely be the criminal's fingerprint," she mutters. Carefully, she lifts the fingerprint from the bowl. She examines it and generates a report. Then, she goes to her computer to check if there's any criminal record associated with the fingerprint. She searches the database extensively, but finds nothing. However, she has gathered a few details about the suspect. She takes out the print and calls Dhruv to update him.

Meanwhile, her assistant who was moreover like her friend Ruhi, works on piecing together the torn fragments of a medical slip they found. It's a challenging task since the paper is completely shredded, taking a considerable amount of time. Just then, Dhruv walks directly into the lab and approaches Anvi.

"Yes, Anvi, you said you had something important to report. Tell me, what is it?"

"Yes, Dhruv, I've found a clue about the criminal." Anvi's words make Dhruv's face light up with hope.

"I discovered two sets of fingerprints on the bowl we found. Besides my own, there was another set, which I'm certain belongs to the criminal." She shows the report and begins to explain. "According to the analysis, the man's age is likely in his 30s. Also, you can see here," she points at the report, "the lines on his fingerprint are faint, suggesting he has worked or is working in a steel or iron manufacturing industry. I also detected a small but deep cut on one of his fingers, which left a distinctive mark."

Dhruv interrupts, "What do you mean by 'latent fingerprints'?"

Anvi explains, "Latent fingerprints are those we can see on surfaces like cups because of natural oils or sweat—prints that aren't immediately visible without proper processing."

"Got it," Dhruv replies.

"Also," Anvi continues, "I detected a tiny trace of sleeping pills powder on the fingerprint, which means"

Dhruv interrupts again, "—which means he poured sleeping pills powder into the bowl, and some spilled onto his hand."

"Exactly," Anvi agrees. "By the way, have you found anything new about the medical slip we discovered?"

"Not yet," Anvi says, looking a bit disappointed. "The paper is in such bad shape. We're still working on it and need more time."

"Please, try to speed it up," Dhruv urges. "We need every lead we can get. Anything else?"

"Yes, I tried to identify the criminal through our database, but I found no match. I don't know how that is possible

He's new—someone who hasn't been caught before, but clearly, he harbours a lot of anger and vengeance."

"I know, Anvi," Dhruv says with determination. "We have to catch him. Let me know if you find anything else."

"I will, Dhruv." Anvi promises. Dhruv takes the report and leaves the lab.

At the police station, Dhruv briefs his team. "Send a team to all the steel and iron industries in our locality. Check the details of everyone around 30 years old, about 5.8 feet tall, with a broad build, and who has been working for a long time. I have a strong feeling the criminal is local and is monitoring our every move. Start investigating immediately."

"Yes, sir," one of the officers responds, clearly motivated.

Dhruv calls a team meeting. "Alright, everyone, this is a crucial opportunity to catch the criminal. I want you to split into two teams and search for him. I've sent the description to your phones. Contact me if you find anything. Suraj and Akash, you'll each lead a team."

The two teams leave the station. Suraj addresses Akash, "My team will take the right side of the city, and yours will take the left." The teams split up and head out.

Back at the station, Dhruv goes through all the reports when his phone rings. "Yes, Anvi?"

"Dhruv, guess what!" Anvi says, excitement in her voice.

"Anvi, please just tell me. I'm not in the mood for games right now."

"Sorry. We managed to identify the name of the pharmacy from the slip."

"Thank goodness! What's the name?"

"Wait, I'm sending it to you now. It's Sapna Medical Shop. I'll also send you the address."

"Thanks, Anvi." Dhruv receives the information on his phone, grabs his bike, and heads straight to the address. He arrives just as the shutter of the pharmacy is coming down.

"Excuse me!" he calls out. An older man turns around.

"Sorry, it's lunchtime. Come back in 15 minutes."

Dhruv approaches him. "Hello, I'm Inspector Dhruv. I'm investigating a case, and I need your assistance."

The old man looks up. "Of course, Inspector, how can I help?"

Dhruv shows him the phone. "This slip is from your shop, right?"

The old man adjusts his glasses and nods. "Yes, this belongs to my shop."

"Can you tell me who purchased the sleeping pills listed here?"

"I never sell sleeping pills without a prescription," the man says. "But let me check my computer." He opens the shutter, walks in, and logs into his system. "Look, everything we sell is recorded here. The date on the slip is July 5th, but we didn't sell any sleeping pills on that date."

"Maybe you forgot to log it," Dhruv says, his frustration mounting. "But the slip clearly came from your shop."

The old man shakes his head. "I wasn't here on July 5th. I was away at a wedding. My assistant was running the shop that day. He might know more."

Dhruv's face shows a glimmer of hope. "Where is he? Can you call him?"

"He's out for lunch, but he should be back any minute."

As if on cue, a young man walks up to the shop. "Here he is—Ashok, my assistant."

"Ashok," the old man says, "this is Inspector Dhruv. He has some questions for you."

Ashok's face pales, and he starts to sweat. "Sir," he stammers.

"Listen, Ashok," Dhruv says sternly, "on July 5th, you sold sleeping pills. Who did you sell them to?"

"Sleeping pills?" Ashok repeats, backing away slightly. The shopkeeper joins in, "Yes, who bought them?"

Ashok's fear intensifies. In a split second, he turns and runs. Dhruv glances at the shopkeeper and then takes off in pursuit. Ashok darts through familiar alleys, but Dhruv is hot on his heels.

"Stop right there!" Dhruv shouts. Ashok, panicking, looks back. "No way! I didn't do anything!" he cries.

Ashok leaps over a puddle, and Dhruv follows closely. "If you're innocent, why are you running?" Dhruv yells.

"Because you're going to arrest me!" Ashok shouts, ducking into a narrow alley. Dhruv follows him. Ashok

spots an empty drum and quickly hides inside, struggling to catch his breath.

Dhruv stops nearby, pretending not to know where Ashok is hiding. "Look, Ashok, I just want information. I'm not here to arrest you. It's really important. Please, come out and talk."

Ashok stays silent. Dhruv sighs. "Fine, I'll leave. I'll wait for you at the station. This is about someone who lost their life." Dhruv walks away, and after a few minutes, Ashok slowly emerges from the drum.

Suddenly, a sharp **"CRACK!"** echoes as Dhruv steps out from behind the drum, pointing a gun at Ashok's head.

"If you don't tell me what I need to know, I won't hesitate to shoot," Dhruv warns.

Ashok's eyes widen in terror, and he stammers, "Okay, I'll tell you!"

"Speak up," Dhruv demands.

"On July 5th," Ashok begins nervously, "a tall man came in asking for sleeping pills. I told him I couldn't sell them without a prescription, but he insisted and... he offered me ten thousand rupees for just one bottle."

"So, for money, you sold the pills without a prescription," Dhruv says, disgusted. "What did he look like?"

"He wore a mask, but he had a scar near his right eye. His shoes were unusual—there was a star emblem on them. He said they weren't from a shop, but specially made. His voice was deep, and he had... a tattoo on his left hand, but I can't quite remember it."

Dhruv lowers the gun and puts it away. "Can you draw the tattoo for me?"

"Yes, sir. I'll come to the station with the drawing."

"Good. I want it by tomorrow."

Ashok adds up "sir don't tell anything to my boss."

Dhruv giving Ashok a light slap on the head. "Do you really think he'll keep you employed after this?"

"No, please, sir," Ashok pleads.

Dhruv turns and leaves, heading

CHAPTER 12

Tattoo of Secrets

At the station, Dhruv begins arranging all the clues on the whiteboard. Meanwhile, the two teams arrive with some reports, and they all gather around him.

Suraj speaks first, "Sir, we checked around 10 factories. From the descriptions, we found five suspects who match, and we have their phone numbers and photos."

"Good, Suraj. What about you, Akash?" Dhruv asks.

"Yes, sir. We also have a list of four people," Akash responds.

"Teams, now you need to keep a close observation on all these individuals," Dhruv instructs.

"Okay, sir," they reply and disperse.

Meanwhile, Ashok arrives at the station, looking for Dhruv. Upon seeing him, he approaches. "Hello, Dhruv sir, I've brought the tattoo drawing you asked for." Dhruv takes the paper, studies it, and murmurs to himself, "Where have I seen this before?" He thinks hard, but it doesn't come to him.

"Thank you, Ashok," Dhruv says, then adds sternly, "But what you did was very wrong. I spoke to your boss, and you'll be suspended for two months. Don't let this happen again. If I hear about you doing this again, you'll end up in jail. Now, go."

Ashok's face falls, but he acknowledges his mistake and leaves the station. Dhruv takes the drawing to his office and sits there, contemplating the tattoo.

Suddenly, there's a knock on his door. "Yes, come in," he says.

"Surprise, bro!" Diya shouts as she enters. Dhruv's face lights up when he sees her.

"Why are you here?" he asks, surprised.

"I have good news!" Diya exclaims with a big smile.

"Oh? And what's that?" Dhruv asks, curious.

"I passed my mains exam!" she announces.

Dhruv is overjoyed. He rushes over and hugs her tightly. "You passed your mains exam? I'm so happy for you! I'm super proud of you. Now, you just need to prepare for the interview, and soon you'll be an IPS officer. Does Dad know about this?"

"No, I told you first because you helped me so much in preparing. You came over so many times to teach me topics. I wanted to tell my role model and cheerleader first. Thank you for always rooting for me," Diya says, her eyes sparkling with gratitude.

Dhruv's eyes well up with tears. "Stop it, are you trying to make me cry?" he teases. "By the way, you looked tense when I came in—what's wrong?" she asks, concerned.

"It's just the case, nothing for you to worry about. Come on, let's go tell Dad," Dhruv says, leading her out.

Diya insists, "I want to know about the case too! And remember, in two months I'll be an IPS officer, solving cases in minutes," she laughs as they walk.

They both head to Gautham's cabin. He's happy to see his daughter but immediately asks, "What are you doing here?"

"Oh God, you and brother asked me the same question! Aren't you both happy to see me?" Diya pouts playfully. Gautham and Dhruv laugh.

"Nothing like that," Dhruv tells "Aren't you going to tell him" he whispers to her with a grin.

Adjusting her tone, Diya announces, "Dad, I cleared my mains!"

Gautham is stunned for a moment, then pulls her into a tight embrace. "I'm so proud of you, Diya. Let's celebrate tonight!" he declares.

The atmosphere is joyful. Diya runs off to invite everyone to the party, leaving Gautham and Dhruv alone. "Thank you, Dhruv," Gautham says sincerely.

"By the way, who was the guy who came to see you this morning?" Gautham inquires.

"Sir, that was Ashok. He gave me a drawing of the tattoo he saw on the killer's hand."

"Really? Let me see it," Gautham replies.

Dhruv retrieves the drawing from his cabin. Gautham studies it. "This is a very unique design," he comments.

"Yes, sir. I feel like I've seen it somewhere before, but I can't place it," Dhruv admits, frustrated.

Gautham pins the tattoo picture on the whiteboard just as Diya walks back in. "Dad," she says, approaching him. But she catches a glimpse of the tattoo on the board and exclaims, "This tattoo—"

"Stop, Diya. You don't need to get involved," Dhruv interrupts firmly. Diya makes a funny face at him, says goodbye, and leaves.

Dhruv escorts her out of the station, saying, "Go carefully, okay?"

Back inside, Gautham calls Akash and Suraj to his. "Look at this picture carefully. This is the tattoo the killer has. Do any of your suspects have a similar tattoo?" he asks.

Suraj examines the image and recalls that two of his suspects had tattoos, but he's not certain if they match. "Sir, two of them have tattoos. I'll investigate further."

"Good," Gautham replies. "Akash?"

"No, sir, none of my suspects have any tattoos," Akash reports.

"Okay, then both of you split up and carefully monitor each person," Gautham instructs. They nod and leave to continue their surveillance.

Meanwhile, in her car, Diya can't stop thinking about the tattoo. Suddenly, she remembers where she's seen it and calls Dhruv.

"What is it, Diya? Is everything okay?" Dhruv asks, picking up.

"Yes, but bro, I've seen that tattoo before!"

"Diya, I told you not to get involved in this case."

"Listen to me!" she insists. "The other day, when you came to my house, remember that man in the car? He had the same tattoo—I saw it clearly because he was holding my hand."

Dhruv pauses, then realizes, "Yes, Diya! You're right! That's where I saw it. Thank you!"

"See? Be proud of me too, bro," Diya laughs. "One of my friend's uncles works in a tattoo shop. He might help you. I'll get his contact information and send it over."

Dhruv thanks her, and within minutes, Diya sends the number and address. "By the way, bro, I expect a nice

dress as a gift tonight!" she teases in a voice message. Dhruv chuckles.

He rides his bike to the old tattoo shop Diya mentioned. Inside, an elderly man is tattooing a girl. "Excuse me, sir," Dhruv says, catching the man's attention.

The girl looks back—it's Anvi. "Hello, Dhruv. What are you doing here?" she asks.

"Hi, Anvi. I'm here for an investigation," he explains, noticing her new tattoo. "Nice tattoo."

"Thank you! It's my puppy's name, Coco," she says with a smile.

The old man watches them. "You two make a good pair," he comments.

"We're just friends," Anvi corrects him, chuckling.

Back to the task, Dhruv shows the man the drawing. "Did you make tattoos like this?" he asks.

The old man studies it carefully. "Yes, I remember it well. This was the first tattoo I ever did, on the most handsome man I've ever seen."

Dhruv is shocked. "Really? Do you have any photos of him or remember anything about him?"

"It was about ten years ago. He said he was getting the tattoo for his daughter. Yes, I took a photo with him. Let me find it."

He pulls out a photo album, and they search through it together. Finally, Dhruv finds a picture that looks familiar and shows it to the old man.

"Yes, that's him!" the old man confirms.

Dhruv is thrilled to have a face to go with the killer. Anvi admires his rare smile, commenting, "Your smile is radiant, Dhruv. Keep smiling."

Dhruv's ears and nose turned red with embarrassment. The old man teased, "See, I told you two look good together!"

Dhruv thanks the old man, asking him to call if the man ever visits again. "Thank you for your help; this will be very useful," Dhruv said, handing over his number. "If this man visits here again, please give me a call."

The old man, curious, asked, "By the way, why are you searching for him?"

Not wanting to make the old man uncomfortable, Dhruv quickly made up a story. "He was a friend of my father's. They had a falling out years ago, and I'm hoping to help them reconcile."

The old man nodded understandingly. "Of course, I'll let you know if he comes by again. He seemed like a good man."

Dhruv took the photo, thanked the old man, and left the shop with Anvi by his side.

Anvi started to walk away when Dhruv called out to her, "Anvi, can I ask you something?"

Anvi's mind began to race. Is he going to ask me out? I wish he would just propose already! She giggled at the thought.

Dhruv noticed her giggling and snapped his fingers in front of her, breaking her daydream. Startled, Anvi said, "Yes? What do you want to ask?"

"Diya asked me to get her a dress for tonight's party. Could you help me pick one out? I have no idea what she would like," Dhruv explained.

Anvi's face fell as jealousy crept in. *Who is this Diya?* she wondered. *Does he already have a girlfriend?* Her expression soured.

Dhruv noticed her change in mood. "What's wrong, Anvi?" he asked.

"Nothing," she said, forcing a smile. "I'll come with you." She climbed onto his bike, trying to hide her disappointment.

They reached the shopping mall and began searching for a dress. Dhruv mentioned, "She's about your height, and her favourite colour is blue, so let's find something nice." Anvi's jealousy was obvious, and as they went through the clothes, she eventually picked out the worst dress she could find. Muttering to herself, she said, "After seeing this dress, she should instantly break up with him."

She glanced back to check on Dhruv and saw that he was on a video call. Curious, she moved closer to see who it was. On the screen was a young woman. Dhruv smiled and introduced them, "Diya, this is my friend Anvi. Anvi, this is Diya."

Diya grinned and teased, "Oh, bro, you went shopping with your girlfriend!"

"She's not my girlfriend, Diya," Dhruv replied with a laugh. "We're just here to find a dress for you."

Diya smiled knowingly and said, "I know everything, brother."

Anvi stared at them in surprise. *Did she just call you 'brother'?* she wondered, feeling a wave of relief.

Dhruv looked at Anvi and said, "Oh, sorry, let me introduce her properly. She is Diya, the daughter of our senior inspector, Gautham Sir. I've been very close to their family, and I don't just consider her my sister—she *is* my only sister. She passed her mains exam, so we're throwing a party. In two months, after her interview, she's going to become an IPS officer just like us," he added proudly.

Diya smiled and said, "Bro, I need to go help Mom now, so I'll talk to you later." Before ending the call, she turned to Anvi and said, "Please, Anvi, you *have* to come to my party tonight."

Anvi hesitated, "Oh, I have work tonight. I'm sorry."

Diya persisted, "No excuses! If you're helping my brother pick out a dress for me, then you absolutely have to come."

Anvi chuckled and said, "Okay, I'll come." Dhruv then disconnected the call, looking relieved.

Dhruv looked at the dress Anvi was holding. "So, you picked a dress? Let me see," he said.

Anvi laughed, "Oh no, this one isn't nice." She quickly put it back and rushed to look for other dresses. After a few minutes, she found a beautiful blue dress and showed it to Dhruv. "What do you think of this one, Dhruv?"

"Wow, Anvi, this is so pretty! She's going to love it," Dhruv said with a smile. "Thank you! But what was the dress you were holding before?"

"Forget about that one, Dhruv. This is the one you should get," Anvi replied, laughing it off. Dhruv agreed, took the dress for billing, and they both left the store.

Dhruv dropped Anvi off at her house. "Don't miss the party tonight, okay? Diya will definitely kill me if you don't come. I'll send you the location," he said with a grin.

"Okay, sure, Dhruv," Anvi replied, smiling as she went inside.

With the dress purchased and the photo in hand, Dhruv headed back to the station. He carefully placed

the photograph in his desk drawer before finally heading home, as it was already quite late.

CHAPTER 13

Diya Goes Missing

At the party, everyone gathered, celebrating Diya's success. The atmosphere was lively, and joy filled the air. Dhruv arrived shortly after, making his way through the crowd to Diya. He handed her a gift, and her face lit up with happiness.

"Thank you so much, bro! By the way, where's Anvi? Hasn't she come yet?" Diya asked, excitement in her voice.

"Yeah, I'm waiting for her. I sent her the location, so she should be here soon." As if on cue, Anvi walked in, looking stunning. Dhruv was momentarily stunned, his gaze lingering. Diya noticed and teased him, whispering in his ear, "Aren't you going to greet her?"

"Stop it, Diya," he muttered, embarrassed.

Anvi approached, greeting everyone warmly and congratulating Diya. Later, Dhruv and Anvi walked to the buffet, chatting as they filled their plates.

After some time,

Suraj rushed over to Dhruv, panic in his eyes. "Sir!" he said, gasping for breath.

"What is it, Suraj?" Dhruv asked, sensing something was wrong.

"It's Diya, sir... She's missing! We've looked everywhere, but we can't find her."

Dhruv's face paled with worry. He abandoned his meal, washed his hands hastily, and joined the search. He kept calling out Diya's name, but there was no response. Gautham, visibly distressed, begged, "Please, Dhruv, find her!"

"I will," Dhruv promised, heading outside to the backyard. There, he spotted a pitch-black shadow moving through the dimly lit garden. Instinctively, he reached for his gun, only to realize he'd left it at home. In desperation, he pulled out a pen from his pocket and advanced slowly.

Suddenly, he lunged, pressing the pen's tip against the neck of the shadowy figure. A startled scream echoed, and to his surprise, it was Diya.

"Diya! What on earth are you doing here? Are you okay?" he asked, his voice full of concern.

"Yes, bro, I'm fine," she said, her voice shaky.

"I was looking for you! Everyone's worried sick—where were you?"

"I'm so sorry, brother. But I don't know what happened. Please, don't be mad," Diya pleaded.

"Why are you out here?" Dhruv asked, his voice stern.

"Bro, I saw that man—the one you've been looking for. He was at my party!" Diya revealed, her face pale with fear.

Dhruv's heart skipped a beat. "What? The man with the tattoo? What was he doing here?"

"I don't know. At first, I thought he was just another guest, but then I saw his tattoo. I asked who he was and why he was there, but he ran, so I followed him. He vanished into thin air," Diya explained.

"I've told you a hundred times, Diya, don't get involved. He's dangerous! I don't want you getting hurt," Dhruv said firmly.

"I was just trying to help," Diya said, her voice small.

"Stop it. You're not an IPS officer yet. Focus on your studies and leave this to me," Dhruv replied, frustration evident in his tone.

"Okay, bro," she said quietly, disappointment flashing in her eyes. As they started walking back, Dhruv noticed Diya limping.

"What happened to your leg?" he asked.

"It's nothing," she said, trying to downplay it.

"Stop. Let me see." Dhruv crouched down and examined her ankle, which was swollen. Diya winced as he touched it.

"How did this happen?" he asked.

"I slipped when I was chasing him and twisted my ankle," she admitted. Dhruv sighed in exasperation.

"Alright, get on my back," he said, kneeling down.

Diya climbed onto his back, and they made their way back to the house. "I'm really angry with you, Diya," Dhruv said, his voice stern.

"I'm so sorry, bro. I promise I won't get involved next time," she said earnestly.

"You better not," he replied, his tone softening just a bit.

"But, bro... what should I tell everyone now?" Diya asked, worried.

"Don't stress about it. I've already come up with a story," Dhruv reassured her with a grin.

"Dhruv, you really are the best brother in the world!" Diya said, relief and admiration filling her voice.

When they returned to the house, Gautham rushed over. "What happened to her?" he demanded, his face ashen.

"It's alright, sir. Diya just went to drop a friend off and sprained her ankle on the way back," Dhruv lied

smoothly, masking his concern. Diya shot him a grateful look.

"She should have informed me," Gautham grumbled.

"She did tell me, but in all the chaos, I panicked," Dhruv said with a forced laugh. Anjali was not amused. "This is not funny," she snapped.

Sensing the tension, Anvi stepped in. "Let's cut the cake, everyone," she said cheerfully, trying to lighten the mood. "Diya, come with me. I'll help with your ankle." She gently guided Diya to the living room and applied a bandage.

"Be more careful next time, okay? Don't go anywhere without telling someone," Anvi advised, her voice kind but firm.

"I will. Thank you, Anvi," Diya said, feeling the relief from the bandage.

Back in the garden, Diya blew out the candles, and everyone clapped, their worries momentarily forgotten. But Dhruv's mind was elsewhere, his face betraying the anxiety he still felt. Anvi, noticing his tension, leaned in. "Diya's fine now. Don't worry," she said softly. Dhruv managed a small smile, comforted by her presence.

As the party wound down, Anvi stood outside, trying to book a cab. After several failed attempts, Dhruv pulled up on his bike. "No luck with the cab?" he asked.

"No, they're all unavailable," she said, clearly frustrated.

"Hop on, I'll drop you home," he offered. Anvi climbed on, and they rode off into the quiet night.

Dhruv's thoughts were a whirl of questions. Why had the killer come to the party? What did he want? Was Diya still in danger? Distracted, he almost crashed into a pole. Anvi grabbed his shirt, her grip firm.

"Are you okay?" she asked, concern in her voice.

"Yeah... I'm sorry," Dhruv said, his focus returning.

"Dhruv, what's wrong? Tell me," Anvi said, touching his hand gently. He took a deep breath. "The killer was at the party. Diya saw him, but he vanished before I could get to him."

Anvi's eyes widened. "We have to be careful, Dhruv. He could be planning something."

"I know. I'm worried about Diya, but she'll be safe for now—she'll be home for the next two months, preparing for her interview," Dhruv explained.

"Don't worry, Dhruv. She promised to stay out of danger," Anvi reassured him. "And I'll be careful too."

"Promise me you'll call if you need anything," Dhruv said, his voice softening.

"I will," Anvi said, smiling. "As long as you're around, I feel safe."

Their eyes met, and for a moment, the danger seemed far away. Dhruv's hand lingered on hers, and he teased, "Why are you blushing like a tomato?"

Blushing even more, Anvi playfully swatted his shoulder. "Stop it. Now drive—I have work tomorrow," she said, laughing. Dhruv chuckled and started the bike again. They rode in comfortable silence, a smile on both their faces.

When they reached Anvi's home, Dhruv waited until the lights in her room went out. Satisfied she was safe, he rode home, his mind still tangled in the mystery. As he lay in bed, exhaustion pulled him into a restless sleep, thoughts of the case spinning in his mind.

CHAPTER 14

Save Her if You Can

The next morning, Anvi enters the lab. The door isn't locked; it's wide open. She thinks that maybe her assistant, Ruhi, has come in early. As she walks in, the room looks incredibly messy. All the tables are overturned, chairs are on the floor, lamps are shattered, and flower pots are knocked over. She says to herself, "Why is the room so messy? When I left the lab yesterday, it wasn't like this. What happened here?"

Feeling both curious and confused, she calls Ruhi, but there's no answer. "Where on earth is this girl?" she mutters, looking around the chaotic room. As she steps further inside, her eyes widen. Suddenly, she freezes, feeling a cold chill run down her spine. There's blood everywhere. All the chemicals are spilled. The word "HELP" is scrawled in blood on the wall. Torn papers are scattered everywhere, and it looks like someone has forcefully broken into the lab.

As a forensic scientist, Anvi knows not to touch anything. She's about to head outside to call Dhruv when she notices something that makes her face go pale, and tears start rolling down her cheeks. She immediately calls Dhruv.

"Hello?" Dhruv answers.

Anvi's voice is shaky. "Dhruv..."

He instantly senses something is wrong and panics. "Anvi, tell me what happened! Is everything okay? Where are you? I'm coming right now!" he bombards her with questions.

Anvi takes a deep breath. "Dhruv, I'm in my lab. Please come here, fast," she says.

Dhruv grabs his bike and rushes to Anvi's lab. When he arrives, the mess is just as she described. He cautiously walks in, calling out, "Anvi, where are you?"

Hearing his voice, Anvi comes out from behind a desk, visibly shaken. Dhruv immediately pulls her into a comforting hug. "Okay, calm down. I'm here now, don't worry." He gently guides her to sit in a chair. "Are you okay?" he asks, handing her a glass of water and patting her head softly. "Tell me what happened. Why is everything such a mess?"

Dhruv catches his breath as Anvi begins to speak. "I don't know... the door was open when I came inside. As you can see, everything is all over the place. "I think it might be a thief," he says, but Anvi interrupts him.

"No," she quickly responds, stopping him.

"Then why are you so scared? It's okay, I'm here. Don't worry. Come on, let's go and file a report. There

are CCTV cameras, right? We'll find the thief," he says reassuringly.

Anvi looks at him, her expression troubled, and then points towards the back room. Dhruv looks puzzled, but he slowly walks toward the room. As he steps inside, his eyes widen at the sight of blood splattered everywhere. His gaze locks on one of the walls, where a message is scrawled: **"SAVE HER IF YOU CAN!!!"**

Stunned, Dhruv approaches the wall, reaches out, and touches the letters. His fingers come away stained red. He brings his hand to his nose and mutters to himself, "Blood... it's written in blood."

He quickly exits the room and sees Anvi standing there, terrified. "Anvi, come with me. Don't worry," he says, leading her out of the lab. Anvi clings tightly to his hand.

"Dhruv, please save her," Anvi begs, her voice breaking. "Please, I beg you. She's not just my assistant—she's my best friend. I can't bear to lose her!" She holds Dhruv's hand tightly, tears streaming down her face.

Dhruv wipes away her tears with one hand while holding her hand with the other. "Trust me, Anvi. I won't let anything happen to her. I will find her and bring her back safely. Don't worry."

Just then, a cab arrives. Dhruv opens the door for Anvi, and she gets in. "Go home safely. I'll come and

meet you this evening. Don't worry, I'll be back," he reassures her, closing the car door. Anvi nods as the cab drives away, heading home.

Gautham's phone rings. "Yes, tell me, Dhruv."

"Sir, you need to come to the forensic lab immediately."

Gautham looks concerned, and along with Suraj and Akash, he heads to the lab. Meanwhile, Dhruv calls the other forensic team, and they are on their way to start the investigation.

When Gautham arrives, he asks, "Yes, Dhruv, what happened? Is there a problem?"

Dhruv slowly guides Gautham into the lab and says, "Sir, this criminal is taking us lightly. He's challenging us."

"What do you mean by 'challenging'?" Gautham asks, confused.

"Sir, go to the wall in that room. You'll understand immediately," Dhruv replies.

Gautham walks into the room, stares at the message for a moment, then walks back, visibly troubled. "What is this, Dhruv?"

"Sir, he's more dangerous than we thought. The message is written in blood," Dhruv explains.

"Where's Anvi?" Gautham asks with concern.

"Sir, she was completely disturbed and scared. I sent her home," Dhruv responds.

"Did she tell you anything?"

"No, sir, she didn't. I'll ask her in the evening," Dhruv says.

"Okay, Dhruv. And what about the CCTV cameras?"

"Sir, I've sent the footage to the cyber team. They'll send me the details shortly. Also, when I went to get information from the tattoo shop the other day, I managed to get a picture of the criminal."

"Okay, Dhruv," Gautham replies, respecting his efforts. "Give me the photo."

"Sir, it's in the drawer of my desk," Dhruv says.

Gautham turns to Suraj and Akash. "You two, stay here and keep an eye on things. We'll be back shortly."

Gautham and Dhruv head to the police station. Dhruv pulls out the photograph and shows it to Gautham. "Sir, this is the photo of the criminal from 10 years ago when he got a tattoo on his hand."

Gautham examines the picture closely. He closes his eyes for about three minutes.

"Sir, what happened?" Dhruv asks, concerned.

"Damn it... why do I feel like I've seen him before?" Gautham mutters, lost in thought.

Dhruv jumps in, bombarding him with questions. "Sir, when, where, how?"

"That's what I'm trying to figure out, Dhruv. I'm sure I've seen him, but I just don't know where. Give me some time, I'll figure it out."

"Sir, now that we have his picture, shouldn't we circulate it?" Dhruv asks.

"No, Dhruv, I don't think that's the right move," Gautham responds, shaking his head. "He's already challenging us. We still have a chance to find and rescue her. Circulating his picture now will only make him angrier, and he might kill her—something we definitely don't want. Let's keep this quiet for now."

Gautham pauses, then continues, "And one more thing—the picture was taken 10 years ago. We have no idea what he looks like now, so that makes it even more challenging. But listen, Dhruv, I know a person who's a friend of mine—an artist and a photographer. Maybe he can help us with this."

"Yes, I think that could really help us!" Dhruv agrees eagerly.

"Wait, let me call him," Gautham says. He dials the number. "Hello, Siddharth, this is Gautham speaking. How are you?"

Siddharth's voice comes through the phone. "Hello, Gautham! I'm fine. It's been a while since you called. Is everything okay?"

"Yeah, I've just been busy with work," Gautham replies. "I called because I need your help on a case."

"Of course, tell me what I can do for you. How can an artist help you?"

"Siddharth, I have a case to solve. We've got a picture of the criminal, but it's an old photo from when he was young—taken 10 years ago. Can you help alter the photo to show how he might look now?"

Siddharth replies, "That's a tough one, Gautham."

"But you can do it, right?" Gautham presses.

"If you send me the picture, I'll try. But I'll need at least a day to work on it, and I'll need a hard copy of the photo," Siddharth responds.

"Okay, I'll send it through one of my officers. Send me your address," Gautham says.

Siddharth gives his address, and Gautham sends the details. He then calls Gajendra. "Gajendra, I'll send you the address. Go there and give this photograph to him."

"Okay, sir," Gajendra replies, and leaves for the task.

Dhruv returns to his desk, but the message **"SAVE HER IF YOU CAN"** keeps lingering in his mind, causing him increasing frustration. At the same time, he can't stop thinking about Anvi. He picks up his phone to call her, but then he receives a call from Suraj.

"Sir, the forensic team found a few hair strands in the lab, and they took a blood sample. I just got a call from them. They said both the hair and the blood belong to the same person—it's Ruhi, sir."

Dhruv pauses for a moment, stunned. He had thought the blood might belong to someone else in the lab, but now he's sure. "No..." he whispers to himself.

"Hello, Dhruv, sir?" Akash says on the other end of the line, noticing Dhruv's silence.

Dhruv is still in shock. "Huh? Oh, sorry, Suraj. I just lost my... for a moment."

Suraj continues, "Sir, they also said the amount of blood found was significant. They said with this much blood loss, there's only a 10% chance for the person to survive."

Dhruv's phone slips from his hand as he bangs his fist on the table. "No, I can't let her die," he mutters angrily. The line goes silent, and Akash disconnects the call.

Meanwhile, as people gather around, Akash begins interrogating witnesses to see if anyone noticed anything suspicious. He asks several people, but no one seems to know anything. Disappointed, Akash pushes the crowd away and begins walking through the lab. At a distance, he spots a stationery shop and heads toward it.

"Hello, my name is Akash, and I'm with the police. I wanted to ask if you noticed anything suspicious

yesterday or this morning near the lab," Akash asks the shopkeeper, pointing toward the lab.

The shopkeeper thinks for a moment. "Well, sir, yesterday I closed my shop really late. As I was locking up, I heard some music coming from the lab. At first, I thought, 'Why would they be playing music in there?' It was around midnight, sir."

"Music?" Akash asks, puzzled.

"Yes, sir. It was pop music. I thought they were having some kind of party," the shopkeeper replies.

"Did you see anyone entering or leaving the lab?" Akash presses.

"Yes, sir. When I was about to head home, I saw a man coming out of the lab with a sack. There was also a big black car parked outside. He put the sack in the trunk, looked around, and then drove right past me," the shopkeeper recalls.

Akash's expression changes, a new thought dawning on him. "Wait—did you see the number plate of the car?"

The shopkeeper shakes his head. "That's the mystery, sir. The car had no number plate."

Akash rubs his hands over his face in frustration. "Thank you for the information," he says.

By the way, the shopkeeper adds, "I just opened the shop. Did something happen?"

Akash lightens the mood. "We're investigating, nothing much to worry about. But if you see anything unusual or someone new coming around, please give me a call." He hands over his number. "Definitely, sir, I'll do that."

With this new lead, Akash thanks the shopkeeper once more and heads back to the lab.

Time passes, and it's now evening. Akash and Suraj return to the police station.

Akash says, "Sir, I spoke with the cyber team. They said they'll send the CCTV footage by tomorrow morning. But, sir, I need to inform you about something."

Akash then narrates the entire conversation he had with the shopkeeper. Dhruv listens carefully, hoping that they will catch the killer quickly.

Suraj hands Dhruv the forensic report. Meanwhile, Gajendra also arrives. "Dhruv, sir, I've delivered the photo," he says.

Gautham walks in. "Good job, everyone. Great work today. It's getting late, so you can all rest for the night. Tomorrow's a big day. Akash, Suraj—what's the latest on the two suspects?"

Suraj responds, "Sir, there haven't been any suspicious movements from them yet, but we're keeping an eye on them."

"Okay, everyone, get some rest. We'll meet tomorrow," Gautham concludes, and they all disperse.

Dhruv grabs his bike and heads straight to Anvi's house. Anvi lives alone in that house. The doorbell rings, and Anvi panics, feeling very scared. She tucks herself under the bedsheet and refuses to come out.

Dhruv rings the bell again, then picks up his phone to call Anvi, but his phone is dead. He bangs on the door and calls out, "Anvi, it's me, Dhruv. Open the door. Are you okay?" He continues calling out, but there is no response from the other side.

Anvi, unable to hear Dhruv's voice because she is hidden in her room, only hears the doorbell ringing. Dhruv, thinking she must have fallen asleep, tells himself, "Maybe she's asleep. I'll talk to her tomorrow." He walks away, and the doorbell finally stops.

Anvi, still scared, tries calling Dhruv, but his phone is switched off. After about 10 minutes, she slowly gets out of bed and peeks through her curtains. Seeing no one outside, she carefully walks down the stairs. She picks up a vase from the table, holding it behind her, and opens the door cautiously to check if anyone is outside.

When she sees no one but, she accidentally drops the vase in surprise. Dhruv, hearing the noise, looks back. "Anvi?" he calls out.

To her surprise, it's Dhruv, and he's been waiting outside. As he sees her, he stands up and walks towards her. He places his hand on her shoulder. "Are you okay, Anvi?"

Anvi, feeling immense relief, immediately hugs Dhruv. "I was so scared. I thought it was the killer, so I didn't open the door. I was so scared, Dhruv."

Dhruv is momentarily surprised by the hug, but without hesitation, he wraps Anvi in his warm embrace. His t-shirt starts getting wet as Anvi cries. Dhruv gently pats her back, trying to console her. The atmosphere between them feels comforting and safe.

Anvi backs off, wiping her tears. "Did you find Ruhi?"

"Anvi, we're still looking for her. I told you, I will find her."

Dhruv, sensing her fear, reassures her.

"I'm very scared Dhruv. What if the killer...?"

"Shh, don't say that," Dhruv cuts her off gently.

"Did you eat?" he asks.

"Yes, I did. What about you?"

"Yes I did" he replies

Dhruv takes both of her hands in his. "Everything will be okay. Don't worry. Go rest now."

"Thank you," Anvi says softly.

Dhruv smiles. "Anvi, it's very cold, and I can't stand here any longer."

Both of them laugh. "Anything you need, call me," Dhruv says.

Anvi's expression changes, and she gives him a soft slap on his shoulder. "Call me? Look at your phone. It's switched off. I tried calling you so many times."

"Oh, sorry, Anvi. If I don't pick up, please call the police, okay?"

Anvi feels very safe, comfortable, and reassured with Dhruv. Then Dhruv leads her inside the house. "Go to sleep now. Tomorrow, I'll be very busy searching for Ruhi."

"Dhruv, shall I join you?"

Dhruv immediately stops her. "Not at all. Tomorrow, you'll stay inside your room all day. Don't open the door for anyone. I'll meet you in the evening."

Anvi smiles back at him. She walks inside the house and locks the door behind her.

Dhruv waits for her room light to go off. Once it does, he rides back to his own house. He opens the door, falls onto his bed, and quickly falls asleep.

Bottom of Form

CHAPTER 15

Bloodstained Clues

The next morning was a very hectic day for the police. All the officers were moving here and there with reports in their hands.

"Dhruv sir, the CCTV footage has arrived," said Suraj.

"Suraj, play it on the screen," Dhruv instructed.

Suraj inserted the pen drive and checked the videos. It was a set of videos from all the cameras in the lab.

"Yes, Dhruv, play this video," he said, pointing to one clip. The video was from the entrance of the lab. A big black car parked in front of the building.

"Suraj, pause," Dhruv said. Suraj paused the video.

"Check the date and time," Dhruv instructed.

"Sir, it's 16th July, and the time is 11:30 p.m."

"Wait," Dhruv said, pausing to think. "16th July... We were at Diya's party."

"Yes, sir," Suraj confirmed.

"Okay, play the video. Let's watch."

Suraj played the video. A man walked out of the car, looked around, and then slowly approached the lab.

"Zoom in, Suraj," Dhruv instructed.

"Sir, he's taking something out of his pocket. It's a sharp, shiny object... It's a knife, sir."

The man in black was trying to open the door with his tools, and there—it opened. He put the knife back in his pocket and walked inside the lab.

Suraj exited the current video and switched to the inside camera footage.

The man in black slowly peered through the screen. Ruhi walked out with papers in her hands, her eyes widening in fear.

"Who are you?" she asked, her voice shaking.

"You'll know very soon," he replied with a smirk on his face.

Ruhi immediately ran inside, slamming the door behind her. He banged on the door hard.

"Open up, or you'll be killed right away!" he shouted.

"No! Who are you? What do you want?" she screamed back.

"Darling, don't piss me off," he said, his voice laced with menace. Ruhi began to tremble. The banging suddenly stopped.

Taking a deep breath, Ruhi quickly spotted a large, heavy table. Summoning all her strength, she dragged the table towards the door, using it as a barricade for protection. She frantically looked around for something to defend herself with, but all she could find were blood samples from the victims and some papers.

Meanwhile, the man in black was moving around the lab. He noticed a speaker and sneered.

"Oh, I saw your friend and those useless inspectors at the party. They're having a great time. How about we have some fun too?" he taunted.

"Go away from here!" Ruhi shouted from the room.

"Ruhi, darling, no one's going to help you. Do you really think the police will come to save you? They're enjoying themselves—let's not disturb them," he said, his voice dripping with evil intent.

He connected the speaker and started playing loud music so no one could hear the commotion.

"Ruhi, come out! Let's dance. Come out, please, or else I might have to come in," he taunted. Ruhi's fear grew with every word. Her eyes were wide with terror, tears streaming down her face. She reached into her pocket, hoping to find her phone, but remembered it was in the other room.

"Oh, shit! Why did I leave my phone there?" she muttered as she desperately searched around for something to defend herself with. Her hand landed on

a small, sharp blade, and she quickly slipped it into her pocket. Then she spotted a glass bottle and, with a surge of panic, smashed it against the floor.

Hearing the sound, he chuckled. "Oh, what happened? Are you okay?" he mocked.

Ruhi carefully picked up a sharp shard of glass and hid it behind her back.

"Don't hurt yourself—that's my job. I'll take good care of you," he said, grinning as he pushed chairs and tables out of his way. "Now, listen. You're wasting my time. Stop playing games. Come out!" he shouted, his voice rising. He approached the door and started banging on it.

"So, you won't listen to me?" he said, stepping back before kicking the door hard. Ruhi could feel the door giving way, and she pressed against it with all her strength, struggling to hold it shut. He was pushing with such force, and she was exhausted, barely managing to keep him out. Suddenly, he stopped.

Ruhi thought he might be tired, so she took a deep breath and stepped back, catching her breath. But then— **bang!**—the door burst open, and the table she had pushed against it toppled over. The man in black stepped inside, and Ruhi stumbled back. Though his face was covered, the sinister smile was clear.

Her hands trembling, she dropped the shard of glass she had been holding. The music blared on. Ruhi's

panic surged; she began to sweat, her face flushing with fear. The man moved towards her slowly, and she instinctively grabbed anything within reach, throwing it at him. He dodged every object effortlessly.

"Do you really think it's that easy to hit me?" he said. He continued advancing, and Ruhi backed away. She grabbed a vase and hurled it with all her strength. This time, it grazed his ear, leaving a small cut.

"Ahh!" he roared, clutching his bleeding ear. It was a minor cut, but seeing his own blood made his fury boil over. In a rage, he charged at Ruhi.

"How dare you hit me!" he screamed, seizing her hair in a tight grip. Ruhi cried out in pain, her please echoing through the room.

"Someone, please help! Please!" she screamed.

"No one is going to save you," he snarled. "My precious blood—how dare you spill it?" He grabbed her head and, with a vicious force, slammed it against the table. He dragged her across the surface, back and forth, as she screamed in agony.

"Now you know what real pain feels like," he sneered. "That's exactly how I felt. Now you'll suffer like the others did, you fool."

Ruhi, barely conscious, collapsed to the floor, blood streaming from a gash on her forehead. It pooled around her, staining the ground red. He crouched

down, pressing his boot onto her hand. Ruhi cried out in anguish, and he laughed cruelly.

"Stop screaming, or I'll hurt you even more," he said with a twisted smile. "The cases you were investigating—you saw what I did to them. Your case will be handled by your dear friend soon enough. Don't worry."

"Please, let me go," Ruhi begged, her voice faint and weak. "What did I do? I won't tell my friend or the police. Please, just let me go."

"Let you go?" he mocked. "And why would I do that, darling? Actually, I feel a bit sorry for you. Today, I planned to kill someone else, but instead, I found you. Now, listen to my story..."

"I went to the inspector's daughter's party—what was her name?" He paused, trying to recall. "Hmm... Diya. I saw that my target was also at the party, so I went there to get her. You see, I wanted to catch and kill my next victim at the party, but unfortunately, everyone was there... especially that Dhruv."

He gave a frustrated sigh before continuing, "Unable to get my target, I was about to leave, and then—how lucky I was! I saw you walking past my car. Damn, I thought to myself, 'My next victim just walked right up to me.'" He laughed as he spoke. "You were on my list, you know. But I wanted to give you a little more time to live. It seems like it's not my choice—God has decided otherwise."

"Sorry, but you need to die quickly now. Come quietly, or you'll suffer more. The choice is yours."

Ruhi, desperate, tried to free her hand from beneath his foot.

"Don't hurt yourself," he sneered. "Fine, I'll move my foot." But instead of lifting it, he pressed down even harder. Ruhi used her free hand to strike his leg repeatedly, but with each hit, he only increased the pressure, causing her more pain.

"I'm sorry!" she screamed in agony.

"What did you say?" he asked, his tone mocking.

"I'm sorry," she repeated, her voice barely above a whisper.

He smirked, pulling a cable wire from his bag. He tied her legs tightly, muttering, "Damn, I should have brought more cable. I'm running short." He shrugged and said, "Wait here—I'll see if there's anything else I can use." He walked out of the room, searching for more supplies.

Ruhi, immobilized but determined, tried to drag her body away from the pool of blood. Each breath grew more laboured, and tears streamed down her face. Weak and gasping, she dipped her fingers into the blood from her head wound and shakily wrote the word "HELP" on the floor, leaving a bloody handprint next to it.

Meanwhile, the man rummaged around until he found a thin rope in a corner. Grinning, he returned to the room where Ruhi lay. He noticed the word she had written and laughed maniacally.

"You think—" he laughed harder, "you think someone will save you just because you wrote this? You fool." He grabbed her by the collar, lifting her off the ground.

"Wait, let me help you," he sneered. He dragged her to the wall and pressed her bleeding forehead against it, forcing her to smear the blood as he moved her head. When only "HEL" was visible, he mocked her.

"Your blood's running out... What's this supposed to mean, 'HEL'? It doesn't even make sense." He paused, his face turning crueller. Without warning, he slammed the other side of her head against the nearby table, opening a fresh wound. Blood streamed freely once more.

"Ah, there we go—blood's back," he said, smirking as he pressed her head against the wall again. With the fresh blood, he forced her to complete the word, writing the final letter, **'P'**.

He threw her to the ground and looked at the finished word. "See, that's how it's done. Understood?" he taunted.

He then shoved her limp body into a sack, stuffing her inside. Ruhi had already lost a lot of blood; she was

unconscious. He tied the knot tightly and began dragging the sack out.

"Wait," he muttered to himself. "They've got your message, but what about mine? I'll write something special—especially for my favourite, Dhruv." He walked over to the floor, dipped his fingers into the blood, and wrote **"SAVE HER IF YOU CAN"** on the wall.

"Perfect," he said with a twisted grin. He noticed a stack of papers scattered on a nearby table. "Wait a second—these are reports about my case, right?" With a cruel laugh, he grabbed the papers, tore them to pieces, and flung the shreds all over the room.

He dragged the sack out, leaving a trail of bloodstains behind. Hoisting her up, he carried the sack to his car, opened the trunk, and shoved her inside. He slammed the trunk shut and drove off to his hideout.

CHAPTER 16

Ruhi's Fight for Survival

Meanwhile, back at the police station, Dhruv watched the video footage with a grim expression. The blood drained from his face, replaced by fury. His anger rose with every second of the recording.

"Sir, this guy is pure evil," Suraj said, his face reflecting a mixture of shock and sadness.

"I know," Dhruv replied, his jaw clenched. "Suraj, check the other cameras and track where he's taken her."

"Yes, sir. Give me ten minutes, and I'll find it," Suraj assured him.

"Good. Report back as soon as you have something," Dhruv instructed, his voice tense.

Dhruv stormed over to Gautham and said, "Sir, I swear, if I find this monster, I'm going to kill him on the spot. How can someone be so cruel? I can't stand seeing what he's done to all these innocent girls."

"I understand, Dhruv. It's heartbreaking," Gautham replied softly. "But you can't just kill him if you find him. We're police officers—we have to bring him to justice."

Dhruv's face turned red with rage. "What are you saying, sir? This man has brutally murdered innocent girls, and you want me to bring him in alive? That's not happening. In the next ten minutes, I'll have his location, and he's challenged me to save her. I will save her—no matter what it takes. And if that means killing him, I won't hesitate," Dhruv said with fierce determination.

"Dhruv, I understand how you feel. I was just like you when I was younger—angry and impulsive. But you need to listen to your senior," Gautham said firmly.

Dhruv's frustration boiled over. He gave Gautham a hard look before storming out of the room.

"Dhruv, sir!" Suraj called out. "I found something!"

Dhruv spun around as Suraj showed him a video clip. "Look, sir, the car was last seen here, in this lane. He might be hiding somewhere in the area."

"Alright, you stay here and keep me updated on the location," Dhruv instructed. "Akash, you're with me. Let's move!"

Akash quickly joined Dhruv, and they both mounted the bike. Dhruv rode with intense focus, while Akash, seated behind, guided him with directions. After a tense 20-minute ride, Akash said, "Sir, stop! The location ends here."

They both got off the bike and took in their surroundings. The area was desolate—an abandoned

place with half-demolished buildings and several under construction.

"What is this place?" Akash asked, scanning the empty landscape.

"He picked the perfect spot for a hideout," Dhruv replied. "Be very careful." They both drew their guns and moved cautiously, scanning their surroundings for any sign of danger.

"Akash, go that way," Dhruv instructed, pointing in a direction. "Call me if you see anything suspicious."

Akash nodded and made his way down a narrow path, moving slowly and carefully. A noise caught his attention—something rustling behind a rusted drum. Heart racing, he approached, gun raised. Suddenly, a group of cats darted out, startled.

"Just cats," Akash muttered to himself with a sigh of relief.

Meanwhile, Dhruv continued to search the area. After a few minutes, the two of them met up again.

"Did you find anything?" Dhruv asked.

"No, sir. Nothing," Akash replied, sounding disappointed.

"Neither did I," Dhruv said with a sigh, his face falling.

Suddenly, Akash's eyes widened. "Sir, the shutter behind you!" he exclaimed.

Dhruv spun around. "What about it?"

"This is the spot—the exact place where we saw the car in the video!" Akash said, pointing at the shutter.

"Look around," Dhruv ordered, immediately taking out his phone. He snapped a picture of the shutter and sent it to Suraj. Then he called him.

"Hello, Suraj. I just sent you a picture—can you confirm if this is the same shutter we saw in the footage?"

Suraj compared the photos carefully. "Yes, Dhruv, sir. You're right—it's exactly the same shutter from the video."

Akash, examining the ground, noticed tire tracks in the muddy area in front of the shutter. "Sir, look—the tire prints!"

"Good catch," Dhruv said. "Take pictures and collect a sample of the tracks."

Akash quickly put on his gloves, took a few pictures of the tire prints, and carefully collected a sample of the mud for evidence.

Akash, the killer is definitely here. We need to be very careful and search thoroughly," Dhruv said.

"Yes, sir. But don't we need more people?" Akash asked, a hint of worry in his voice.

"You're right," Dhruv agreed, pulling out his phone.

He dialled Gautham's number. "Hello, sir. I've found the location where the killer's car was last spotted."

"Really, Dhruv? That's great news!" Gautham said, sounding relieved.

"Yes, sir. But I need backup. Can you send a few more officers to this location? Make sure Suraj comes along as well."

"Definitely, Dhruv," Gautham assured him. He left his office and called out, "Suraj! Take five officers and head to Dhruv's location. He needs your assistance."

"Yes, sir!" Suraj responded, quickly gathering the officers and heading out.

"Akash, while we wait for backup, I want you to stay here," Dhruv instructed. "The killer might show up."

"Yes, sir," Akash replied, taking cover behind a large rock, his eyes scanning the surroundings.

Dhruv moved further down the lane, checking every corner carefully. He eventually came upon an old, dilapidated house that looked suspicious. The building's worn façade and cracked windows gave it an eerie vibe. He took out his gun, holding it steady, and with one powerful kick, he forced the front door open.

The interior was pitch black. Dhruv switched on his torch and slowly stepped inside, scanning the room for any movement. Dust hung in the air, and the wooden floor creaked under his weight. As he moved further in, he noticed a shabby door at the end of the hallway. It was locked from the outside, which made it even more suspicious. Dhruv cautiously approached it, his finger hovering over the trigger.

Suddenly, the lights flickered on, flooding the house with a dim, eerie glow.

"Who are you?" a masculine voice boomed from behind him.

CHAPTER 17

Hope in the Darkness

Ruhi looked around, barely conscious. Her head throbbed as she tried to wake up. Her mouth was gagged with a cloth, her hands tied tightly behind her to a pillar, and her legs bound as well. She struggled but couldn't free herself. The place was dimly lit, with broken windows and doors adding to its eerie atmosphere. The room was filled with rusted junk and discarded items. She felt an overwhelming thirst, her parched throat making her situation worse. Her eyes were bloodshot, and there was a painful wound at the back of her head. Through a crack in a broken door, Ruhi spotted someone, and her eyes widened in surprise.

Dhruv's eyes narrowed as he tightened his grip on the gun. Alert, he turned around swiftly. For a moment, he paused, scanning his surroundings. Then, he tucked his gun back into his pocket.

"Yes, what do you want?" the old man asked, his voice trembling with fear.

"Hello, Grandpa. My name is Dhruv, and I've come here to investigate a case," Dhruv replied firmly.

"A case? Okay... but what are you doing in my house?" the old man demanded, his tone becoming defensive.

"Sorry, I just found this house suspicious, so I walked in," Dhruv explained.

"Suspicious? What do you mean by that?" the old man asked angrily.

"Nothing," Dhruv said curtly, brushing off the question.

Meanwhile, tears streamed down Ruhi's cheeks as she saw Dhruv standing right in front of her. She could see him clearly, and a wave of happiness swept over her. She tried to move swiftly, but her attempts to free herself failed. She opened her mouth to shout, but no sound came out—the cloth gagging her muffled all her cries.

Dhruv took a quick look around the place and began to walk off. His gaze lingered momentarily on a locked door, but he continued moving, noting the old man's growing irritation.

Ruhi's face fell as she watched Dhruv walking away. She desperately tried to call out, "No, no, no, Dhruv! I'm right here, please don't go. Please don't go!" But her voice remained muffled by the cloth gag. Helpless, she sank into despair, losing hope.

Moments later, the old man approached the locked door, reaching for the key. Just as he was about to unlock

it, Dhruv re-entered the room. Ruhi's heart leapt with renewed hope.

"Excuse me, Grandpa," Dhruv said firmly.

The old man turned to him, startled. "Yes? What do you want now?"

"I want answers," Dhruv replied with determination.

The old man's face twisted in confusion, but fear flickered in his eyes. "Answers? What do you mean?" he asked, his voice trembling.

"Grandpa, I've searched this entire place and found nobody else here. How is it that only you are living in this house?" Dhruv asked sharply.

The old man hesitated but quickly composed himself. "This place isn't fit for anyone to live in. Do you think anyone can survive here?" he said, trying to deflect the question.

"Yes, I know this place is uninhabitable," Dhruv responded, his tone firm. "But that's not my point. My question is not about others—I'm asking *you*. What are you doing here?"

The old man chuckled nervously, attempting to mask his unease. Dhruv's piercing gaze, however, made him falter. Finally, the old man said, "Inspector, I'm just an old man. Nobody's going to hire someone my age. But I still have to earn a living, don't I? So, I come here,

collect plastic, paper, and other waste, and sell it to get by."

Dhruv listened intently, though suspicion lingered in his expression.

But Dhruv wasn't ready to trust anyone at this point.

"Okay," he said cautiously.

"Do you want to ask more questions?" the old man added.

"Yes," Dhruv replied. "Have you seen any suspicious person around here?"

Dhruv pulled his phone out of his pocket and showed the old man a photo of the killer—both a younger and an older version. The old man studied the pictures carefully before shaking his head.

"No, I haven't seen him around here," he said.

"Grandpa, please look carefully. It's very important for me to get information about this man," Dhruv urged.

The old man squinted at the pictures again, taking his time, before meeting Dhruv's gaze and replying, "No, inspector. I'm certain—I've never seen him anywhere around here."

Disappointed, Dhruv sighed and showed the man another picture, this time of a car.

"Have you seen this car anywhere?" he asked.

The old man's expression changed. "Yes, sir, I saw this car yesterday," he replied.

"Okay. Do you know where the car is now? Did you see anyone get out of it?" Dhruv pressed.

"Sorry, inspector," the old man said apologetically. "It was dark last night. I saw the car passing by as I was coming home, but I couldn't see much more."

"Okay," Dhruv said, taking in the old man's answers. He decided to dig deeper.

Dhruv scanned the area but found nothing unusual. However, his eyes fell on a locked door.

"Yes, what's behind this door?" Dhruv asked, his tone sharp.

"Sir, that's where I keep my most valuable junk," the old man replied hesitantly. "I'm afraid someone might steal it."

Dhruv raised an eyebrow and looked at him intently. "You told me that nobody else lives here. So, who exactly do you think is going to steal your things?"

The old man's nervousness was evident, but he didn't reply.

"Open the door," Dhruv demanded, his voice firm. "Let's see what precious things you have in there that you think people would want to steal."

The old man hesitated, his reluctance clear on his face.

"Sir, trust me. There's nothing inside," the old man said nervously.

Dhruv fixed him with a piercing stare. "Open this door, or I'll break it down," he warned.

With trembling hands, the old man approached the door, unlocked it, and quickly stepped aside.

As Dhruv moved closer, Ruhi's heart raced with hope. Tied to the pillar amidst the junk, she whispered to herself, "Please, Dhruv, please open the door. I'm here. Please."

Dhruv opened the door, and his face reflected a mix of frustration and confusion. The room was indeed filled with junk—ropes, plastic bags, cardboard, sacks, and other discarded items.

"This is truly a junkyard," Dhruv muttered, shaking his head. He began to search the room, moving things around methodically.

As he worked, the old man's eyes darted nervously to a bloodstain near a box. Quickly, he stepped forward and planted his foot over it, trying to cover it.

Dhruv noticed the old man's odd behaviour and walked closer to him. The old man, now panicking, reached into his pocket, his fingers brushing against the handle of a knife.

Dhruv paused, then suddenly broke into a laugh. "Grandpa, go sell all this. You'll make enough to move to a better place," he said mockingly as he turned to leave the room.

The old man let out a shaky breath and discreetly returned the knife to his pocket.

As Dhruv walked out of the house, he left his card on a dusty table. "If you find anything suspicious, call me," he said over his shoulder.

Inside the room, Ruhi struggled desperately, her movements violent as she tried to break free. Tears streamed down her face as she watched Dhruv leave.

Hidden among the piles of junk, Ruhi was tied to a pillar, her presence concealed by the chaotic mess. From a small gap in the junk, she could see Dhruv—but he couldn't see her.

Ruhi's hope faded as the door shut behind Dhruv.

The other team had arrived at the scene. Dhruv gathered them and gave clear instructions. "Be sharp and attentive. He's likely still here. Inform me immediately if you find anything suspicious," he ordered firmly.

Just then, Suraj's phone rang. "Hello, sir," he answered.

"Hello, Manoj. What's the update?" Suraj asked.

"The person you told me to keep an eye on—he vanished during the lunch break, sir," Manoj replied, his voice tinged with worry.

"Vanished? What do you mean by that, Manoj?" Suraj demanded.

"Sir, I was following him, but he just disappeared into thin air. I went back to the workplace to check, and he's not there. It's been hours. I'm certain he's the one we're after. I'll keep searching for him, sir," Manoj assured him.

"Yes, I need him found," Suraj said decisively before ending the call.

Without delay, Suraj rushed over to Dhruv and informed him. "Sir, Manoj lost track of the suspect. He vanished during the lunch break."

Dhruv's eyes narrowed. "Tell Manoj to keep a sharper eye on him from now on," he instructed.

"Already done, sir," Suraj replied.

Dhruv's phone rang. "Hello, Dhruv. Did you find her?" Gautham asked.

"No, sir, not yet. But I'm certain he's still here. We're going to stay all night to continue the search," Dhruv replied with determination.

"Dhruv, it's already late, and you've been working the whole day. Are you sure you still want to stay all night?" Gautham asked with concern.

"Yes, sir. I have to. I need to catch him as soon as possible," Dhruv insisted.

"Alright, Dhruv. If you need my help, don't hesitate to call," Gautham said before ending the call.

As the day turned into evening, everyone gathered at a designated spot. The team looked exhausted. Dhruv addressed them.

"Boys, you can all go rest now. Tomorrow morning, everyone gather here, and we'll continue the search," he said.

"But sir, what about you?" Akash asked.

"I'll stay here, Akash, in case he tries to make a move," Dhruv replied.

"Okay, sir. Then I'll stay with you," Akash offered.

"Sir, why should you stay alone? I'll stay too," Suraj added.

One by one, the rest of the officers chimed in, volunteering to stay. Dhruv felt a surge of pride seeing their dedication, but he didn't want to overburden them.

"Guys, you can leave. I'll manage here. Akash and Suraj, you can stay with me. The rest of you are already tired—go get some rest. That's an order," Dhruv said firmly.

Reluctantly, the other officers complied, taking the car and leaving. Akash, Suraj, and Dhruv stayed back, determined to keep watch throughout the night.

Suraj spoke up, "Sir, I'll go tomorrow and meet Manoj."

Dhruv nodded. "Okay, Suraj. Take the lead and keep a keen eye on him."

"Understood, sir," Suraj replied confidently.

Dhruv turned to Akash. "What about the other suspect?"

"Sir, yesterday, when I went to his workplace, the owner informed me that he had met with a terrible accident and is currently hospitalized," Akash explained. "I personally went to the hospital to verify. He's in such a critical condition that he can't even move an inch from his bed."

Dhruv listened carefully, then responded, "So that clears up any doubt. Our suspect number one is now our primary focus."

Suraj straightened up. "I'll handle it, sir."

Dhruv gave a firm nod. "Good. It's up to you now, Suraj. Don't let anything slip."

"Yes, sir," Suraj assured him.

Akash sighed, "Sir, I'm really hungry."

Dhruv glanced at him and replied, "Both of you go eat and come back. I'll stay here."

"But what about you, sir?" Akash asked with concern.

"Just bring me a water bottle—that's more than enough," Dhruv said.

Suraj and Akash nodded, then left to grab food. Dhruv was left alone, sitting in the quiet of the night. He looked visibly tired. At a distance, he noticed an old sofa placed outside. He walked over and sat down, trying to rest.

His phone rang suddenly, breaking the silence.

"Hello, Dhruv," came a sweet, familiar voice. It was Anvi.

"Yes, Anvi. Tell me, are you okay? Do you need anything?" he asked with concern.

"Dhruv, are *you* okay?" she countered.

"Yes, Anvi, I'm fine. Just a bit tired and frustrated. I'm still searching for her, but don't worry—I'll find her," he reassured her.

"Dhruv, I called because I'm worried about you. Have you eaten?"

"No," Dhruv admitted.

"Dhruv, please eat something. You need energy or you won't be able to work properly. Should I bring

something for you? Just send me your location," she offered.

"No, Anvi. It's not safe for you to come here. Suraj and Akash have gone to get food, so I'll eat when they return. Did you eat?"

"Yes, I already did," she replied.

"Good. Now go rest. I'll talk to you tomorrow," Dhruv said. Exhausted, he dozed off on the sofa.

Anvi, still on the line, heard him softly snoring. She chuckled and whispered, "Good night. Sleep well," before disconnecting the call.

A while later, Suraj and Akash returned with food. They looked around for Dhruv and spotted him sleeping on the sofa. Both exchanged smiles.

"Let's not wake him up," Suraj whispered. "We'll keep watch."

Akash nodded, quietly taking off his jacket and draping it over Dhruv, as the night was getting colder. Suraj placed food and water beside him. The two split up to keep watch near the shutter.

As they stayed alert, they suddenly heard faint footsteps approaching.

Suraj froze and whispered, "Akash, did you hear that?"

"Yes, Suraj," Akash replied, gripping his gun.

The two quickly hid themselves, their weapons drawn and ready, eyes locked on the direction of the sound.

CHAPTER 18

Dark Dealings at Midnight

Akash and Suraj are very alert. As the footsteps approach, they become even more attentive. The footsteps draw closer. A very tall man appears, accompanied by three other well-built men. The group seems to be exchanging something in the cold midnight air.

Suraj glances at Akash, who gives him a signal: "Now is the time." Both Suraj and Akash rise from their hiding spot, pointing their guns at the four men. The men freeze momentarily.

Suraj commands, "Everyone, hands up! We are from the police. Drop whatever you have in your hands!"

The leader of the group steps forward. Before he can act, Akash warns him, "Don't move an inch, or I'll shoot you!"

The leader laughs mockingly and responds, "You'll shoot me? Go ahead, then. Let's see if you have the guts." The other men join in his laughter, which angers Akash.

Akash demands, "What's in your hands? What is this?"

The leader smirks and retorts, "Inspector, stay out of this. You have no idea who you're dealing with or whose work we're doing. You'd better mind your own business. By the way, how did you even find out we were here? Were you following us by any chance?"

Akash demands, "Who are you working for? Tell us what's in your hand!"

The leader sneers, "Inspector, we won't reveal our leader's name. But since you're so curious, it's drugs. Want some? Trust me, it's fun. Here, take this." He approaches Akash with a mocking grin.

Furious, Akash slaps the leader hard across the face. The leader and his men pause for a moment, stunned. Then the leader growls, "How dare you hit me!" and retaliates by striking Akash.

Suraj, enraged, yells, "How dare you hit a police officer!" and lands a solid punch on the leader's nose. Blood splatters as the leader stumbles back, clutching his face.

Seeing their leader attacked, the other men rush toward Akash and Suraj. A brawl breaks out. Punches and kicks fly as chaos ensues. Suraj lands a powerful punch on one of the men, sending him flying backward with a loud *boom*. But as Suraj turns to check on Akash, he sees one of the men choking him.

"Akash!" Suraj shouts and rushes to help. However, the gang leader grabs Suraj's leg, pulling him down and stopping him in his tracks.

Suraj watches helplessly as Akash struggles to breathe, his face turning red. Suraj fights to free himself, trying to land a kick at the gang leader. But the leader pulls him up and then, hurling him to the ground with force.

Meanwhile, Dhruv wakes up, startled by the sounds of the fight. His eyes widen as he sees the chaos unfolding before him. Without hesitation, he runs to help. He strikes one of the men on the head with a powerful blow, causing the man to cry out in pain and release Akash from his grip.

Akash collapses to the ground, gasping for air and coughing uncontrollably. Dhruv quickly kneels beside him, helping him sit on a nearby sofa. He hands Akash a bottle of water, urging him to drink and catch his breath.

Without wasting another moment, Dhruv rushes back into the fray. One of the men approaches him wielding a knife, the blade gleaming in the dim light. The man swings wildly, and the sharp edge grazes Dhruv's face, leaving a shallow cut. Blood trickles down Dhruv's cheek, but instead of backing down, he becomes furious.

Fuelled by anger, Dhruv delivers a fierce kick to the man's stomach, sending him flying across the place. Not

stopping there, Dhruv spots a large drum nearby. With agility, he climbs onto it, then leaps off, landing directly on top of the remaining men. They crash to the ground under his weight, groaning in pain.

Dhruv pulls out his gun and fires a warning shot into the air. The loud *bang* silences the place instantly. Everyone freezes, staring at him in shock.

"What the hell is going on here? Who are you? What are you doing here? What's your intention? Are you all connected to the killer?" Dhruv shouts, bombarding the gang with questions.

The leader steps forward, smirking, but Dhruv immediately raises his gun. "Don't move an inch, or I'll shoot!" he warns.

Yet, the leader remains unfazed, staring at Dhruv with defiance, as if daring him to pull the trigger.

As the leader moves forward defiantly, Dhruv tightens his grip on the gun and fires a shot at the man's right leg. The leader cries out in pain and collapses to the ground, clutching his injured leg. The other members, terrified, immediately drop their weapons and kneel with their hands raised in surrender.

Dhruv steps forward, grabs the leader by the hair, and demands, "What are you here for?"

"Sir, we're sorry! We come here once a week to exchange drugs," the leader confesses, trembling. "We do whatever our boss tells us to do."

"Boss?" Dhruv presses. "Who is your boss?"

The leader hesitates before answering, "Sir, we've never seen him. We just take the packets, leave them here at this spot, and then update our boss."

"Okay, give me his number," Dhruv orders.

The leader stammers, "Sir, I... I don't have his number."

"What do you mean you don't have his number?" Dhruv shouts in frustration.

"Sir, I swear! All we do is leave the drugs here and mark the spot with a heart symbol. Someone else comes to collect them tomorrow. That's all we know, sir. Our job is only to drop the drugs. We don't know anything beyond that," the leader pleads desperately.

Dhruv's patience wears thin. He points his gun at the leader's head and warns coldly, "Don't lie to me, or I'll make sure the rest of these four bullets go straight into your skull."

The leader cries out, "No, I swear on my life, sir! We're telling you the truth!"

Dhruv glares at the man before straightening up. "Fine. You're all coming to the station. My team knows exactly how to make you talk." He looks at Suraj and nods.

Suraj pulls out his phone and calls the police, giving them the location and instructing them to come

immediately. "We've got suspects to take in," he says firmly.

The police van arrives, and Dhruv instructs the officers to load the gang members into the vehicle. One by one, the suspects climb in, subdued and silent. As the van drives away, Dhruv turns to look at Akash and Suraj. Both were badly injured, their bodies covered in bruises and cuts.

"Both of you, head to the hospital immediately," Dhruv orders sternly.

"Okay," they reply, nodding weakly. Dhruv quickly calls for an ambulance, which arrives shortly after. The medics help Akash and Suraj into the vehicle, and it drives off toward the hospital.

Left alone, Dhruv sinks into the nearby couch, rubbing his temples. His mind races as he tries to piece everything together. What is this new problem? Why are the drugs being exchanged here? Could this somehow be connected to the killer? Is the killer orchestrating all of this?

The weight of the case presses heavily on him. This location seemed to be at the centre of everything—a hub of danger and chaos. Dhruv's head throbbed with the stress of unanswered questions.

Determined to find answers, Dhruv grabs the confiscated drugs and carefully places them back in the designated spot. Using the black paint left by the gang,

he marks the area with the heart symbol, just as the gang members had described. He then retreats to a hidden vantage point nearby, prepared to keep watch.

Time crawls by as Dhruv waits, his eyes scanning the darkness for any movement. The night stretches on, and exhaustion begins to take its toll. Despite his best efforts to stay alert, his heavy eyelids betray him. Slowly, Dhruv drifts off to sleep, slumping against the wall of his hideout, unaware of what might happen next.

The sun rises, and its warm rays fall directly on Dhruv's face. He stirs, squinting and covering his face with his hand to block out the light. Half-asleep, he feels a gentle touch on his face. Slowly, he opens his eyes, blinking against the brightness.

It was Anvi.

"Anvi? What are you doing here? I told you it's dangerous here! Who gave you this address?" Dhruv asks, his voice still groggy but laced with concern.

Anvi looks at him with a calm expression and says, "Shhh, Dhruv. How many questions are you going to ask me? Just be quiet for a second, okay?" She gently presses her finger to his lips. "First, let me put ointment on your wounds."

Dhruv grabs her hand, stopping her. "Why are you here, Anvi?" he repeats, his voice firm.

"I'll answer all your questions, but can you please wait a moment?" she replies softly. Her gentle tone

disarms Dhruv, and he finally relaxes, letting her continue.

As Anvi carefully applies ointment to his face.

"Aghh!" Dhruv winces in pain, involuntarily flinching.

Anvi panics. "Oh no, I'm so sorry!" she says, her voice trembling. She instinctively leans closer to his face and gently blows air on the wound to soothe it. They end up very close, their faces inches apart.

They look into each other's eyes, just staring. Dhruv observes her face closely and moves a bit closer.

"Done," she says softly, finishing with the ointment. Dhruv snaps out of the moment and smiles to himself.

She helps him sit up properly, steadying him with her hands.

"Okay, listen," Anvi begins, "I went to the hospital early this morning."

"For what? Anvi, are you okay? Are you hurt?" Dhruv interrupts, his concern evident in his tone.

"I'm fine, Dhruv," she reassures him. "One of my friends was admitted to the hospital. While I was there, I saw Akash and Suraj lying in bed. At first, I was terrified because I didn't know what had happened to you. I searched for you, but when I couldn't find you, I approached Suraj. He told me you were here, gave me the location, and... well, here I am."

Dhruv smiled as he realized how much Anvi genuinely cared for him. At the same time, he said, "I told you not to—"

Anvi quickly interrupted, "Yes, I know, you told me. Please don't give me another lecture, Dhruv. I was so scared! You were all alone here, and do you think I could sit peacefully after hearing about what happened last night? Look at you—you're badly injured!" She dusted off the dirt from his clothes, her worry evident in every gesture.

Dhruv felt a warmth in his heart and almost leaned in to hug her, but he stopped himself, realizing the moment. Instead, he walked toward the marked spot to check on the drugs. His eyes widened in alarm as he noticed they were gone.

"Anvi, did you see a black bag here?" he asked urgently.

"No, Dhruv," she replied. "When I came, there was nothing here."

"Ah, shit!" he exclaimed, frustrated.

"What happened, Dhruv?" she asked, concerned.

"Nothing," he said quickly, trying to mask his frustration. "I need to get to the police station right away."

"But Dhruv, look at you—you're not in a condition to go anywhere," she protested.

"It's okay, Anvi," he said, trying to brush off her concern. "Please, just take me there."

Anvi sighed and reluctantly pulled out Dhruv's bike.

"Do you know how to ride a bike?" he asked, surprised.

"Yes, Dhruv. I know how to ride. You just sit behind me," she said confidently.

Dhruv hesitated. "It's okay, Anvi. I'll ride," he said stubbornly.

Anvi shot him a sharp stare. Dhruv chuckled and relented, "Okay, madam. As you say."

Anvi started the bike, and Dhruv climbed on behind her. As they rode, Dhruv couldn't help but admire her confidence and skill. He was quietly impressed by how well she handled the bike, weaving through the streets effortlessly.

Finally, they arrived at the police station. Anvi parked the bike and turned to him. "Okay, bye, Dhruv. Call me if you need anything," she said with a small smile.

Dhruv smiled back, watching her as she turned to leave. As she walked away, he murmured softly to himself, "I need you."

Anvi stopped and turned around. "Did you say something?" she asked curiously.

"Nothing," Dhruv replied quickly, shaking his head.

Anvi smiled faintly before heading off. Dhruv watched her go, then took a deep breath and walked into the police station, ready to dive back into the case.

CHAPTER 19

Web of Lies

Dhruv rushes to his cabin. He gathers all the items and moves to the whiteboard. As he starts arranging the clues, he calls out, "Sir, Gautham! Look at this."

"Sir, Maanvi was his first victim, Arohi was the second, and now Ruhi is the third. These three have something in common. Also, the letters '**J**', '**U**' seem to be connected to these killings. And yesterday's drugs are somehow tied to all this as well."

"Yes, Dhruv, I also think there's some connection," Gautham said. "Did you find anything at the junkyard?"

"Nothing, sir. But I did meet an old man," Dhruv replied.

"An old man?" Gautham interrupted.

"Yes, sir. That old man was living there. I asked him about the killer and the car, but he had only seen the car passing by. Sir, we need to keep our guards stationed there."

"Yes, keep them there," Gautham agreed. "And Dhruv, we'll take care of the rest here."

"No, sir. Let me stay here," Dhruv insisted.

"How are Suraj and Akash?" Dhruv asked.

"They're fine, don't worry," Gautham reassured him. "Suraj has gone to meet Manoj today."

"Okay, sir," Dhruv said, lost in thought. There has to be a connection. Something ties all these things together... but what?

Meanwhile, Manoj stood waiting for Suraj. A strange man with white hair, torn clothes, and worn-out shoes approached him.

"Hello, Manoj," the man said.

Manoj was shocked for a moment. "Yes? Who are you? What do you want?" he asked.

The man patted him on the head.

Manoj frowned in anger. "Hey! Why are you hitting me?"

The man laughed. "You idiot, it's me—Suraj!"

"Suraj, sir? You?!" Manoj stammered in shock.

"Yes, it's me," Suraj replied.

"Sir, I didn't recognize you at all! You look so different," Manoj said, surprised.

"Alright, stop flattering me," Suraj said with a smirk. "Now, listen—where is he?"

Manoj pointed discreetly toward a man wearing a blue shirt. "Sir, you see that guy in the blue shirt? That's him."

Suraj nodded and said, "Okay, I'll keep an eye on him. Meanwhile, you stay put. If he makes any wrong move, we have to catch him immediately."

Suraj entered the factory and blended in by starting to work there. As time passed, he closely followed the man's movements, staying alert.

Meanwhile, at the police station. Dhruv stormed into the interrogation cell, his anger evident. He walked straight to the leader of the group, glaring at him.

"Now, tell me—who is your boss?" Dhruv demanded, lifting a stick threateningly.

"Sir, I already told you!" the man stammered, terrified. "Every week, we leave the drug bag at the same spot and walk away. That's all I know. You already know who's behind this!"

Another man stood up. Dhruv turned to him.

"Yes? Do you know who's behind this?" Dhruv asked.

"Yes, sir," the man replied nervously. "I knew that selling drugs could make a lot of money. So, one day, after we dropped off the bag and left, I went back to the spot to take the drugs for myself and sell them. But when I got there, I saw someone else."

"Who?" Dhruv interrupted.

"A guy in a black hoodie, sir. He had come to take the drugs."

"A black hoodie?" Dhruv asked, leaning closer. "Did you notice anything unusual about him?"

"No, sir. He just took the bag and left. I got scared and ran off too," the man explained.

Dhruv nodded and turned to leave.

"Wait, sir—one more thing," the man added quickly.

"What is it?"

"He had a big, detailed tattoo on his left hand. It was... nice, sir."

"A tattoo? On his left hand?" Dhruv asked, narrowing his eyes.

"Yes, sir," the man confirmed.

"Okay," Dhruv said, and with a determined expression, he walked out of the cell.

By now, Dhruv was certain they were dealing with the killer. He immediately called Suraj.

"Hello, Suraj. Where are you?"

"Sir, I'm at the factory," Suraj replied.

"Is the suspect there?"

"Yes, sir. He's right in front of me, eating food," Suraj said in a low voice.

"Keep a very close eye on him. Don't let him slip away. I'm on my way," Dhruv instructed.

Suraj nodded, but the guy in the black hoodie started to sense that something was wrong. He glanced around nervously, realizing he was being watched. Fear gripped him. Without finishing his meal, he bolted, leaving everything behind.

"Sir!" Suraj called out.

"What happened, Suraj?" Dhruv asked.

"Sir, he's on the run! I'm following him," Suraj said, out of breath.

"Don't let this slide, Suraj. Go after him!" Dhruv ordered.

"Yes, sir," Suraj replied, cutting the call as he sprinted after the suspect.

Meanwhile, Manoj was calmly standing outside, enjoying a cup of coffee. As soon as he spotted the suspect running, he immediately dropped his coffee cup and joined the chase. Now, both Suraj and Manoj were pursuing the man.

The suspect weaved through alleys and darted across busy roads, desperately trying to shake them off. After a long, gruelling chase, he found himself cornered

in a narrow alley with no escape. Suraj stood at one end, blocking his path.

Panicked, the suspect turned to flee in the other direction, only to find Manoj waiting there.

"You're trapped now," Suraj said firmly. "There's no way out. Just surrender."

The suspect's face twisted with worry. "Why are you chasing me? What do you want from me?" he demanded.

Suraj stepped closer. "We know about your crimes. It's better for you if you cooperate and come with us," he said calmly.

The suspect grew more agitated, his eyes darting around the alley. Spotting a glass bottle lying nearby, he grabbed it, smashed it on the ground, and held the jagged edge tightly in his hand.

"Listen, both of you!" he shouted, his voice trembling with desperation. "If you leave me alone, you'll stay alive. But if you come closer, I'll kill you both!"

Manoj stood his ground. "We're from the police. Don't even think about doing something stupid. Just cooperate and come with us!"

"Why should I?" the suspect retorted angrily. "What did I even do?"

"If you haven't done anything, then why are you running?" Suraj asked, narrowing his eyes. "Come with us, and you can explain yourself."

The suspect refused, his grip on the broken bottle tightening.

Suraj warned him, "Just come with us before our boss gets here. It's your last chance."

The suspect sneered mockingly. "Your boss? What can he do? He can't do anything to me!"

Suddenly, Dhruv descended swiftly from the rooftop, silently approaching the scene. Within moments, he was standing right behind the suspect.

"I'll tell you what *their sir* will do," Dhruv said coldly.

The suspect spun around in shock, only to be met with a solid punch to the head. The force of the blow sent him collapsing to the ground, unconscious.

Dhruv straightened, brushing off his hands, and looked at Suraj.

"Suraj, handcuff him," Dhruv ordered.

Without wasting a second, Suraj stepped forward and securely cuffed the suspect's hands behind his back.

They brought the suspect to the station and locked him in a cell.

"Good work, Suraj and Manoj," Dhruv said. "Now, we need to find out where Ruhi is. Wake him up and start questioning him," he instructed Suraj.

Suraj nodded and entered the interrogation room. Another officer escorted the suspect in and made him sit on the chair. Suraj eyed him coldly.

"I've heard your name is Varun," Suraj began. "Now tell me—what's your real name?"

The suspect sat silently, refusing to answer.

From outside the room, Dhruv watched the exchange, his temper flaring. He turned to Gautham and said, "Sir, the audacity of this man! Give me two seconds, and I'll make him talk."

Gautham stopped him immediately. "Dhruv, remember—Ruhi is with him. We can't afford to take any risks. Let's wait and see."

Back in the room, Suraj leaned closer, glaring at the suspect. "Listen,

don't piss me off," he warned. He picked up his stick and delivered a sharp blow to the man's shoulder.

The suspect cried out in pain. "Okay, okay, I'll talk!" he shouted. "My name is Harsh!"

"Hmm, Harsh," Suraj said, narrowing his eyes. "Then tell me—where is Ruhi?"

"Who? Ruhi?" Harsh asked, feigning ignorance.

"Don't play games," Suraj snapped. "The young woman you kidnapped from the lab."

"I don't know any Ruhi, sir! I haven't kidnapped anyone. I don't even know any girl by that name. Why would I do that?" Harsh said, his voice trembling.

Suraj frowned, clearly disappointed with the answers. Meanwhile, Dhruv turned to Akash and said, "Go get him a glass of water."

Akash looked confused. "But sir, why?"

"Just do it," Dhruv insisted. "And wear gloves," he added firmly.

Akash followed the instructions, put on gloves, poured a glass of water, and handed it to Harsh. The suspect drank it quickly.

As soon as Harsh finished, Akash took the glass and looked back at Dhruv.

"Take that glass to the lab," Dhruv instructed. "Check the fingerprints and see if they match the ones we found in the forest."

Akash took the glass and sent it to the lab for verification. Fifteen minutes passed, and they still hadn't received any updates.

Suddenly, Gautham's phone rang. He answered it and walked out of the room to take the call.

The moment Gautham left, Dhruv stormed into the interrogation room. Without hesitation, he grabbed Harsh by the collar and yanked him forward.

"Tell me where Ruhi is!" Dhruv roared. "Or I swear, you'll rot in this cell for the rest of your life! Don't you dare mess with me!"

Suraj quickly intervened, pulling at Dhruv's arm. "Sir, please! Leave him! Control your anger, sir!" he pleaded.

Dhruv shrugged off Suraj's grip and glared at Harsh.

Harsh, trembling, stammered, "Sir, if you can't find the killer, how is that my fault? Don't blame me for something I didn't do! I don't even know who you're talking about! How would I know her? Please, let me go!"

Dhruv's eyes burned with fury. "Then why did you run away?" he demanded.

"Sir, because you were chasing me!" Harsh admitted, his voice cracking.

Dhruv stared at him for a long, tense moment, making Harsh squirm in silence. But Dhruv's patience was gone. He let go of Harsh's collar, his breathing heavy with frustration, and stormed out of the room.

Before leaving, Dhruv turned back and growled, "I'm coming back in ten minutes. When I return, I *better* have an answer."

He slammed the door behind him as he left.

Suraj leaned closer to Harsh, his tone calm but firm. "Look, it's better if you just tell us the truth. Save yourself before this gets worse." staring at Harsh's hand. "Okay, now tell me—what is this tattoo on your hand?"

Harsh hesitated. "Sir, I just liked it. I saw it in a shop and decided to get it done, that's all."

Suraj slammed his hand on the table, his patience wearing thin. "Harsh, I'm not in the mood for your lame excuses. Shut up and tell me the real reason you got this tattoo!"

"Sir, I swear, I'm telling the truth!" Harsh insisted, his voice trembling.

Suraj sighed and turned to leave the room. "Wait here," he said and walked out. Approaching Gautham, he said, "Sir, I'm going to bring the man we caught last night. He can confirm if Harsh is the guy."

"Good idea, Suraj," Gautham replied. "Go get him. I'll keep an eye on Harsh in the meantime."

Gautham entered the interrogation room, his presence immediately making Harsh more nervous. As Gautham walked closer, Harsh panicked.

"Sir, please! I'm telling you the truth! Please let me go!" he begged.

Moments later, Suraj returned with the man they had arrested the previous night. The man's face was pale as he was brought into the room. Suraj positioned him in front of Harsh.

"Look at him carefully," Suraj instructed. "Is this the guy you saw?"

The man hesitated, his fear evident. "Don't be scared," Gautham reassured him. "Just tell us the truth. Is it him?"

Suraj then instructed Harsh, "Stand up and face him." Harsh complied reluctantly, his body tense.

The other man stepped back toward a corner, squatting slightly as he examined Harsh's face and the tattoo on his hand.

Finally, he spoke, his voice shaking. "Sir... yes, it's him. I'm sure of it. He's the one who used to collect the drugs. I remember him clearly. That tattoo—I'm certain it's him."

Suraj's face lit up with determination. "So, it's him. The drug dealer."

Harsh's expression darkened as he realized the walls were closing in.

Dhruv, hearing this from the hallway, stormed into the room, followed by Akash. Now, Harsh found

himself completely surrounded—Dhruv, Gautham, Suraj, and Akash stood around him, their eyes locked on him.

"You've run out of choices, Harsh," Dhruv said coldly.

CHAPTER 20

Unmasking the Truth

Harsh panics, his heart pounding fast as he starts sweating. "Okay, sir, I will tell you everything," he says nervously.

Everyone grows curious and takes a step back. Harsh looks at Dhruv with fear in his eyes. "Sir, I swear I have not killed anyone. Yes, I deal drugs, but that's it."

"Don't lie!" Dhruv shouts, his voice sharp and accusing.

Gautham places a hand on Dhruv's shoulder and whispers, "Calm down, Dhruv."

Dhruv takes a moment to compose himself.

Then Harsh says, "Sir, I go to that junkyard every week." Dhruv glares at Harsh and presses further, "And then?"

Harsh stammers, "Sir, I take the drugs and give them to our boss."

"Who is your boss?" Gautham asks firmly.

"Sir, I am not allowed to tell," Harsh replies, his voice trembling with fear.

"Not allowed to tell?" Dhruv snaps angrily. "I'll show you how you're allowed to talk!" He takes a step forward, his anger palpable.

Harsh backs away, visibly scared. "Sir, I have never met him. But every night, he comes, takes the drugs from me, and leaves," he says, fear flashing in his eyes.

"How does he look?" Suraj asks, stepping into the conversation.

"Sir, he always wears a mask and rides a bike. Other than that, I don't know," Harsh responds nervously.

Dhruv interrupts sharply, "If you're lying or making up this story, I swear I won't let you get away with it." He glares at Harsh and storms off.

Gautham follows him and says, "Dhruv, from his story, I think he's telling the truth."

"No, sir," Dhruv replies, shaking his head firmly. "He's so clearly lying. Just give me a chance, sir—I'll get the truth out of him."

Meanwhile, Akash shows Harsh a picture of Ruhi. "Look at her. Have you seen her somewhere?" he asks.

"No, sir. I have not seen her," Harsh replies nervously.

"Look properly, you idiot!" Suraj presses angrily.

"Sir, I don't know her," Harsh says, his voice shaking. "I only deal with drugs, nothing else. I haven't

kidnapped or killed anyone. Please, leave me alone!" he pleads desperately.

Akash steps forward, his tone firm. "Listen, Harsh. Drug dealing is also a serious crime. We need to find out who's behind this, so stay put and cooperate. Don't make this harder for yourself."

Dhruv's head felt so heavy. He hadn't been eating properly or sleeping well. Noticing this, Gautham said gently, "Dhruv, go rest for now. We've already caught him. We'll find Ruhi too. Please, don't stress yourself."

Dhruv looked at Gautham with tired eyes. "Sir, how can I not stress? What did those poor girls even do sir? I've promised Anvi that I'll find Ruhi," he said, his voice filled with frustration and guilt.

Just as he finished speaking, Dhruv's phone rang. It was Anvi. He held the phone up to Gautham and sighed, "Look at this, sir. What do I even tell her now?" Without answering, he disconnected the call and walked to his cabin.

Sitting at his desk, Dhruv tried to calm himself, but the phone rang again—it was Anvi, calling back. He felt a pang of guilt and sadness. He didn't want to answer, knowing he had no updates to give her. Once again, he disconnected the call, placing the phone aside.

Overwhelmed, Dhruv put his head down on his desk, consumed by his thoughts and exhaustion.

The police landline rings, and Gajendra picks up the call. "Hello? Hello?" he says.

A trembling, scared voice responds, "It's... it's me, Anvi."

Gajendra freezes in shock. "Anvi? What happened?" he asks urgently.

Her voice quivers as she tries to speak. Alarmed, Gajendra quickly places the phone aside and rushes upstairs, shouting, "Sir! Sir!"

Dhruv lifts his head from his desk. "What happened?" he asks, his tone sharp with concern.

"Sir, it's Anvi," Gajendra says, out of breath.

Hearing her name, Dhruv springs to his feet and rushes to the phone. "Yes, Anvi? What happened?" he asks, his voice filled with worry.

"Dhruv!" she cries out, her voice breaking. "I'm sending you a location. Come fast!" And before he can say anything, the call disconnects.

Dhruv looks at his phone as the location pops up. Without wasting a second, he grabs his keys, hops onto his bike, and speeds off.

Arriving at the location, Dhruv parks his bike hastily and runs toward the house. Standing outside, he sees Anvi, panicked and visibly shaken.

As Anvi sees Dhruv, she runs to him and hugs him tightly, sobbing uncontrollably.

"Anvi, tell me what happened. Don't cry," Dhruv says softly, tapping her head gently to comfort her.

Anvi pulls back slightly, tears streaming down her face. "Dhruv... Ruhi..." she stammers.

"Ruhi? Where is Ruhi? Did you find her?" Dhruv asks urgently, searching her face for answers.

Anvi looks at him, her lips trembling. Dhruv gently wipes her tears. "Wait, stop crying first. Tell me—where is Ruhi? Is she okay?" he asks, his voice calm yet filled with concern.

Anvi silently points toward the door of the house nearby.

"Is she inside?" Dhruv asks. "Is this her house?"

Anvi nods hesitantly.

"Okay, come. Let's go meet her. She needs you, Anvi. Come, let's go inside," Dhruv says, encouraging her.

But instead of moving, Anvi clings to his shirt, gripping it tightly, tears flowing again.

"Alright, I'm here," Dhruv reassures her, his voice steady and comforting. "Come with me. I won't leave your side."

He takes her hand firmly, holding it tight, ensuring she feels safe, and together, they walk toward the house.

As Dhruv walks inside, he stops in shock. His eyes widen as he takes in the scene. Turning to Anvi, he sees her gripping his hand tightly, burying her face against his bicep, trembling with fear.

Near the door, a sack lies on the floor, its surface soaked with blood. Dhruv's heart sinks—his worst fear might be true. Could it be Ruhi?

He steps forward cautiously, his mind racing. Glancing back at Anvi, he quickly pulls out his phone and calls the forensic team, his voice firm despite the dread creeping into him. Then, he dials Gautham.

"Yes, Dhruv? Where are you? Why did you rush out so suddenly?" Gautham asks, concern in his voice.

"Sir," Dhruv begins, his tone grim, "there's a sack filled with blood... it's lying in front of Ruhi's house."

"What?" Gautham exclaims, shock and sadness lacing his words.

"Yes, sir. I've already called the forensic team," Dhruv continues.

Gautham pauses for a moment before asking, "Dhruv, does Anvi know about this?"

Dhruv hesitates. "Sir, about that..."

"What, Dhruv?" Gautham presses.

"Sir, Anvi is the one who called me. She's the reason I'm here," Dhruv explains.

There's a brief silence before Gautham responds, "Then take Anvi somewhere safe, Dhruv. She shouldn't be here in this state. I'm on my way—send me the location of the house."

"Yes, sir. Please come quickly," Dhruv replies, his voice steady but filled with urgency. He sends the location before turning back to Anvi, determined to protect her.

Gautham immediately calls Akash and Suraj. "Listen, Dhruv has found Ruhi," he says.

Akash's face lights up with relief. "Thank God, sir! How is she? And how did he find her?" he asks eagerly.

Gautham hesitates, his expression heavy with sorrow. Seeing the look on his face, Akash's excitement fades. "What happened, sir?" he asks, concern replacing his earlier relief.

"There's a blood-stained sack in front of Ruhi's house," Gautham says grimly. "And... it seems like it could be Ruhi."

"What?!" both Akash and Suraj exclaim in shock.

"You heard it right," Gautham confirms, his voice sombre. "We need to leave right away."

Without wasting another moment, the three of them grab their things and head toward Ruhi's house, their hearts heavy with dread.

Meanwhile, the forensic team arrives. One of the team members carefully opens the sack, glancing at Dhruv with a troubled expression—it was clear something was wrong. Along with another forensic expert, they carefully remove the body from the sack.

As Anvi catches a glimpse of the body, her face pales, and she faints instantly.

"Anvi! Anvi!" Dhruv shouts in panic, rushing to her side. "Anvi, wake up! Anvi, get up!" He pats her face gently, trying to revive her. Panic spreads across his face as he quickly sprinkles water on her, but she remains unconscious.

At that moment, a police van arrives, and Gautham, Suraj, and Akash rush out. "What happened, Dhruv?" Gautham asks urgently.

"Sir, she saw the body... it's Ruhi. She fainted, and she's not waking up. Please do something, sir!" Dhruv pleads, his voice trembling with worry, his eyes filled with genuine concern for Anvi.

Gautham steps in decisively. "Dhruv, take her to the hospital immediately. Suraj, drive him there."

Without hesitation, Dhruv scoops Anvi up into his arms as Suraj opens the back door of the car. Dhruv

places her inside carefully, holding her hand tightly as they drive off.

"Anvi, wake up... Anvi, look at me," Dhruv says softly, his voice full of concern. "I'm right here. Please, open your eyes."

The car speeds toward the hospital, and moments later, they arrive. Dhruv quickly picks Anvi up again, carrying her inside. He turns to Suraj. "You go back to the scene—I'll stay with her."

Suraj nods and hurries back to the location while Dhruv walks into the hospital, still holding Anvi protectively in his arms, his face etched with worry.

At the location, the forensic team carefully removes the body from the sack. The sight is gruesome—the body is severely damaged, almost unrecognizable. One of the team members places the body onto a stretcher, moving with precision and care.

As the stretcher is wheeled forward, Gautham walks closer, his gaze fixed on the lifeless form. His eyes land on the forehead—it bears a distinct mark of the letter 'S'. Gautham pauses, taking a deep breath to steady himself before turning to the forensic team.

"Get the report as soon as possible," he instructs, his tone firm yet heavy with the weight of the moment.

The forensic team nods and carefully transports Ruhi's body to the forensic lab for further analysis.

Gautham then turns to Akash. "Check the area. See if anyone saw anything unusual or suspicious around here," he orders.

"Okay, sir," Akash replies promptly before leaving to investigate, determined to uncover any leads that might help the case.

Akash walks through the area and soon finds a small crowd gathered nearby. "Hello, did anyone notice anything unusual here?" he asks.

There's a moment of silence. No one answers. Akash, frustrated, walks back in the direction of Gautham.

Meanwhile, a young boy runs up to Gautham. "Sir," he says, breathless.

Gautham looks at him and asks, "Yes, what's your name, and what happened?"

"My name is Omkar, sir. I'm an engineering student. This morning, around 5 o'clock, when I came here for jogging, I saw a car parked near this spot."

Gautham raises an eyebrow. "What colour was the car?"

"It was a black, big car," Omkar replies. "I ran two laps around this area, and when I passed the car again, it was still parked there. I went near the car and knocked on the window, thinking I should tell the driver not to park here. But there was no sound at first. I knocked

again, but still no response. I thought no one was inside, so I walked home, sir."

Omkar pauses, then adds, "The strange thing is, the car didn't have a number plate."

Gautham's face hardens as he processes the information. He looks at Akash with a concerned expression. "If the killer is in the cell, then how could the car be here, and Ruhi... how is she connected?"

Akash thinks for a moment. "Sir, maybe someone's helping him from the outside."

Gautham nods, his mind racing. "Yes. Akash, you and Suraj stay here and investigate further. I'm going to the station. I'll ask him directly and get the truth."

Akash and Suraj carefully examine the area for CCTV cameras but find none. Akash turns to Suraj, a look of frustration on his face.

"Suraj, we have to catch him as quickly as possible, but I don't understand how he managed to leave the sack here while he's in the cell. Okay, even if someone is helping him from the outside, how did he communicate his message?"

Suraj nods thoughtfully. "Yes, Akash. The closer we get to solving this case, the deeper it seems to get. I feel like we're missing something major."

"Agreed," Akash responds. "For now, let's wait for the forensic report. By the way, call Dhruv. Ask if Anvi is feeling better. Wait, let me call him."

Suraj dials Dhruv's number.

"Hello, Dhruv sir, is everything okay there? Asks Suraj

"Yes, Suraj. She's just sleeping now. The doctor said it was due to the shock. What about there? Did you find anything?

"Sir, you look after things there. We're managing here. Once you're back at the station, we'll update you."

As they were talking, Anvi slowly regains consciousness and tries to sit up. Seeing Dhruv, she stirs.

"Suraj, I'll come to the station, let's talk there," Dhruv says, disconnecting the call. He then helps Anvi sit up gently.

"Anvi, are you feeling better?" Dhruv asks softly.

"Don't touch me, Dhruv!" she shouts, her voice filled with anguish.

Dhruv understands that she's both sad and angry, blaming herself for not being able to save Ruhi.

"Anvi, I know you're upset," Dhruv says, his voice steady but filled with regret. "I did my best. I'm really sorry."

Anvi begins to cry uncontrollably. "Dhruv, how will I answer her parents? How will I face her? It's so difficult... Why didn't you save her? Why, Dhruv?" She hits Dhruv's chest in her frustration, tears flowing freely.

"Dhruv, what did she do to deserve this? You should've saved her!" she cries harder, her pain overwhelming her.

Dhruv, heartbroken, gently taps her head, trying to comfort her. "I'm really sorry, Anvi. But I promise you, I will find the killer soon."

He pats her head slowly. "You need to rest now," he says quietly, helping her lie back on the bed.

Anvi nods weakly, still shaken.

"Anvi, can you give me Ruhi's mom's number? I need to inform them," Dhruv asks, his voice gentle.

Anvi hands him her phone with Ruhi's mom's contact, and Dhruv takes it, preparing to make the call.

"Hello, ma'am. My name is Inspector Dhruv, speaking from the Vidyapur police station."

"Yes, please tell me, Inspector," the woman responds, her voice calm but laced with concern.

"Ma'am, can you come to Vidyapur as soon as possible?" Dhruv asks, his tone careful.

"Why? What happened, sir?" she asks, sounding anxious.

"Ma'am... Ruhi..." Dhruv hesitates, his heart heavy with the words he must say.

"Yes, Ruhi, she's my daughter. Did she do something wrong, sir? I've told her many times not to fool around and to come back to our hometown Kerala, but she never listened."

"Ma'am, she didn't do anything wrong," Dhruv says gently. He pauses, struggling to find the words. "Ma'am... Ruhi is no more... in this world. You need to come here as soon as possible."

There's a long silence on the line before Ruhi's mother collapses to the floor in shock. "What... what are you saying, Inspector?" she cries in disbelief.

Her husband, Ruhi's father, enters the scene. "Hello, Inspector. What is this you're saying? I'm a lawyer, and I can file a case against you for making false statements!"

"Please, sir, I'm not making any false statements," Dhruv responds, his voice strained. "But Ruhi... she is no longer with us. Please, you need to come to Vidyapur immediately."

The line goes silent as Dhruv disconnects the call, his heart heavy with sorrow.

Dhruv returns to Anvi, finding her fast asleep. Her eyes are swollen, and her face is flushed with redness, a clear sign of the pain she's been through. Seeing her like this fills Dhruv with deep sadness.

He quietly walks over to her, gently brushing her hair away from her face. His thumb moves softly over her cheek, his heart heavy with guilt. "I'll come back, Anvi. Please take care of yourself. I'm so sorry," he whispers, his voice low and filled with regret.

He moves closer, his breath almost mingling with hers, just an inch away. His heart races as he looks at her peaceful, vulnerable face. For a moment, he forgets everything around them.

At that moment, a nurse approaches. "Sir," she calls out.

Dhruv turns, his attention pulled away.

"Excuse me, sir. I need to give medication to the patient," the nurse says, gently interrupting.

Dhruv nods, stepping back. He looks at the nurse, his voice firm yet caring. "Please call me if she needs anything. Don't let her go anywhere. I'll come to pick her up myself."

With that, Dhruv takes one last glance at Anvi, his heart torn, before he leaves the room.

CHAPTER 21

Buried Secrets

Dhruv rushes to the police station and meets Gajendra there.

"Gajendra, where is Gautham Sir?" he asks.

"Sir, Gautham Sir is with the suspect in the cell," Gajendra replies.

"Thanks," Dhruv says and walks towards the cell.

As he approaches, he hears Gautham speaking to the suspect. Frustrated, Dhruv opens the door with a bang and storms in.

Before Dhruv can reach Harsh, the suspect, Gautham quickly intervenes, stopping him.

"Sir, leave me! I know how to get the truth out of him!" Dhruv insists, his voice filled with anger.

"Dhruv, please calm down," Gautham says firmly. "I am questioning him. Just wait and stand right here."

Gautham then turns back to the suspect.

"Listen, Harsh. Tell me everything. You're caught. You have no other option. Tell us the truth—why are you killing young women? What is your motive?"

"Sir, I am telling you the truth! I didn't kill anyone!" Harsh pleads, his voice trembling. "I only deal with drugs, sir. Trust me, I didn't kill or kidnap anyone!"

Hearing this, Dhruv's anger flares up even more. He grabs Harsh by the collar.

"I know you're the killer! Tell me how you killed her! How did you leave her body at her house when you're locked up here? Who is helping you? Tell me!" Dhruv shouts, his voice echoing through the room.

Gautham notices the anger and disappointment on Dhruv's face and steps in to de-escalate the situation.

"Dhruv, move back!" Gautham shouts, his voice firm and commanding. "Don't take the law into your own hands. Be calm! I'll handle this. Dhruv, walk out of here and stay at your desk. I'll talk to you there."

Reluctantly, Dhruv lets go of Harsh's collar and walks away, his frustration evident in every step.

Meanwhile, Gajendra enters the room holding a file.

"Dhruv Sir!" he calls out. "Here's the report."

"What report, Gajendra?" Dhruv asks, his tone still tense.

"Sir, this is the fingerprint report of the suspect," Gajendra replies.

"Okay, give it here," Dhruv says, snatching the file. He quickly skims through the report, examining it in detail.

As he reads, his expression darkens. "What the hell is this?" he shouts, slamming the file onto the table.

"Gajendra, is this the correct report, or have you mixed it up with some other case?"

"Sir, it's the fingerprint report, sir," Gajendra says nervously.

"Why? What happened, sir?" Gajendra asks, his face filled with curiosity.

Dhruv takes a deep breath, his frustration evident. "The fingerprints don't match! How is this even possible?" he says, slamming the file on the table.

Just then, Gautham enters the room. "Sir, this report confirms that the fingerprints don't match," Dhruv informs him.

"That's exactly what I was trying to tell you earlier," Gautham says firmly. "You can't jump to conclusions, Dhruv. Before you came here, I had already given him a good dose of questioning—yes, even a bit of force—and yet, he's been consistent with his claim. He swears he only deals with drugs and has nothing to do with any kidnapping or murder."

"Dhruv, listen to me. I've worked in this field for years. After the interrogation I gave him, if he was guilty,

he would have confessed by now. He's either telling the truth, or he genuinely doesn't know anything," Gautham explains patiently.

Dhruv's frustration grows. "Then that means the real killer is still out there," he mutters, clenching his fists.

"Yes, Dhruv," Gautham says gravely. "He's still out there, roaming free."

Dhruv's eyes narrow with anger and determination.

Just then, Gautham adds, "I received a call from the forensic team. They're bringing Ruhi's body, and we need to go to her house. I'll leave from here now, and you can pick up Anvi and join us there. By the way, how is she?"

"She's fine, sir," Dhruv replies, softening slightly.

"Good. Make sure you bring her," Gautham says.

"Okay, I'll get her," Dhruv agrees.

With that, they leave the station, each carrying the weight of the unresolved case on their shoulders.

At Ruhi's house, it was past midnight. An ambulance approached the quiet street, its flashing lights casting an eerie glow on the surroundings. Two men stepped out, carefully carrying Ruhi's body on a stretcher.

One of them turned to Gautham and said, "Sir, we've examined her body, but the detailed reports will be available tomorrow."

"Okay," Gautham replied sombrely, nodding slightly.

They gently placed Ruhi's body inside the house. Gautham's eyes filled with tears as he took in the heartbreaking sight. The sorrow was palpable, etched deeply onto the faces of Akash and Suraj, who stood silently, their expressions heavy with grief. They didn't say a word but remained rooted to the spot, watching her lifeless form with a mixture of disbelief and sadness.

As time passed, more people began to arrive— Ruhi's friends, colleagues, and acquaintances. The house grew crowded, the air thick with mourning and whispers of shock and disbelief. It was a scene of collective sorrow, where everyone tried to make sense of the tragedy that had unfolded.

The sunny day had turned dark and ominous, with heavy clouds blanketing the sky. The atmosphere mirrored the grief that filled the air.

Ruhi's parents arrived, accompanied by their younger son, Akarshit. The moment they stepped out of the car, they rushed into the house.

As soon as they saw Ruhi's lifeless body, both parents collapsed to the floor, overcome with sorrow.

Ruhi's mother, Rekha, let out a heart-wrenching cry, her voice trembling with pain.

"Ruhi, please get up! Ruhi, I told you so many times this place wasn't safe. I begged you to stay with us, but you never listened! What will we do without you now? How will we survive, Ruhi? We can't live without you… we'll go with you, Ruhi!" she cried, her words barely coherent through her sobs.

Her husband, Rithesh, broke down beside her, tears streaming down his face. His voice cracked as he called out to his daughter.

"Ruhi, please come back! Please wake up! Look at your younger brother Akarshit. Are you really going to leave him alone? What will he do without you? He never goes to sleep without talking to you. How will he sleep now, Ruhi? Please, wake up!"

Rithesh's trembling hand reached out, gently touching Ruhi's face. His voice softened as he choked back tears.

"Come, let's go home. You don't have to stay here. Let's go… please…"

The room was silent except for their cries, the sound of heartbreak echoing through the house. Everyone present watched in silent mourning, their own eyes brimming with tears, unable to console the grieving family.

Akarshit, just an 8-year-old child, looked around in confusion. Everything felt strange and unsettling to him. He could sense that something was wrong, but he didn't understand what. Slowly, he walked towards Ruhi's body.

Standing beside her, he looked at her motionless form and innocently asked, "Dad, why is sister sleeping? Isn't it daytime? Then I want to sleep too. If I sleep at this time, you always scold me. Why aren't you scolding sister? Scold her, Dad. Wake her up!"

His small voice, filled with confusion and pain, broke the hearts of everyone in the room. Unable to contain his emotions, Akarshit began to cry, tugging at his father's arm.

The sight of the little boy's anguish was too much for Gautham. His chest felt heavy with grief as he silently walked out of the house. He found a quiet spot under a tree and stood there, wiping the tears streaming down his face.

Back inside, Suraj approached Rithesh, his voice calm but firm. "Sir, I know this is incredibly difficult, but please... if you break down, how will you take care of them? They need you, sir."

But Rithesh, consumed by his grief and anger, pushed Suraj back. His voice was sharp and filled with bitterness.

"Don't you dare touch me!" he shouted. "I know what I'm doing! If you people had done your jobs properly, this day would never have come!"

The room fell into a heavy silence, the weight of his words hanging over everyone. Suraj, stunned but understanding the depth of Rithesh's pain, stepped back, saying nothing. The grieving father turned away, clutching Akarshit tightly, his sobs echoing through the house.

Akash, helping Suraj to his feet, whispered, "Suraj, this isn't the right time to talk to them. Let it be." Suraj nodded silently, and the two of them stepped back, giving the grieving family some space.

The entire house was filled with the sound of crying and muffled sobs. The overwhelming grief was palpable, heavy in the air.

As time passed, dark clouds gave way to rain. It started pouring heavily, forcing everyone standing outside to rush into the house for shelter. The rain only seemed to add to the somber atmosphere.

Just then, Dhruv and Anvi arrived at Ruhi's house. The rain was relentless, pelting down like tiny needles. Dhruv got out of the car first, opened the trunk, and retrieved an umbrella. Holding it above his head, he walked to the passenger side, waiting for Anvi to step out. But Anvi didn't move—she stayed seated in the car, motionless.

Concerned, Dhruv opened the car door and bent down slightly to look at her. "What happened, Anvi? Come on, let's go. Ruhi is waiting for you," he said gently.

Anvi's eyes welled up with tears, and she broke down, her voice trembling as she spoke. "Dhruv... how will I face her? How will I face her parents? I—I don't know what to say. How can I even look at them after what happened?"

Dhruv crouched closer, his voice calm but firm. "Anvi, get a grip. This isn't your fault. None of this is your fault. You didn't know this would happen—none of us did."

He paused, looking into her tear-filled eyes. "Anvi, if you don't go inside now, you'll never be able to meet her again. This is your chance to say goodbye. Please... come out."

Anvi wiped her tears with trembling hands, her heart heavy with guilt and sorrow. After a moment's hesitation, she nodded and stepped out of the car, holding onto Dhruv's arm as they walked toward the house together under the umbrella.

Her heart was racing, her throat dry, and her hands trembling. Sensing her unease, Dhruv held the umbrella in one hand and firmly gripped her other hand.

"Anvi, I'm here with you. Come on, let's go," he reassured her.

Finally, Anvi stepped into the house. The moment she saw Ruhi lying there, her legs gave way beneath her, and she fell to the ground. Her voice cracked as she called out, "Ruhi…"

Rekha, Ruhi's mother, looked around and spotted Anvi. Her eyes filled with a mix of sorrow and anger as she got up and walked toward her.

"I'm so sorry, Aunty… I didn't know this would happen," Anvi said, her voice trembling with guilt and grief.

But Rekha couldn't hold back her emotions. She cried out loud and pushed Anvi away. "Get out of my house! I trusted you. I let her work with you, thinking she'd be safe. If you had never called her here, this wouldn't have happened. Now leave! Don't ever come back here!" she shouted, her grief turning into misplaced anger as she pushed Anvi again.

Seeing this, Dhruv quickly stepped in. "Ma'am, please stop," he said gently but firmly. "What has Anvi done? This isn't her fault. I'm truly sorry for your loss, but Anvi had nothing to do with this. Please… let her say goodbye."

He bent down, helping Anvi to her feet, and guided her toward Ruhi's body.

Anvi, who had spent so much of her career examining lifeless bodies, found it nearly impossible to look at her best friend in this state. Tears streamed down

her face as she glanced at little Akarshit, sitting quietly in the corner. Unable to hold back, she hugged him tightly.

"I'm so sorry, Akarshit ... I'm so, so sorry," she whispered through her tears.

After a moment, she let go and walked to a corner of the room, standing silently, overcome with grief. She stood there, motionless, her heart shattered, trying to process the loss of her dear friend.

Everyone who had gathered was in tears. The grief in the room was overwhelming. Ruhi's parents, Rekha and Rithesh, sat motionless, their strength drained, unable to cry anymore.

Amidst the sorrow, little Akarshit walked over to Dhruv, gently tugging at his hand. Dhruv knelt down to his level, a soft smile on his face despite the heaviness in his heart.

"Yes, kid, tell me," Dhruv said.

Akarshit frowned and crossed his arms. "Uncle, my name is Akarshit, not 'kid.' Don't call me that!"

Dhruv forced a small smile and nodded. "Alright, Akarshit. What do you want to tell me?"

Akarshit's innocent eyes looked up at him as he asked, "Uncle, why is my sister not waking up? Why are Mom and Dad crying? Is my sister never going to wake up?"

Dhruv's heart sank at the questions. The lump in his throat made it hard to speak, but he composed himself, knowing he had to say something to comfort the little boy.

"Akarshit," Dhruv began gently, "I heard you like stars."

Akarshit's face lit up. "Yes! How did you know?"

"Ruhi told me," Dhruv replied with a soft smile. "And you know what? She told me a secret—she's going to get stars for you. That's why she's sleeping. When she leaves from here, she'll go up into the sky and bring you the brightest stars."

Akarshit's eyes widened with excitement. "Really?! She's going to get stars for me?" he exclaimed, jumping a little in joy.

"Shhh," Dhruv said, gently pulling him close. "It's a secret. Don't tell anyone, okay?"

Akarshit nodded enthusiastically, whispering, "Okay, uncle. I won't tell anyone."

But then he glanced at his parents and frowned. "Why are Mom and Dad crying? They're so bad, uncle. They don't want her to go get stars!"

Before Dhruv could respond, Akarshit walked over to his father. He tugged at Rithesh's hand, wiping his tears with his tiny fingers. "Dad, don't cry! Sister will go

get stars for us. Don't cry, Mom! She'll come back soon with the brightest ones!"

Rekha and Rithesh looked at their son, their tears flowing even more freely now. Overwhelmed by his innocence, they pulled Akarshit into a tight hug, holding him as though he were their anchor in the storm of grief.

The room fell silent, the weight of loss momentarily softened by the pure and innocent love of a child who still believed in stars.

After a long wait, it was finally time to take Ruhi on her last journey. The atmosphere grew heavier, and everyone gathered to bid her farewell. A few men stepped forward to lift Ruhi's body carefully. As they carried her toward the door, Rekha broke down, her cries piercing through the sound of the rain.

"Please, don't take her! How will we live without her? My Ruhi... please don't leave us!" Rekha cried out, clutching her chest as her legs threatened to give way.

Little Akarshit walked up to his mother, gently tugging at her sari. His innocent voice broke through her wails. "Mom, I'm here with you now. I'll take care of you. Let Ruhi sister go... she's going to get stars for us."

Tears streamed down Rekha's face as she looked at her young son. Unable to hold back her emotions, she

bent down and hugged him tightly, holding onto him as if he were her lifeline.

Outside, the rain continued to pour, but there was no choice. Ruhi's body couldn't be kept any longer due to its condition. Despite the downpour, the men carried her outside, the sound of rain mingling with the quiet sobs of those following behind.

It was a heartbreaking sight—Raindrops mixed with tears as family and friends walked alongside, saying their silent goodbyes to a soul taken too soon.

CHAPTER 22

Shelter in Your Arms

It was 7 p.m. Rithesh and the others had come after completing all the rituals. The house still felt the same. Gautham, Suraj, and Akash left the place. Rekha began lamenting, "I wish my daughter were here. What will we do without her? I should never have sent her here. It's all my fault," she said, blaming herself.

Anvi couldn't bear to see this, so she ran out of the house, even though it was raining heavily. Without an umbrella, she dashed into the rain.

Dhruv grabbed an umbrella and ran after her. Anvi stopped midway and turned around. "Dhruv, don't follow me. Please, just let me be alone," she pleaded.

Dhruv, his voice filled with concern, said, "Anvi, it's raining, and you're clearly not in a state to be left alone. I know this is a very hard time for you, but understand this—I'm not going to leave you alone. Take this umbrella," he said, offering it to her.

Anvi shook her head, tears streaming down her face. "Dhruv, it's too much for me. I can't take this anymore. I don't deserve to live," she cried.

Without hesitation, Dhruv stepped closer. He took off his jacket, wrapped it around her, and shielded her head with the umbrella. "Let's go home now. You need to rest," he said gently.

Anvi hesitated, but Dhruv's unwavering presence calmed her. "Okay... you wait here".

Dhruv guided her to stand under a shelter, then walked back to Ruhi's house to get his bike. He rode back quickly, and by the time he returned, the rain had stopped, leaving only a light drizzle.

They reached Anvi's house, but Dhruv felt it was not right to leave her alone in such a state. "Anvi, let's go inside," he said.

"I'll stay alone for now," Anvi replied quietly.

"Okay, but first, let's get you inside the house. We'll talk about this later," Dhruv said gently. He took the key from Anvi and unlocked the door. They both stepped inside.

"Go change your clothes, or you'll catch a cold," Dhruv told her.

Anvi nodded and went upstairs to her room. She took a warm bath and changed into comfortable clothes. Dhruv waited for her in the dining area, his hair still damp from the rain.

When Anvi came down the stairs, she saw him and offered him a towel. His clothes weren't soaked, but his hair was still wet.

Upon seeing him, Anvi said, "Why don't you change your clothes, Dhruv?"

"No, it's okay, Anvi. My clothes aren't that wet," Dhruv replied with a smile. "Once I'm sure you're resting well, I'll head home and sleep. Besides, I don't even have any spare clothes."

Anvi looked at him with concern. "Dhruv, you'll catch a cold! Why don't you change into my pajamas?" she suggested.

Dhruv laughed in disbelief. "What? Your pajamas? Will they even fit me?"

"No, Anvi, I'm fine. I'll manage with this," he said, shaking his head. "I'll leave after you sleep."

Anvi took a step closer to him, her voice softening. "Dhruv, why don't you stay here tonight? It's still raining.

The room seemed to grow quieter.

Dhruv froze, his eyes locked on hers. His face reddened, the tips of his ears turning crimson as he opened his mouth to respond—but instead, a loud sneeze erupted.

"Ah-choo!"

"Dhruv!" Anvi exclaimed, stepping back instinctively. She stared at him for a moment, then burst out laughing, unable to hold it in.

Dhruv rubbed the back of his neck, "I'm sorry," he muttered, his voice almost drowned by her laughter.

Both of them burst into laughter. "I'm sorry, Anvi," Dhruv said, still chuckling.

Dhruv knew that Anvi hadn't eaten anything since morning, so he quickly pulled out his phone to order food. "Order something for yourself, Anvi," he said, offering her his phone.

"Okay," she replied, but then asked, "What about you, Dhruv?"

"No, Anvi, I'm not hungry," Dhruv answered.

Anvi frowned, knowing he hadn't eaten either. "I know you haven't eaten anything either, so let's both eat," she said, determination in her voice. "I'll be back in five minutes," she added, then walked up to her room.

A few moments later, she returned, holding a pair of pajamas in her hand. "Dhruv, this is the new pair of pajamas I bought. They're oversized, and I don't think they'll fit me. I was going to return them, but I think they'll fit you perfectly. You should wear these," she said, offering them to him.

Dhruv looked at the pajamas, feeling even more shy. "Anvi, is this the pair of pajamas you want to give me?"

"Yes, Dhruv. What's wrong with them?" she asked, her eyes twinkling with amusement.

"Anvi, they're pink! Plus, they have strawberry prints on them!" Dhruv said, his face turning red.

Anvi struggled to control her laughter. "Dhruv, they'll look really nice on you!" she teased.

Dhruv stared at the pajamas, clearly uncomfortable. "Please, I'll look so funny," he muttered.

Anvi walked toward him, smiling. "No, go ahead, Dhruv. You'll look fine. It's not about looking good; it's about you not getting sick. Go change quickly, or you'll catch a cold!"

Dhruv looked at Anvi for a moment before walking up to her room with the pajamas. After a while, he came downstairs, wearing the oversized pajamas.

Anvi tried to hide her laughter, but a smile spread across her face. Dhruv, noticing her amusement, said, "Anvi, if you want to laugh, please go ahead. Don't hold it in."

As soon as he finished speaking, Anvi couldn't hold back anymore. She burst into laughter. "Dhruv, you look cute, but more than cute, you look funny!" she said

between fits of laughter. She laughed so hard that she almost fell to the floor.

Seeing her laugh, Dhruv smiled, knowing exactly what she meant. "I know, you meant to make me look funny," he said with a grin.

"No, Dhruv!" Anvi tried to say, still holding her stomach from laughing so much.

Dhruv did look quite funny in the pajamas, especially as he walked down the stairs. Anvi couldn't control her laughter. "Dhruv, please, I can't stop laughing! You look so funny!" she said, barely able to catch her breath.

Wiping tears from her eyes, she added, "By the way, Dhruv, it actually fits you really well. You should keep these pajamas!"

"Of course, I'm not going to give them back," Dhruv replied, shaking his head with a smile.

Dhruv walked over and sat on the couch beside Anvi. He looked at her and smiled softly. "You look very pretty, Anvi. It's been so long since I've seen you laugh like that," he said.

Anvi listened to him carefully, then shook herself out of her thoughts and sat up, moving closer to the sofa. After a moment, she looked at him and said, "I don't know, Dhruv... I don't even know when I'll ever get a chance to tell you this, but... whenever I'm around you, I feel so safe. I feel so good. The care you give me is

so overwhelming. I feel so blessed to have you in my life." She paused, gathering her thoughts before continuing, "I just... I don't know how to say this, but yes, I think—no, not think—I like you, Dhruv."

Dhruv was stunned into silence, caught completely off guard by her confession.

The surrounding was completely silent, with only the sound of raindrops tapping against the window. Dhruv smirked and slowly moved closer to Anvi. Anvi, feeling suddenly embarrassed, spoke quickly.

"Dhruv, I didn't mean to say that just now. I know you see me only as a friend. I understand, you're a police officer, and you care deeply for others, but I don't know... I just felt like telling you," she explained, her voice soft and hesitant. "After my dad, the care and feeling of safety I've only gotten from you. I thought... I thought maybe you liked me too."

She paused, taking a deep breath. "Okay, let's just stop here," she finished, nervously glancing at him.

Dhruv looked at her for a moment, his expression serious. "Yes, Anvi, I do care about you," he said quietly. "I love being around you because you make me laugh and feel happy. But—"

Anvi, suddenly panicking that he was about to reject her, quickly interrupted. "Okay, Dhruv, forget what I said. Why did I even tell you that? I'm sorry," she

said, her face turning red with embarrassment. "I'm hungry, though. Let's have dinner."

She quickly grabbed his phone and began to order. "Pizza for me," she said, looking at him. "And what about you?"

"I'll just have a sandwich," Dhruv replied.

"Okay, done," Anvi said as she placed the order. "In about 15 minutes, we'll get the food."

The room fell into an uncomfortable silence. Neither of them made eye contact, and Anvi was still feeling deeply embarrassed about her confession.

Fifteen minutes later, Dhruv looked at Anvi, opening his mouth to say something. "Anvi, I think..." he started, but paused.

"Yes, Dhruv? What do you think?" she asked, eager to hear him.

Before he could say anything, the doorbell rang. Anvi jumped up, saying, "I think our order has arrived." She walked to the door.

Dhruv, from a distance, watched her and smiled.

Anvi opened the door, thanked the delivery person, and brought the food inside, closing the door behind her. She sat back on the couch, and they both began to eat their meal in silence.

Once they finished, Dhruv turned to her. "Anvi, are you feeling better?"

"Yes, I feel good now, Dhruv. Thank you," she replied, grateful.

"Then I'll leave," Dhruv said.

Anvi's face fell, and she forced a small smile. "Yeah, okay," she said quietly.

Dhruv stood up and walked upstairs to check if his clothes had dried, but they were still damp. Meanwhile, a loud thunderclap echoed through the air, and the rain started pouring heavily again.

Anvi walked up to the room where Dhruv was. "Dhruv, it's raining."

"I can see that, Anvi," he replied, smiling slightly.

"Why don't you stay here tonight?" she asked, her voice soft. "You can sleep in the guest room, and I'll sleep in my room. It's raining so heavily, and I don't think it's safe for you to leave now. You might get sick."

Dhruv looked at her, caught off guard by her offer.

"Okay, Anvi, I'll sleep here," Dhruv said, nodding.

Anvi handed him some warm blankets and started to leave, closing the door behind her. But before she left, she turned to him and said softly, "Good night, Dhruv. Sleep well."

Dhruv smiled back at her. "Good night, Anvi."

After she left, Dhruv lay down on the bed. He looked at himself in the mirror and couldn't help but laugh. "Dhruv, look at yourself... you look funny. But not that funny, cute, actually," he chuckled to himself, shaking his head. He then turned over and tried to sleep.

However, Dhruv found it hard to sleep. He was restless, his thoughts a whirlwind, and he felt completely disturbed. He tossed and turned in bed, unable to find peace.

Dhruv woke up, feeling restless. He switched on the light and reached for the glass of water on the side table. After drinking, he sat on the bed for a moment, trying to gather his thoughts. Just then, he heard a soft sobbing sound. He felt a strange unease.

"Maybe it's just a dream," he muttered, turning off the light again. But the sobbing continued, louder this time.

With a sense of growing concern, Dhruv turned the light back on, got out of bed, and walked out of his room. The sobbing sound grew clearer as he moved down the hall.

His heart raced with fear as he approached Anvi's room. He slowly opened the door, the sobbing growing louder.

"Anvi?" Dhruv called softly, but the sobbing stopped abruptly.

He stepped inside, calling again, "Anvi, are you okay? Are you crying?"

Silence followed. He walked toward the bed, turning on the small table light. Anvi was fast asleep, her face peaceful. Dhruv stood there for a moment, confused, until he noticed a tear running down her cheek.

It was Anvi who had been crying. His heart sank, and he slowly reached out, gently tapping her shoulder. "Anvi, are you okay? Do you want to talk?" he asked quietly.

Anvi's eyes fluttered open, and as soon as she saw him, she broke down in tears. Dhruv quickly moved to sit beside her, gently waking her up and helping her sit up on the bed. He sat beside her, his hand comforting on her back.

"Anvi," Dhruv said softly, wiping her tears. "If you want to cry, then cry it all out. Don't hold it in. It's difficult, I know, but it's not your fault. Stop blaming yourself."

His words were calm and steady, his thumb gently rubbing the back of her hand.

Unable to hold back, Anvi suddenly hugged Dhruv tightly. She clung to him, seeking comfort in his presence. Dhruv hugged her back, making sure she felt safe and supported.

"Thank you, Dhruv," she whispered through her tears. "Thank you for being here for me."

Anvi pulled away from Dhruv, her face filled with guilt. "I'm sorry to put you in this situation," she whispered.

Dhruv gently pulled back, his expression serious. "I don't know what will make you feel better or how to stop your tears. But one thing I do know—seeing you cry hurts me, Anvi. It really does. What happened has happened, and nothing can change that. Ruhi wouldn't want to see you like this either. So please, stop crying."

Anvi's heart sank as she thought about what Dhruv said. She realized it would hurt Ruhi even more if she continued crying. With a shaky breath, she nodded. "Okay, Dhruv, I won't cry anymore."

"Good," Dhruv said softly, his concern never wavering. "Now, get some sleep."

He carefully pulled the bedsheet over her, tucking it in gently around her. "Do you want some water?" he asked.

"No," Anvi replied, her voice quieter now.

Dhruv pulled a chair closer to her bed and sat down, watching her with a quiet intensity. "Anvi, go to sleep. I'll stay here," he said, his voice gentle.

"I'm okay, Dhruv. You can sleep too. I'll call you if I need anything," Anvi said, trying to reassure him.

"No, Anvi, you sleep. I'll stay here," he insisted.

As she slowly drifted into a deep sleep, Dhruv sat by her side, his thoughts a mix of concern and unspoken feelings. "Anvi, I have to tell you something," he whispered quietly, though he knew she wouldn't hear him. "I feel really good when I'm around you. I don't know what this is yet, but I like you, Anvi. I didn't want to confess like this, but you... you forced me to."

He paused, watching her sleep peacefully. "I know the timing isn't right, but once this case is over, I'll tell you everything. I promise." He reached out, his fingers gently touching her cheek. "You look so cute when you sleep. Just... please don't cry. It aches my heart."

He smiled softly as he saw her sleeping so soundly. Moments later, exhaustion took over, and Dhruv, still sitting beside her, fell asleep in the chair.

As the sun rose, Dhruv slowly woke up. He looked over at Anvi, a soft smile spreading across his face. He gently touched her head, his fingers brushing through her hair before he quietly got up and walked to his room.

After changing into his clothes, he took a moment to write a short note.

"Anvi, I will call you back later. Don't stress too much ."

He smiled as he wrote the last part, then carefully placed the note on her side table beside her. With one

last glance at her, he left the room, his heart heavy with unspoken feelings.

CHAPTER 23

The Call

Dhruv gets back to his house, changes his clothes, and heads to the police station.

Gautham looks at Dhruv and says, "Dhruv, you don't look well."

"Yes, sir, I have a cold," Dhruv replies, sneezing. "Achoo! I'm sorry."

"It's okay, Dhruv, but make sure you visit a doctor," Gautham advises.

"Yes, sir. I'm going this evening," Dhruv assures him.

"Sir, any updates?" he asks.

"Yes, we have the forensic report," Gautham says.

"Sir, what does the report say?"

"Dhruv, she was also brutally killed," Gautham replies. "The report is here. You can read it." Gautham hands him the forensic report.

Dhruv opens the report, and as he reads, his expression sinks. Guilt is written all over his face.

"Sir, the loss of blood…" Dhruv says, his voice trailing off.

"Yes, Dhruv, you read that right. It is the main reason for her death. She lost a lot of blood," Gautham confirms.

"Sir, when she was losing so much blood, what was that bastard doing?" Dhruv exclaims angrily. "I think he was just sitting there and watching her suffer. How can he be so inhuman? This is really ridiculous!"

"I know, Dhruv," Gautham says. "Do you see these lines on her neck?"

"Yes, sir, I can see them," Dhruv replies.

"The forensic scientist told me she was choked—but it happened after she had already died."

"What?" Dhruv exclaims, shocked. "Why would he even do that?"

"He did it because he wanted to have fun," Gautham says grimly.

"Sir, this definitely has something to do with revenge," Dhruv insists.

"Yes, Dhruv, I think the same. It's all about revenge," Gautham agrees.

"But why? What is his motive?" Dhruv wonders aloud.

"That is what we have to find out," Gautham replies. "This time, the letter **'S'** was marked. What do these letters have to do with revenge?"

"Sir, I think we should definitely figure out what's linking all these things," Dhruv says thoughtfully. "There must be something common—something major we're missing."

"Look into it, Dhruv," Gautham urges.

"I will, sir," Dhruv promises as he heads to his cabin.

Once inside, his phone rings. It's an unknown number. Dhruv pauses, staring at the screen, his thoughts racing.

As the ringing was about to stop, Dhruv picks up the call.

"Hello?" Dhruv says.

There's no response.

"Hello? Who is this?" Dhruv calls out again, his voice firm.

Still, there's only silence. Frustrated, Dhruv ends the call.

Moments later, the phone rings again. It's the same number. This time, Dhruv picks up and shouts, "Hello! Who is this? Look, I'm very busy. I don't have time for your pranks!"

A deep voice finally speaks. "I know how busy you are."

Dhruv stiffens. "Who is this?" he demands.

"What's this, Dhruv? How can you forget me?" the voice taunts.

"Excuse me, mister—whoever you are—speak clearly! Like I said before, I don't have time for this nonsense," Dhruv retorts, his frustration boiling over.

The man on the other end bursts into laughter, his voice chilling. "Oh, silly Dhruv. How can you be so forgetful?"

"I thought I was important to you, Dhruv," the man says, his tone mockingly sad. "But now I feel so hurt that you've forgotten me. That's not fair." He chuckles, the sound sending chills down Dhruv's spine.

Dhruv's fists clench as a thought crosses his mind. "Are you the serial killer?" he asks, his voice low and tense.

Silence hangs on the other end.

"Hello? Are you the one we're looking for?" Dhruv demands.

A loud, mocking laugh erupts from the caller. "Finally, Dhruv, you caught on," the man says, laughing darkly.

"What the hell do you want?" Dhruv snaps. "Why are you killing these innocent girls?"

"Innocent?" the man scoffs. "They're getting exactly what they deserve."

"Deserve?" Dhruv says, his voice rising. "What do you mean by that?"

"You'll find out soon enough, Dhruv," the man replies, his tone dripping with malice.

"Whatever your reasons, it's not right to kill someone! Who are you to decide what they deserve?" Dhruv shouts.

The man's tone shifts, anger seeping through his words. "Dhruv, no matter what, you can't catch me. I even challenged you, and yet, you're still chasing shadows. What a poor excuse for an officer you are," he sneers.

Dhruv grits his teeth, barely containing his frustration. "If you're so brave, why don't you face me directly? Why go after innocent girls?"

"You've already seen my guts, Dhruv," the man taunts. "And I'll kill every girl on my list. Just wait and watch."

Dhruv's anger boils over. "I will catch you very soon!" he screams.

"Come on, Dhruv. You can't catch me—unless I let you. You know that as well as I do," the man says, his tone dripping with arrogance.

Just then, Gautham and another inspector enter the room. Dhruv glances at them and gestures for silence, keeping his focus on the call.

"I don't know what your motive is," Dhruv says, his voice trembling with restrained anger. "But stop killing anyone. Surrender yourself before it's too late!"

The man chuckles darkly. "Silly, silly Dhruv. You still don't get it, do you? I'm not going to stop. Not until I've killed the last person on my list."

Dhruv slams his fist on the table, the loud thud echoing through the room. "I won't let that happen!" he shouts.

"Oh, Dhruv," the man says mockingly. "Always so dramatic. Do you think you can stop me? Tell me, how? You're always a step behind. You've got nothing. No leads, no plan. Just empty threats."

"I'll find you," Dhruv growls. "I swear, I'll find you and make you pay for what you've done."

"Find me?" the man laughs, his voice dripping with arrogance. "You couldn't find me even if I stood right in front of you. Do you know why? Because you're too predictable, Dhruv. Always playing by the rules, always so righteous. It's pathetic."

"Enough of your games!" Dhruv shouts. "What's your endgame? What do you get out of killing these innocent girls?"

"Innocent?" the man sneers. "You keep calling them innocent. You don't know them like I do. They've sinned, Dhruv. And I'm their judge, jury, and executioner."

"You're not God!" Dhruv fires back. "You have no right to decide who lives and who dies. No one does!"

The man's tone hardens, the mockery fading. "You think I care about your morality, Dhruv? Your rules mean nothing to me. These girls deserve what they get, and nothing you say will change that."

Dhruv grits his teeth, his frustration boiling over. "You're nothing but a coward, hiding behind a phone and preying on the defenceless. If you think you're so righteous, face me!"

The man chuckles again, the sound sending a chill down Dhruv's spine. "Face you? Oh, Dhruv, I don't need to prove anything to you. I've already won. I've been playing this game for so long, and you're just a pawn."

"Call it what you want," Dhruv snaps. "But this ends now. I'll hunt you down, no matter where you hide."

"Hunt me down?" the man mocks. "You're delusional. But I admire your determination. It's almost

entertaining." He pauses, and his tone shifts to a sinister calm. "But let me warn you, Dhruv. The closer you get, the more dangerous it will be—for you and for everyone around you."

"I'm not afraid of you," Dhruv replies coldly.

"You should be," the man says softly, almost whispering. "But enough talk. I have more important things to do. Goodbye, Dhruv. I'll be seeing you... or maybe not."

He bursts into a chilling laugh and abruptly ends the call.

"Hello? Hello!" Dhruv shouts into the phone, but the line is dead. He stares at the screen, his knuckles white from gripping the phone too tightly, as the weight of the conversation sinks in.

Dhruv slams his hand on the table once more, the frustration boiling over.

Gautham, who has been quietly observing, looks at him with concern. "Who was it, Dhruv?"

"That bastard, sir," Dhruv replies, his voice tight with anger.

"What did he say?" Gautham asks, his eyes narrowing.

Dhruv clenches his fists. "That stupid fellow has challenged me, sir. He said I'll never catch him. Well, no

matter what, I'm going to catch him and give him what he deserves."

Gautham nods, a determined look on his face. "Yes, Dhruv. We'll catch him soon. I promise you that."

"Yes, sir," Dhruv responds, his voice filled with resolve.

Turning to Suraj and Akash, Dhruv says, "Let's get back to work. We're not letting this guy slip through our fingers."

Dhruv looks down at his phone, still buzzing with the recording of the call.

"Wait, sir, look at this," he says, tapping on the screen. "The call has been recorded."

Gautham's eyes light up with interest. "Good work, Dhruv. Let's hear it. Play it on the speaker."

With a nod, Dhruv connects the phone to the speaker, and the chilling sound of the call fills the room. They all listen closely, knowing this could be the key to catching the killer.

They play the call on the speaker, and as the conversation echoes through the room, Gautham's anger is evident. His hands tense, gripping the edge of the table, his jaw clenching as he listens.

Suraj takes down notes, writing everything the man said, paying careful attention to every detail. They all look at the notes, trying to piece together the puzzle.

"Sir, what is his motive?" Dhruv asks, his voice heavy with frustration. "And look at the way he's challenging us. What does he mean by 'they deserve this'? Sir, I believe this is connected to some past case. We need to dig deeper into this. Let me investigate, please."

Gautham sighs, rubbing his forehead in thought. "Okay, Dhruv. Do what's right. Just be careful."

Dhruv nods and then brings up another issue. "Sir, what about the four people I told you should be at the junkyard?"

"Yes, Dhruv," Gautham replies. "I've already sent Sumith, Vedanth, Rishab, and Sunil. I've divided them into groups. These four will be there tonight and tomorrow."

"Suraj," Dhruv calls out. "I want you to be with them and lead. If you find anything—any clue—call me immediately. You'll need to keep a sharp eye on things tonight."

Suraj looks determined. "Okay, sir. I'll do my best," he says, standing up and heading out of the room.

"Akash," Dhruv calls next. "Take this call recording and examine it carefully. We might find something hidden in the details. We need to be thorough."

"Yes, sir," Akash responds, taking the recording and leaving to start his work.

As the others leave, Dhruv returns to his cabin, the weight of the investigation pressing on him. He sits down at his desk and begins to sift through all the clues.

"Let me start from the beginning," he mutters to himself. "These three girls..."

He pauses, looking over the profiles of the victims. "Nothing is common between them. They're all from different places, and they didn't even know each other. There has to be something else—something we're missing."

Dhruv stares at the papers in front of him, his mind racing for connections, trying to understand what could link the murders together.

Dhruv sits at his desk, his mind racing as he stares at the letters on the board. "Second thing," he mutters to himself. "These letters... they have something to do with the killer. What's he trying to tell us with these clues?" He scratches his head in frustration. "What is it? Think hard, Dhruv, think."

His eyes flick to the letters again. **"J... U... S..."** he murmurs. "What do they stand for?" He leans back in his chair, trying to make sense of the puzzle. "Does this have something to do with their parents? What is this connection? Why can't I figure it out?"

Suddenly, he hears someone rush into the room. It's Akash, looking urgent.

"Sir, come here!" Akash calls out.

Dhruv snaps out of his thoughts. "Yes, Akash?"

"Sir, listen to this carefully," Akash says, his voice serious. "I'll try to minimize the conversation. Just focus on the audio, okay?"

Dhruv gives him a thumbs-up, still deep in thought but willing to give Akash a chance.

Akash plays the audio again, and Dhruv listens intently, but once again, he can't seem to catch anything significant. He looks at Akash, confused.

Akash slowly plays the audio again, but this time, he speeds it up slightly.

As the audio plays, Dhruv hears it clearly now—faint at first, but unmistakable: the sound of a bell ringing. "Ting, ting, ting…"

Dhruv's eyes widen, realization dawning on him. He pulls off his headphones. "A bell ringing… What kind of bell is that?"

Akash looks at him, his voice steady. "Sir, the bell sound usually comes from a clock. A big clock."

Dhruv stares at him, still processing the connection. "A big bell… Have you seen this anywhere?"

Akash nods quickly. "Yes, sir. I know exactly where it is."

"Where?" Dhruv asks urgently.

"I'll show you, sir. I've seen a big bell before—at the old church near the outskirts of city. It's huge."

Dhruv's pulse quickens. "Alright, Akash, let's go. We need to get there right away."

Akash nods and they rush out of the police station. As they walk out into the evening air, Dhruv glances at his watch. "It's already past 6 PM…"

"Time's ticking, sir," Akash says, as they hurry to the car.

CHAPTER 24

The Deadly Case

On the way, it was getting dark. "By the way, Akash, how do you know about this place?" Dhruv asked.

Akash stammered at first, "Sir... sir..."

"Yes, Akash, tell me," Dhruv prompted.

"Sir, it's because I come here with my girlfriend. It's a really nice place to sit and relax, sir," Akash admitted nervously.

Dhruv smiled knowingly. "This is what you do after work at the station, huh?"

Panicking, Akash replied, "No, sir, not every day... but often. Sir, you can go here with Anvi; it's a very nice spot."

Dhruv immediately hit Akash on the head. "Anvi is my *friend*! You just focus on your girlfriend."

Akash laughed, "Okay, sir."

Moments later, they reached the place. Dhruv looked at Akash seriously. "Akash, be very careful and stay alert. He might be here."

Both of them walked closely together, scanning their surroundings. Suddenly, Akash noticed something burning under a bench. He approached cautiously and picked it up. It was a burning cigarette.

"This might have been left by the killer," Akash said, examining it closely.

Dhruv nodded, his eyes narrowing. "Stay focused. Let's look for more clues."

The two continued to survey the area carefully, their senses heightened by the stillness of the night. The faint rustle of leaves and distant sounds only added to the tension as they searched for any sign of the suspect.

Akash muttered to himself, *"He might have just left."* Determined, he continued searching, his eyes darting everywhere. He scoured the area until his gaze froze on something unusual.

In the distance, he spotted a man wearing a dark, black coat, walking away with deliberate steps. Akash squinted, his instincts kicking in. *He looks strange... could he be the one?*

Without wasting a moment, Akash called out, "Hello! Excuse me! Listen!" His voice echoed in the stillness.

The man didn't turn around, his pace steady.

"Hey! Stop right there!" Akash shouted, his tone more commanding this time. He reached for his gun, his senses razor-sharp. "Stop! I know who you are!"

The man's steps quickened. Noticing this, Akash followed, his grip tightening on the weapon.

"I said stop right there!" he barked, starting to run.

But the man didn't slow down; instead, he broke into a full sprint. Akash, adrenaline surging, chased after him. "Hey! Stop right now!" he yelled again, his voice firm as he kept running, ready for anything.

Akash kept running, his breaths coming in gasps as he struggled to keep up. Realizing he needed backup, he pulled out his phone and quickly dialled Dhruv.

"Yes, Akash. Tell me—did you find anything?" Dhruv's voice was sharp and urgent.

"Sir... sir," Akash stammered, still catching his breath. "The killer—he's right in front of me! He's running, and I'm chasing him, sir!"

"What? Wait... good, Akash! Just follow him and send me your location immediately," Dhruv commanded.

Akash stopped for a moment, quickly shared his live location, and resumed the chase. Dhruv, receiving the location, immediately set out to follow him.

Meanwhile, Akash paused, scanning his surroundings. But the man was gone. It was as if he had

vanished into thin air. Akash's heart sank, but his resolve hardened. *I can't miss this chance. Not when he's so close. I will catch him.*

With his gun gripped tightly in his hand, Akash moved cautiously forward. He found himself in a dark, narrow lane, the dim light of the street barely illuminating the path. His fingers fumbled for the small torch in his pocket. With a click, the beam of light cut through the darkness, casting eerie shadows on the walls.

Suddenly, he heard faint footsteps echoing in the lane ahead.

"Look, I know you're the killer!" Akash called out, his voice steady yet commanding. "Surrender yourself now before things get worse for you."

Silence. The only response was the faint rustle of the wind. Akash's grip on his gun tightened as he took slow, deliberate steps forward.

Then he heard it again—footsteps. This time, they came from behind. Akash froze, his mind racing. *Wait, from behind? Or is it from the side?* The sound seemed to shift, leaving him momentarily disoriented.

The footsteps grew louder, closer, echoing ominously in the confined space.

Akash turned sharply, his gun raised, his torchlight flashing. His eyes darted, searching for any movement.

His heart pounded as he scanned the lane, ready for whatever—or whoever—might be lurking in the darkness.

"Show yourself!" he demanded, his voice unwavering.

The sound stopped abruptly. The air grew still, the tension suffocating, as Akash braced himself for what would happen next.

"Wait, Akash!" Dhruv shouted, his voice carrying a hint of panic.

"Sir, you?" Akash turned, startled.

"Yes, Akash, it's me," Dhruv replied, stepping closer.

"For a second, sir, you scared me," Akash said, exhaling sharply.

"Sorry about that," Dhruv said with a faint smile. "Did you find him?"

"Sir, he ran into this lane, but I don't see him anywhere now. He might still be hiding here." Akash scanned the shadows nervously.

"Alright," Dhruv decided. "I'll circle around and come from the back. You move forward. If there's any update, call me immediately."

"Done, sir." Akash nodded, gripping his gun tightly as Dhruv disappeared into the darkness.

Akash moved cautiously, his footsteps echoing faintly. Then, he heard it again—footsteps approaching from the front.

"Sir? Is that you? Dhruv, sir, is this you?" he called out. But there was no reply.

He raised his flashlight, the beam cutting through the gloom. What he saw froze him in place. Standing in front of him was a dark figure, the man's face obscured but his presence unmistakably menacing.

A cold sweat broke out on Akash's forehead. His breathing quickened, and fear overtook him. The figure looked almost unreal, terrifying in the faint light. His mind faltered for a moment, and before Akash could react, the man hurled a small rock at him.

The rock struck Akash's forehead, leaving a sharp sting and a cut that trickled blood. Stumbling backward, Akash tried to steady himself, but the dark man charged at him, slamming him against a pile of rocks nearby. Akash fell hard, hitting the ground with a thud.

"Ahh!" he cried out in pain.

From a distance, Dhruv heard the shout. He ran toward the sound, his gun at the ready. "Akash!" he called out as he spotted him sprawled on the ground.

"Sir... the killer..." Akash muttered, pointing weakly in a direction.

"Killer? Where is he?" Dhruv demanded.

"There, sir. He went that way. Go! I'll follow you," Akash urged.

Dhruv nodded and bolted in the direction Akash indicated. His sharp eyes caught a shadow flitting behind a tree in the distance.

"Hey! Stop right there!" Dhruv shouted, his voice commanding. "You told me to catch you, right? Look, I'm here. Now come out!"

The shadow shifted, moving restlessly under the cover of the tree's branches. Dhruv's grip on his gun tightened as he approached, his heart pounding with anticipation.

"Aaah! Don't try to move!" Dhruv shouted, his voice firm and authoritative. "Wherever you are, stop right there. You have no place to go!"

The man froze for a moment but then slowly bent down. Dhruv's eyes narrowed, tracking his every move. The man picked up a stone and hurled it toward Dhruv.

Dhruv dodged effortlessly, sidestepping the rock. "You think that'll work on me, you killer?" he taunted. "Don't forget—I've got a gun in my hand."

The man hesitated, clearly rattled. His eyes darted around, but there was nowhere to run. His breathing quickened as panic set in.

Just then, Akash stumbled into view, his hand clutching the wound on his head. Despite his pain, he

positioned himself strategically, now facing the killer from the other side.

The killer stood trapped, with Dhruv in front and Akash behind. He looked back and forth, his desperation growing.

"Are you okay, Akash?" Dhruv asked without taking his eyes off the man.

"Yes, sir. This is our chance," Akash replied, his voice steady but strained. He limped closer, his injured leg slowing him, but his determination was evident.

Dhruv and Akash advanced cautiously, their guns trained on the man.

"One more step, and I'll shoot!" Dhruv warned, his tone cold and unforgiving.

The killer, visibly nervous, glanced at the ground and then at the tree nearby. His game was up, and he knew it. But in a desperate final act, he raised his head, spotted a low-hanging branch, and broke it off with surprising force.

Before anyone could react, he flung the branch toward Akash. It struck Akash hard as he bent slightly to steady himself.

Akash cried out in pain, stumbling but keeping his focus. "Sir, don't let him escape!" he shouted, gritting his teeth as he tried to regain balance.

Dhruv's eyes blazed with determination. He steadied his aim, the gun pointed squarely at the killer. "That's enough!" he barked, ready to end the chase once and for all.

The killer lunged toward Akash, gripping his neck with one hand and pulling a sharp knife from his pocket with the other. He pressed the cold blade against Akash's skin, its edge gleaming in the faint light.

"Dhruv! Drop your gun before I do anything," the killer demanded, his voice low and menacing.

"Let him go!" Dhruv shouted; his gun aimed squarely at the man. His hands stayed steady, but his mind raced.

Akash struggled slightly, but the killer tightened his grip. "Hey, buddy, don't you dare move," the killer sneered. "You move, and this knife goes straight into your neck. Trust me on that." He let out a mocking laugh, his confidence unnerving.

Dhruv's grip on his gun tightened as he panicked internally. He needed to act, but one wrong move could cost Akash his life.

"Sir!" Akash called out, his voice strained but determined. "Don't worry about me. Just shoot him!"

Dhruv's eyes widened. "Akash—"

"Sir, trust me," Akash interrupted. "Nothing is going to happen to me. You *have* to shoot him, sir. Please, don't let this chance slip away!"

The killer laughed again. "Really, Akash? You're willing to risk your life for this guy to shoot me? Brave, but stupid." He pressed the knife slightly closer to Akash's throat. "Dhruv, I'm serious. Drop the gun. Now."

Dhruv's heart raced. He looked at Akash, his subordinate's resolve shining through even in the face of death. On one side was Akash's unwavering determination to catch the killer, even at the cost of his own life. On the other side was the grim reality that the killer wouldn't hesitate to take Akash's life.

"I won't tell you again," the killer snarled. "Drop it!"

Dhruv's hands trembled slightly as he weighed his options. He couldn't afford to lose both Akash and the killer. His mind was a storm of fear and logic, torn between trust in Akash's courage and the killer's ruthlessness.

Finally, Dhruv closed his eyes for a brief moment, took a deep breath, and lowered his gun. The sound of the weapon clinking against the ground echoed through the tense silence.

"Good choice," the killer said with a twisted grin, his knife still against Akash's throat.

Dhruv stared at the killer, his mind racing. *I haven't given up yet.*

The killer smirked as he watched Dhruv. "Good boy, Dhruv. You think I'll just leave him unharmed?"

Dhruv's eyes widened in anger and fear. "Hey! You said you'd let him go once I dropped the gun!"

The killer chuckled mockingly. "Oh, Dhruv, I was just joking. What fun would I get from killing him now? You, though—you've been my real challenge."

He pressed the knife tighter against Akash's neck, forcing him to move forward. Dhruv clenched his fists, helpless as he followed the killer with his eyes.

At the end of the lane, the killer's car came into view. He'd parked it perfectly for a quick escape. Using Akash as a shield, the killer dragged him toward the vehicle.

"Let him go!" Dhruv yelled, his voice desperate, but the killer ignored him.

Reaching the car, the killer pushed Akash hard, sending him sprawling to the ground. Blood seeped from a deep cut on Akash's neck as he gasped in pain. Without a second glance, the killer jumped into his car, started the engine, and sped away into the darkness.

"Akash!" Dhruv shouted, rushing to his fallen comrade. Akash was holding his neck, blood flowing between his fingers.

"Akash, don't say a word," Dhruv said, his voice trembling but firm. "You're going to be fine. I'll get you to the hospital right now."

He pulled out his handkerchief and pressed it gently against Akash's neck. "Wrap this around your neck, tightly. We need to stop the bleeding."

Lifting Akash carefully, Dhruv carried him to his car, his heart pounding. On the way to the hospital, Dhruv kept talking to Akash, his voice full of both panic and determination.

"Don't panic, Akash. You're strong, you'll be fine. I'm not going to let anything happen to you," he said, glancing at him in the rearview mirror. Akash nodded weakly, holding the makeshift bandage against his wound.

The hospital lights came into view, and Dhruv sped into the emergency entrance. He jumped out, yelling for help. A team of doctors and nurses rushed over, taking Akash onto a stretcher and wheeling him inside.

Dhruv, left standing in the waiting room, stared at his blood-stained clothes. His hands trembled as guilt and fear washed over him. *I should have stopped him. I shouldn't have let this happen.*

Moments felt like hours as he paced the waiting room, his mind replaying the events over and over. He clenched his fists, his jaw tightening. *I'll find that killer... I'll make him pay.*

Dhruv paced anxiously in the waiting room, his phone pressed against his ear. "Gautham sir, it's bad... Akash got hurt during the chase. He's in the operation theatre now."

"What?" Gautham's panicked voice came through the line. "I'm coming to the hospital right away!"

Within minutes, Gautham arrived, rushing toward Dhruv. "Is he okay, Dhruv? What happened?"

Before Dhruv could reply, the doors of the operation theatre opened. A doctor stepped out, removing his surgical mask. Dhruv and Gautham ran to him.

"Doctor, is everything okay?" Dhruv asked, his voice trembling.

The doctor gave a reassuring nod. "Yes, don't worry. You brought him here just in time. The operation was successful, and he's stable now. He will recover."

"Doctor, can we see him?" Gautham asked, his voice filled with concern.

"Not yet," the doctor replied. "He needs rest. You can meet him in about an hour."

As the doctor walked away, Dhruv let out a shaky breath and sat down, his hands on his knees. "Sir, this is my fault," he muttered, guilt evident in his voice.

"No, Dhruv," Gautham said firmly, sitting beside him. "This is not your fault. You heard the doctor—

Akash is fine, and it's because of you that he's alive. Don't blame yourself."

Dhruv shook his head. "This killer is testing my patience, sir. If I see him again, I swear I won't hold back. I'll kill him on the spot."

Gautham placed a calming hand on Dhruv's shoulder. "You need to focus, Dhruv. You're doing everything you can. Now, listen to me—go home, change your clothes, and rest. I'll stay here."

"No, sir," Dhruv said, shaking his head again. "I need to see Akash first. I won't leave until I talk to him."

Gautham couldn't help but smile faintly at Dhruv's determination. He admired the bond Dhruv had with his colleagues, especially Akash. "Alright," Gautham said. "But come with me first."

Gautham led Dhruv to the hospital canteen. "Eat something before we go see Akash," he insisted.

"No, sir, I'm fine. I don't need anything," Dhruv replied, avoiding eye contact.

"Dhruv, listen to me," Gautham said, his tone firm but kind. "You need to eat. It's not a request."

Reluctantly, Dhruv picked up a juice bottle and drank from it. Gautham watched him, ensuring he consumed enough to regain some energy.

"Good," Gautham said with a nod. "Now let's go back.

Dhruv nodded silently, determination returning to his eyes as they walked back to the waiting room.

Time passed as Dhruv and Gautham discussed the case, their conversation circling back to the killer. Dhruv's frustration and determination were palpable, but Gautham kept his tone steady, encouraging Dhruv to stay focused.

Soon, the doctor gave them permission to visit Akash. They entered the hospital room, where Akash lay on the bed, pale but conscious. Seeing Dhruv and Gautham, Akash managed a weak smile.

Dhruv walked up to the bed, his face a mixture of relief and guilt. "Akash... are you okay?"

Akash nodded faintly, attempting to speak, but Gautham quickly intervened. "Akash, don't try to talk. It'll hurt your throat. Just rest."

Dhruv's eyes betrayed his sadness. He had always been protective of his team, and seeing Akash in this state hit him hard.

Despite the pain, Akash rasped, "Sir, I'm okay. Don't worry about me. Focus on the case. I'll be back at work tomorrow."

Dhruv let out a short laugh, shaking his head. "Tomorrow? Have you looked at yourself? Rest first, Akash. We'll handle things for now."

Gautham chimed in, smiling softly. "Exactly. Take care of yourself. Get back to work when you're fully recovered. No sooner."

Akash smiled, appreciating their concern. Gautham then added, "By the way, I've informed your family. Your mom is on her way."

As he finished speaking, the door opened, and Akash's mother entered. Her face crumpled as she saw her son lying injured on the bed. Tears streamed down her face as she rushed to his side.

"What happened? Who did this to you?" she cried, her voice trembling.

Akash reached out to her, his movements slow. "Mom, don't worry," he said gently, though his voice was hoarse. "Nothing serious happened. I'm okay now."

But his words did little to calm her. She continued crying, her hands trembling as she brushed his hair away from his face.

Dhruv stepped forward, his voice steady but empathetic. "Aunty, he's okay now. The doctors have taken care of him. Please don't worry."

Gautham added, "He'll recover fully. He just needs rest now."

Seeing that their presence wasn't easing her worry, Dhruv and Gautham exchanged glances. "We'll leave

you two alone for now," Gautham said gently. "Take care."

They stepped out of the room, leaving Akash and his mother alone.

Inside, Akash continued trying to comfort his mother. "Mom, please don't cry. See, I'm fine. It's just a small injury."

She shook her head, wiping her tears. "You call this small? You could have—" She stopped herself, taking a deep breath. "Why do you have to take such risks? Why didn't you call me earlier?"

"Mom," Akash said softly, his voice filled with love. "It's my job. But I promise, I'll be more careful. Now, please, stop crying. You don't need to worry."

Still sniffling, his mother sat down beside him, stroking his hand. "Fine, but you have to rest, Akash. No more heroics for a while."

"I promise, Mom," Akash said with a faint smile. "I'm really sleepy now."

"Okay, my son," she whispered, her voice trembling but calmer. She stayed by his side as he closed his eyes and drifted into sleep.

CHAPTER 25

Shadows in the Night

"Dhruv, go back home. I'll check all the payments and medicines. Here's your bike key—I've got your bike ready. You can take it," says Gautham to Dhruv.

"Thank you, sir," Dhruv replies before walking out of the hospital. He starts his bike and begins driving, his mind preoccupied with the incident that had just occurred.

As he rides, he spots a girl walking alone in the distance. He accelerates slightly and follows her. The girl looks back, panics, and starts running. Dhruv speeds up again and stops his bike in front of her.

"Excuse me," he says.

The girl freezes, her eyes widening as she notices the bloodstains on Dhruv's white shirt. He follows her gaze and quickly reassures her, "Don't worry. It's dark, and it's not safe for you to be walking alone here."

"Yes, I don't feel safe," the girl replies, her eyes darting between his shirt and face. Slowly, she reaches into her pocket, gripping a pepper spray canister.

Realizing her fear, Dhruv pulls out his badge and shows it to her. "I'm with the police. We're working on

a case. It's really not safe to walk around here alone. I'm just concerned about your safety. Please, you may go now."

The girl hesitates for a moment, then notices his badge and seems reassured. She puts the pepper spray back in her pocket and hurries away.

Dhruv starts his bike again and continues driving. A little while later, he spots another girl walking alone. Shaking his head, he mutters to himself, *Why are these girls roaming around at this hour all alone?*

"Okay, Dhruv, go. It's your duty," he says to himself as he prepares to approach her.

Dhruv starts his bike but suddenly slams the brakes as he recognizes the person ahead—it's Diya.

"Brother!" she calls out, her eyes widening as she notices the bloodstains on his shirt. "What happened? Are you hurt? Let's go to the hospital!"

"Leave it, Diya. This isn't my blood," Dhruv replies calmly.

Her face pales. "Then… did you kill the killer?" she asks, her voice trembling with fear.

Dhruv sighs and looks at her. "Diya, what are *you* doing out at this time?"

"Brother, I had gone to get some books for my interview preparation," she says hesitantly.

"Diya, what time is it now?"

"It's 9 PM," she replies, lowering her gaze.

"Yes, and you know very well it's not safe out here at this hour. If you needed books, you could've asked Dad or me to get them. That's what we're here for!"

"I'm sorry, Brother," Diya says softly, guilt in her voice.

"No, Diya, listen to me. You know we're searching for the serial killer. It's not safe—I don't even know who his next target is, and I can't risk anything happening to you," Dhruv says, his tone firm but filled with concern.

Diya nods silently, understanding the gravity of the situation.

"I'm really sorry," Diya said sincerely. "I promise I won't go anywhere without informing you or Dad. I swear."

Dhruv's expression softened slightly. "Okay, but you also have to share your live location with me whenever you go out."

"Okay, done," Diya replied with a small smile.

"Fine, now sit. I'll drop you home," Dhruv said firmly.

"No, it's okay. You should go and change your shirt. I can manage," Diya insisted.

Dhruv's eyes narrowed in irritation, giving her a sharp look. Realizing she had no choice, Diya sighed and hopped onto the bike. "Okay, fine. Let's go," she said.

Dhruv started his bike and drove her home. By the time they reached, Gautham arrived at the same moment. He looked at both of them curiously and asked, "Dhruv, why are you still out, and Diya, what's the meaning of coming home at this hour? And why are you with Dhruv?"

Diya froze, fearing Gautham's scolding. She glanced nervously at Dhruv, who gave her a reassuring smile before replying, "Sir, she came to my house to pick up some books. I didn't even change before bringing her back home."

Gautham looked at both of them for a moment, then nodded. "Okay. If she's with you, Dhruv, I'm fine with it."

"Yes, sir," Dhruv replied.

"Alright, come inside and have dinner," Gautham offered with a smile.

"No, thank you, sir. I'm really tired; I'll head home now," Dhruv said politely.

Gautham smiled and patted him on the back. "Take care."

As Dhruv sat back on his bike, Diya walked up to him, leaned in, and whispered, "Thank you," softly into his ear. Then she quickly turned and walked into the house, leaving Dhruv smiling faintly as he drove off into the night.

Dhruv parked his bike and walked to the door of his house. As he approached, he noticed a small note stuck on the door. Curious, he picked it up and read:

"I know you were busy today. I also know very well that you'll not eat anything after getting back from work. So, I've left food for you near the plant. Pick it up, eat well, and send me a snap.

With love,

Anvi."

A small smile crept across Dhruv's face as he read the note. Looking around, he spotted a bag near the plant. He picked it up, unlocked the door, and stepped inside.

After freshening up, Dhruv grabbed the food Anvi had left for him. Taking a bite, he said to himself, "This is so tasty!" He quickly finished the meal, grateful for the thoughtful gesture.

Feeling re-energized, Dhruv sat down at his desk. He spread out a blank sheet of paper and began sketching a plan to catch the serial killer. He analysed the details, jotting down points and connecting dots.

Finally, leaning back in his chair, he murmured to himself, "Now I know exactly what to do tomorrow."

Satisfied with his plan, Dhruv went to bed, ready for the challenges of the next day.

CHAPTER 26

Hunting the Shadow

Dhruv woke up in the morning and stepped outside. He looked up at the sky; it was windy, and the weather was grim. Taking a deep breath, he muttered to himself, "Dhruv, today is the day." Determined, he started his bike and drove straight to the police station. Parking his bike, he walked briskly into Gautham's cabin.

"Good morning, sir. I need to talk to you," Dhruv said urgently.

Gautham nodded. "Go ahead, Dhruv. What's on your mind?"

Dhruv took a deep breath and said, "Sir, I have an idea to catch the killer. I think we should circulate his photo everywhere—on social media, news channels, and all possible public platforms. If people see it, someone might recognize him and give us a clue. We have to act fast."

Gautham frowned slightly. "Dhruv, don't you think that's risky?"

"I know it's risky, sir, but if we don't take risks, we'll never catch him," Dhruv replied, his voice firm with

determination. "He slipped through our fingers so many times yesterday. You've seen what those poor girls went through. And sir, Akash risked his life for this case. I can't let anyone else suffer. I'll catch him, even if it costs me my life."

Gautham studied Dhruv for a moment, noting the fire in his eyes. Finally, he nodded and opened his wallet, pulling out a business card. "Here's the contact for a news channel. The manager is a friend of mine. Speak to them—it'll be easier this way."

Dhruv took the card, his face lighting up with a determined smile. "Thank you, sir," he said before leaving the room with renewed resolve.

Dhruv picked up the card, walked to his desk, and dailed the number on it. After a few rings, the call connected.

"Hello," Dhruv said firmly.

"Hello, yes? Who is this?" a voice replied on the other end.

"This is Inspector Dhruv from the Vidyapur Police Station," Dhruv introduced himself.

The manager, Anand, sounded startled. "Yes, sir. How can I help you?"

Dhruv continued, his tone serious. "Mr. Anand, I have a request for you. I'll be sending you a photo

shortly, and I need it broadcasted on your channel continuously. It's urgent."

Anand hesitated but asked, "Whose photo is it, sir?"

"It's a serial killer," Dhruv said bluntly. "We need to catch him, and if anyone calls with information after seeing the photo, you must update me immediately."

There was silence on the line for a moment before Anand spoke hesitantly, "Sir, I'm really sorry, but I can't do that."

Dhruv's brows furrowed in frustration. "What do you mean you can't? This is critical! People's lives are at stake!"

Anand's voice trembled as he explained, "Sir, I also have a daughter. What if the killer sees this and comes after me or my family? What if he blackmails me—or worse—kills me? I'm sorry, but I can't take that risk."

"Anand, are you serious?" Dhruv snapped, anger flaring in his voice. "Do you realize how many innocent girls he has already killed? This isn't just about you—it's about saving lives!"

But Anand's fear had taken hold. "I'm sorry, sir. I really can't," he said before abruptly ending the call.

"Hello? Anand? Hello?" Dhruv called out, but the line had gone dead.

Dhruv walked up to Gautham, his face tense. "Sir, this guy Anand doesn't want to post the photo on his channel."

"What? That's not possible!" Gautham said, his brows furrowed. Picking up his phone, he dailed Anand's number.

"Hello, Anand. This is Gautham speaking," he said firmly.

"Oh, hello, Gautham! How are you?" Anand replied nervously.

"I'm fine. My inspector called you about the serial killer case. Did he explain everything?"

"Yes, Gautham, he did," Anand admitted hesitantly. "But I'm really scared. How can I post it? Isn't it dangerous? I'm worried for my safety."

Gautham sighed deeply, trying to calm him. "Anand, listen to me. This is extremely important. We need your help to catch him. Please, do me this favour."

"Gautham, I know you've helped me during my worst times, and I'll always be grateful. But this... I'm scared for my daughter's safety. What if he targets her?"

"Anand, nothing will happen to your daughter, I promise you. The killer has specific target. Think about this—what if it was your daughter in the place of those innocent girls?"

"Gautham, stop it!" Anand shouted angrily.

Gautham softened his tone but remained firm. "I'm sorry, Anand, but you need to understand how important this is. Please think it through."

There was a pause before Anand said, "Alright, give me ten minutes. I'll call you back." He ended the call abruptly.

Gautham leaned back in his chair, his face troubled. Dhruv stood silently, watching him closely. "Sir, what happened?" Dhruv finally asked.

"He's not ready, Dhruv," Gautham admitted. "His channel has the largest following, and it's the most effective way to get the word out. But what can we do? I didn't expect this from him, especially after everything I've done for him."

Dhruv clenched his fists but said calmly, "It's okay, sir. We'll find another way. Do you know anyone else in this field who can help?"

"No, Dhruv. That's the problem. I trusted Anand," Gautham said, shaking his head.

Just then, Gautham's phone buzzed. Seeing the caller ID, his face lit up. "Dhruv, it's Anand!" he said excitedly.

Gautham immediately answered the call. "Hello, Anand. Tell me."

"Gautham, I am ready. I will post it on my channel. If I get any calls, I'll inform you right away," Anand said resolutely.

"Thank you so much, Anand. This means a lot," Gautham replied, relief evident in his voice.

"I want to help", Gautham. Let's catch this killer. Also, send Dhruv to my office with the photo," Anand added.

"Understood. Thanks again, Anand," Gautham said before disconnecting the call.

Turning to Dhruv, he smiled faintly. "Take the photo and go to Anand's office. Let's finish this."

Dhruv nodded, determination shining in his eyes, and headed out.

Dhruv rode his bike to the news studio and parked in front of the building. He walked inside, scanning the office until a man approached him.

"Hello, Dhruv. I'm Anand, the manager here," the man introduced himself.

"Hello," Dhruv replied, pulling two photos from the file he carried. "Here are the pictures."

Anand took the photos and examined them carefully. His eyes lingered on one of the images. "This tattoo," Anand said, pointing to the design. "It's really unique."

Dhruv nodded. "Yes, it's one of his distinguishing features. And these," he said, showing Anand the younger and older pictures of the killer, "are how he looked then and now."

"Got it," Anand said. "What exactly do you want me to say when I post these?"

"Tell people that if they see anyone resembling this man, or anyone with a tattoo like this, they should contact the police immediately," Dhruv instructed.

"Understood, Inspector," Anand replied.

"Also, announce that there's a reward for anyone who provides useful information," Dhruv added.

Anand raised an eyebrow. "A reward? Will they really be rewarded?"

Dhruv smirked slightly. "People don't act out of goodwill alone. If we show them there's something in it for them, they'll work harder to help us. So, make sure you include that."

"Alright," Anand said with a nod. "I'll take care of it."

Satisfied, Dhruv turned to leave. Meanwhile, Anand called his team together. He handed the photos to his lead reporter, explaining the situation and giving precise instructions about what to say on air.

Within minutes, the newsroom buzzed with activity, preparing to broadcast the urgent message.

"Good evening, viewers. This is a special live broadcast from *News 24/7*. Tonight, we bring you an urgent message from the Vidyapur Police Department regarding a dangerous criminal at large."

My name is Viransh, and I will be your reporter tonight. We begin with a critical update on a series of heinous crimes that have gripped our community over the past 20 days. A serial killer is at large, and authorities are working tirelessly to identify the individual and uncover their motive.

Displayed on your screen are two photos of the suspect—the first shows him in his younger years, while the second depicts how he is believed to look now. If you recognize this individual or have seen him anywhere, please report it immediately to the police.

The killer has already claimed three innocent lives:

The first victim was Maanvi, whose body was found brutally murdered and left in a sack near her home.

The second victim was Aarohi, who went missing during a trip with friends and was later found dead in front of her house.

The third victim, a forensic scientist working on this very case, was kidnapped from her lab and killed.

These victims were young, bright, and full of life. Their tragic deaths have left families devastated and a community seeking justice.

Law enforcement officials describe the suspect as **tall, with broad shoulders also he has scar on his right eye** and they emphasize his **unique tattoo on his left hand**, which could help in identifying him.

The police urge the public to remain vigilant and report any suspicious activity immediately. If you see anything unusual or have information that could assist in the investigation, contact the Vidyapur Police Department or use the helpline number displayed on your screen.

Authorities assure us that they are working around the clock to apprehend this dangerous criminal and bring justice to the victims and their families.

Stay tuned for further updates as this story develops, and remember—your cooperation could make all the difference in ensuring the safety of our community.

Stay safe, remain alert, and thank you for joining us tonight on this special broadcast.

As the live broadcast ended, Dhruv stood nearby, watching intently. The reporter, visibly energized from delivering the critical message, walked back to him.

Dhruv nodded with approval, his eyes reflecting a mix of determination and hope. "Well done," he said, his voice firm yet appreciative. "That was exactly what we needed. If you receive any tips or leads, no matter

how small, please inform us immediately. Lives depend on it."

The reporter gave a confident nod. "Of course, Inspector. We'll keep the lines open and ensure any updates reach you first."

"Thank you," Dhruv said, a faint smile breaking through his otherwise serious demeanour. With that, he turned and left the office, his mind already racing with plans to follow up on the next steps of the investigation.

CHAPTER 27

Echoes of the Dead

The news was all over the place, and fear gripped everyone. People were terrified, desperate to feel safe. The tension in the air was palpable.

From the bedroom, Meena called out, "Chirag! Come fast! Look at the news!"

Chirag hurried downstairs, a pile of books still in his hands. "What happened, Meena?" he asked, concern etched on his face.

"Look at this!" she said, pointing at the television screen.

Chirag stared at the news report, his face growing darker as he listened.

"This bastard killed my daughter!" Meena shouted, her voice trembling with anger and grief. "If I find him, I won't tell the police—I'll kill him myself!"

Chirag's face turned red with fury. "What on earth did our daughter even do? Why did she have to die?" His voice cracked under the weight of his emotions.

Both of them stood there, overwhelmed by frustration and sorrow. Tears streamed down Meena's

face as she collapsed onto the couch. "Chirag, my heart aches. I can't believe our daughter is gone... and this monster took her from us."

Chirag knelt beside her, holding her trembling hands. "Meena, I feel the same. But now that we've seen his face, we'll find him. Stop crying, please," he said softly, trying to calm her.

He stood up, clutching his books, and began climbing the stairs. Halfway up, he stopped abruptly, his body stiffening as if struck by a sudden thought. He stayed there, motionless, for several minutes.

Meena noticed and called out, "What happened, Chirag? Why did you stop?"

Chirag slowly turned around and walked back down. His face was pale, his eyes distant. "Meena," he said hesitantly, "why do I feel like I've seen him somewhere before?"

Her tear-filled eyes lit up with a glimmer of hope. "Where, Chirag? Do you remember where you've seen him?"

He shook his head. "Not clearly... his face feels familiar, but it's like a blur right now. I need to think. Maybe I should go through my old cases. Perhaps something will come back to me."

Meena looked at him, her grief momentarily replaced by determination. "If there's even a chance you've seen him before, we need to follow it."

Chirag nodded, though his face remained clouded with confusion. He turned and slowly climbed back to his study, lost in thought.

On the other side of city, Amit's phone buzzed with a notification. He picked it up and opened the news app. His eyes widened in shock as he saw the picture of the killer flash across the screen.

Clenching his fists, he felt a surge of rage. "You bastard!" he shouted. "I'm not going to let you get away with this. You killed my daughter—I'll kill you!"

Hearing his outburst, Smiti walked into the room, concern written all over her face. "What happened, Amit? Are you okay?"

Amit froze, realizing he couldn't let Smiti know about this. He knew her temper too well; she might act impulsively and take the law into her own hands.

"No, no, nothing serious," he replied quickly, forcing a smile. "I just had a small argument with a friend."

Smiti's eyes narrowed suspiciously. "Really? It didn't sound like a simple argument. I heard you say something about killing…"

"Oh, that!" Amit stammered, thinking fast. "I was talking about the mosquito! See, they're all over the place!" He swatted at an imaginary mosquito and even pretended to shoo one away from her head.

Smiti frowned but seemed to buy the excuse. "Okay... come downstairs for lunch," she said before turning and leaving the room.

As soon as she was gone, Amit let out a heavy sigh. His face hardened again as he looked back at the photo on his phone. "I won't let you get away with this," he muttered under his breath.

The killer sat hunched in front of the TV, his eyes burning with rage as the news blared. "Dhruv," he muttered, his voice a low, menacing growl. "This doesn't look good for you." He suddenly let out a twisted laugh, one that echoed through the room like a dark omen. "Do you really think you can catch me like this? Silly Dhruv... how amusing," he sneered, his tone dripping with mockery.

The anger boiled over, his laughter giving way to an explosion of fury. He flipped the table in front of him, sending papers and objects flying. His breathing grew heavy, and his eyes burned with madness as he began tearing through the room, overturning furniture and smashing whatever he could find.

Grabbing a knife from the counter, he ran the blade against a sharpening stone with deliberate, almost obsessive strokes. The scraping sound filled the room, mingling with his muttered curses. Beads of sweat formed on his forehead, his grip tightening on the knife as the reality of being hunted closed in on him.

He paused, turning toward the cracked mirror beside the TV. His reflection stared back at him, a distorted image of his own chaos. He tilted his head, his lips curling into a wicked smile. "You think you'll catch me with this face?" he whispered, his voice venomous and cold. Slowly, he dragged the knife across his cheek, leaving a faint red line as he grinned wider.

The dim light of the room cast shadows across his face, deepening the malevolence in his expression. He leaned closer to the mirror, his voice barely audible but filled with menace. "Not a chance," he hissed, before laughing once more—a dark, unhinged sound that filled the air with dread.

The room was in ruins, but the killer didn't care. He was already plotting his next move, his mind a storm of rage and cunning.

Dhruv sat patiently by the table, his eyes glued to his phone, waiting for any leads. The silence was heavy, but finally, his phone buzzed. With a glimmer of hope, he picked it up and answered, "Hello, yes, this is Dhruv."

A voice on the other end spoke eagerly. "Hello, sir. My name is Dev, and I think I've seen this guy somewhere."

Dhruv leaned forward, his heart racing. "Where? Tell me, where did you see him?"

Dev hesitated. "I will, sir, but first... can you confirm the reward? How much will I get?"

Dhruv's face darkened, his patience slipping. "Listen, Mr. Dev, if you've seen him, just tell us where. As soon as we catch him, you'll be rewarded," he replied, his voice firm.

"Is that so, sir?" Dev said, chuckling. "Then okay, I'll look for him and let you know."

Dhruv frowned, sensing something off. "Wait a minute. Just now, you said you'd seen him. What are you talking about?"

Dev laughed again. "Oh, sir, I just wanted to hear it directly from you about the reward. So, I lied."

Dhruv's temper flared. "Idiot! Do you think this is some kind of joke?" he yelled before slamming the phone down. He clenched his fists and muttered, "What kind of stupid person is he?"

Frustrated, he leaned back in his chair, taking a deep breath. The search for the killer felt like an endless maze, and this prank call had only added to his agitation.

The telephone rang again. Dhruv's heart skipped a beat as he picked it up, his voice steady with hope. "Hello?"

"Sir, my name is Omkar," the voice on the other end said urgently. "The tattooed guy you're looking for—I saw him this morning!"

Dhruv straightened in his chair, gripping the phone tightly. "Where did you see him?"

"Sir, I went to the pharmacy this morning to get some medicines, and I saw him there," Omkar explained.

Dhruv's tone sharpened. "Are you absolutely sure it was him?"

"Yes, sir! I even asked him about his tattoo. He said he had it done for someone special in his life," Omkar confirmed.

Dhruv pressed further. "Which pharmacy? Give me the exact address—I'm heading there immediately."

"It's Siya Pharmacy, sir, on 5th Cross near the fruit market."

A wave of excitement washed over Dhruv. "Thank you, Omkar," he said, his voice filled with gratitude.

Omkar hesitated for a moment before asking, "Sir, what about my reward?"

Dhruv smiled faintly. "Let me catch him first," he replied before ending the call.

Without wasting a second, Dhruv called out to his colleague. "Gajendra, listen carefully," he said firmly.

"Go to this address—Siya Pharmacy, 5th Cross near the fruit market. Show them the killer's photo and the tattoo photo. Ask the pharmacist what the man bought and see if they noticed which direction he went."

"Yes, sir!" Gajendra responded promptly, jotting down the details before rushing out.

In minutes, Gajendra reached the location. The area bustled with activity, but his focus was sharp. He approached the pharmacy, determined to uncover the next clue that could lead them to the killer.

Gajendra walked briskly into the pharmacy and approached the counter. "Hello, I'm from the Vidyapur Police Station," he said, flashing his ID. He then pulled out his phone and showed the pharmacist a picture of the tattoo. "I've been informed that a man with this tattoo was here earlier. Did you see him?"

The pharmacist adjusted his glasses and studied the image carefully. After a moment, he nodded. "Yes, sir, he was here," he said.

Gajendra felt a surge of hope and smiled. "What did he buy?"

"Let me check," the pharmacist replied. He turned to the security monitor and began reviewing the footage. After a few minutes, he found the relevant clip and played it for Gajendra.

"Here it is, sir," the pharmacist said, pointing at the screen. "This man you're talking about came into the pharmacy at around 11:00 a.m. today."

He paused and opened an Excel sheet on the computer, scrolling through the day's sales. "One second, sir... let me confirm what he purchased."

After scanning the records, the pharmacist said, "This man bought two 500ml bottles of Dettol, two packets of cotton rolls, and a bandage."

Gajendra frowned, puzzled. "Dettol, cotton rolls, and a bandage? Are you sure?"

"Yes, sir. That's what he took."

Gajendra stood in silence for a moment, confused by the seemingly mundane items. Why would a killer need these things? Though the information seemed trivial, he decided it might still be useful.

He stepped aside and called Dhruv. "Sir, I've got the details. The man came here at 11:00 a.m. today and bought two bottles of Dettol, cotton rolls, and a bandage."

Dhruv paused on the other end, his voice reflecting the same confusion. "That's odd... why would he need those? Hmm. Okay, Gajendra, come back for now."

"Yes, sir," Gajendra replied and hung up. Though the clue seemed insignificant, something about it

lingered in the back of his mind as he prepared to return.

Gajendra returned to the police station, his shoulders slumped in disappointment. As he entered, Dhruv noticed the look on his face and sighed. Sitting at his desk, Dhruv stared blankly at the ringing phone in front of him. He didn't want to answer it. After so many dead ends, his faith in this strategy was dwindling, and guilt weighed heavily on him for not making more progress.

The phone stopped ringing, leaving a heavy silence in its wake. Dhruv leaned back in his chair, rubbing his temples in frustration.

Moments later, Suraj and another officer walked into the room. Dhruv looked up at them, his face tired but expectant. "Did you find anything?" he asked.

Suraj's expression was grim as he replied, "Sir, I observed the area thoroughly. No one seems to live there except for an old man. Honestly, I suspect he might be involved."

Dhruv frowned and shook his head. "No, it's not him," he said firmly. "I've already checked that place myself. The old man is just a junk collector. He doesn't fit the profile of the killer. Think about it—how could a man who struggles to carry a sack of junk possibly have the strength to kidnap women and kill them?"

Suraj nodded slowly but still looked unsure.

"I've already given him my card," Dhruv continued. "If he notices anything suspicious, he'll contact us. For now, let's not waste time chasing shadows."

Dhruv glanced at the tired faces of his team. "You've all pulled an all-nighter. Go home and rest," he said, his voice softening.

The officers hesitated but eventually nodded and left the room. Dhruv leaned back in his chair again, staring at the ceiling, his mind racing to connect the dots. Somewhere out there, the killer was still at large, and time was running out.

Suraj nodded. "Yes, sir. I'll check in with Akash first, and then I'll head home to rest."

"Okay, Suraj. Go check on him," Dhruv said, his tone carrying a hint of exhaustion.

As Suraj left, Dhruv's phone buzzed again, jolting him from his thoughts. He glanced at the screen—an unknown number. He hesitated for a moment, his hope nearly extinguished after the string of dead ends. With a sigh, he picked up the call, his voice flat. "Hello?"

CHAPTER 28

The Vanishing Clue

"Hello," Dhruv speaks in a very low voice. From the other end, a loud, mocking laugh echoes.

"Hello, Dhruv. How are you?"

Dhruv's eyes widen in alarm. Without a moment's delay, he bolts out of the room, signalling frantically for Suraj. Suraj rushes in, concern etched on his face. Using hand gestures, Dhruv motions for him to follow. They quickly enter a monitoring room equipped with advanced tracking tools. Dhruv hands Suraj a phone number and instructs him, "Track this number immediately."

Suraj gets to work, his fingers flying across the keyboard. Meanwhile, Dhruv, maintaining his composure, resumes his conversation with the caller.

"You... What do you want?" he demands.

The killer chuckles ominously. "Oh, Dhruv. You know exactly what I want. I must say, I didn't expect such a laughable tactic from a police officer like you. You're amusing."

Dhruv's jaw tightens in anger. "You think this is funny? Even if I'm not standing in front of you, I can

sense the fear on your face. I'll track you down and put you behind bars."

The killer's voice shifts, dripping with malice. "You made a grave mistake posting my photos online and mentioning the tattoo. Mark my words, Dhruv—you're going to lose this game because you can't catch me unless I let you."

Suraj signals to Dhruv: *Five more minutes.* Dhruv nods subtly.

"What are you gaining from this?" Dhruv questions.

"PEACE," the killer replies coldly.

Suraj gestures again: *Two minutes.*

Dhruv turns to Rishab and Sumith, giving them quick orders. "Get to the location now!"

Rishab and Sumith waste no time, racing to the address in their police van. At the same time, Vedanth coordinates with them over the radio, receiving updates from Suraj, who is monitoring the killer's location.

Sumith and Rishab's Conversation (On the Way to the Location): In the police van, Rishab and Sumith exchange a tense conversation.

"What do you think we'll find this time? Another wild goose chase?" Rishab asked.

"I don't know, but something feels off about this case. The killer is always one step ahead. How does he know what we're planning?" Sumith replied.

"You think we have a leak in the team? Someone feeding him information?" asked Rishab again.

"(Sighing) I hope not, but it's the only thing that makes sense. Let's just focus on the job. If he's there, we'll catch him this time," said Sumith.

"Yeah, but keep your guard up. This guy's smarter than the usual criminals we deal with," Rishab said.

"I've got your back. Let's just hope Vedanth's directions are spot-on," Sumith added.

Guidance from Vedanth (During the Search): Vedanth monitors the killer's suspected location on the tracker while communicating with Rishab and Sumith.

"Rishab, take a left after the next intersection. The signal is coming from a small alley up ahead," Vedanth instructed.

"Got it, Vedanth. We're almost there," Sumith responded.

"Careful. The signal's stationary now, but stay alert. He might've left traps or decoys," Vedanth cautioned.

Meanwhile, Rishab and Sumith arrive at the suspected location—a narrow alley. Vedanth updates Dhruv, giving him a thumbs-up gesture. Dhruv grins and taunts the killer.

"Guess what? My team has tracked you down. It's over."

A sudden silence hangs on the line before the killer's voice trembles. "What?!"

"Vedanth, we've found a phone. It was dumped in a bin nearby. There's no one here," Sumith said.

"Just a phone? Damn it! Let me inform Dhruv sir. Stay there and keep searching the area," Vedanth replied.

"I'll double-check, but it looks like the killer was never here," Sumith said.

Dhruv continues speaking with the killer over the phone, his voice growing more agitated.

"You think you're clever, don't you? Dropping a phone in a trash bin to throw us off?" Dhruv said.

" Clever? No, Dhruv. I'm just better than you. This is child's play for me," the Killer responded.

"You're not better. You're a coward who hides behind burner phones and empty threats," Dhruv shot back.

"Coward? That's rich coming from a man who can't even protect his own team. You're running in circles, Dhruv, chasing shadows," the Killer taunted.

"Keep laughing while you can. My team is closing in on you. Every second, we get closer," Dhruv warned.

" Closer? Oh, Dhruv, I'm practically holding your hand and leading you. But even if you find me, do you think you'll win? I'm always ten steps ahead," the Killer said mockingly.

"Not for long. You're scared, and it shows. That's why you keep calling—to rattle me. But it won't work," Dhruv retorted.

" Scared? Let's see how brave you are when I send you my next surprise. And trust me, Dhruv, it'll be something you'll never forget," the Killer threatened.

The call ends abruptly, leaving Dhruv fuming with anger and frustration.

Back at the station, Dhruv gathers his team. "How did he know we were tracking him? He's one step ahead of us every time."

Suraj speaks up. "Sir, it's possible he's bugged this place. We should check for cameras or listening devices."

"Good idea," Dhruv agrees. "Search every inch of this place."

The team meticulously combs through the office—checking under desks, inside drawers, and even the flooring. Despite their exhaustive efforts, they find nothing. Evening falls, and the team is visibly drained.

"Take a break," Dhruv finally says, his voice tinged with disappointment. As the others leave, he turns to Gautham.

"Sir, if there's no bug here, then the killer has an informant among us. That's the only explanation."

Gautham's expression darkens. "If that's true, it's deeply troubling. But don't lose hope, Dhruv. We'll get him."

"I'm staying here tonight," Dhruv replies.

"Alright. Rest if you can," Gautham says before leaving.

Alone in the quiet office, Dhruv sifts through case files, piecing together connections. Exhaustion overtakes him, and he falls asleep, his mind still racing with unanswered questions.

CHAPTER 29

Unmasking the Phantom

The next morning, Dhruv was still sleeping soundly at his desk. Suddenly, Gajendra burst into the room, yelling, "Dhruv sir!"

Startled, Dhruv woke up abruptly, rubbing his eyes. "What is it, Gajendra? You don't look alright. What happened? Don't tell me someone's missing again!"

"Sir... Sir..." Gajendra stammered, clearly distressed.

"What happened, Gajendra? Speak up quickly!" Dhruv demanded.

Summoning his courage, Gajendra blurted out, "Sir, the media and people... they're protesting outside!"

"What?" Dhruv exclaimed in shock. "What do you mean? Why would they do that?"

Before Gajendra could explain further, Gautham rushed into the room, interrupting them. "Dhruv, look at this!" Gautham said, shoving his phone toward Dhruv.

Dhruv took the phone and stared at the screen. His eyes widened in disbelief, and he was left speechless.

Just then, Dhruv's phone rang. He glanced at the caller ID, and his expression turned sorrowful. Silently, he showed the screen to Gautham.

The name "Chirag" was displayed.

"Sir, how am I supposed to answer this call?" Dhruv said hesitantly, his voice trembling.

The call went unanswered, and Dhruv stared at his phone in despair. Finally, he muttered, "I never thought the killer could be so cruel and mean. Why is he doing this?"

Gautham placed a reassuring hand on Dhruv's shoulder but remained silent, sensing that this was only the beginning of a much larger storm.

Within minutes, Rithesh barged into the police station, heading straight to Dhruv's chamber. Without hesitation, he stormed in and shouted, "What is wrong with you inspectors? You people can't even work on this case properly! Look at the news—do you see what's happening?"

Rithesh's face was flushed with anger and frustration. "Do you people have even the slightest idea what we're going through? I can barely hold myself together! What is going to happen to us?" he cried out, his voice trembling with desperation.

As Rithesh broke down, Rekha, overcome with emotion, collapsed at Gautham's feet. Tears streamed

down her face as she pleaded, "Please, sir, do something! We can't take this anymore!"

Dhruv stood there, silent and conflicted, as the weight of the situation pressed down on him. Gautham bent down to help Rekha, his face etched with concern.

"We're doing everything we can," Gautham said, though his voice lacked confidence. "I promise, we will get to the bottom of this."

But even as he spoke, he knew the road ahead was far from clear.

"Sir, please remove the news. We can't bear to watch it—it's too hard for us," Rekha pleaded, tears streaming down her face.

Gautham knelt down beside her and said gently, "Ma'am, we understand how painful this is. We're just as shocked by the news and the videos circulating right now. We've already called the teams to take them down, but... it's proving impossible at the moment."

Before he could finish, Amit barged in, sobbing uncontrollably. "Sir, what's happening on the television? We were already dealing with so much, and now this? Why us? Why is this happening to us?" he cried, his voice filled with anguish.

Dhruv, overwhelmed by the scene, silently walked out of the room. Taking a deep breath, he pulled out his phone and dialled the news channel.

"Hello, this is Inspector Dhruv speaking. What the hell is going on with your broadcast? Take it down immediately!"

The voice on the other end stammered, "Sir, we don't know what's happening. It seems our channel has been hacked. We've brought in our best tech teams, but... it's not getting resolved. Please, give us one more hour."

"One hour?" Dhruv interrupted angrily. "Do you realize what's happening here? People are on edge, and parents are breaking down. If this isn't fixed soon, things will spiral out of control!"

"Sir, I completely understand," the representative replied, panicked. "Until we fix this, I strongly suggest you advise people to avoid switching on their televisions or accessing the internet."

Dhruv hung up, frustration etched on his face. Returning to the room, he looked at the group and said, "We're trying to stop this, but in the meantime, please avoid watching any more news. I'll make sure this is handled."

His words offered little comfort, but it was the only reassurance he could give for now.

Dhruv declared, "Yes, I am going to do that," as he stepped purposefully out of the police station.

The moment he appeared, the media, already on high alert, surged toward him with cameras and microphones.

"Sir, what is happening on the internet?" one reporter asked. "What actions are you taking? How will you get rid of this problem?"

Dhruv paused briefly and replied calmly, "Our team is working on this. But if you all barge in like this, you're only creating more problems for us. Please, I request all of you to step back and allow us to do our job."

Another reporter pressed on, "Sir, how are you planning to catch the killer? What if he's planning to kidnap someone else or worse? Will you take responsibility for another incident?"

At this, Dhruv's expression hardened, and he snapped, his voice sharp and unwavering. "Do you think we're not doing anything in our power to catch the killer? Do you think this is easy for us? Tell me!"

The crowd fell silent, sensing his rising frustration.

Dhruv continued, his voice filled with restrained anger. "One of our officers, Akash, almost lost his life because of this killer. Do you think we're taking this lightly? While you stand here with your microphones and cameras, asking questions to fill your headlines, our teams are risking their lives. Instead of sensationalizing this for views and TRPs, why don't you contribute to

finding the killer? Stop promoting those videos and making our job harder!"

With that, Dhruv turned and walked back into the police station, his words hanging heavy in the air. The reporters, stunned into silence, didn't dare ask another question, their cameras lowering as the weight of his message sank in.

Dhruv walked back into the room, his eyes heavy with sorrow. Taking a deep breath, he said, "I am truly sorry for everything that's happening on the internet. Our team is working tirelessly to get it removed, and I promise it will be resolved soon. I request you all to have faith in us."

"Faith in you?" Rithesh interrupted sharply, his voice filled with anger. "You had a chance to save my daughter, but you failed. And now you want me to trust you again?"

Rithesh's voice grew louder as he shouted, his emotions boiling over. Dhruv, keeping his tone low, tried to respond, "Sir, I understand what you're going through, but—"

"But what, Dhruv?" Rithesh cut him off, his face flushed with rage. "Tell me, but what? What excuse can you give me now?"

Turning to Rekha, he gently helped her to her feet and said, "Don't fall in front of these people. They're

not going to do anything for us. We'll have to find our own way."

With those words, Rithesh and Rekha walked out, their anguish palpable.

Amit, still standing in the corner, turned to Dhruv, his eyes brimming with tears. "Please help us," he said, his voice trembling with desperation.

Dhruv remained silent for a moment, the weight of their pain pressing down on him. He nodded solemnly, his own guilt and determination growing stronger.

As Rithesh and Rekha walked off, Dhruv slammed his fist on the table, his voice trembling with rage. "I swear, if I catch him, I'll kill him in a second without hesitation."

Suraj entered the room hurriedly. "Sir, I've already given the orders to cut down the internet, and it's done. Nobody will be able to watch those videos now."

Dhruv turned to Gautham, his expression filled with anguish. "What is this, sir? He had the audacity to upload videos of him killing those poor girls on the internet! How could he even think of doing something so vile?"

He paused, his voice breaking. "Sir, just watching those videos makes my heart cry. It's tearing me apart. How can the parents bear this?"

Before Gautham could respond, Dhruv's phone rang. He glanced at the screen—it was Chirag calling. Hesitating for a moment, he picked up the call.

"Dhruv sir," Chirag's panicked voice shouted through the phone.

Dhruv felt a chill run down his spine. "What happened, Chirag sir? Why are you shouting?"

"If you've seen those videos on the internet, I'm really sorry. We've cut the internet, and the team is working to remove the content permanently," Chirag said, his voice cracking.

Suddenly, Chirag began sobbing uncontrollably. "Meena... Meena..."

"Sir, I can't hear you clearly. Stay where you are— I'm coming to your place. Give me 10 minutes," Dhruv said, his tone firm despite the urgency in his voice.

Ending the call, Dhruv turned to Gautham. "Sir, I think I should go to Chirag's house." Without waiting for a response, he grabbed his bike keys and rushed out of the police station, determination etched on his face as he sped toward Chirag's house.

Dhruv drove at an alarming speed, his mind racing as he made his way to Chirag's house. Within minutes, he arrived, but his heart sank when he saw an ambulance parked outside. A sense of dread washed over him as he stepped off his bike.

Walking slowly toward the house, he was greeted by the sound of wailing. The cries grew louder with each step, and the house was packed with people. Dhruv's heart pounded in his chest as he pushed his way through the crowd, his hands trembling.

As he entered the room, his breath caught in his throat. Chirag's wife, Meena, lay lifeless on the floor. For a moment, Dhruv was paralyzed, unable to process the scene before him. His hands and legs trembled uncontrollably.

Chirag, his face streaked with tears, approached Dhruv, his voice breaking. "Sir... look at this. My wife... she committed suicide."

Dhruv's heart sank further. "But... why?" he asked softly, almost afraid to hear the answer.

Chirag collapsed in front of him, sobbing uncontrollably. "The video... the one on the internet today," he said through tears. "My daughter... the way she was crying, begging to be freed. And that monster— he didn't even show her mercy. He killed my daughter without hesitation!"

Chirag's voice grew louder as he screamed, "Did you see it, Dhruv? How did you let this happen? My wife... she couldn't bear the pain of watching our daughter suffer like that. She ended her life because she couldn't live with the horror of it!"

Dhruv stood silently, his heart breaking as he listened to Chirag's anguished cries. He felt powerless, knowing no words could ease the pain of a man who had lost everything.

Finally, Dhruv spoke, his voice low but resolute. "Sir, I know this is unbearable for you. I can't even begin to imagine your pain. But I promise you, I will catch that monster. I will put him behind bars. This, I swear."

Chirag continued to sob, his grief overwhelming. Dhruv placed a hand on his shoulder, unable to find more words. "I'm so sorry," he said softly before turning and walking out of the house, his own heart heavy with sorrow and guilt.

As he stepped outside, the cries from the house echoed in his ears, fuelling his resolve. He knew he couldn't rest until justice was served.

As Dhruv walked away from Chirag's house, his eyes burned red with suppressed tears and rising anger. His hands clenched into fists as he made a silent vow: the moment he saw the killer, he would end him without hesitation.

Mounting his bike, Dhruv sped back to the police station, his mind a whirlwind of grief and rage. Upon arriving, he noticed Gautham outside, engaged in a phone call. Dhruv stopped and waited, pacing slightly as he tried to compose himself.

When Gautham ended the call and turned to Dhruv, he immediately sensed the tension in his subordinate. "Yes, Dhruv, what happened? Is everything okay?"

Dhruv hesitated, his voice caught in his throat. Finally, he spoke, his tone heavy with sorrow. "Sir... Chirag's wife, Meena, committed suicide. She... she couldn't bear to watch the video of how Aarohi was killed."

Gautham froze, his face a mask of disbelief. "What?!" he exclaimed, his voice filled with shock. "Meena... committed suicide?"

Dhruv nodded grimly. "Yes, sir. The pain of seeing her daughter's final moments broke her completely. And now, Chirag has lost not only his daughter but his wife too—all because of that monster."

Gautham's shoulders slumped as the weight of the tragedy sank in. "This is... devastating," he said, his voice barely above a whisper.

After a moment, Gautham took a deep breath and tried to offer some solace. "Dhruv, I was just speaking with the channel representatives. The videos have been successfully deleted from all platforms, and they've assured me they're taking extra precautions to ensure the footage doesn't resurface."

Dhruv's tense expression softened slightly. "That's great news, sir. Hopefully, it'll prevent others from going through what Chirag's family has endured."

Gautham nodded. "I've also informed the other parents involved about the removal of the videos. They needed to know that their children's dignity is being restored, even in this small way."

"Thank you, sir," Dhruv said, his voice tinged with gratitude. With a small nod, he turned and walked to his cabin, the fire of determination in his heart reigniting.

Dhruv spread all the pictures and evidence across his desk and began meticulously analysing the case. His eyes landed on the cryptic letters from the killer: **'J' ,'U',** and **'S'.** He furrowed his brow, trying to decipher their meaning.

"What could these letters stand for?" Dhruv muttered to himself. "What's the common link?"

He leaned back in his chair, recalling the details of each victim:

The first victim, Maanvi—her father was a teacher.

The second victim's father was a doctor.

The third victim, Ruhi—her father was a lawyer.

Dhruv rubbed his temples, deep in thought. "There has to be a connection. This can't be a coincidence. Why these specific professions?"

Just then, Gautham entered the room with a look of urgency.

"Dhruv," he said, his voice steady but tense. "Now I remember him."

Dhruv's eyes widened. "Sir, you mean the killer?"

"Yes, Dhruv," Gautham confirmed, nodding gravely. "I remember who he is."

"Dhruv, let me explain how I remembered him," Gautham said, walking towards Dhruv's desk. "I was going through my old cases when I came across a picture of him. As I read the case details, everything clicked."

Gautham handed Dhruv a file. "Take a look at this, Dhruv."

Dhruv took the case file from Gautham and began to examine it carefully. The room grew darker as the hours passed, but Dhruv remained focused on the details inside the file. One by one, the facts began to form a clearer picture in his mind.

As he read through the information, a sense of realization started to settle in. At first, he couldn't understand the connection between the victims—what linked these girls to one another? He flipped through the papers again, narrowing in on the names of the people who had previously handled the case.

Suddenly, he stopped. His eyes went wide with shock.

"Wait, what are these names?" Dhruv whispered, his mind racing. "These names... why are they here?"

He stared at the next name, his breath catching in his throat. "Do I know who his next victim is?"

Dhruv's legs began to tremble, and he collapsed back into his chair, overwhelmed by the realization that was hitting him. The puzzle pieces were falling into place, but the truth was far worse than he had imagined.

Just then, Gautham's voice came through on the phone, his tone frantic. "Dhruv!"

"Yes, sir. What's wrong?" Dhruv replied, his voice shaky.

"Diya," Gautham shouted. "She hasn't come yet."

Dhruv's heart skipped a beat. His worst fear was beginning to unfold.

CHAPTER 30

The Price of Survival

Dhruv's legs trembled; he didn't want the worst to happen. "Sir, wait! Let me call her," Dhruv said.

Gautham interrupted, "I tried, but her phone is switched off."

"What? Sir, what?" Dhruv exclaimed, panic in his voice.

"Okay, I'm coming there," he said and quickly grabbed his bike, heading to Gautham's house. Fear gripped him, but he held on to the hope that Diya was safe. She knew how to fight back, after all.

Driving as fast as he could, Dhruv reached Gautham's house in no time. He didn't even bother parking his vehicle properly and rushed inside.

There, he saw Gautham sitting on the sofa, his head resting on one hand. Dhruv slowed down as he approached him.

"Sir, don't panic. It's just 10 o'clock. She might be on her way. Maybe she forgot to charge her phone," Dhruv said, trying to reassure him, though his own heart was pounding with fear. "This isn't the first time she's come home late. Let's wait, sir."

At that moment, Anjali walked out of the kitchen holding a glass of water.

"Drink this, Gautham. I'm sure she's just a bit late. Don't worry," Anjali said gently, handing the glass to her husband.

The whole place was eerily quiet, but the fear in their hearts was evident. Time passed, yet Diya still hadn't arrived. The tension in the room grew heavier with every passing minute, making the atmosphere increasingly unsettling.

Just then, Dhruv's phone rang. It was Anvi. He stepped aside and answered the call.

"Hello, Dhruv... Dhruv!" Anvi's voice sounded anxious.

"Yes, Anvi, tell me. What happened?" Dhruv asked urgently.

"Dhruv, I saw the killer's car pass by, and I heard a girl crying out!"

"What? Anvi, did you see her?" Dhruv's voice rose with alarm.

Hearing the exchange, Gautham hurried over, but Dhruv gestured for him to stay quiet.

"Where did you see her, Anvi?" Dhruv pressed.

"I had gone to the laboratory for some work, and that's when I saw the car passing by," Anvi explained,

her voice shaking. "I followed it and saw it park at a distance. I'm near the spot now. I'm sending you the location—come quickly!"

Dhruv didn't waste a second. As soon as he received the location, he bolted towards his bike.

Gautham stood frozen, watching him. Dhruv turned back briefly and said, "Sir, I'll bring Diya back. Don't worry." Without waiting for a response, he sped off into the night.

Halfway to the location, Dhruv's bike sputtered and came to a halt. He realized it had run out of petrol. Frustration surged through him.

"What the hell is this now?" he muttered angrily, parking the bike to the side of the road.

Gripping his phone tightly in one hand, he started walking toward the location. He was determined to get there, no matter what. As he got closer—about five minutes away—he began calling out.

"Anvi! Diya! Where are you? Anvi, where are you?"

His voice echoed into the stillness as he scanned the area. Just then, he spotted Anvi walking slowly ahead of him. Relief mixed with alarm surged through him as he ran toward her.

"Anvi!" he called out, quickening his pace.

Anvi was moving sluggishly, her energy clearly drained. As soon as she saw him, she stumbled and fell into his arms.

Dhruv held her, his mind racing. Something felt terribly wrong. Looking at her closely, he noticed her face was pale, and her movements were unsteady.

"What happened, Anvi?" he asked, concern etched on his face.

"My leg... it's hurt," she murmured weakly.

"What happened to your leg, Anvi?" Dhruv asked urgently.

Anvi, struggling to speak, finally managed to reply, "I saw Diya..."

"What? Where? Where did you see her?" Dhruv interrupted, his voice trembling.

"I saw Diya... she was in the killer's car. It was parked right there," she said, pointing weakly toward a spot in the distance.

Dhruv's eyes followed the direction of her hand as she continued, "When I approached, Diya called out my name. I tried to break into the car to help her, but I couldn't. Just then, the killer came out. He hit me— hard. He kicked my leg, and I fell. After that, he pushed me aside and ran off..."

Her voice broke, and it was clear Anvi was in bad shape. Dhruv quickly guided her to a safe spot nearby, helping her sit down gently.

"You wait here. I'm going to call Suraj for backup," he told her firmly.

Taking out his phone, Dhruv dailed Suraj.

"Suraj," Dhruv said, his voice sharp with urgency.

"Yes, sir. What's the matter?" Suraj replied, sensing the tension.

"I'm sending you my location. I need backup immediately!" Dhruv said, cutting the call after sharing the details.

Suraj received the location and wasted no time. Within minutes, he was on his way to the scene.

Dhruv, highly attentive, walked straight in the direction Anvi had pointed.

He called out desperately, "Diya! Diya, where are you? If you can see me, please give me a sign! Diya, I'm here for you. Please, where are you?" His voice echoed in the stillness, but there was no response.

Moments later, Suraj arrived at the scene. Spotting Anvi slumped on the ground, he rushed to her side.

"What happened, Anvi? Are you okay? Where is Dhruv, sir?" he asked urgently.

But Anvi was barely conscious, unable to answer. Without a second thought, Suraj carefully lifted her into his car and drove to the nearest hospital. On arrival, he quickly admitted her, ensuring she received immediate medical attention.

Meanwhile, Dhruv was still tirelessly searching for Diya. His heart raced with fear and determination as he scanned every inch of the area.

Suddenly, his phone rang. It was Gautham.

"Dhruv, did you find her? Is she okay?" Gautham asked, his voice trembling with worry.

Dhruv's heart was heavy, but he tried to sound composed. "Not yet, sir. But trust me, I will find her."

Gautham broke down on the other end of the call. "Please, Dhruv, you know how dangerous the killer is. Please save her... please."

"Sir, she's my sister. I will do anything to bring her back. Please trust me," Dhruv replied, his voice firm and filled with determination.

Dhruv didn't move an inch from the area. He continued searching for Diya through the entire night, refusing to rest until he found her.

Dhruv searched tirelessly for Diya, putting all his effort into finding her, but his search ended in vain. Exhausted, he pulled out his phone and called Suraj.

"Hello," Dhruv said weakly.

"Hello, sir. Are you okay?" Suraj's voice was filled with concern.

"Is Anvi okay, Suraj?" Dhruv asked.

"Yes, she's fine. I just dropped her home and am on my way back," Suraj reassured him.

"Thank you, Suraj," Dhruv said, his voice heavy with fatigue.

"Sir, what's going on? Can you tell me?" Suraj asked.

"Suraj, can you come pick me up? My bike ran out of petrol, and I'm really tired," Dhruv replied.

While Dhruv was still on the call, he was startled to see Suraj's police car pull up nearby.

"How did you get here so quickly?" Dhruv asked, surprised.

"Sir, I came here to help you," Suraj explained.

"Okay," Dhruv muttered, too drained to question further.

Suraj helped Dhruv into the car and drove him home. Once there, Dhruv thanked him before heading inside.

Completely worn out, Dhruv collapsed onto his bed, but his thoughts soon turned to Anvi. Remembering her injuries, he picked up his phone and called her.

"Hello, Anvi," he said softly.

"Dhruv, are you okay? Did you find her?" Anvi asked anxiously.

Dhruv sighed deeply. "Anvi, are you okay? I'll continue searching for her tomorrow."

"I'm so scared, Dhruv," Anvi admitted, her voice trembling.

"You don't have to be scared, Anvi. Diya means everything to me," Dhruv replied, trying to sound reassuring despite the ache in his own heart.

As he thought about Diya, his eyes filled with tears. The thought of losing her was unbearable.

"Anvi, take your medicine and get some rest. Lock your doors properly, and take care," he said before ending the call.

Finally, Dhruv lay back on the bed. Memories of Diya flooded his mind, overwhelming him with emotion. Silent tears streamed down his face as exhaustion took over, and he drifted into a restless sleep.

The next morning was unusually sunny, but the brightness outside didn't reach where Diya was. As she opened her eyes, the surroundings came into focus—gloomy and dusty, with an eerie stillness. She quickly realized she was tied to a pillar.

Her heart raced as she looked around. The place was terrifying, with shadows looming and a suffocating

silence. Diya tried to move but found herself bound tightly. She struggled with all her might but couldn't free herself.

Suddenly, she heard footsteps approaching. Panic surged through her, but she quickly decided to pretend to be unconscious. Closing her eyes, she lay still.

The killer entered, dragging an axe along the floor. The sound of metal scraping against the hard surface echoed through the room, sending chills down her spine.

He pulled up a chair and sat down in front of her.

"Hello, madam. Wake up. I don't have much time for this. Get up," he said, his tone mocking and cold.

But Diya remained motionless, feigning sleep.

The killer stood up, and her fear grew as his footsteps came closer. Suddenly, he stopped, walked back, and returned with a large bucket of ice-cold water. Without hesitation, he splashed it on her.

The freezing water hit her like a shockwave, making her gasp for air. Diya coughed and breathed heavily as she regained her senses.

"Ah, finally awake," the killer said, smirking as he watched her.

Diya's eyes darted around, trying to take in her surroundings while her mind raced to figure out a way to escape.

"Sorry, let me introduce myself properly," he said, scratching his head. "Hello, my name is... oh, wait. What will you even do knowing my name? Let's just keep it simple. You can call me Mr. Killer. Wow, that name suits me perfectly!" he exclaimed mockingly, clearly amused by his own joke.

Diya stared at him, her face a mix of fear and confusion. His expression was hidden behind a mask, making him even more menacing.

"You look puzzled. Did you forget me already, darling?" he asked, his voice dripping with mockery. "You remember, don't you? That day in the car when you were about to pull off my mask?"

His words hit her like a jolt. Diya's mind raced as she tried to recall the moment. Her fear was palpable, but she knew she had to stay calm and figure out a way to survive.

Diya's expression changed as she pieced everything together.

"Yeah, that was me," the killer said, his voice dripping with arrogance. "And then at the party... oh, how I wanted to kill you right there. But what could I do? All those stupid inspectors were around you—especially that Dhruv."

The fear within Diya surged, but she maintained her composure, managing a defiant smile.

"You think you can kill me? Do you even know who my father and brother are?" she said boldly, trying to buy herself time.

The killer let out a mocking laugh. "Oh, I know very well. Your dad? Useless. And Dhruv? Slow as a snail. Trust me, darling, before they even get close to finding me, you'll already be delivered to your house in a sack at the gate," he sneered, his laughter echoing menacingly.

Despite her growing fear, Diya's sharp mind stayed focused. She refused to let him see her panic. Masking her emotions, she stared at him with determination.

"Why are you doing this? What's your motive?" she asked, her voice steady but firm.

The killer chuckled darkly. "Ah, the same old question," he said, shaking his head as if bored. "You know, I'm starving right now. Let me finish my food, and then I'll tell you all about it."

Diya frowned, confused by his response.

"Are you going to kill me?" she asked cautiously.

The killer stepped closer, towering over her, his eyes gleaming with sadistic pleasure.

"Kill you?" he repeated, grinning wickedly. "Oh no, darling. Killing you would be far too easy. I'm going to give you so much pain that you'll wish for death—and you'll never forget it," he said, laughing cruelly.

Diya's heart raced, but she kept her resolve. She knew she had to stay strong, find a way out, and not let him break her spirit.

"Before that, do you want to talk to your brother?" the killer asked with a smirk.

Diya's face lit up with hope. "Please, do that! I want to talk to him," she said eagerly.

The killer pulled out his phone, pausing to look at her with a sly grin. "But you don't look like someone who's been kidnapped," he remarked coldly.

Diya's heart sank as she saw him pick up a glass bottle. He began approaching her, his footsteps deliberate and menacing.

Fear overtook her, and she pleaded, "Please, don't! Don't do this. What did I ever do to you?"

The killer chuckled darkly. "You talk too much," he said with a mocking tone. Without another word, he raised the bottle high above his head and brought it down with force, smashing it against her head.

The sound of breaking glass echoed in the room. Diya let out a muffled cry as sharp pain shot through her skull. Blood began to trickle down her face, the crimson streaks contrasting against her pale, frightened expression.

The killer watched with twisted satisfaction, his grin widening as the blood dripped onto the dusty floor.

Diya's vision blurred slightly, but her mind raced. Despite the pain, she knew she couldn't let him see her completely broken.

"Now you look good," the killer said with a twisted grin, pressing Diya's cheeks roughly.

Ignoring her muffled cries of pain, he grabbed a random cloth from the room and tied it tightly around her mouth. "Now shut your mouth and stay put," he ordered coldly.

Diya squirmed in her bonds, but she was helpless to resist. Her heart pounded as the killer loomed over her.

"Now, let's call your dear brother," he sneered.

Diya's eyes widened with fear and anger as he picked up his phone. Without hesitation, the killer initiated a video call.

Meanwhile, Dhruv was still lying in bed, his exhaustion evident. The sudden buzzing of his phone jolted him awake. Half-asleep, he groggily reached for it.

"Who's video calling me this early?" he mumbled, rubbing his eyes. But when he saw the unknown number on the screen, his demeanour changed. Suspicion crossed his face as he sat up straight and answered the call.

The screen lit up, and Dhruv froze in shock. A masked man appeared on the other side of the video call.

"What the...?" Dhruv muttered, his voice laced with disbelief and concern. He immediately stood up, his heart racing as he tried to process the situation.

The masked man tilted his head mockingly and said, "Good morning, Dhruv. Did you miss me?"

Dhruv's blood ran cold. His eyes darted across the screen, trying to take in every detail, desperate to find any clue about where Diya might be.

"Hello, Dhruv," the killer said mockingly, his voice dripping with malice.

Dhruv's eyes widened as he heard the voice. He sat up, panic rising in his chest. "Where are you? Where is Diya?" he demanded, his voice shaking with anxiety.

The killer chuckled darkly. "Wait, Dhruv," he said, letting the tension hang in the air. After a brief pause, he continued, "I have a beautiful surprise for you."

Dhruv's heart raced with fear and confusion. He could feel the anger building up inside him, but he had to stay calm.

The killer then shifted the camera slightly, revealing Diya, unconscious and bleeding heavily.

Dhruv's eyes widened in horror. "Diya! Diya, look here! Diya, your brother is here!" he shouted, his voice breaking.

Diya stirred at the sound of his voice, her eyes fluttering open. Though she was barely conscious, she slowly looked at the camera.

The killer moved into the frame with a twisted grin. "Hey, Dhruv. How do you like my surprise?" he taunted.

Dhruv's anger flared. "Don't you dare touch her! If you do, I swear I will kill you!" His fists clenched, the blood pounding in his ears.

The killer laughed cruelly. "I wish you had warned me sooner, but what can I do? I've already hit her. Wait a second... let me give you a live demo."

"NO! No!" Dhruv screamed, his heart pounding in his chest as the killer raised a hammer.

The killer swung the hammer down with force, striking Diya's right leg. The sickening sound of bone breaking filled the air, and Diya screamed in agony, her cries muffled by the cloth gag.

"Brother, please save me!" she managed to cry out, her voice weak and desperate.

Dhruv's face contorted in shock and rage. "No! Leave her alone!" he shouted, his tears streaming down his face. His entire body shook with fury and helplessness.

The killer smirked. "I can't hear you properly, Dhruv. If you want me to let her go, tell me please just in a little better tone."

Dhruv's fists clenched as the pain in his chest intensified. "You bastard! What do you want? What did Diya do to you? Leave her alone!" His voice was raw with emotion.

The killer raised the hammer again, preparing to strike.

"Please, leave her! Please!" Dhruv begged, his voice cracking.

The killer paused, clearly enjoying the torment. "This is what I wanted, Dhruv. Tell me again... better," he taunted.

Dhruv's eyes filled with tears, his body trembling. "Please... leave her..." he begged, his voice full of pain and desperation.

The killer grinned. "Okay, let's play a fair game."

He leaned in closer to the camera. "I'll give you one full day to find her. If you fail by midnight tonight, well... sorry, Dhruv. The next morning, you'll be getting her body," he said with a twisted laugh.

"No! Don't do that! What did she do to you? Don't hurt her!" Dhruv screamed, his voice raw with desperation.

The killer's grin widened. "Okay, Dhruv. Work hard. Bye."

He ended the call abruptly.

"No! No!" Dhruv cried out, his hands trembling as he stared at the screen. He dialled the number again, but it went straight to voicemail.

In a fit of frustration and helplessness, Dhruv hurled his phone across the room, the device crashing to the floor with a loud thud.

On the side, the killer let out a mocking laugh. "See how much Dhruv loves you," he taunted. "Do you really think he will find me?" He laughed again, the sound cold and cruel.

The air was thick and hot, the sun glaring through the dusty room. With a smirk, the killer pulled off his mask, revealing his face to Diya.

As soon as Diya saw him, her heart skipped a beat. Her eyes widened in shock, her breath catching in her throat. It was a face she knew all too well — a face she hadn't expected to see again. The recognition hit her like a blow to the chest.

CHAPTER 31

Edge of Survival

Dhruv got ready quickly and prepared to leave for the police station. As he was about to step out, he looked around for his phone but couldn't find it. He scanned the room again and suddenly remembered he had thrown it earlier in a fit of frustration. Picking it up, he was relieved to find it undamaged and still working. Taking a deep breath to steady himself, he headed out to the police station.

Upon reaching the station, Gautham approached him immediately.

"Dhruv, did you find anything?" he asked, his face tense with worry.

Dhruv hesitated for a moment, then revealed what had happened the previous day.

"Sir, I'm going to search every corner of this city. But we need to act fast. Please circulate Diya's pictures to the public," Dhruv said firmly.

Gautham, however, raised his hand to stop him. "No, Dhruv," he said, his voice trembling. "What if the kidnapper gets angry? He might harm her—or worse. I can't take that risk with my daughter's life. Let's handle

this more cautiously. I'll call in the special forces to track her down."

Understanding Gautham's pain and reasoning, Dhruv nodded. "Okay, sir. As you say."

Gautham immediately began coordinating efforts while Dhruv called everyone to gather. Once all the officers were assembled, Dhruv addressed them.

"Hello, everyone. There's been another kidnapping," he began, his voice heavy with emotion.

The room fell silent, and stunned expressions spread across the officers' faces. Until now, none of them had been aware of this. Sumith broke the silence.

"Who is it, sir? When did it happen? How?"

Dhruv, struggling to find the right words, looked down, visibly upset. Finally, Gautham stepped forward to answer.

"It's my daughter," Gautham said, his voice cracking. "Diya has been kidnapped. And I'm certain it's the same killer we've been hunting. Please... I beg you... find her and bring her back to me." Tears streamed down his face as he folded his hands in front of the team.

The room was filled with shock and disbelief. The officers exchanged glances, their determination quickly replacing their initial astonishment.

"Sir, don't worry," Vedanth spoke up, his tone resolute. "We'll find her. Do we have any leads, her photo, or other details? Have the parents filed a formal complaint?"

Dhruv and Gautham exchanged a glance. Though the pain was evident in their eyes, the team could see their resolve.

"Her picture is ready," Gautham said, regaining his composure. "We'll circulate it among the task force and begin the search immediately."

The officers nodded, and the room buzzed with energy as plans were set in motion. Despite the heavy atmosphere, there was a growing sense of urgency and determination among the team.

Dhruv took charge, addressing the gathered officers with urgency in his voice.

"Listen up, everyone. I've sent Diya's photo to each of you. Form teams and question every person you come across. Leave no stone unturned. We need to find her as quickly as possible."

"Yes, sir!" the officers responded in unison, their resolve evident.

The teams dispersed swiftly, the sound of police sirens filling the air as they raced across the city. Each officer carried a printed photo of Diya, holding it up as they approached locals in busy streets, marketplaces, and residential areas.

"Have you seen this girl?" they asked repeatedly, showing her picture to shopkeepers, passersby, and anyone who might have seen something.

The sun blazed brightly in the clear blue sky, casting sharp shadows on the bustling streets. Despite the warmth of the day, there was a palpable tension in the air. The officers moved with purpose, their eyes scanning every corner, their ears tuned to the smallest clue.

Each team reported back to Dhruv periodically, but so far, no promising leads had surfaced. Still, the officers pressed on, determined to bring Diya home safely.

On the other side of city, the killer entered the dimly lit room, a bowl of steaming soup in his hand. He leaned down toward Diya, who was tied to a chair, her face pale but defiant. Gently, he nudged her shoulder to wake her.

"I brought food for you," he said, his tone almost mockingly kind. "Go ahead, have some."

Diya's eyes fluttered open. The sharp pang of hunger gripped her, but her gaze immediately hardened as she looked at him.

"Why are you offering me food when you're going to kill me anyway?" she asked, her voice steady despite the fear gnawing at her.

The killer chuckled darkly, his grin widening.

"Oh, you think I care about your well-being?" he sneered. "No, Diya. I just don't want you to die hungry. I want to kill you myself. And not just kill you—I want to make you suffer so much that you beg for death. For that, I need you alive and breathing."

A shiver ran down Diya's spine, but she forced herself to stay calm, swallowing her fear. She decided to play along.

"Fine," she said, glancing at the soup. "But how am I supposed to drink when my hands are tied?"

The killer paused, his expression softening into mock regret.

"Ah, my mistake, Diya. Let me fix that for you."

As he reached down to untie the knots around her wrists, Diya's heart raced. This was her chance. She remained still, waiting for the right moment.

But just as his fingers hovered over the rope, he stopped abruptly. A sly smirk crept across his face.

"Wait a minute," he said, leaning back. "What if you try to run away?"

Diya's hopes crumbled, her disappointment evident, though she quickly masked it.

"Why would I do that?" she said, keeping her tone measured. "I don't even know where I am. And besides, you've given my brother a day to save me. He'll come. He always does."

The killer seemed to consider her words for a moment, his face thoughtful. Then, suddenly, he burst into laughter, shaking his head.

"You think I'll fall for that?" he said, his eyes gleaming with amusement. "Nice try, Diya. But no."

He leaned in closer, his grin unnervingly wide.

"Instead, I'll feed you myself," he said, lifting the bowl of soup. "Just like I did at the party that day."

The killer slowly dipped the spoon into the steaming bowl of soup and held it up to Diya's lips.

"Come on, drink," he said, his voice dripping with feigned kindness.

Diya glared at him. She couldn't stomach the thought of accepting even a drop of water from him.

"No," she said firmly, turning her head away.

The killer frowned but remained persistent, moving the spoon closer to her face again. Diya's anger flared. Without a second thought, she pushed the spoon away with her cheek, sending the hot soup splashing onto him.

"Ahh!" he yelled, recoiling in pain. "What the hell is this? I try to feed you, and this is how you repay me?"

Growling in frustration and pain, he instinctively threw the bowl of scalding soup. It landed squarely on Diya's wounded leg.

"Aah!" Diya screamed, the burning liquid searing her skin and intensifying the pain in her already injured leg. Tears streamed down her face as she cried out,

"It's burning! It hurts!"

The killer sneered, his tone cold and mocking.

"Now you know how it feels when something hot burns your skin," he said, his voice dripping with malice. "You idiot. Now I need to change," he muttered angrily, turning and storming out of the room.

As soon as he left, Diya wiped her tears, her expression shifting. A small, determined smile crept onto her face. This had been part of her plan.

She glanced down at the floor and spotted a shard of glass near her leg. Carefully, she shifted her leg, pushing the glass closer to her hands. The sharp pain from her burned leg made every movement agonizing, but she gritted her teeth and pressed on.

Finally, the glass shard was within reach. Twisting her wrist as much as she could, she managed to grasp it. The glass was sharp, and as she began sawing at the thick rope binding her wrists, the jagged edges cut into her palms. Blood started dripping down her hands, but she ignored the pain, focusing all her energy on freeing herself.

Each stroke against the rope felt like an eternity, the fibres resisting her efforts. The sharp sting in her hands grew worse, but Diya refused to give up. Her eyes darted

to the door every few seconds, her heart pounding with the fear that the killer might return at any moment.

The sound of her own laboured breathing and the faint rasp of the glass against the rope were the only noises in the room. The tension in the air was suffocating, but Diya pressed on, her resolve unshaken.

Diya clenched her jaw, her mind racing for another way to escape. But for now, she would have to bide her time.

As Diya worked on the rope, her hands trembling and bleeding, she suddenly froze. Her breath hitched, and her eyes widened in terror as she saw the shadow of the killer approaching from the hallway. Her heart pounded like a drum, fear coursing through her veins.

She quickly dropped the glass shard, letting it fall beside her, and lowered her head, feigning submission. Her body went completely still, not even daring to breathe loudly.

The killer stepped into the room, his sharp gaze scanning her. Diya kept her eyes downcast, pretending to be defeated, her body limp. After a long, tense moment, the killer let out a huff and walked off without a word, his heavy footsteps fading into the distance.

Diya exhaled slowly, a wave of relief washing over her. But she didn't waste any time. As soon as she was sure he was gone, she grabbed the glass shard again and

resumed cutting the rope, this time with renewed urgency.

Finally, after what felt like an eternity, the last fibre of the rope snapped. Her wrists were free. The sensation of relief was overwhelming, but her ordeal was far from over.

She rubbed her aching wrists for a moment before turning her attention to her legs. Carefully, she untied the ropes binding them, wincing as pain shot through her wounded leg. Blood seeped through the fabric of her pants, but she pushed through the agony.

Now unbound, Diya was technically free—but her body felt like it was giving up. She was weak, bleeding, and drained of energy. Still, she knew she couldn't stop now. Summoning all her strength, she struggled to her feet. Her legs wobbled beneath her, and she stumbled, almost falling back to the floor. Gritting her teeth, she steadied herself, forcing her injured leg to bear some weight.

She looked around the room, panic coursing through her as she tried to figure out her next move. Her eyes darted from corner to corner until they stopped at a rusted metal cupboard in the far corner of the room. It wasn't much, but it was her best chance.

Ignoring the searing pain in her leg, she limped as fast as she could toward the cupboard. Every step felt like fire shooting through her body, and tears welled in her eyes, but she didn't stop. She had to hide.

Finally, she reached the cupboard and pulled the creaky door open. She squeezed inside, her breath coming in shallow gasps. The space was cramped, and the smell of rust was overwhelming, but it didn't matter. She shut the door as quietly as she could and crouched down, wrapping her arms around herself.

Inside the darkness of the cupboard, Diya bit her lip to keep from crying out in pain. Her leg throbbed, her hands were slick with blood, and her body ached from exhaustion. But for the first time in hours, she felt a small glimmer of hope.

Now she just had to wait for the right moment.

Outside in the scorching midday sun, the killer stood smoking, blowing plumes of smoke into the air. His eyes narrowed as he muttered to himself.

"What if Dhruv finds her? What if he catches me?" he growled, pacing back and forth, his frustration growing with each passing moment. "I can't let her go so easily. This is my chance to kill her—she has to die today!"

With an angry grunt, he flicked the cigarette to the ground and crushed it under his boot. Grabbing a hammer from a nearby table, he stormed back inside, his face twisted with rage.

As he entered the room, his steps faltered, and his eyes widened. Diya was gone.

His chest heaved as frustration bubbled into fury. He gritted his teeth and bellowed,

"Diya! Dear Diya, come out! Uncle won't do anything to you, I promise. Don't play games with me."

His voice softened into a sinister mockery.

"I gave your precious brother a chance to find you. If he really loves you, he'll come. But you—don't make me angry."

The room was silent except for the faint sound of his breathing. On the other side of the room, Diya crouched inside the cupboard, her trembling hands covering her mouth to stifle any sound. Her eyes brimmed with tears, and her heart pounded like a drum in her chest. The fear was suffocating, but she forced herself to remain silent.

The killer's gaze swept the room, his frustration mounting. Then his eyes fell on the faint trail of blood smudged across the floor, leading toward the cupboard. A wicked grin crept across his face.

"Ah, clever girl," he whispered. "You can run, but you can't hide."

Gripping the hammer tightly, he picked up a sharp knife from the table and began walking towards the cupboard. His footsteps were slow and deliberate, each one louder and more menacing than the last.

Inside the dark cupboard, Diya's breathing grew shallow. Her heartbeat thundered in her ears as panic threatened to consume her. Her legs trembled uncontrollably, but she clenched her fists, forcing herself to focus. She wouldn't let him kill her—not without a fight.

Her hands fumbled blindly through the cramped space, searching for something, anything, she could use. Suddenly, her fingers brushed against a sharp edge, and she winced as it nicked her skin. Grasping the object tightly, she realized it was a broken piece of metal. Determined, she braced herself for what was to come.

The killer reached the cupboard and paused for dramatic effect. He grinned, relishing the fear he imagined Diya must be feeling. Then, in one swift motion, he yanked the cupboard door open.

His face twisted into confusion. The cupboard was empty.

CHAPTER 32

The Escape

"What the—?" he muttered, turning his head to scan the room. His eyes landed on another cupboard nearby.

As he took a step toward it, the first cupboard door suddenly flew open with a loud creak. Before he could react, Diya burst out, her eyes blazing with a mix of terror and defiance. In one hand, she held the sharp metal shard. In the other, she clutched a heavy wooden log she had grabbed in her frantic search.

The killer stumbled back, momentarily stunned by her unexpected attack.

The killer smirked, his laughter echoing menacingly through the room.

"You think you can escape, Diya? This is my world. Once someone enters here, they don't leave unless I let them. And I'm not feeling generous today," he sneered, breaking into a maniacal laugh.

Diya glared at him, her fists tightening.

"Listen, you twisted maniac—I'm not like your other victims. I know how to fight back," she snapped, her voice steady despite her pain.

The killer's eyes flicked to her injured leg, and he chuckled darkly.

"With that weak body and busted leg? Silly girl, you're just amusing me now."

Diya's anger flared. Her eyes darted behind her, spotting a shattered bottle lying near the wall. She didn't rush; instead, she subtly shifted her weight and edged backward, her eyes locked on the killer.

The killer advanced, his grin widening.

"Let's end this charade, shall we?" he said, stepping closer.

The moment he was within striking distance, Diya grabbed the broken bottle. With a swift, desperate motion, she hurled it at him. The sharp glass struck his head with a sickening crack, slicing deep.

"Ahh!" the killer screamed, clutching his bleeding head as he stumbled backward. "You little—!"

Seizing the opportunity, Diya turned and bolted toward the door. Her injured leg screamed in protest, and her steps faltered on the wet floor. With a loud *thud*, she fell hard onto the cold ground.

Pain radiated through her body, but the door was just a few feet away. Determined, she began dragging herself forward, inch by agonizing inch.

But the killer wasn't finished. Blood dripping down his face, he recovered quickly and lunged at her. Grabbing her hair, he yanked her back violently.

Diya screamed in pain, but she refused to panic. Twisting her body, she slammed her elbow into his gut with all her might.

"Leave me!" she shouted.

The killer growled, his face twisted with rage. He grabbed her hair even harder this time, yanking her head back. Diya cried out, the pain searing, but her mind raced.

She remembered the small shard of glass she had hidden in her pocket earlier. With trembling hands, she pulled it out and slashed at his arm.

"Aaagh!" he howled, letting go as blood poured from the fresh wound.

Diya didn't waste a second. With adrenaline surging through her, she kicked his leg hard, sending him crumpling to the ground. She scrambled to her feet, wincing as her injured leg buckled beneath her. Summoning every ounce of strength she had left, she stomped on his chest, knocking the wind out of him.

The killer gasped for air, his face contorted in pain.

"Stop right there, Diya," he hissed, his voice low and venomous. "If you leave this place, I swear you'll

regret it. Outside, you're dead. At least here, I'm giving your brother a chance to save you."

Diya ignored him, her determination unwavering. She spotted a heavy toolbox on a nearby table. Without hesitation, she grabbed it and hurled it at him.

The box hit him squarely in the chest, knocking him flat onto the floor. Breathing heavily, Diya limped toward the door. She turned back one last time, her eyes blazing with defiance.

"I'm not afraid of you. I'll expose you for the monster you are. And I'll make sure you're caught," she spat.

With that, she turned and limped out of the room, leaving the killer groaning in pain, his threats echoing behind her.

Diya burst through the door, her breath ragged and heart pounding. Wasting no time, she turned back and bolted the door shut. Her hands shook as she scanned the area. Spotting a rusted sofa abandoned nearby, she hobbled over to it, her injured leg screaming in protest.

Gripping the edge of the sofa with all her remaining strength, she dragged it toward the door, the sound of scraping metal against concrete echoing in the still air. With one final heave, she wedged it against the door, barricading it. Her chest heaved as she glanced at her makeshift block.

Satisfied, she turned and began running, adrenaline her only fuel.

The lanes around her seemed endless, each one identical to the last. No matter which way she turned, she found herself back where she started. Her energy was fading fast, her body trembling from dehydration and exhaustion. The blazing sun beat down mercilessly, making her head spin.

But just when despair began to creep in, she spotted something—a lane that opened up to the main road. In the distance, she could see cars moving, their silhouettes shimmering in the heat. A spark of hope flared within her.

"That's it," she whispered to herself, summoning her last reserves of strength. She started limping toward the road, each step heavier than the last. As she got closer, she forced herself into a desperate run.

Suddenly, she heard it—the unmistakable sound of heavy footsteps behind her.

"No!" she gasped, turning her head. Her heart sank as she saw the killer charging towards her, his eyes wild with fury.

"Stop right there, Diya! STOP!" he roared, his voice booming.

Panic surged through her veins, but she didn't stop. She pushed her body harder, her injured leg dragging

behind her as she stumbled forward. The sound of the killer's pursuit grew louder, closer.

Finally, she reached the main road, her feet hitting the pavement. Gasping for air, she stumbled into the middle of the road, collapsing to her knees. The world spun around her as cars screeched to a halt, and people gathered, their faces a blur.

"Help... help me..." she managed to whisper, her voice barely audible.

From a distance, the killer stopped in his tracks. He stood on the edge of the lane, his face contorted with rage. He clenched his fists, his teeth grinding as he muttered to himself,

"Diya, you've made a terrible mistake. But this isn't over. I *will* find you. And when I do..."

His voice trailed off as he turned and ran back into the maze of lanes, disappearing from sight.

Diya, now surrounded by concerned strangers, felt her body give way to exhaustion. As her vision blurred and the world darkened around her, she knew one thing—she had made it out alive.

For now.

The crowd that gathered around Diya didn't know what to do. Some whispered among themselves, while others simply stared, unsure of how to help.

From a distance, Suraj who happened to be nearby, noticed the commotion.

"What's going on over there?" he muttered to himself, his curiosity piqued. He quickened his pace, weaving through the bystanders.

As he pushed his way through the crowd, his eyes landed on the frail figure lying on the ground. His breath caught in his throat.

"Diya?" he whispered, disbelief washing over him.

He rushed to her side, gently cradling her limp form. Her face was pale, her body bruised and battered, and she was completely unconscious.

"Diya! Can you hear me?" he called, his voice filled with urgency.

When she didn't respond, Suraj quickly lifted her into his arms, his heart pounding with worry. Without wasting another second, he carried her to his car and sped to the nearest hospital.

As they arrived, medical staff met him at the entrance.

"She's in critical condition. Take her to the emergency ward immediately!" a nurse instructed.

Suraj followed them as far as he could, watching helplessly as Diya was wheeled away into the emergency room. He stood frozen for a moment, trying to steady

his shaking hands. With a deep breath, he pulled out his phone and dailed Dhruv.

The line connected after a single ring.

"Hello, Dhruv sir," Suraj said, his voice trembling. "I found Diya. She's in bad shape. We're at the hospital. Please come quickly."

Without waiting for a response, he disconnected the call, his mind racing with thoughts of what Diya might have endured.

Standing outside the emergency room, Suraj clenched his fists.

"Whoever did this to her... they won't get away with it," he vowed under his breath.

CHAPTER 33

Unbroken Bonds

Just in time, Dhruv and Gautham arrive at the hospital, their faces filled with worry and desperation. They rush toward the emergency ward, each step quickening as they approach the door.

As they near the entrance, Suraj looks up and sees them coming. Before they can ask a single question, he steps forward, his voice shaking but urgent.

Suraj turned to face them, his expression a mix of relief and concern. "Sir, she's okay. She's a brave girl, sir."

Dhruv stepped closer, his voice urgent. "Where did you find her, Suraj?"

"Sir," Suraj began, "I found her on 5th Cross Road, just a few blocks from here. Don't worry, sir. She'll be fine," he reassured them, though his own voice wavered slightly.

Just then, the doctor emerged from the emergency ward. Both Gautham and Dhruv rushed to him, their anxiety palpable.

"Doctor, is she okay? How is she doing?" Gautham asked, his words tumbling out in desperation.

The doctor glanced at them, reading the panic in their eyes. "We're still running some tests. For now, I can't say anything definitive. I'm sorry," he said before walking away.

Gautham's eyes filled with tears, his shoulders slumping under the weight of uncertainty.

Dhruv placed a reassuring hand on his shoulder. "Sir, she's a brave girl. She'll be alright, trust me," he said gently.

The corridor outside the emergency ward was a flurry of activity as doctors and nurses hurried in and out. The air was thick with tension. Dhruv sat on a bench, anxiously tapping his foot against the floor, his eyes fixed on the emergency ward doors.

Gautham's phone buzzed, pulling him out of his thoughts. He answered quickly. "Hello, Anjali."

"Gautham, did you find her?" Anjali's voice was filled with urgency.

Gautham hesitated, unsure of how to break the news gently. But he couldn't lie. "Yes, Anjali. I found her. She's in the hospital now, but she's doing well," he said, his voice steady but cautious.

"What? Which hospital? I'll be right there!" Anjali's panic was evident.

"No, Anjali," Gautham tried to calm her. "I'll bring her home once she's better. Please, stay there and make something comforting for her to eat."

But Anjali wouldn't listen. "No, Gautham. I need to see my daughter. I'm coming!" she insisted.

Before Gautham could respond, the call ended abruptly. He sighed, rubbing his temples as the tension around him grew heavier.

Time seemed to stretch endlessly. Finally, the doctor emerged from the emergency ward, his expression calm. Dhruv immediately approached him, his heart pounding.

"Doctor, how is she?"

The doctor smiled reassuringly. "Don't worry. She's fine now. She needs rest for the time being. I'll let you know when you can see her."

A wave of relief swept over them. Gautham, Dhruv, and Suraj exchanged grateful glances, their faces softening for the first time that day.

Akash was idly twirling a stick in his hand as he strolled down the path. From a distance, he spotted Gautham and the others gathered near the hospital entrance. His brow furrowed in confusion as he quickened his pace to join them.

As Akash approached, Suraj noticed him first. "Hey, Akash! How are you?" Suraj greeted with a small wave.

"Hello, Suraj. I'm good," Akash replied, though his curiosity was evident. "What's going on here? Why are you all at the hospital?"

Dhruv sighed deeply, his voice heavy with emotion. "Diya has been admitted to the hospital," he said, his heartbreak clear.

Akash froze in shock, his grip tightening on the stick. "Diya? What happened to her, sir? Is she okay?" His voice was filled with worry and confusion.

Before Dhruv could explain further, Suraj stepped in. "It's a long story, Akash. She'll be fine, though. Don't worry," he reassured him, though his own concern lingered in his tone.

Akash nodded slowly, trying to process the news. "Alright, sir. I hope she recovers soon.

The hospital corridor was heavy with a tense, sombre atmosphere. Anjali hurried in, her eyes scanning the room until they landed on Gautham. Her voice was shaky, yet filled with concern as she asked, "How is she doing? And how did she end up here?"

Gautham met her gaze and replied calmly, "Suraj brought her here. She's stable now, doing much better. After some time, we can go in and meet her."

Anjali sighed in relief, but tears continued to stream down her face. Her emotions were a mix of gratitude and lingering worry. The room remained steeped in a heavy silence, the weight of the situation evident on everyone's faces.

Breaking the quiet, Suraj spoke up with resolve, "Sir, I think we should station guards here for Diya's protection."

Gautham nodded in agreement, his expression firm. "Yes, Suraj, that's a good idea. Even so, I'm going to stay with her at all times."

Dhruv stepped forward, his voice steady yet emotional. "Sir, I'm staying here too. I won't leave her side this time."

Gautham smiled faintly at Dhruv, appreciating his dedication. "I know, Dhruv. I wouldn't expect anything less."

Turning back to Suraj, Gautham added, "Make arrangements for a special team to be set up here. It's necessary."

"Yes, sir. I'll see to it immediately," Suraj replied, before excusing himself to make the arrangements.

The atmosphere remained serious, but there was a renewed sense of purpose as everyone worked together to ensure Diya's safety.

As the group lingered in the corridor, a nurse approached them with a professional yet empathetic tone. "Hello, only two visitors are allowed to see her at the moment, though she's still unconscious."

Anjali stepped forward immediately. "I'm her mother," she said, her voice trembling with emotion. Turning to Gautham, she added, "You come with me."

Gautham nodded, and together, they entered the quiet hospital room.

The stillness inside was almost unbearable. The steady beep of the heart monitor was the only sound. Anjali froze at the sight of her daughter lying pale and motionless on the bed. Her tears flowed freely as she clutched Gautham's arm for support.

"I can't bear to see her like this," Anjali whispered, her voice breaking.

Gautham's heart ached, but he stayed strong for her. Gently, he took her hand in his. "She'll be fine," he reassured her. "She's a fighter, Anjali. Don't lose hope."

Anjali leaned her head on his shoulder, seeking comfort. Together, they stood in silence, their eyes fixed on Diya, willing her to wake up.

Outside the room, Dhruv stood by the door, peeking through the glass. His heart sank at the sight of Diya. Tears welled up in his eyes, and he quickly turned away, unable to bear it. Wandering aimlessly into the

hospital garden, his mind was consumed with memories and worries.

Suddenly, his phone buzzed in his pocket, breaking his thoughts. It was Gautham.

"Hello?" Dhruv answered, his voice trembling.

"Dhruv, where are you?" Gautham's tone was urgent yet controlled.

"I'm... I'm in the garden, sir," Dhruv stammered, feeling uneasy.

"Come quickly, Dhruv. Right now."

"What happened, sir? Is everything okay?"

"Just come back, Dhruv," Gautham replied firmly.

Dhruv wasted no time, rushing to the lift and heading back to the ward. He approached Gautham with a mix of fear and hope.

"Sir, what happened?" he asked breathlessly.

Gautham's face lit up with excitement as he delivered the news. "Good news, Dhruv! Diya has opened her eyes, and she's starting to move her hands!"

Dhruv's face broke into a wide smile, his eyes glistening with tears of relief and joy. "Sir, I need to see her. Please let me go inside!"

"Yes, go," Gautham said warmly, stepping aside.

Without hesitation, Dhruv entered the room, his heart racing with anticipation.

Dhruv pushed the door open gently and stepped inside. The room was dimly lit, with only the soft glow of the monitors illuminating Diya's fragile form. She was fast asleep, her face pale and her body wrapped in bandages. The sight of her lying there made Dhruv's chest tighten.

His hands felt cold, trembling as he walked toward her. Pulling a small chair closer to the bed, he sat down beside her. His gaze lingered on her for a moment, a mixture of sorrow and guilt clouding his eyes. Slowly, he reached out and picked up her delicate hand.

Her hand felt cold, and his touch was hesitant, as though afraid he might hurt her further. Gently, he ran his fingers over hers, his voice barely a whisper.

"I'm so sorry, Diya," he began, his words heavy with regret. "I'm sorry for putting you in this situation. I'm sorry for not being there when you needed me the most."

He paused, his throat tightening. A tear slipped down his cheek and fell onto her hand. He didn't wipe it away.

"I can't imagine how scared you must have been," he continued, his voice breaking. "How did you handle so much pain on your own? You're so brave, Diya. Stronger than anyone I've ever known."

Dhruv lowered his head, holding onto her hand like it was his lifeline. "I'm proud of you for fighting back, for escaping that monster's trap. You're incredible. I know it must have been a nightmare, but I promise you this…" His voice grew firm, though his tears didn't stop. "I'll catch him, Diya. I'll make sure he pays for what he's done."

He exhaled shakily, pressing her hand gently against his forehead. "But first, I need you to get better. I need to see you smile again. To hear your voice. Please, Diya. Get well soon."

For a moment, the room was silent except for the soft beeping of the machines. Dhruv stayed still, his head bowed, holding her hand as though he could will her back to health with his sheer presence.

Suddenly, Dhruv felt a faint movement in Diya's hand. He froze for a moment, his breath catching in his throat. Slowly, he lifted his head and looked at her. Her eyes fluttered open, and beneath the oxygen mask, she softly murmured, "Brother…"

Dhruv's tears spilled over as a wave of relief and joy washed over him. Quickly wiping his tears and sniffing to compose himself, he smiled tenderly. He moved his hand to her head, gently brushing her hair back, and leaned closer to press a soft kiss on her forehead.

"You're going to be better, Diya," he whispered, his voice filled with unwavering reassurance.

Diya's lips curled into a faint smile, the sight of her beloved brother giving her a sense of comfort and strength. She raised a weak hand, gesturing for him to come closer. Dhruv leaned in, his ear near her lips as she whispered in a soft, trembling voice, "I... I know... the killer."

Dhruv's eyes widened in shock, but he immediately shook his head, his expression shifting to one of gentle firmness. "No, Diya. Not now. Don't say a word about it."

"But—" she tried to protest, but Dhruv cut her off, his tone soft but resolute. "We're here to handle that, Diya. You've been through enough. Rest now, please. That's all I want from you. Just rest."

He squeezed her hand lightly, brushing his thumb over it in a soothing motion. "I'll be right here when you need me," he promised.

Before stepping away, he leaned in once more and kissed her forehead gently, his silent vow to protect her evident in his touch. Diya's eyes grew heavy again, but there was a sense of peace in her gaze as she drifted back to sleep.

Unbeknownst to Dhruv, Gautham and Anjali had been watching quietly from the corner of the room. Anjali's eyes were moist with emotion as she turned to Gautham.

"I don't think even if Diya had her own brother, she could have received this much love," Anjali said softly, her voice laden with admiration. "The way Dhruv cares for her... it's unlike anything I've ever seen."

Gautham nodded, his own heart moved by the moment. "Definitely not," he agreed. "Their bond is something rare. It's pure and unconditional."

The two stood silently for a moment, witnessing the love and care Dhruv had for Diya. It was a bond forged not by blood, but by something far stronger—faith and devotion.

The hour was late, and exhaustion was etched on everyone's faces. Gautham, sensing the weariness in the room, addressed the group. "Boys, go and get some rest for now. Anjali and I will stay here with Diya. Don't worry—special guards have been stationed across the ward. She's safe."

Dhruv's eyes, heavy with fatigue, revealed just how draining the day had been. Akash, though determined, was still recovering and visibly worn out. Even Suraj, always composed, looked as though the weight of the day was catching up to him.

Dhruv hesitated for a moment, glancing toward Diya's room. "Sir, please take care of her," he said softly, his voice filled with both concern and trust. "I'll be back first thing in the morning."

Gautham placed a reassuring hand on Dhruv's shoulder. "She'll be fine. Go now, get some rest. You all need it."

With a nod, Dhruv, Akash, and Suraj left the hospital together, their steps heavy with exhaustion. As they walked away, the events of the day played on their minds, but there was a shared sense of relief knowing that Diya was safe and recovering.

Back in the hospital, Gautham and Anjali remained by Diya's side, watching over her with quiet vigilance. The night was silent, save for the occasional sounds of the hospital. It had been an emotionally and physically draining day for everyone, but there was solace in knowing that brighter days lay ahead.

The next morning, the hospital was abuzz with activity, as if the world outside hadn't paused for the events of the previous day. Dhruv, eager to see Diya, had woken early, quickly changed into fresh clothes, and made a stop to pick up her favourite flowers.

Arriving at the hospital, he hid his face behind the colourful bouquet, a playful smile on his lips as he entered her room. Diya, now a bit more recovered, looked up at the unexpected sight, her expression puzzled. Slowly, Dhruv approached her, dramatically revealing the flowers.

"Hey, surprise!" he shouted, grinning widely.

For a moment, Diya stared at him in shock. Then, as some petals fell from the bouquet and landed on his head, her laughter bubbled up despite the oxygen mask she wore. Her soft giggles filled the room, and Dhruv's heart swelled with relief and joy.

"What's so funny?" he asked, tilting his head in confusion.

Beside him, Anjali had joined in the laughter, her smile bright as she wiped a tear of amusement from her eye. "Ma'am, is something funny?" Dhruv asked, looking even more puzzled.

Anjali, trying to stifle her laughter, pointed toward a nearby mirror. "Look at yourself, Dhruv!" she managed to say.

Turning to the mirror, Dhruv realized his hair was covered in petals and leaves, scattered messily from the bouquet. He chuckled, dusting them off his head. "Hello, madam," he said, looking at Diya with mock seriousness. "I don't think I look that funny!"

Diya continued to laugh, her eyes crinkling with delight. Dhruv couldn't help but smile as he watched her, a deep sense of happiness settling over him. It had been so long since he'd seen her this way. Setting the flowers aside, he pulled a chair close to her bed and sat down.

"Get well soon, okay?" he said gently. "When you're better, I'll take you on a trip. Just the two of us."

Diya's eyes lit up at his words. She had always wanted to go on a trip with him, but life had always gotten in the way—his work, her studies. Now, the promise of that trip felt like a beacon of hope. She nodded eagerly, her smile glowing despite the mask.

Anjali watched the two of them, her heart warm. Then she turned to Dhruv. "Did you eat anything, Dhruv?" she asked, her tone full of motherly concern.

"Yes, ma'am," Dhruv replied with a small smile. "Did you?" he asked in return.

Anjali nodded. "Yes, I did. Don't worry about me."

The room was filled with a gentle warmth—a sense of healing, hope, and love. For the first time in a while, things felt lighter, as though the promise of brighter days was just within reach.

As Dhruv sat beside Diya, the room still filled with the warmth of their light conversation, Gautham suddenly walked in, his face etched with frustration.

"Dhruv, I've been trying to call Gajendra for ages, but he's not picking up," Gautham said, his tone urgent.

"I've tried too, sir," Dhruv replied, a hint of concern in his voice. "No response from him either."

Suddenly, Diya's breathing became erratic, her eyes wide with fear as she began to panic. The sound of her distress sent a ripple of concern through the room.

Everyone turned to her, their expressions shifting to alarm.

"Diya, what's wrong?" Dhruv asked softly, reaching out to her.

Her hands were shaking as she struggled to breathe, her body trembling. Gautham immediately sprang into action, rushing out of the room.

He called for the doctor, his voice sharp. "Get in here, now!"

As the doctor arrived, the tension in the room escalated. Diya's panic was escalating, her eyes wild with fear, and before anyone could react, the fire alarm blared through the hospital, its loud, shrill sound cutting through the chaos.

Panic rippled through the corridors. People were running in every direction, unsure of what was happening.

Dhruv stood frozen for a moment, his heart racing. He looked at Gautham, his voice tight with worry. "Sir, what's happening? Is there a fire in the hospital?"

Gautham's face was hard, his eyes narrowed with determination. "I don't know Dhruv".

"Sir stay here with Diya. Don't move an inch. I'll go check on what's going on," Gautham replied.

"Yes, Dhruv," Gautham replied, his heart still heavy with concern for both Diya and the situation unfolding around them.

As Gautham left the room, Dhruv stood up and made his way toward the door. He looked at the guards stationed outside. "Don't let anyone in. No matter what happens, stay alert," he instructed.

The guards nodded in acknowledgment, their expressions serious.

Dhruv stepped into the hallway, his pulse quickening as the siren continued to wail. The sight of fire trucks pulling up outside the building only added to the sense of urgency.

He made his way toward the source of the alarm, his thoughts racing. What was going on? Was it a drill? Or was something more serious happening?

As the fire engines arrived, their sirens blaring, the tension in the air was palpable. The chaos around him only seemed to escalate, and Dhruv felt the weight of his responsibility settling heavier on his shoulders.

The entire hospital was thrown into chaos. Panic spread through the halls as the fire alarm continued to blare, sending everyone into a frenzy. Dhruv stood in the midst of it, trying his best to maintain control.

"Guys, don't panic!" he shouted, his voice straining to be heard over the noise. "There's no fire! Please, stay in your places!"

But his words fell on deaf ears. People continued to run, shouting, and scrambling for exits, their fear making it impossible to keep order.

Just as Dhruv was about to take further action, Gautham arrived, pushing through the crowd with urgency.

"Dhruv, what's all this panic about?" Gautham asked, his eyes scanning the chaos.

Dhruv turned to him, frustration lining his face. "I have no idea, sir. I'm still searching for answers."

He started to walk away, but then stopped abruptly. Something didn't feel right. He turned back to Gautham. "Sir, I told you not to leave the room. Why did you leave?"

Gautham raised an eyebrow in confusion. "What do you mean? You called me here, right?"

Dhruv's eyes widened in disbelief. "What? No, sir. I didn't call you."

A sudden realization dawned on Gautham. "Gajendra came to me and said you called for me."

"Gajendra?" Dhruv repeated, his voice tense. "Is he here?"

"Yes," Gautham replied. "But he's injured, Dhruv. I was going to ask him about it, but he said you needed me here, so I came."

The shock hit Dhruv like a punch to the gut. "Where is Gajendra?"

"Not sure," Gautham said, his gaze searching the room.

Suddenly, Dhruv's heart raced. "Diya!" he shouted in alarm. His mind went into overdrive. What if something had happened to her while they were distracted?

Without another word, Dhruv sprinted toward the ward, his thoughts scattered. As he approached the door, he saw something that made his blood run cold. The guards who had been stationed outside the room were lying unconscious on the ground, their bodies crumpled in a heap.

His fear intensified, and he opened the door to the ward with shaking hands.

Inside, the sight that greeted him was horrific. Anjali lay on the floor, blood streaming from her head, unconscious and unmoving.

"Ma'am!" Dhruv shouted, rushing to her side. "Ma'am , what happened?"

Anjali's eyes fluttered weakly, and she tried to lift her hand, pointing toward the screen of Diya's bed. Her lips parted, but she couldn't speak.

Dhruv, his heart pounding, looked toward the bed. He froze when he saw what was happening.

Leaving Anjali in Gautham's care, Dhruv quickly moved toward the bed, his instincts screaming that something terrible was unfolding.

Meanwhile, Gautham, having arrived at Anjali's side, gently held her in his arms, his eyes full of concern. "Anjali, stay with us," he whispered, his hands trembling as he tried to stop the bleeding.

The situation had taken a dire turn, and Dhruv could feel the weight of the nightmare pressing down on him. The worst had arrived.

Dhruv's legs trembled as he walked towards the screen. His heart was hammering in his chest, and every step felt heavier than the last. When he finally pushed the screen aside, his vision blurred for a moment, but what he saw was a nightmare come to life.

Diya's lifeless body lay before him, the blood flowing from her wounds, pooling on the bed. Her face, once full of life and laughter, was now pale, and the letter **'T'** was crudely carved into her forehead.

Dhruv froze, his heart shattering in his chest. His breath caught in his throat as his knees buckled beneath him, and he collapsed to the ground in disbelief. His mind couldn't process what he was seeing.

Gautham, hearing the despair in Dhruv's voice, turned and rushed over, leaving Anjali on the floor. He moved swiftly to the bed, his own heart sinking as he

took in the horrific scene. The worst had happened. Diya was gone.

Both men were trapped in a state of shock, unable to comprehend the atrocity before them. The air around them felt heavy with sorrow, and the room seemed to close in on them, pressing in with unbearable weight.

"Sir," Dhruv's voice broke through the stillness, his words trembling, "the killer is here. The killer is still in the hospital."

Without waiting for a response, he bolted out of the room, his heart racing. The hospital was still in chaos, the sirens blaring, and people running every which way.

In the midst of the madness, Dhruv's eyes scanned the crowd, looking for any signs of the killer. And then, just as he was about to give up, a fireman rushed past him, his pace quick and unyielding. Dhruv instinctively turned to follow him, but something about the man's touch—his presence—felt wrong.

"Hey, you! Stop right there!" Dhruv shouted, his voice full of authority, but the fireman didn't even flinch.

Dhruv's instincts screamed at him to pursue, so he dashed through the crowd, pushing past people in his frantic search. But the fireman was already too far ahead.

At a distance, the fireman stopped, turning around slowly. He pulled off his mask, revealing a smirk that sent chills down Dhruv's spine. The man's face was unmistakable. It was Gajendra.

Dhruv's body went cold, his mind struggling to grasp the truth. The realization hit him like a physical blow, and he froze, his heart sinking into his stomach.

"No…" Dhruv whispered, his voice filled with disbelief. "Gajendra…"

The man's eyes gleamed with malice as he turned away and disappeared into the distance, leaving Dhruv stunned, motionless, caught in a whirlwind of shock and horror.

CHAPTER 34

Echoes of the Shattered Hearts

Looking at the crowd, Dhruv felt a surge of frustration. Unable to contain it, he pulled out his gun and fired a shot into the air. The crowd froze, fear washing over them as they crouched down, heads bowed.

"I've been saying there's no fire!" Dhruv shouted, his voice trembling with anger and despair. "Yet you're all running like fools, and because of you, I... I..." His words faltered, his breath hitching. Abruptly, he turned and sprinted back toward the hospital ward where Diya was.

Outside the room, Akash and Suraj stood silently, their heads bowed in grief. Dhruv slowed his steps as he approached, his heart begging him to stop, to turn back. But he forced himself forward.

As he entered the room, Gautham rushed toward him, his face contorted with anguish.

"Dhruv, what is this?" Gautham's voice cracked. "She fought so hard... and still, she lost her life. We were all here to protect her, yet even with us, she wasn't safe. How could this happen, Dhruv?"

Gautham's legs gave way as he collapsed to the floor, overcome by emotion. Dhruv stood frozen, unable to speak. After a moment, he found his voice.

"Let's take her home," he whispered, his voice hollow. "Let's take her from here."

He turned to Suraj, giving him a silent signal. Suraj quickly made arrangements, calling the ward boys and providing Diya's home address.

The room fell into a suffocating silence, the weight of loss hanging heavy in the air.

Meanwhile, Anjali was undergoing treatment in another ward. She had sustained a severe head injury and lost a significant amount of blood. Suraj stayed by her side, while Gautham remained with Diya.

It was late afternoon, and Gautham's house was filled with visitors who had come to pay their respects. The atmosphere was sombre yet filled with a warmth that sought to console.

Dhruv stood in a corner, his face etched with grief. His arms were folded, and his head hung low as silent tears streamed down his face. He felt as though the weight of the world had settled on his shoulders.

Just then, Anvi entered the house. Her steps faltered as her eyes landed on Diya. She moved closer, sat beside her, and began to sob uncontrollably.

"I'm so sorry, Diya," Anvi cried, her voice breaking. "I'm so sorry I couldn't save you..." Her words were laced with pain and regret.

Wiping her tears, Anvi stood and let her gaze wander around the room. Her eyes eventually found Dhruv, standing isolated in the corner, his grief palpable. She walked over to him, her heart aching as she saw his slumped figure.

Before she could speak, the sound of a car approaching the house broke the silence. Everyone turned their heads toward the door.

The car door opened, and Anjali stepped out, her head wrapped in bandages. Slowly, she made her way into the house, her expression blank and detached. Without looking at anyone, she walked straight to Gautham.

"Gautham," she said, her voice tinged with confusion, "where is Diya? I've been trying to call her, but she's not answering. And... why are there so many people here?"

Her concern was genuine, but her words sent a shockwave through the room. Gautham froze, his mind reeling. He didn't know how to respond.

Before he could gather his thoughts, Suraj stepped forward, his voice low and heavy.

"Sir," he began hesitantly, "there's something you need to know."

"What is it, Suraj?" Gautham asked, his voice strained. "Why is she acting like this?"

Suraj sighed deeply, then handed Gautham a medical report.

"Ma'am has lost part of her memory," he explained. "She remembers people, but she doesn't recall what happened at the hospital. She doesn't know... she doesn't know that Diya is no longer with us."

The room fell into a stunned silence as the weight of Suraj's words settled over everyone. Gautham clenched the report in his hands, his heart breaking all over again.

Suraj's words struck Gautham like a dagger to the heart, each syllable deepening the unbearable weight of his grief. His trembling hands could no longer support him, and he collapsed to the floor.

Seeing this, Dhruv quickly approached, but before he could say anything, Anjali knelt down beside Gautham. She gently held his hand, her face lit with an innocent, oblivious smile.

"Tell me, Gautham, why is everyone here?" she asked eagerly. Then, as if realization dawned, she beamed. "Oh, I know! It's my birthday today, isn't it? You've thrown a party for me, haven't you? I'm so happy, Gautham! Tell me, what should I wear? And where is Diya? She'll help me pick something out!"

Before anyone could stop her, Anjali stood up. "Wait, let me call her!" she said, rushing toward Diya's room with childlike excitement.

Gautham's eyes filled with tears as he watched her. He turned to Dhruv, his voice shaking. "Dhruv... I've lost them both. My Diya is gone, and now Anjali... she doesn't even remember. What do I do? I can't live like this, Dhruv. I... I just want to die." He buried his face in his hands, sobbing uncontrollably.

Dhruv placed a reassuring hand on his shoulder, his own voice heavy with sorrow. "Sir, I know how much this hurts. I know it feels like your entire world has collapsed. But if you lose hope, what will happen to ma'am? How will she bear all this? She's not in a state to understand what's going on right now, sir. You have to stay strong for her."

Dhruv paused, taking a deep breath before continuing. "Sir, I'll take ma'am to see Diya."

"No!" Gautham cried, gripping Dhruv's arm. "How can she see her lying there... lifeless? I'm terrified, Dhruv. I can't let her go through that."

Dhruv knelt down to meet Gautham's tear-filled eyes. "Sir, if she doesn't say a final goodbye to Diya, she'll regret it for the rest of her life. She'll feel an emptiness she won't understand. And Diya... Diya would want her mom to see her one last time. I know it's hard, sir, but this is something she needs to do. Please, trust me."

Gautham hesitated, his heart torn apart by conflicting emotions. Before he could say more, Dhruv stood and walked toward Diya's room, his steps heavy with determination and sorrow.

In the room, Anjali sat on Diya's bed, absentmindedly running her fingers over the blanket. Dhruv knocked softly on the door.

"Hello, ma'am," he said, his voice quiet but steady.

Anjali looked up and smiled. "Come in, Dhruv! Why are you standing there?" she asked cheerfully. "Dhruv, I know you know all the plans. Tell me, what is the plan? I really want to wear a nice dress, but I can't find Diya anywhere. Where is she?"

Dhruv hesitated, his heart aching at her innocent questions. "Ma'am," he began, struggling to steady his voice, "I... I know where she is."

Anjali's face lit up with excitement. "I knew it! She's planning something with her dad, isn't she? For my birthday?"

"Yes, ma'am," Dhruv replied, forcing a smile. "She's waiting for you downstairs. You have to come down, ma'am."

As he spoke, Dhruv felt like each word was tearing at his soul. He hated lying to her, but he knew this was the only way.

Anjali stood up abruptly. "Wait, Dhruv! I'll get ready and come. I want to look my best!"

Dhruv gently stopped her, his voice tinged with urgency. "Ma'am, it's already late. Diya has to go to a very beautiful place, and she can't wait any longer. Please, ma'am, you need to come now."

Anjali looked confused, her brows furrowing. "What? Where is she going? She didn't even ask for my permission!"

Dhruv swallowed hard, trying to keep his composure. "Ma'am, she's waiting for your permission. She won't go without it. She's downstairs, pretending to be asleep on the floor. She told me that only if you tell her to go, she'll wake up. She's waiting for you, ma'am."

Anjali's confusion deepened, but she nodded slowly.

Dhruv continued, his voice soft and pleading. "Ma'am, when you see her, please look at her all you want. She'll be so happy to see you. And please... tell her beautiful words—words that will make her feel good. She'll be listening, ma'am, I promise."

Anjali looked at Dhruv, still puzzled but sensing the earnestness in his words. "Okay, Dhruv," she said, nodding. "Let's go. I'll tell her everything."

Dhruv led her out of the room, each step feeling heavier than the last, as he prepared himself for the heartbreaking moment ahead.

Anjali, now convinced, walked down the stairs with Dhruv by her side. Gautham stood at a distance, watching them anxiously. Dhruv caught his gaze and, with subtle hand gestures, assured him that he would manage the situation.

As they approached Diya's body, Anjali's face lit up with amusement. She burst into laughter.

"Diya, I know your tricks to get out of things!" she said, her voice playful. "I'm not going to give you permission to escape, so wake up, okay?"

Her words struck like a knife in the hearts of everyone in the room. Dhruv stepped closer, his voice a quiet whisper.

"Ma'am, remember what you promised me?" he said softly. "Please, ma'am, just as we talked earlier."

Anjali scratched her head, looking momentarily confused. "Oh, right! Sorry, Dhruv, I forgot," she said, shaking her head lightly. She then knelt beside Diya, her hands trembling as she gently brushed her daughter's hair.

With a tender smile and tears brimming in her eyes, she began to speak. "I'm so lucky to have you as my daughter, Diya. I'll always love you so much—no matter what mistakes you make, my love for you will never change."

Her voice broke for a moment, but she continued, her words filled with warmth and affection. "I heard you

want to go on a trip. You can go, my darling. But promise me you'll be safe and come back soon. I'll be waiting for you. Not just me—so many people love you, especially Dhruv. No matter how much you troubled him, he was always there to help you. Before you go, make sure to thank him and say sorry for all the mischief."

She paused, her tears falling freely. "Always remember, Diya, your dad and I will love you forever. Goodbye, my darling," she said, her voice barely above a whisper.

Anjali gently kissed Diya's forehead, then looked up at Dhruv with tearful eyes. She gave him a weak smile. "Did I do well, Dhruv?" she asked, her voice wavering.

Tears streamed down Dhruv's face as he nodded. "You did well, ma'am. You did very well," he said, his voice choked with emotion. "Let's take her now."

Gautham, who had been watching silently, stepped forward, joined by the others. Together, they lifted Diya's body, their faces etched with grief.

Anvi stood quietly beside Anjali, her hand resting gently on her shoulder. The room was silent except for the soft sound of sobbing. As they carried Diya away, Anjali's tear-filled eyes followed them, her lips forming a faint smile as though saying one last goodbye.

It was already late, and the night sky was draped in a sombre silence. The rituals were complete, and it was time to let go. The weight of the day bore heavily on everyone as they returned home, their hearts heavier still.

Dhruv stood with Gautham, his eyes brimming with guilt and sorrow. "Sir, I know this is incredibly difficult for all of us. I'm so sorry... Please forgive me," Dhruv said, his voice barely audible.

Gautham shook his head gently, his own grief etched deeply into his features. "Dhruv, I don't blame you. I know how much you adored her. You did your best. But... I need to be alone now," Gautham replied, his voice breaking.

Dhruv nodded, struggling to keep his composure. "Okay, sir. Please take care of yourself and ma'am. I'll come by tomorrow," he said softly.

CHAPTER 35

The Night We Fell in Love

Dhruv walked to his bike and rode home. The cold breeze whispered through the quiet streets, matching the heaviness in his heart. As he approached his gate, he noticed a familiar figure waiting for him.

Anvi stood there, her arms crossed against the chill, her expression soft and understanding. Dhruv slowed his bike, parked it, and hesitated for a moment before stepping toward her.

She gave him a small, encouraging smile. "Do you want a hug?" she asked gently.

Dhruv's eyes, already glistening with unshed tears, gave in. A single tear rolled down his cheek. Without a word, Anvi stepped forward and wrapped her arms around him.

As soon as he felt her embrace, Dhruv melted. The dam of his emotions burst, and he cried into her shoulder, his sobs muffled by the quiet night. Anvi tightened her grip, pulling him closer.

"It's okay, Dhruv," she whispered, her voice steady but tender. "I know it's so hard for you. I'm so sorry.

Please, cry as much as you need. Don't keep it all bottled up inside."

She gently tapped his back, her touch grounding him in the moment. Dhruv held her tighter, burying his face in her shoulder, unable to speak through his tears. The cold night seemed to fade away in the warmth of their embrace.

The wind picked up, sending a chill through the air. Anvi shivered slightly but didn't pull away. "Dhruv… are we going to hug out here all night? It's freezing," she said, her voice light, trying to ease his pain.

Dhruv pulled her even closer, his hold firm and desperate. "Don't worry," he murmured. "I'll keep you warm. Can I… Can I hug you a little longer? Please. Because I… I…" His voice faltered as he buried his face in her neck, unable to finish the sentence.

Anvi tilted her head slightly, her voice soft. "You want what, Dhruv?" she asked gently.

Dhruv pulled back just enough to look at her. His hands moved to her face, cupping her cheeks as his tear-filled eyes met hers. For a moment, he opened his mouth to speak but said nothing. Instead, he let the silence speak for him, his touch and his gaze conveying the depth of his emotions.

The night grew colder, but between them, the warmth only grew stronger.

"Come, let's go inside," Dhruv said softly, grabbing her hand.

They stepped into the house, the warmth inside contrasting with the chill of the night. Dhruv glanced at his watch and sighed. "It's already late, Anvi. Come, let me drop you home," he said, his tone gentle but firm.

Before he could move, Anvi tightened her grip on his hand, stopping him. Her eyes searched his face with concern. "Are you okay, Dhruv?" she asked softly, her voice filled with genuine care.

Dhruv hesitated, his gaze dropping to the floor. He opened his mouth to respond but found himself at a loss for words. Instead, he exhaled deeply and shook his head slightly.

Anvi stepped closer, her eyes never leaving his. "Dhruv, you don't have to hold everything in. I'm here. You can talk to me," she said, her voice steady and reassuring.

The moment the words left Anvi's mouth, Dhruv broke down completely. His knees buckled, and he sank to the floor, his hands covering his face as he sobbed. "Anvi... I couldn't save Diya. How could I let this happen? How could I not save her?" he cried, his voice raw with anguish.

Anvi immediately knelt beside him and gently pulled his hand, guiding him to sit on the sofa. She sat close, holding his hand tightly in hers.

"Dhruv," she said, her tone firm yet soothing, "you did everything you could to save her. I know how much you cared for her, how much you tried. Diya would be so happy, so proud of you. The bond you two shared was so pure, so unbreakable. I know it's hard, but what's happened can't be undone."

Her words were gentle but carried a quiet strength. She squeezed his hand tighter and continued, "If you truly want to honour her, to give her justice, then you need to find the person responsible. Catch the killer, Dhruv. Put them behind bars. That's what Diya would want."

Dhruv's trembling began to subside as he absorbed her words. Her voice, filled with determination and care, gave him a sense of clarity amidst his chaos. He nodded slowly. "Diya will always remain in my heart," he said, his voice steadier now. "From childhood, I watched her grow... saw her become the person she was."

Anvi tilted her head slightly, her brow furrowing in curiosity. "From childhood? What do you mean?" she asked, her voice laced with intrigue.

Dhruv paused and took a deep breath, his gaze distant as he began to speak. "This is my story, Anvi. When I was ten years old, I lost both my parents in a car accident. My world shattered that day. My dad and Gautham sir were best friends, and when I lost my parents, they took me in. They adopted me as their son, but for me... no one could ever replace my parents.

Gautham sir and Anjali ma'am never forced me to call them mom or dad—they understood my pain."

He paused for a moment, his voice trembling slightly as he continued. "A year later, Diya was born. It was like... like light came back into the house. Her laughter, her energy—it brightened everything. She would always play with me, and as we grew up, we went to school together. From the time I was ten, I lived with them, and they became my family."

Dhruv's voice softened, tinged with admiration. "I always wanted to become an IPS officer, just like Gautham sir. He was my inspiration. So, when the time came, I moved out to focus on my studies. I wanted to stand on my own feet—I didn't want to be more of a burden to them. But... you know what, Anvi? Even though I moved out, Gautham sir quietly paid my bills and my tuition fees. Every single time. And Anjali ma'am... she never stopped sending me food. Not a day went by when I didn't feel their love."

A small smile broke through the pain on his face as he recounted, "And then there was Diya. My god, Anvi, she was something else. Every single day, she'd show up at my place, uninvited, and stay all night. We played games, laughed, talked for hours. Once, I tried teaching her how to cook. She ended up blasting my oven!"

Anvi chuckled softly, the image bringing a moment of lightness to the conversation.

"My whole kitchen turned pitch dark, and so did her face," Dhruv said, the memory drawing a faint laugh from him. "That day, I laughed so hard, I couldn't breathe. Diya always had a way of turning the ordinary into something unforgettable. Those moments... they were my everything."

But the smile faded as quickly as it came. Dhruv's voice grew heavy with sorrow. "They were my family, Anvi. And now... she's gone. I'm going to miss her so much." His voice cracked, and tears spilled over. "I'm so sorry, Diya," he whispered, burying his face in his hands as the grief overtook him.

Dhruv's gaze fell to the floor again, his shoulders heavy with emotion. "She trusted me, Anvi. She believed in me, and I couldn't protect her. I feel like I failed her."

Anvi reached out, placing her free hand on his cheek, gently turning his face toward hers. "Dhruv, listen to me," she said firmly. "You didn't fail her. You gave her love, care, and protection whenever you could. Sometimes life throws us things we can't control, no matter how hard we try. But you're still here. And now, it's up to you to make sure she gets the justice she deserves."

She gently placed her hands on his shoulders. "Dhruv, please... stop crying," she said softly. "I know it's hard, especially when you hold so many precious memories with her. But please don't do this to yourself."

Dhruv looked up at her, his eyes red and swollen. "But how, Anvi? How can I stop? How can I let her go?"

Anvi interrupted gently, cupping his face and wiping his tears with her thumbs. "Dhruv, I'm not asking you to forget her," she said firmly. "Her memories will always be with you—they'll always be a part of who you are. She's not truly gone, Dhruv. She's in a safer place now, and she'd want you to remember her with love, not pain."

Her words, spoken with such quiet conviction, seemed to reach a part of Dhruv that had been locked away. He nodded slowly, tears still falling, but the weight on his chest felt just a little lighter.

"You look so tired. Come, let's sleep," Anvi said softly, her voice filled with care.

Dhruv hesitated, looking at her. "Aren't you going home?"

Anvi smiled at him warmly. "I don't want to leave you all alone in this situation."

"Wait... are you staying here?" he asked, startled.

"Dhruv, let's go," she said, ignoring his confusion and pulling his hand.

"But, Anvi, I don't have an extra bedroom," he stammered.

Anvi gave him a playful look. "No wonder you've never dated a girl." She tugged his hand again. "Come on, we'll figure it out."

They reached his bedroom, and Anvi glanced around. "Now, you sleep on the bed, and I'll take the couch," she said matter-of-factly.

Dhruv shook his head immediately. "Anvi, you won't be able to sleep on the couch. You take the bed, and I'll take the couch."

Anvi crossed her arms and looked at him with exaggerated puppy eyes. "+Dhruv, you care about me so much."

"Of course I do," he replied sincerely.

"Then you better sleep on the bed," she said with a grin, pushing him gently onto it.

"But, Anvi—"

"Shhh, Dhruv. Just sleep," she interrupted, tucking the blanket over him.

Dhruv sighed and lay on the bed reluctantly. Anvi stood beside him, watching. "Close your eyes, Dhruv," she instructed.

He obeyed immediately, closing his eyes tightly.

Anvi chuckled softly. "Good boy." She turned off the bedside lamp and sat on the couch.

Moments later, Dhruv opened his eyes in the dark. "Anvi," he called softly, "how will you sleep there?"

Anvi switched the light back on and walked over to him. She sat on the edge of the bed, gently brushing his hair back with her hand. "Can you please sleep? Because I also need some rest," she teased, her touch comforting.

Dhruv smiled faintly. "Okay, fine. But if you feel uncomfortable, let me know, and we'll switch places."

Anvi smiled, leaning down slightly. "Okay, Dhruv. Now sleep." She turned the light off again and stayed by his side until his breathing grew calm, a peaceful silence settling over them.

After a while, Dhruv was asleep, but Anvi couldn't rest on the couch. Quietly, she got up and walked to the bed. As she gazed at Dhruv, peacefully sleeping, a soft smile crossed her face. She bent down slightly, gently running her fingers through his hair.

"You sleep so cutely," she whispered to herself, watching him.

Then, gathering the courage, she sighed and murmured softly, "Dhruv, I need to tell you this before it's too late. I'm in love with you. Being with you makes me so happy. But I'm scared... scared that you'll reject me. I'm really in love with you."

As her words hung in the air, Anvi leaned in and, unable to hold back, pressed her lips gently against his in a soft, sweet kiss. Just as she did, Dhruv shifted

slightly, and panic flashed through her. Quietly, she slid one leg off the bed, about to slip away.

But before she could get far, Dhruv reached out and grabbed her hand. "Please don't go," he murmured.

Anvi froze, her cheeks flushed a deep shade of red. She looked over her shoulder, meeting his eyes with a mixture of surprise and vulnerability. Before she could react, Dhruv pulled her back into his arms, holding her tightly against his chest.

He looked at her, his voice full of tenderness. "How could you think I would reject you?" His fingers caressed her hair softly as he continued, "I love being with you, Anvi. And if you need to hear it now, I'll say it... I love you. I've loved you for a long time."

Anvi's heart swelled with joy, and without thinking, she lightly slapped his chest in playful disbelief. "Were you pretending to sleep, or were you really listening to me?" she asked, her voice teasing yet full of warmth.

Dhruv smiled, his eyes locking with hers. The closeness between them was undeniable, the air between them thick with longing. "I was listening, trust me," he said softly, his thumb brushing over her cheek. "And you're so cute when you're embarrassed."

Anvi smiled shyly, and Dhruv, sensing the moment, gently pulled the bedsheet over them both, cocooning them together in warmth. He leaned forward, his lips brushing against hers in a soft, lingering kiss. "Now

sleep," he whispered. "Don't think too much. Yes, I love you. You heard me right."

Anvi's heart fluttered as she rested her head on his chest, her hand over his heart, feeling the steady beat. She closed her eyes, a content smile on her lips, as Dhruv's arms wrapped around her, pulling her closer.

Together, they lay there, holding each other as the night wrapped around them, a perfect stillness settling over the room.

CHAPTER 36

The Secret Behind the Door

Dhruv wakes up in the morning, with Anvi beside him. He smiles at her, marvelling at how beautiful she is. Gently, he brushes the hair off her face and leans in to kiss her forehead softly. Anvi stirs slightly, moving a little in her sleep. Before she fully wakes up, Dhruv quietly gets out of bed, adjusts her blanket, and heads to the bathroom to freshen up.

A little while later, he emerges, dressed and ready for the day. Without disturbing Anvi, he leaves the house. As soon as he steps outside, he picks up his phone and calls Gautham.

"Hello, sir," Dhruv greets him.

"Hello, Dhruv," Gautham replies in a soft voice. "Is everything okay?"

"Yes, sir, I'm fine," Dhruv responds. "What about ma'am? How is she doing?"

"She's still sleeping," Gautham answers. "Is there a problem, Dhruv?"

"No, no, sir. I just wanted to check if everything is alright. If you need anything, please let me know."

"Actually, Dhruv, there's something I want to discuss with you," Gautham says. "Come over in the evening, and I'll tell you then."

"Alright, sir. I'll be there," Dhruv replies.

With that, Dhruv ends the call and heads to the police station to begin his day.

At the police station, Dhruv rushes straight to the whiteboard. As he studies it, everything suddenly clicks—he feels like he has found the answer.

"Suraj!" he calls out.

Suraj quickly enters the room. "Yes, sir?"

"Has Gajendra come in?" Dhruv asks.

"No, sir. He hasn't been here for the past two days," Suraj replies.

Dhruv's expression hardens. "Take his address from the register, go to his place, and bring him here."

"Why, sir? What happened?" Suraj asks, confused.

"He's behind all this," Dhruv says firmly. "Gajendra is behind everything, and we need to catch him as quickly as possible."

Suraj is stunned. "Sir, what are you saying? Gajendra? Our Gajendra?"

"Yes, Suraj," Dhruv confirms. "I saw him at the hospital that day. He's the one who killed Diya, and he slipped right through my hands."

It was difficult for Suraj to process the shocking revelation, but after a moment of hesitation, he nodded. "Yes, sir. I'll check on him right away."

With that, Suraj leaves the room, determined to follow Dhruv's orders.

Dhruv stared at the board, his mind racing. *What could Gajendra's motive be? Why is he killing innocent girls?* His thoughts turned to Diya. *Why would he even think of killing her?* As these questions flooded his mind, a surge of anger rose within him, and he slammed his hand on the desk. The force caused the watch he had placed on the table to fall to the ground.

Taking a deep breath, Dhruv bent down to pick it up. As his fingers brushed the watch, a thought struck him. *Watch... the watch.* He murmured the word under his breath, piecing something together in his mind.

Without wasting another second, he bolted out of the room, shouting, "Vedanth! Vedanth!"

Hearing the urgency in Dhruv's voice, Vedanth rushed in. "Yes, sir! What happened?"

Dhruv looked at him sharply. "Did we get Diya's watch from the forensic team?"

Vedanth paused, thinking. "Sir, one second. Let me check." He quickly returned to his desk and retrieved a small notebook. Flipping through its pages, he said, "Sir, according to the forensic report, we recovered her neck pendant and earrings. That's it."

"What about the watch?" Dhruv pressed.

"Watch?" Vedanth repeated, confused. "No, sir. There was no watch. It wasn't mentioned in the report either."

Dhruv's jaw tightened as he muttered, "It's not there...?" He took a deep breath, frustration evident on his face. "Vedanth, I had gifted Diya a digital watch. Why didn't I think of this earlier? We could have tracked it... we could have found her sooner." He sighed heavily, a mix of regret and determination washing over him.

Vedanth looked at Dhruv and said, "Sir, even if we had saved Diya back then, I think this killer would have still found a way to harm her. But now that we know about the watch, why don't we track it and at least find the location?"

"Yes, you're right, Vedanth. That's exactly what I was thinking," Dhruv replied. "Come, let's head to the tracking room."

The two of them quickly moved to the control room. Vedanth turned to Dhruv and asked, "Sir, do you remember the serial number of the watch?"

Dhruv paused, then shook his head. "No."

Vedanth frowned. "Sir, without that number, we can't track it."

"Wait, Ved," Dhruv said, his mind racing. "I ordered it online. Maybe I can find the details there. Let me check."

Dhruv pulled out his phone and started searching through his purchase history. After a few tense moments, he found the order and showed it to Vedanth.

Vedanth glanced at the information and immediately started typing rapidly on the keyboard, his eyes fixed on the laptop screen. Within minutes, a green light appeared on the display. Dhruv's eyes widened as he leaned closer. "Ved, what is this?"

Vedanth grinned. "Sir, her watch is still active. This means we can track it and find the location."

Dhruv's expression turned determined. "Track the location immediately!" he ordered.

Vedanth nodded and began working even more swiftly, his fingers flying over the keyboard. In no time, he pinpointed the exact location, jotted it down on a piece of paper, and handed it to Dhruv. "Sir, this is the address."

Dhruv took the paper and smiled. "Good job, Ved! You stay here and monitor the situation. Guide me if I miss anything. I'll take Rishab and Sunil with me."

"Okay, sir," Vedanth replied with a nod.

Dhruv rushed out of the control room, calling out, "Rishab! Sunil! Follow me!" The two officers quickly joined him, and the three of them got into a car and sped off from the station.

On the other side, Suraj followed the address and reached Gajendra's location. He parked his bike a little distance away and cautiously approached the house on foot. As he got closer, a foul smell hit him, sharp and overwhelming. Immediately, he pulled out his handkerchief and covered his nose. The stench was unbearable.

The house appeared locked, and Suraj quickly scanned the area for something to help him open the door. His eyes landed on a metal rod lying nearby. Picking it up, he began striking the lock with determination. After several attempts, the lock finally gave way, and the door creaked open.

The foul smell intensified as soon as the door was ajar, forcing Suraj to take a step back, unable to bear the stench. He staggered out of the doorway and immediately called the forensic team.

"I need the team here right away," Suraj said urgently over the phone, giving them the location details.

He then walked a safe distance from the house and waited for the team to arrive, his senses still reeling from the nauseating odour emanating from inside.

On the other side, Dhruv and his team reached the location, their eyes sharp and scanning their surroundings. It was an old, eerie area near a junkyard. Dhruv turned to the others and said, "This is the place. The house is somewhere nearby. This time, we have to get him."

Just then, Vedanth called Dhruv. "Hello, sir. Have you reached the location?"

"Yes," Dhruv replied.

"The house is about 500 meters from where you are. Keep walking in that direction," Vedanth guided him.

Dhruv moved slowly, carefully following Vedanth's instructions. Sunil and Rishab walked close behind him, their senses alert. Vedanth's voice came through the phone again, "Sir, stop right there. The house is on your right."

Dhruv turned to his right and spotted the house. Something about it seemed oddly familiar, but he didn't have time to dwell on the thought. Cutting the call, he turned to Sunil. "Sunil, you take the back. Rishab, you're with me."

Sunil nodded and quickly ran to circle the house. Dhruv and Rishab approached the front door

cautiously, but it was locked. They exchanged a glance and began looking for another way in.

"Sir!" Rishab called out, pointing to a broken window on the side of the house. Dhruv nodded.

Rishab picked up a stone and smashed the remaining glass, causing shards to fall to the ground with a loud crash. Clearing the edges, they both climbed through the open window and dropped into the room inside.

Once inside, they pulled out their torches, lighting up the dim and dusky space. The room was filled with junkyard scraps—broken furniture, rusted tools, and other discarded items, creating an unsettling atmosphere. The air was thick with dust, and every step echoed faintly.

Dhruv looked around, his expression grim. "Stay alert," he whispered to Rishab, as they began to search the room cautiously, their torches slicing through the darkness.

As Dhruv moved cautiously through the house, a sense of familiarity crept over him. *I've been here before...* he thought, his mind racing. He continued searching, his eyes drawn to a faint trail of blood on the floor. Following it, he came across a rope lying on the ground, surrounded by shards of broken glass and bloodstains.

"This is it," Dhruv murmured, his voice heavy with anger. "This is where Diya and the other girls were tied

up. That bastard... I will get you," he vowed under his breath.

On the other side of the house, Rishab was scanning the area carefully. His torchlight landed on a small, suspicious-looking door. The way it stood slightly ajar piqued his curiosity. Approaching it quietly, he reached for the handle. The door wasn't locked, so he slowly pushed it open.

The room inside was pitch dark. Rishab stepped in, his torch cutting through the gloom as he searched for a light switch. His hand found it, and with a quick flick, the room was flooded with light.

What he saw made him freeze. His eyes widened in disbelief, and he felt a chill run down his spine. *How could this be real?*

Snapping out of his shock, he called out, his voice urgent, "Dhruv! Sir, come here! You have to see this!"

Hearing the panic in Rishab's voice, Dhruv rushed toward the room. He entered quickly, his gaze following Rishab's.

The sight before him made Dhruv stop dead in his tracks. His breath caught, and his body tensed. The room held something so horrifying that even he, a seasoned officer, was momentarily stunned.

The two stood there in silence, the weight of the discovery pressing heavily on them both.

On the other side, the forensic team arrived at the location, and Suraj guided them to the house. The team entered cautiously, their trained eyes scanning every corner for evidence. Suraj stood outside, anxiously waiting for updates.

Moments later, one of the forensic team members came out, his expression grave. "Sir," he said to Suraj, "a body has been found inside."

Suraj's face went pale. "A body? Are you sure?"

"Yes, sir. It seems like it has been there for days. But we'll need further analysis to confirm the details," the forensic expert replied.

The team carefully brought the body out, placing it on a stretcher. The corpse was in a state of advanced decomposition, making identification difficult. However, as they prepared to move it into the ambulance, Suraj's eyes fell on a detail that stopped him cold—a bracelet on the hand.

The bracelet was unmistakable. It was the same one Gajendra had. Suraj's suspicion began to take shape, but he needed confirmation. He quickly dialled Dhruv.

"Hello, Dhruv sir, I've reached Gajendra's place," Suraj said.

Dhruv's voice immediately sharpened with anticipation. "Did you find him? Did you catch him?"

There was a brief silence on the other end.

"Suraj? Answer me! Did you find him?" Dhruv's tone grew firm.

"No, sir," Suraj replied reluctantly. "I didn't find him. But... we discovered a body in the house."

Dhruv froze for a moment. "What are you saying? A body? Whose body is it?"

"Sir, I can't confirm yet. The forensic team has taken it for analysis. But... I have a strong suspicion it's Gajendra. The body's hand had a bracelet—the same bracelet Gajendra had."

Dhruv took a sharp breath, his mind racing. "If that's Gajendra's body... then who's behind all this? What does this mean?"

Suraj, sensing the gravity of the situation, remained silent.

"Meet me at the station immediately," Dhruv ordered, cutting the call abruptly.

Suraj stood there, staring at the ambulance as it drove away, his mind swirling with questions. If Gajendra was dead, the mystery had just taken a chilling turn.

The room Dhruv and Rishab were in was filled with tools, giving it an eerie and sinister atmosphere. Along one wall, there was a large board pinned with photos of the victims. Beneath each photo were small

handwritten notes—details that Dhruv immediately recognized as information about the victims.

But what caught his attention the most was a collection of highly realistic masks displayed on a nearby shelf. The masks were of different faces, each disturbingly lifelike.

Dhruv turned to Rishab, his expression grim. "I think this guy is using these masks to change his identity... and then killing people."

Rishab nodded, his face tense. "Yes, sir. It all makes sense now."

Dhruv reached into his pocket and pulled out his phone to inform Gautham of their findings. But just as he was about to dial, he froze. The sound of footsteps echoed faintly in the distance, growing louder with every step.

Someone was coming.

Dhruv's instincts kicked in. "Rishab," he whispered, motioning for silence. His hand moved to the light switch, and he flipped it off, plunging the room into darkness.

Both men quickly found hiding spots among the clutter, their breathing shallow as they waited in tense silence. The footsteps grew closer, the floorboards creaking under the weight of whoever—or whatever—was approaching.

Was it the killer?

Dhruv's grip tightened on his torch, ready for anything as they both stayed hidden, waiting to see who would enter the room.

CHAPTER 37

The Final Chase

The sound of footsteps grew louder, and Dhruv and Rishab tensed, becoming even more cautious. The footsteps grew closer, and then, suddenly, the lights in the hall flickered on, flooding the space with brightness.

A tall, well-built man entered the room, wearing a black coat. It was none other than the killer.

He walked in confidently, scanning the area, as if sensing that someone was there. After a moment, he casually removed his coat and tossed it aside. His eyes roamed the room, but he didn't seem to notice the two officers hidden in the shadows.

He approached the fridge and grabbed a beer bottle, popping the cap off. Sitting down at a nearby table, he took a long drink, muttering to himself, "Three more victims, and I'll be done with this. That stupid Dhruv still can't catch me."

The words were loud enough for Dhruv to hear, his hands curling into fists. *Damn him,* he thought, frustration mounting. But before Dhruv could make a move, Rishab whispered urgently, "Sir, let him come in. It'll be better to catch him red-handed."

Dhruv took a slow breath, calming himself. Rishab was right. They needed to wait.

Dhruv quickly sent a message to Sunil, instructing him to prepare for backup and to be ready for the moment they made their move. Everything was in place, and now all they had to do was wait.

The killer took two more sips of beer, clearly lost in his thoughts. "Alright," he muttered to himself, "let me see who's next. Which face should I use this time?"

He stood up and slowly approached the door to the room. Dhruv and Rishab, both fully alert, watched him with keen eyes.

As the killer opened the door and stepped inside, Dhruv's heart pounded. In one swift motion, he switched on the light, revealing himself. With a gun pointed directly at the killer, Dhruv stepped forward. Rishab emerged from behind, his own gun raised, flanking him.

The killer froze, stunned. His eyes widened in disbelief.

Dhruv didn't hesitate. "Your game is over," he said, his voice cold. "There's no way you're escaping this time."

The killer stood there, fear creeping into his eyes as he realized he had been caught.

Dhruv's hand was steady as he dailed Gautham's number, his eyes never leaving the killer. The moment the line connected, he spoke quickly. "Sir, I've got him. I found the killer."

There was a brief pause on the other end, and then Gautham's voice came through, calm but firm. "Good. Now, I need you to bring him in alive. No unnecessary action, Dhruv. We need him alive for questioning."

Dhruv's grip on the phone tightened, his frustration rising. "What are you saying, sir?" he snapped. "How do you expect me to let him go just like that? This man's killed innocent people. He's a threat. I should end this now."

On the other end, Gautham's voice remained steady. "I understand your anger, but killing him won't give us the answers we need. We need him alive, Dhruv. Do you understand?"

The words hit Dhruv like a slap. His chest tightened with anger. "I don't care about your orders! This man needs to pay for what he's done!"

Rishab glanced nervously between Dhruv and the killer. The tension in the room was palpable. As Dhruv and Gautham continued to argue, the killer saw an opportunity. With a sudden burst of energy, he lunged at both Dhruv and Rishab, knocking them off balance.

The force of his attack caught both officers off guard. Dhruv stumbled backward, barely able to catch

himself, while Rishab was thrown to the ground. The killer, using the chaos to his advantage, scrambled toward the door.

"You're not getting away!" Dhruv shouted, struggling to his feet.

But the killer was already halfway to the exit, moving with surprising speed. Dhruv and Rishab quickly recovered, chasing after him.

The killer reached the door and threw it open, dashing into the night. But Dhruv was right behind him. "Stop!" Dhruv yelled, but the killer had already gained a few steps.

Sunil and a few other officers, stationed outside, heard the commotion and rushed to the scene. "There he is!" one of the officers shouted.

The killer sprinted down the alley, but he wasn't fast enough. Sunil tackled him to the ground, knocking him off balance. For a moment, it seemed like the killer might finally be caught. But with a vicious twist, he broke free from Sunil's grasp, shoving him hard into the concrete.

The killer regained his footing and attempted to escape again, but Dhruv wasn't far behind. He launched himself at the killer, grabbing him by the arm and twisting it behind his back. The struggle was fierce, but the killer was determined. With a swift, brutal motion,

he elbowed Dhruv in the ribs, forcing him to stumble back.

Rishab was on his feet now, and together, he and Dhruv managed to corner the killer. But just as they were about to secure him, the killer lashed out with a hidden knife, slashing across Dhruv's arm.

"Damn it!" Dhruv grunted, but he didn't give up. With Rishab's help, they wrestled the knife from the killer's hand and pinned him down to the ground.

The killer's breath was ragged, his eyes filled with hatred. "You think you've won, Dhruv?" he spat, his voice low and menacing. "You're nothing. I'll escape again. You'll never catch me."

Dhruv glared down at him, blood dripping from his arm. "Your game is over," he said, his voice cold. "This time, you're not getting away."

But just then, as more officers arrived, the killer managed to slip free once again, using the chaos to his advantage. With a final, defiant laugh, he sprinted into the shadows, disappearing away.

Dhruv clenched his teeth in frustration. "Dammit! We almost had him!"

Gautham arrived on the scene shortly after, looking around the area with a calm, calculating gaze. Dhruv stormed up to him, barely able to contain his anger.

"You let him go!" Dhruv barked. "I had him! We could have ended this right now!"

Gautham's expression remained neutral. "I told you to bring him in alive, Dhruv," he said quietly.

Dhruv's fists clenched in frustration, but he didn't argue further. They turned to scan the area, searching for any new clues.

As the evening drew on, the two officers continued their investigation. They found more evidence—a mask, a piece of fabric, a blood-stained rag. The pieces of the puzzle slowly started to come together. The killer had been using various masks, changing faces to throw off his identity.

The realization hit them hard. The killer hadn't been working alone; he had been using these masks to disguise himself, making it impossible for anyone to recognize him.

As the evening wore on, Dhruv's phone rang. He answered it, his heart sinking when he heard the voice on the other end.

"Dhruv..." The voice was cold and mocking. "You're still looking for me, huh? Though I was so close to you, yet you couldn't catch me? Well, I've got something special for you. I've got Anvi."

Dhruv's pulse raced. "Wait—don't you dare touch her ?" he demanded.

The killer's laughter echoed in his ear. " Really , do u think you can save her? Come and save her if you can this time. But you have to come alone. If you bring anyone, she dies."

Dhruv's mind raced. He couldn't waste any time. "Where?"

The killer gave him an address, then hung up without another word.

Dhruv's face hardened as he looked around at his team. "Stay here. I'm going alone."

The hunt was on. This time, he wasn't just after a killer—he was after a monster who had kidnapped the one person Dhruv cared about most.

As the night sky darkened, Dhruv prepared for the final confrontation. The killer was about to reveal his twisted story—but would Dhruv make it in time to save Anvi?