

Justice in The Shadows

**EVERY RAPIST SHE FINDS GETS THE ONLY SENTENCE
THEY DESERVE.**

Harsh Bansal



BlueRoseONE^{INDIA}
Stories Matter

New Delhi • London

BLUEROSE PUBLISHERS

India | U.K.

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BlueRoseONE
Stories Matter
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ISBN: 978-93-7139-832-9

Cover Design: Shubham Verma

Typesetting: Sagar

First Edition: July 2025

Acknowledgement

This book is born out of pain, outrage, and an unshakable desire for justice—not just for the characters in these pages, but for countless real voices that were silenced in the shadows.

I would like to thank every survivor who found the courage to speak, and every person who stood by them. Your strength inspired this story.

To my readers—thank you for choosing to walk into the darkness with me, not to escape it, but to confront it. I hope this book makes you feel something real, something that stays with you.

To my family and friends, your belief in me was my light on the darkest writing days.

And finally, to justice—not the one written in law books, but the one we fight for when no one else will.

This is for the unheard. This is for the unseen.

This is *Justice in the Shadows*.

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Chapter 1

The Friendship

Friends, Right?

“Do you have a problem with her? And why do you care if she doesn’t talk much? She’s just selective about who she wants to talk to. For your information—she doesn’t like you. So stop giving her a hard time, or you’ll have to deal with me,” Vera said sharply, defending her best friend, Tanya.

Vera was a young, beautiful girl in her twenties, fair-skinned and tall. An ambivert by nature, she often wore loose-fitting clothes and kept her hair tied in a ponytail. Tanya, on the other hand, was an introvert—shorter in height, with curly hair and a slim figure.

Vera gently took Tanya by the arm and led her away. “You shouldn’t be scared of those girls. They’re mean, and you should be mean to them too.”

“That’s not me, Vera. I don’t care what people say. I just ignore them,” Tanya replied calmly. “Anyway, let’s go to the canteen. I’m starving—I didn’t have breakfast this morning.”

“Let’s go. I’m hungry too,” Vera said.

They headed to the college canteen. Vera ordered a sandwich and beetroot juice, while Tanya went for some pasta and a soft drink. They picked a quiet corner table and waited for their order.

“Next week is our farewell party. Have you decided what you’re going to wear?” Vera asked.

“I think... I don’t want to attend the party. Too many people. You know I don’t like that kind of crowd,” Tanya replied.

“You should come. Without you, I won’t enjoy it at all. After all, an extrovert needs her introvert sidekick,” Vera teased, smiling.

They both burst out laughing. Then they chatted about the rest of the day’s lectures. A few minutes later, their food was ready. Vera stood up, grabbed the tray from the counter, and returned to the table. They started eating while continuing their conversation.

Vera tried once more to convince Tanya about the party. “I really want you to come. One last college party—we should enjoy it together.”

Tanya sighed, but then a smile crept onto her face. “Okay! I’ll come. But only if you pick me up and drop me back. Deal?”

“Deal. You don’t have to worry about a thing,” Vera said, relieved.

After finishing their meals, they paid the bill. Tanya checked her phone. “We still have fifteen minutes before the math lecture starts.”

“Let’s stroll around the corridor until then. Then we’ll head to class,” Vera suggested.

“You just read my mind,” Tanya smiled.

As they walked down the corridor, Tanya suddenly spotted someone. “Look! Your crush is coming this way. Should I stop him for you?” she teased.

She stepped in front of Vera like she was about to intercept him, but Vera quickly pulled her back. “Wait—were you seriously going to stop him?” Vera whispered, alarmed.

“Why not? I was trying to get you a boyfriend,” Tanya whispered back, grinning.

“You’re just teasing me, aren’t you?”

“Nope,” Tanya giggled, and Vera joined in.

After a few more minutes of light-hearted strolling, they made their way to the lecture hall.

The Farewell Party

“I’ll come pick you up in an hour. Be ready,” Vera texted Tanya.

“Don’t worry about me, I’ll be ready by the time you come. You’re the one who’s always late,” Tanya replied.

“Oh really? Well, today I’ll prove you wrong,” Vera texted back with a smirk as she put her phone down and started getting ready.

“Let’s see who proves who wrong,” Tanya replied, smiling to herself.

Tanya opened her wardrobe, searching for something to wear. At the same time, Vera was doing the same. Vera picked a navy blue one-piece dress, while Tanya chose a black gown with floral embroidery. They both applied light makeup and began getting dressed.

Once she was ready, Vera texted Tanya to let her know she was on the way. Tanya, just finishing up, heard the notification and replied that she was nearly ready too.

At around 4:00 PM, Vera arrived at Tanya's place and honked the horn. Tanya heard it, stepped out of her PG, and got into the car.

"We still have 30 minutes. The party starts at 4:30, right?" Vera asked.

"You're the one who dragged me to this party, and you're asking me the time?" Tanya teased.

"If I remember right, it's 4:30... or 16:30. Honestly, I'm not even sure," Vera admitted with a shrug.

"It doesn't matter. We're not performing. Even if we're a little late, we'll just sneak in from the back and sit quietly," Tanya replied.

"And at the end, we'll dance and eat—that's the main part anyway," Vera grinned.

"Yeah, a little dancing won't hurt," Tanya said softly.

Soon, they reached their college. Vera parked the car, and they walked toward the seminar hall where the farewell party was taking place.

They could already hear music and laughter spilling from the hall—clearly, the event had begun. They decided to enter through the back door. Once inside, they spotted two

empty chairs in the corner and made their way there, settling in to enjoy the remaining performances.

A boy named Rajat, a fellow student from their batch, walked onto the stage holding a guitar. He began his performance with the song *Phir Bhi Tumko Chaahunga* by Arijit Singh. As he sang, his eyes locked onto Tanya. For a moment, Tanya returned the gaze—but after a few seconds, she looked away.

Suddenly, Tanya's phone started vibrating. It was her mother calling. She showed the screen to Vera and whispered, "I need to take this."

Vera nodded and gave her space. Tanya slipped out of the hall, searching for a quiet classroom to talk. Just as she found one, the call got disconnected. She immediately called her mother back.

"Hey Mom, how are you?" Tanya asked softly.

"I'm fine, Tanya. How far have you reached, honey? When are you coming home? You're on your way, right?" her mother asked, confused.

"No, Mom, I'm not coming home today. It's my farewell party tonight. After this, I'll be preparing for my final semester exams. If I get a break in between, I'll definitely visit," Tanya explained gently.

"But yesterday you said you'd come home..." her mother insisted.

"I didn't say that, Mom. Maybe you're confused because of your Alzheimer's," Tanya replied carefully.

"I don't have Alzheimer's, honey," her mother said softly.

Meanwhile, Rajat had finished his performance and left the seminar hall. He was looking for Tanya. Spotting her in a nearby classroom talking on the phone, he waited outside, watching her silently.

When he saw her end the call, he stepped in, blocking her path.

“Tanya, hey!” he said.

“What are you doing here? Leave me alone,” Tanya replied, startled. She tried to exit, but he blocked the door.

“I sang that song for you. You just walked out—you didn’t even listen,” Rajat said, visibly frustrated.

“I’m not interested in you or your performance. I had to take an urgent call. Now please move,” she said firmly, avoiding eye contact.

“I love you, dammit! Why don’t you understand?” Rajat said, raising his voice. He grabbed her hand tightly. “I really, really love you.”

“You’re hurting me—let go,” Tanya said, wincing.

“That pain is nothing compared to how you’ve hurt me. Do you even know what it feels like to be ignored every day? To die inside every time you say you don’t feel anything for me?” Rajat shouted, tightening his grip.

“I don’t have feelings for you. You can’t force love,” Tanya said, pain evident in her voice. A tear rolled down her cheek. “Let go of my hand—please.”

Rajat suddenly pushed her backward. She fell to the floor, her phone clutched in her hand. As she struggled to get up, he pushed her again. He grabbed her by the arm and dragged her to the corner of the classroom.

“No! Please—don’t do this. Are you crazy?” Tanya pleaded, her voice trembling.

But Rajat didn’t stop. He began touching her inappropriately.

“No! No! Please! Stop! Don’t do this,” she begged.

He didn’t listen.

While the rest of the college was busy celebrating the farewell party, Tanya was being raped inside an empty classroom.

After it was over, Rajat calmly walked out and rejoined the party, as if nothing had happened.

Tanya was left lying on the floor—shattered, broken, and crying. She wanted to scream for help, but no one heard her. There was no one to save her.

She lay there, silently trying to gather the strength to stand again—with a soul torn apart.

I’m Here for You

Vera began to grow uneasy. Tanya had been gone a long time—longer than any phone call should take. Concerned, she got up from her seat and stepped outside the hall, just as her phone rang. It was Tanya.

She answered quickly, “Tanya? Where are you?”

On the other end, she heard Tanya crying—barely able to speak. “I... I... I’m in 42,” she stammered between sobs.

Vera’s heart dropped. “I’m coming right now. Just stay there.”

She ran through the corridors toward classroom 42. When she reached it, she saw Tanya sitting on a desk, looking shattered—her dress crumpled, her hair messy, her eyeliner smeared from crying.

Vera rushed to her and wrapped her arms around her in a tight hug.

“What happened, Tanya? Are you okay? I was so worried. Talk to me—I’m here now,” Vera said gently, holding back her own tears.

“I don’t want to be here anymore. Please take me to your home,” Tanya whispered, barely able to speak.

“Okay. We’ll go to my place first. But once we’re there, I need you to tell me everything. Whatever happened, we’ll face it together,” Vera said softly.

Tanya nodded quickly, her head moving up and down with urgency.

Without another word, they left the classroom. Vera noticed bruises on Tanya’s wrist but didn’t say anything just yet. She gently guided Tanya through a quiet path at the back of the college garden—avoiding the crowd and any unwanted attention.

They reached the parking lot. Vera unlocked the car, and they both got in silently. The guard opened the gate without noticing anything unusual, and they drove off.

The ride home was quiet. Neither of them spoke or even looked at each other. Tanya kept staring out of the window, her mind elsewhere. Vera kept glancing at her with worry, but respected the silence.

When they arrived, Vera helped Tanya into the house and made her sit on the couch. She went to the kitchen, poured her a glass of water, and returned.

Tanya took the water with trembling hands and drank slowly.

“I need to know what happened,” Vera said gently, but firmly. “You’re scaring me. Please don’t shut me out. I’m your best friend, and I’m here for you.”

Tanya took a deep breath, gathering whatever strength she had left.

“Rajat,” she began, “he’s had a thing for me since day one. Today... he cornered me in the classroom. He grabbed me... he harassed me... and he raped me.”

Vera froze, the glass in her hand trembling. “What? What did you just say?”

She stood up in shock. “That bastard! I swear I’ll make him pay. Let’s go back and tell everyone what he did.”

“No!” Tanya cried out, her voice shaking. “Please don’t tell anyone. If people find out... they’ll all look at me differently. They’ll whisper, judge... I won’t be able to handle that. I just... I just want to forget it happened.”

Tears rolled down Tanya’s cheeks again as she pleaded with Vera.

Vera clenched her fists, trying to control her emotions. Her own eyes welled up, but she wiped them quickly. She sat beside Tanya and pulled her in for a hug.

“I’m so sorry this happened to you,” she whispered. Tanya leaned into her, eyes closed, resting her head on Vera’s shoulder.

“Let me get you something to eat at least,” Vera said after a while.

“I’m not hungry... I just want to sleep,” Tanya murmured.

“You should eat a little. It’ll help you feel better. Please,” Vera insisted.

She went to the kitchen and opened the fridge, scanning for something light. She spotted sandwiches and a bottle of apple juice. She poured the juice into two glasses, placed the sandwiches on a plate, and brought them out.

“We can go to my room. It’ll be more comfortable there,” she said.

Tanya nodded, and they moved to Vera’s room. The room was simple: a study table with a laptop, a bookshelf beside it, and a wardrobe next to the bathroom door.

Tanya walked straight into the bathroom. Once inside, she sat on the toilet and noticed she was bleeding. Her eyes filled with tears again. She cleaned herself, flushed, and washed her hands. Then she stood in front of the mirror, staring at her own reflection—searching for the girl she was just a few hours ago.

She washed her face and stepped out.

“Come, sit on the bed. Let’s eat together,” Vera said gently.

They sat down. Vera’s phone rang—it was her mother, Gayatri.

“Hello, Mom,” she answered, trying to sound normal.

“Hi, Vera. How was your farewell party, honey?”

“It was boring, so we left early. Tanya and I came back together.”

“Oh, that boring, huh?” her mother chuckled.

“Yeah. Anyway, are you home from work now?”

“Yes, I just got in. Going to start making dinner.”

“Okay, Mom. I’m tired, I’ll call you later.”

“Alright, sweetheart. Take care.”

Vera hung up and looked over at Tanya. “You haven’t started eating yet.”

“I was waiting for your call to end,” Tanya replied softly.

“Well, now let’s eat. Don’t worry, okay? One step at a time. I know you’re hurting, and maybe the pain won’t ever fully go away—but we’ll handle it. You’re not alone.”

Tanya looked at Vera and gave a faint nod. Her eyes showed gratitude.

They started eating quietly, sipping juice in between. After finishing, Tanya lay down on the bed without changing out of her dress. She was too exhausted.

Vera changed into her pajamas and lay down beside her, pulling the blanket over both of them.

For a while, they said nothing. Just the silence of shared pain filled the room—until slowly, Tanya’s breathing settled, and sleep finally took her.

Serial Killer in Town

Tanya woke up from her sleep and noticed Vera still lying beside her. She glanced at the clock—it was just past 9

a.m. Her head felt like it was about to explode. She rushed to the kitchen and poured herself a glass of water, gulping it down.

Still feeling unsettled, Tanya lay down on the living room sofa and switched on the television. She kept flipping through channels until one broadcast caught her attention. It was her college's name being mentioned on a news channel. She quickly switched back to that channel and turned up the volume.

“Rajat, a 21-year-old student of SKPG College on GT Road, Panipat, was found dead early this morning around 4 a.m., right in front of the college gate,” the news anchor reported. “The serial killer appears to be back in Panipat. We say this because the method of the murder is identical to the killer's previous six crimes—all victims were revealed to be rapists. However, it has yet to be confirmed whether Rajat had committed such a crime, and if so, how the killer found out. There are many unanswered questions. Rajat is now confirmed as the seventh victim. Despite years of investigation, the police have failed to find any clues about this vigilante murderer.”

Tanya's eyes widened in terror. She immediately turned off the television and ran to the bedroom. Shaking Vera frantically, she cried, “Vera! Wake up!”

Startled, Vera opened her eyes. Seeing Tanya in tears, she sat up instantly. “What happened? Are you okay?”

“Rajat... he's dead. I just saw it on the news. Come—come to the living room,” Tanya said breathlessly.

Vera followed her. Tanya turned on the TV again, and the same news was playing.

“This murder matches the previous patterns exactly,” a police officer was saying on screen. “The killer tore open Rajat’s back, removed both his kidneys, and extracted his heart. The heart was placed in the victim’s hand with a stone, and the word ‘RAPIST’ was carved on his chest. A typed note was also left near the body.”

The reporter asked, “What did the note say, sir?”

The officer read aloud:

He looked like the boy next door.

But behind smiles and suits, he was a monster in disguise.

He hurt someone who didn’t like him back.

And the world stayed silent.

But silence doesn’t last forever. Someone was listening.

Someone believed her.

This isn’t rage. This is balance.

This is what happens when justice sleeps too long.

He was not a victim. She was.

And somewhere out there, someone finally chose her side._

Vera muted the television and turned to Tanya, who was trembling.

“How did the killer find out about... this?” Vera asked aloud.

“I don’t know,” Tanya replied in a whisper, assuming the question was for her. “What’s going to happen now? What if people find out I was raped? I won’t be able to handle it, Vera.”

Her breathing grew shallow, panic rising.

“Hey, hey—breathe, Tanya. Deep breaths. Follow me.” Vera sat her down and demonstrated calm breathing. Tanya copied her, slowly calming down. Vera gently pulled her into a comforting hug, letting Tanya rest her head on her shoulder.

Just then, Vera’s phone rang. It was her computer science professor, Mr. Rajbir. She showed the screen to Tanya, whose face drained of color. Her hands trembled again.

Vera braced herself, answered the call, and put it on speaker.

“Hello, Vera,” the professor said.

“Hello, sir,” she replied.

“Did you see the news this morning?”

“Yes, sir. I did. It was about Rajat.”

“I need you to come to college today at 12 noon. The police are taking statements from all students. Don’t be nervous—I’ll be there to support you all. Just tell them whatever you know. Are you with me, Vera?”

“Yes, sir. I’ll be there.”

“You and Tanya are best friends, right?”

“Yes, we are.”

“Then please let her know too. That’ll save me a call—I have to reach out to everyone. We’ll all gather outside the library, alright?”

“Understood, sir. See you soon.”

Vera ended the call and looked at Tanya, who had tears in her eyes again.

“I don’t want to go, Vera,” she whispered.

“I know. But if we don’t go, it’ll look suspicious. We need to stay calm. Whether or not you tell them the truth—it’s your decision. I’ll be right beside you, no matter what. Don’t be afraid. We’ll face it together.”

Tanya looked down, breathed deeply, and nodded slowly.

“You get ready first,” she said. “Then take me to my PG so I can change too. We’ll go to college together.”

Vera nodded. “Alright. We’ll do this—together.”

Chapter 2

College Environment

At The Library

“I’m on my way, Mom. Have you reached the college yet?” Vera asked her mother Gayatri over the phone.

“Yes, I’m already outside the college gate. How much longer will you take?”

“Umm... we’ll be there shortly.” Vera hung up and focused back on the road, continuing to drive with Tanya beside her.

As they approached the main gate of SKPG College, a huge crowd had already gathered, making it difficult for them to spot Gayatri. After searching for a while, Vera decided to try the other gate. They found a parking space near the back entrance and parked the car.

Stepping out, Vera tried again to locate her mother but still couldn’t spot her. She quickly called her.

“Where are you, Mom? I don’t see you anywhere.”

“I’m to your right. I can see you clearly from here. Just turn to your right and walk forward.”

Vera turned and spotted Gayatri standing near the second gate with her signature yellow scooter. She and Tanya walked over and greeted her warmly. Gayatri embraced them both tightly, as if trying to shield them from what lay ahead.

“Have they taken the body from the scene, Aunt Gayatri?” Tanya asked softly.

“Yes, they did—just when I was on the call with you earlier. There were many people around, including Rajat’s parents. They followed the ambulance to Panipat Hospital, where his body is being taken,” Gayatri replied, her voice low but steady.

Together, the three of them walked towards the college library. As they arrived outside, they saw Professor Rajbir waiting. He was in his early thirties, bald, wearing specs, a half-sleeve shirt, and jeans. His usual casual demeanor had been replaced by concern.

Tanya’s steps faltered. The sight of police officers and CBI agents talking among themselves made her anxious. Her breathing grew shallow.

Vera noticed Tanya’s discomfort and immediately held her hand tightly to comfort her. Tanya squeezed back, silently grateful.

“I know this must be scary—for you, for the students, for the teachers, for the whole campus,” Rajbir said gently. “But don’t panic. Just be honest. Answer only what you know. I’ll be right here with you the entire time.”

Both girls nodded silently. Professor Rajbir then turned to Gayatri.

“Good to see you, ma’am. Please stay close to the girls, and stay calm. They’ll need your support.”

“Of course,” Gayatri replied with a reassuring smile. “We haven’t done anything wrong, so there’s no reason to be afraid. Just be strong and speak the truth,” she told the girls firmly.

Tanya’s eyes wandered to a group of Rajat’s friends standing nearby. She noticed a few of them trying to make eye contact with her. She quickly looked away, focusing on her breath and trying to remain composed.

One by one, more students from their class began to arrive and assemble outside the library. Soon, the entire batch was present.

Then the CBI officials, with the help of the local police, began their questioning process.

The Statements

The officials began the questioning process by calling out the names of students they wanted to speak with first. Naturally, they started with those believed to be close to Rajat.

“We’d like to speak with Rajat’s close friends first,” an officer announced to the gathered students.

A heavy silence fell over the group. No one stepped forward.

The officer turned to Professor Rajbir, who stood just outside the questioning room. “Do you know who Rajat’s close friends were?”

Rajbir hesitated. “I’m not entirely sure, but I’ve often seen him hanging out with a boy named Ajay. Whether they were close or not, I can’t say for certain.”

The official nodded. “Call Ajay in first.”

Ajay stepped into the room, nervous but trying to remain composed. He sat down across from the officials, while Rajbir remained near the door.

“Tell us about Rajat,” said the senior officer, introducing himself as Inspector Runjish Kapoor. “What was he like? Do you think he could’ve done something like... rape? Did he behave oddly recently? Was there a girl he liked who rejected him? Speak honestly—this is your chance. Until someone comes forward and says, *‘He raped me’*, everything will remain unclear. We’re here for the truth.”

Ajay took a long breath before answering. “I don’t think Rajat could do something like that. But... last night, after his performance at the farewell party, he went out for a while. When he returned, he seemed different—distracted, nervous, almost like he’d seen a ghost. He looked scared.”

Ajay continued, “Later, when the performances ended and we went for dinner, I asked him what was wrong. Ritesh and Sonu were with me. Rajat told us that he had gone to look for Tanya after his performance. He wanted to confess his feelings to her one last time... but she rejected him again. She was the only girl he ever liked during college.”

“He said he wouldn’t bother her anymore. After dinner, we all joined the dance floor. That’s when we realized Tanya and her friend Vera were missing. Once the party

ended, we went home on our bikes—but Rajat said he'd walk instead. Said he needed fresh air."

The officers sent Ajay back and called Ritesh and Sonu one by one to cross-verify the story. Both boys repeated the same statement almost word-for-word.

Then came the name everyone was expecting—Tanya.

Professor Rajbir approached Tanya outside the library. "They're calling you in now."

Tanya stood up, avoiding eye contact with anyone as she walked toward the room. Inside, her hands trembled, her heart raced. She felt as though Rajat's friends had revealed something—something that made the officials summon her earlier than expected.

Vera watched anxiously, silently praying for her friend's strength.

Inside, Inspector Runjish Kapoor sat across the table with his colleague, Sub-Inspector Pooja Malik.

"Hello Tanya," Runjish said gently. "Please, have some water. You look nervous."

Tanya sipped the water, her eyes brimming with fear.

"I'll come straight to the point," Runjish said. "Did Rajat do something to you? This is a safe space. If something terrible happened, you can tell us now. We won't use your name publicly. Rajat's friends told us he liked you since day one. He apparently tried to speak with you after his performance. What happened yesterday? This is your moment. We're here to help."

Tanya's hands shook. Tears spilled down her cheeks. She couldn't speak.

Runjish noticed her condition and signaled Pooja to take over while he stepped outside.

Pooja moved closer, softening her voice. “Everything’s going to be okay, Tanya. Just breathe. You can tell me anything, alright?”

Tanya finally whispered, “I want my friend Vera with me. Only then... only then I can talk.”

Pooja nodded, offered her another glass of water, and stepped out to call Vera in.

Outside, Rajbir approached Vera. “Tanya’s asking for you.”

Gayatri grabbed Vera’s hand and gave it a gentle squeeze. “Stay strong,” she said.

Vera entered the room and saw Tanya in tears. She rushed to sit beside her, holding her hand tightly.

“Now that your friend is here, Tanya, take a deep breath and tell us everything,” Pooja said, looking between the two.

“That’s okay, Tanya,” Vera added softly. “Tell them what happened. I’m right here.”

Tanya began to speak, her voice shaking but clear. She told Pooja everything—how Rajat had harassed and raped her in Classroom 42 after his performance.

Pooja listened attentively. When Tanya finished, she asked, “One question remains—how did the serial killer know? Tanya, did you tell anyone else besides Vera?”

Tanya shook her head. “No. Only Vera.”

Pooja turned to Vera. “Did you tell anyone?”

“No. No one else knows,” Vera replied firmly.

“After you left the college, where did you go?” Pooja asked.

Before Tanya could respond, Vera answered, “We went straight to my house. Tanya told me everything there. We ate dinner and went to bed. We only found out about Rajat’s death this morning.”

Pooja nodded, satisfied for now. “Alright. You can go.”

As they stepped outside, Vera whispered, “Just act normal.”

Meanwhile, inside the library, the officers continued their questioning—now calling in two students at a time to avoid raising suspicions about Tanya and Vera.

The tension outside was palpable. Students, teachers, and parents waited nervously. Whispers circulated, eyes darted, and everyone speculated about the serial killer.

When half the statements were collected, the officials decided to take a short break.

In a quieter corner, Runjish and Pooja sat together reviewing what they had so far.

“While you were talking to the students, I reviewed the CCTV footage,” said Runjish. “Tanya went into Classroom 42 first. Rajat entered a few minutes later and stayed for about 20 minutes. After that, Vera went in, and both girls exited through the back garden gate. No one else went in or out. The footage shows Tanya in distress. That lines up with what they told us.”

“So the rape did happen,” Pooja confirmed. “Now we need to check their phone records. We must confirm neither of them contacted the killer or planned anything.”

“I’ve already submitted the request—for Tanya, Vera, and everyone in Rajat’s class,” Runjish replied. “We’ll cross-check all communication. For now, let’s keep taking statements. There might still be something we’re missing.”

“We also need to review footage from later that night,” Pooja added. “When the killer left the body at the college gate.”

“We’ll get there,” said Runjish, standing. “Let’s go back in.”

With that, the two officers returned to the library, preparing for the next round of questioning.

The Two Kinds of Protests in the Society

Outside the main gate of the college, two protest groups had formed. One group stood firmly in support of the serial killer, while the other condemned the actions as unlawful and dangerous. Their voices clashed in the air as each side argued their point passionately, trying to prove themselves right.

As the commotion grew louder, more people from nearby streets began gathering. The crowd swelled, and soon, media vans pulled up. Reporters with cameras and mics rushed toward the protesters, eager to capture the growing tension.

A man from the pro-serial killer group stepped forward and took the microphone. His voice rang out through the speakers.

“Rapists must be punished like this. The serial killer is not a murderer—he is a deliverer of justice! We, as Hindus, come from a history where wars were fought in the name of women’s dignity—Ramayana, Mahabharat. In comparison to those, this killer’s actions are nothing. He is a hero. Anyone who stands against him is, knowingly or unknowingly, supporting rapists!”

Shouts and cheers erupted from his group. But before the noise could settle, a man from the opposing protest group stepped forward, raising his voice to speak into the mic.

“None of us here support rapists. Let me make that clear—neither your group nor ours. But what this serial killer is doing is not justice—it’s vigilantism. There are laws, and if we bypass them in the name of revenge, we will tear apart the system meant to protect all of us.”

He paused, scanning the crowd before continuing.

“Yes, the last six victims were proven guilty. But we don’t know yet if Rajat was. What if this time, the killer got it wrong? What if an innocent boy was murdered in cold blood? Shouldn’t we wait for the full investigation before celebrating someone’s death?”

Just then, attention shifted. One of the reporters noticed a group of police officers and CBI officials emerging from the college gate. The media swarmed toward them like a wave.

“Sir, do you have any updates on the case?” a reporter called out to Inspector Runjish Kapoor. “Was Rajat guilty? Have you found anything on the serial killer’s identity?”

Runjish, calm but firm, spoke into the cluster of mics.

“Yes. Based on our initial investigation and victim testimony, we can confirm that Rajat was guilty. He did commit the crime.”

Gasps spread through the crowd.

“We are still working on uncovering the identity of the serial killer and are pursuing certain leads. At this point, we cannot disclose any further details—especially the identity of the victim, for her safety and privacy.”

“Sir, who was the girl? The public deserves to know!” another reporter pressed.

“I’m sorry,” Runjish replied. “But revealing her identity would be unethical and dangerous. We have a responsibility to protect her.”

With that, he and Sub-Inspector Pooja entered their car and left the scene.

The reporter turned back toward the camera and spoke live on air.

“The officials have confirmed Rajat’s guilt. However, the identity of the girl remains confidential. Authorities say the investigation is ongoing and that they are working to find the serial killer.”

Meanwhile, back among the protesters, the group supporting the serial killer erupted in celebration. Cheers, claps, and chants filled the air. But someone from the opposite group climbed onto a concrete barrier and called out, waving his arms.

“Hey! Wait! Please, just listen for a moment!”

The crowd quieted slightly as he continued, his voice trembling with a mix of emotion and urgency.

“Yes, Rajat was guilty. That’s now confirmed. But is this really a moment to celebrate? A life has been lost. A crime was committed. A girl’s dignity was destroyed. And our society... failed to protect her. We should be ashamed.”

Murmurs spread through the crowd.

“This serial killer only exists because our system is broken. Justice takes years. Survivors are blamed. People in power do nothing. *That’s* what we should be angry about. Not cheering murder—but demanding reform.”

He took a breath and added solemnly, “Also, think about Rajat’s parents. They weren’t part of his crime. But today, they lost their son. Let us not forget that pain.”

The protesters, regardless of which side they were on, nodded quietly. The celebration stopped. What remained was a shared silence—a reflection of a society wrestling with its failures.

Inside the College

Back at the library, students and a few parents had gathered in murmuring clusters. The tension was thick. With the police now confirming that the rape had occurred, everyone had the same question in their minds:

Who was the girl?

The officials had kept the victim’s identity confidential, but suspicion was already swirling. Ajay and his friends, Ritesh and Sonu, stood huddled in a corner. Their eyes followed Tanya’s every move.

“I’m telling you,” whispered Ajay, “it was her. Tanya. Who else would Rajat be that obsessed about?”

“You saw how weird he was after that performance,” Ritesh added. “He said she rejected him again.”

“And they both disappeared after that,” Sonu chimed in. “She was the one he went to see after his performance.”

Their suspicions confirmed their growing obsession. They watched Tanya and Vera as they headed down the corridor toward the girls’ washroom.

“Let’s wait by the door. She has to come out sometime,” Ajay said. They moved toward the hallway and leaned against the wall beside the girls’ bathroom entrance, waiting—intent on confronting her.

Got into a Stranger

As Gayatri waited patiently outside the restroom for Vera and Tanya to return, she noticed a group of teachers walking toward the library. Something caught her eye—they weren’t from this college. Their ID cards had a different logo, suggesting they were from another institution, possibly invited for academic coordination or investigation support.

As the group passed, one of the lady teachers—busy chatting with her colleague and not watching where she was going—accidentally bumped into Gayatri, who had been standing close to the library gate.

“Oh! I’m so sorry,” the teacher exclaimed, adjusting her dupatta. “I wasn’t watching where I was going. I got caught up in our conversation.”

“It’s alright,” Gayatri said kindly. “I was probably standing too close to the path. No harm done.”

The two women smiled at each other politely.

But then, Gayatri’s eyes lingered on the woman’s face for a moment longer. Something about her looked... familiar.

“You know,” Gayatri added thoughtfully, “you look very much like my daughter.”

The teacher raised her eyebrows in surprise, then chuckled. “Is that so? Well, I’ll take that as a compliment. I’m only 44, so your daughter must be quite beautiful.”

“She is,” Gayatri said proudly. “Her name is Vera.”

The teacher’s smile widened. “Vera—that’s a lovely name. Strong and elegant. It was nice meeting you, ma’am, but I’d better catch up with my colleagues before they leave me behind.”

“Nice meeting you too,” Gayatri replied warmly.

With that, the teacher hurried along, her heels clicking softly against the tiled floor as she rejoined the rest of the visiting faculty. Gayatri watched her for a moment, still intrigued by the resemblance. She shook her head with a soft smile—*must be just a coincidence*.

Just then, her smile faded.

Out of the corner of her eye, Gayatri spotted Vera and Tanya emerging from the hallway leading to the restrooms. But before they could make it back to her, three boys—Ajay, Ritesh, and Sonu—stepped in front of them, blocking their way.

Gayatri's instincts sharpened instantly. She narrowed her eyes and took a step forward, alert. The tension in the hallway thickened in an instant.

Tired of Hiding and Answering

"Hey! Vera, Tanya—listen," Ajay called out, managing to catch their attention just as they stepped out of the restroom.

Vera turned, narrowing her eyes slightly. "Yes, what is it?"

Ajay and his friends looked hesitant, especially when facing Tanya. There was an uncomfortable pause—none of them seemed to know how to phrase what they wanted to say.

"What do you guys want to talk about?" Vera asked again, a little firmer this time.

Ritesh stepped forward and gathered his courage. Looking directly at Tanya, he spoke in a quiet, cautious tone. "I don't know how to ask this the right way, but... we really need to know—did Rajat do something wrong to you yesterday? Because after his performance at the farewell party, he said you rejected him again. And after that... he didn't seem like himself. He was agitated. On edge."

He looked down, regret heavy in his voice. "We knew he had a short temper. And when he got angry, he could be... reckless. If he did something to hurt you, we're really sorry, Tanya. We had no idea."

Tanya's face froze. She stared at them in silence for a few seconds before finally speaking. Her voice was flat, tired.

“I don’t have anything to tell you. And I don’t want to talk about yesterday. He confessed his feelings again, I rejected him. That’s it. So please... don’t ask me again.”

Ajay opened his mouth, about to press further, but Ritesh quickly placed a hand on his arm and shook his head. Vera grabbed Tanya’s wrist gently, and the two girls walked past the boys without another word.

“She’s hiding something,” Ajay muttered as they watched them walk away. “I’m sure Rajat did something. And she’s just trying to keep it in.”

Ritesh nodded in agreement. “It’s written all over her face. But if she didn’t say anything, it means she’s not ready—or maybe she’s scared.”

Back near the college exit, Gayatri saw Vera and Tanya approaching. Her eyes narrowed as she noticed the boys lingering near the washroom door.

“What were they talking to you about?” Gayatri asked the moment they reached her.

“Nothing important, Mom. Let’s just go home,” Vera replied quickly.

“They were Rajat’s friends, weren’t they?” Gayatri asked, her eyes sharp. “I remember one of the officials saying they would start questioning his close friends. And right after that, both of you were called in for questioning too. Vera, if there’s something I should know... please don’t shut me out. I’m your mother. I can tell something is going on.”

Vera and Tanya looked at each other.

That moment of silent exchange told Gayatri everything she needed to know.

“We should talk about this in private,” Vera said at last. “Let’s go sit in the car.”

They walked together to the parking lot. Vera sat in the driver’s seat while Gayatri and Tanya took the back. The car doors closed, sealing them off from the noise and crowd outside.

Tanya took a deep breath and finally spoke, her voice shaky. “Aunt Gayatri... Rajat—he raped me yesterday. In classroom 42.”

Gayatri’s breath caught. Her eyes welled with tears as she immediately pulled Tanya into her arms.

“My god... you’re so strong, Tanya,” she whispered, hugging her tightly. “You’ve been holding this pain alone since yesterday? I can’t even imagine what you’re going through.”

She gently took Tanya’s face in her hands. “You must tell your mother. She deserves to know.”

“I can’t,” Tanya said, her voice cracking. “I’ll never be able to tell her. She’s already suffering. She’s fighting a disease I can’t even name out loud. If I tell her this... it’ll destroy her. And I have my exams next month. I need a job after that. I have to keep us going. My dad left us years ago. He calls sometimes but I never pick up. He was terrible to Mom, and I’ll never forgive him for it.”

Tanya’s voice broke as the dam of emotion she had held back all this time finally collapsed.

“I’m so tired... I’m suffocating... I haven’t been able to breathe for the past 24 hours. Please, don’t tell anyone. Please.”

Tears streamed down her face as she cried out loud in the backseat. Vera sat silently in the front, her forehead resting on the steering wheel, crying in silence.

Gayatri held Tanya tighter, letting her sob it all out. She didn’t speak until Tanya’s cries had softened.

“You don’t have to carry this alone anymore,” Gayatri whispered.

She kissed Tanya’s forehead and stroked her hair gently. “Let’s go home now. I’ll follow you both on my scooter. When we get there, we’ll order something nice to eat and try to breathe again. One small step at a time.”

Tanya gave a small nod, still wrapped in Gayatri’s comforting arms.

Vera started the car in silence. And as the three of them slowly pulled out of the college gate, they carried something heavier than any of them had ever known—but they carried it together.

Chapter 3

Deep Down into the Investigation

CBI Delhi Office – Phone Records

After wrapping up the statements at SKPG College in Panipat, Runjish and Pooja arrived at the CBI headquarters in Delhi. It was a calm March night, the kind that balanced between winter's chill and spring's warmth. The city buzzed faintly outside as the agents settled into their offices, waiting for the phone records and CCTV footage to arrive.

They decided to step out for a quick dinner with some colleagues while the tech team compiled everything.

An hour later, the records and footage finally arrived. Both officers headed straight to the tech room, where they found Vineet waiting. He was a 32-year-old tech analyst—fair-skinned, messy black hair, thick glasses, and a black hoodie draped lazily over his chair. He sat at his desk, a large screen in front of him showing split windows of data files and security footage.

“Do you have the records and footage ready?” Runjish asked as he stepped into the room with Pooja.

Vineet turned toward them and pushed two chairs over from the side. “Yes, it’s all here. Where do you want to start?”

“Let’s begin with the phone records,” Pooja said, settling into her chair. “Check the locations of every student’s phone from the moment Rajat left classroom 42 until morning. Also, track who they contacted in that timeframe.”

Runjish nodded in agreement. Vineet got to work, flipping through tabs and filtering data.

After a few moments, he spoke up. “Rajat’s phone lost connection around 8:20 p.m., about 400–500 meters from the college. After that, it never reconnected.”

“Put that thought on hold for now,” Runjish said, his eyes scanning the screen carefully.

They continued going through the student logs, searching for any unusual activity.

“Most students only called each other,” Runjish observed, “but Vera... she received a call from someone outside the college circle.”

Pooja raised an eyebrow. “That’s the girl who’s best friends with Tanya, right?”

“Yes,” Runjish confirmed. “Vineet, run a trace on the number that called Vera. Check whose name it’s registered under. Also, see if they’ve got any other numbers linked to their ID.”

“On it.” Vineet typed rapidly, pulling up the record. “The number belongs to a woman named Gayatri.”

“Who is she?” Pooja wondered aloud.

“Let's find out,” Runjish said as he flipped through the college's student contact list. Pooja quickly retrieved the full student and guardian database from her office and handed it to him.

Vineet continued working. “Gayatri called Vera from a location close to Vera's registered home address. After that, both phones stayed at their respective locations all night. No further calls, no texts. And no other numbers linked to either of their IDs.”

Runjish examined the student list. “Gayatri is Vera's mother.”

He leaned back in his chair. “I don't think they're involved. Let's drop Vera and her mother from the suspect list for now. We're wasting time chasing shadows.”

“Fair enough,” said Pooja. “Let's go back to Rajat's phone activity and check his friends' numbers.”

Vineet pulled up the logs. “No calls from Sonu or Ritesh after the party. Ajay did try calling Rajat once, but the call didn't go through—Rajat's phone was already off by then.”

“What about Rajat's own call history?” Pooja asked.

“He only called Ajay earlier that evening, way before the incident,” Vineet replied.

Runjish exhaled heavily, rubbing his temples. “So that's another dead end.”

Pooja leaned forward. “What about Tanya's phone records?”

Vineet clicked a few more times. “Tanya didn't make a single call or send a single text after the incident. Neither

did Vera. In fact, no one from that group showed any digital activity from that point onward.”

For a moment, the room fell silent. The lack of digital clues made things more frustrating than expected.

“This case just keeps getting colder,” Runjish muttered.

“But something doesn’t add up,” Pooja said, deep in thought. “If the serial killer somehow found out Tanya was raped, and no calls or texts were made... then how did they know?”

Runjish looked at her, then at Vineet.

“No one spoke. No one typed. No one left their location. But the killer still knew.”

CBI Delhi Office – CCTV Footage

“Now let’s check the CCTV footage. I really hope we find something in those tapes,” Runjish said as he leaned toward Vineet and Pooja.

Vineet nodded, plugged the external hard disk into his system, and began playing the footage from the point when everyone started entering the seminar hall for the farewell party. All three officers watched intently, occasionally fast-forwarding to cover more ground.

They focused first on the moment Tanya entered Classroom 42, followed a few minutes later by Rajat. They wanted to confirm whether anyone else—outsider or insider—witnessed anything suspicious. But the footage showed nothing unusual. No one followed, and the hallway remained empty. Not even a glance from a passerby. The guard at the gate also didn’t leave his post, not even once.

They then shifted to the footage from the college's front gate. It captured teachers and students exiting after the party. In the frame, they spotted Rajat shaking hands with friends. A few minutes later, his friends left on their bikes.

Then came the key moment—Rajat began walking alone, guitar slung over his back, heading down the footpath to the left side of the college. The camera's angle offered a view of the street extending about 400 meters into the distance.

Suddenly, a van entered the frame. It slowed and stopped briefly beside Rajat near a dirty roadside drain. It lingered for about five seconds, then continued forward and disappeared from the footage. When the van exited the frame, Rajat was no longer visible either.

“Wait, play that part again,” Runjish ordered sharply. Vineet rewound the footage and played it in slow motion.

Now it was clear—the van had stopped beside Rajat, and after that moment, Rajat vanished.

“They must have kidnapped him,” Pooja concluded grimly. “Zoom in on the number plate.”

Vineet zoomed in and Pooja quickly jotted it down. “Run this number and find out who owns the van,” she said. “Also, check whether the van was parked outside the college earlier—maybe the driver was waiting.”

Vineet searched the footage outside the college but only half the parking area was visible. He found nothing that matched the van. Then, he ran the number plate. The system flashed: **NO RECORD FOUND.**

He ran it again to be sure. Same result.

“The number plate is fake,” Pooja muttered, frustration creeping into her tone.

“Of course it is,” Runjish said bitterly. “Let’s take a short break. Maybe fresh eyes will help.”

Vineet forgot to stop the footage and it continued running in the background as they leaned back, exhausted. He called a servant to bring three cups of coffee to the tech room.

Five minutes later, the servant arrived. As the trio sipped their drinks, Runjish said, “We need to gather more CCTV footage from the shops and traffic cameras near the college. Maybe we can follow that van’s path.”

“I’ll put in a request to the Panipat local police,” Pooja added. “We should also check if the van was parked nearby before Rajat left. Might give us a view of the driver.”

After they finished their coffee, Vineet glanced back at the screen and suddenly frowned.

“The timer’s still running, but the footage is pitch black,” he said.

“What do you mean?” Pooja asked, standing up.

“I don’t know... let me see when it went dark.” Vineet scrubbed through the timeline. “Ten minutes after Rajat’s kidnapping, around 8:30 p.m., the footage goes completely black. And it stays that way until...”

He fast-forwarded.

“Until 3:00 a.m.—look!”

The screen flickered, and now Rajat’s **dead body** appeared, propped up against the front gate of the college.

“He hacked the CCTV system,” Vineet whispered. “The serial killer—or someone working for him—replaced the original footage with black screens.”

“Can we recover the originals?” Runjish asked.

“It’s possible... but difficult. If he overwrote the footage and deleted the originals, our chances are slim. Whoever did this is not an amateur. He knew exactly what he was doing.”

“Tomorrow you’re going to Panipat,” Runjish instructed. “Try everything you can to recover that footage. I’ll coordinate with the local authorities to get video from nearby shops and traffic cams. If we’re lucky, we might trace the van.”

“We also have a conference tomorrow morning at 10 a.m.,” Pooja reminded him. “Both the Delhi and Haryana CMs will be present, along with three crime officers from the Intelligence Bureau. We need to present a status report.”

Runjish checked the clock. **2:00 a.m.**

“Every time we find something useful,” he muttered, “it sends us back to square one. Whoever this killer is, he’s not working alone. He’s smart. He’s precise. And he’s always ten steps ahead of us. But I’m not giving up. I’ll catch him. No matter what.”

“Calm down, sir,” Pooja said, trying to keep the team grounded. “Let’s just hope tomorrow brings us a breakthrough. For now, let’s get some rest and return with a fresh mind.”

Vineet agreed and began shutting down his system. Pooja and Runjish headed back to their offices, gathered their things, and turned off the lights. Vineet locked up the tech room and followed the other two officers out of the building.

CBI Delhi Office – The Conference

Inside the CBI headquarters in Delhi, Runjish and Pooja sat silently in the conference room, waiting. A few case files lay neatly arranged before them on the polished table. The atmosphere was tense yet professional. The air-conditioning hummed faintly.

A servant entered and quietly informed them, “The Chief Ministers and Intelligence Bureau agents have arrived.”

Both officers stood immediately and followed the servant toward the main entrance, where the guests would soon be arriving.

At the gate, they were joined by other staff members to receive the dignitaries. Flashes from media cameras outside briefly illuminated the compound as reporters tried to breach the perimeter. But the CBI guards stood firm, not allowing any press entry.

Moments later, the guests arrived:

- **Rahul Shukla**, Chief Minister of Delhi
- **Ravinder Hooda**, Chief Minister of Haryana
- **Shiv Kumar, Sheo Prasad, and Vinod Mehta** from the **Intelligence Bureau**

Runjish and Pooja welcomed them with firm handshakes and ushered them into the conference room.

Once inside, everyone took their seats around the table. A servant entered once more, serving each guest a glass of water before quietly exiting. Pooja gestured toward the glasses. "Please, have some water before we begin."

After a short pause, the meeting commenced.

"Three cases in Delhi. Four in Haryana. Two of them from Panipat alone. And still—after *two years*—your team hasn't caught the serial killer?" Rahul Shukla's voice cut through the air, sharp and demanding.

"Do you understand how that reflects on us? On the law enforcement system? It's a national embarrassment. What have you people been doing?"

Runjish remained composed. "Sir, we understand the gravity of this. The serial killer is highly intelligent and leaves no trace—no fingerprints, no surveillance hits, no digital activity. We also believe he isn't working alone. He has help—someone with technical knowledge and resources."

"As of last night," he continued, "we've received a new lead. One of our top officers is in Panipat, retrieving additional CCTV footage and working to recover a possibly compromised recording from the college. We are pursuing every thread."

"We appreciate your effort, but the public doesn't care about excuses," said Ravinder Hooda, his tone cooler but

equally firm. “Elections are next year. If we don’t handle this soon, it could become a major blow to the current government’s credibility.” He looked at Rahul, who nodded in agreement.

Ravinder continued, “From today, the **CBI** will work jointly with the **Intelligence Bureau** on this case. That means full transparency and cooperation.”

Pooja and Runjish exchanged a quick glance but stayed silent.

Rahul added, “We’re not removing the case from you. Just reinforcing it. The IB team will assist you in cracking it quickly.”

Vinod Mehta, the senior-most IB officer among the three, nodded. “You have our assurance, sir. Once we’re fully briefed, we’ll dedicate ourselves to solving this case. You won’t be disappointed.”

Shiv Kumar and Sheo Prasad echoed his sentiment with silent nods.

Pooja could see through it. Their tone was friendly, but the message was clear—they were taking over. She could feel Runjish’s unease.

“May I see the files?” Sheo Prasad asked.

Runjish slid the stack of files across the table. Vinod Mehta flipped through them briefly, then closed them. “These will take a day to review. I’ll be taking them with me when we leave,” he said, looking between the ministers and the CBI officers.

“If you have any questions during the review, don’t hesitate to ask Runjish or Pooja,” Ravinder Hooda said. “You’ll all be working together now—on paper, at least.”

“Yes, sir,” both Vinod and Runjish said at the same time. The words were mechanical, but their thoughts were far from cooperative. Everyone in the room understood this wasn’t a partnership—it was political pressure disguised as collaboration.

In truth, according to Indian law, the CBI and IB operate independently, free from political interference. But laws meant little when reputations and elections were at stake. The ministers were overstepping their authority, and everyone knew it.

“When will your colleague return from Panipat?” Rahul Shukla asked.

“Most likely late tonight,” Pooja answered. “He’s gathering hours of footage from different cameras near the college and trying to retrieve the hacked recording. Depending on how long that takes, he may return by early morning.”

Vinod interjected, “In that case, ask him to report directly to this office tomorrow morning. We’ll all be here, and we’d like to hear what he has found firsthand.”

Pooja nodded, forcing a polite smile. “Of course. We’ll update you.”

The ministers stood. “We have other matters to attend to,” Ravinder Hooda said.

“I’ll escort you,” Pooja offered, and she walked with them out of the room.

After the ministers left, the Intelligence Bureau agents also got up to leave, carrying the case files with them. There was a subtle finality to the way they did it, as if they now owned the investigation.

Once the room was empty, a servant entered to clear the glasses and straighten the table.

CBI Delhi Office – Vineet’s Findings

Vineet walked into the CBI headquarters the next morning, a backpack slung over his shoulder and fatigue heavy in his steps. He spotted Runjish, Pooja, and three unfamiliar faces seated in Pooja’s office across from his tech room.

He unlocked the door to his office and stepped inside, eager to drop his bag and boot up his system. But before he could even sit, the door burst open and all six individuals walked in, startling him.

“Jesus Christ!” Vineet shouted, jumping slightly. “Are you guys here to arrest me or give me a heart attack? At least let me catch my breath!”

Runjish raised his hands in mock surrender. “Alright, alright, we’ll step out and give you a minute.”

But as they turned, Vineet sighed and waved them back. “Forget it. You’re already in. Might as well stay now. I didn’t sleep much last night, that’s all.”

He glanced at the three unfamiliar faces. “And who are the new ones?”

“They’re from the Intelligence Bureau,” Pooja explained. “They’ve officially joined the investigation team.”

Vineet nodded, masking his skepticism, and turned on his computer. As his system loaded, a servant noticed the lack of chairs and quickly fetched a few extras. Once everyone was seated and Vineet had settled in, Vinod Mehta leaned forward.

“Alright, Vineet. Tell us what you found in Panipat.”

Vineet exhaled. “Yesterday was... intense. The hacker didn’t just compromise the college’s CCTV system. He hacked into nearly every public surveillance camera across Panipat—from 8:33 PM to 3:00 AM.”

Everyone fell silent.

“Is that even possible?” Pooja asked, eyes wide.

“I didn’t believe it at first either,” Vineet said. “But the evidence was undeniable. What’s worse is *how* he did it. The hacker didn’t wait to download any footage. He rerouted the live feeds directly to his own system, effectively cutting off all traceable activity.”

He continued, “And here’s where it gets insane—he used **thousands** of different IP addresses from **thousands** of different locations, all routed through VPNs across the dark web. Every single trace is covered. If I had to guess, most of those IPs are spoofed or fake. There’s no way we can track him through digital forensics. He’s a ghost.”

“So the serial killer is paying him big money for this level of expertise,” Vinod concluded. “That explains the

kidneys. He's selling them to fund this whole operation—hacker, getaway, everything.”

Runjish nodded in agreement. “Makes sense.”

“What about the van?” asked Sheo Prasad. “Any lead from the surrounding shops or street cameras?”

“I did find it,” Vineet said. “A shop's camera opposite the college caught the van arriving around 8:00 PM. It was parked under the highway bridge—not visible from the college's own cameras.”

“And the driver?” asked Pooja.

“No one exited or entered the van. The windows were black-taped from the inside. Night vision couldn't penetrate it. The van only moved after Rajat stepped out of the college. They timed it perfectly.”

Runjish leaned back and rubbed his face. “Every time we think we've got something, it just evaporates. We've been chasing shadows for two years.”

Vinod shook his head. “We don't know how the killer chooses his victims, how he tracks them, or even whether we're dealing with a man or a woman. It's like trying to solve a puzzle with half the pieces missing.”

Everyone turned as Shiv Kumar, quiet until now, finally spoke.

“I've been thinking,” Shiv said. “There was a case I studied about five years ago. Another serial killer. Same MO—kidnapping rapists, carving ‘RAPIST’ into their chest, leaving the bodies in public. The parallels are... striking.”

The room went still.

“Are you saying this could be a copycat?” Pooja asked.

“Or connected somehow,” Shiv replied. “Either way, looking into that old case might give us clues we’ve been missing.”

Vinod leaned forward. “Shiv, can you locate that file? Go through it again, this time with Runjish. He’s been living this case for two years—his insight will be valuable.”

“I already know where the file is. I’ll get it today,” Shiv said.

“Good,” Vinod nodded. “You two work that angle. Meanwhile, Pooja, I, and the rest of the team will dig deeper into what we already have.”

Everyone agreed.

Shiv and Runjish rose and exited the tech room together, heading out to retrieve the file from the archives. The others returned to the conference room, ready to dissect every detail once again.

The hunt wasn’t over. Not yet.

Chapter 4

The Past Catches Up with You

A Lady Comes to Vera's Door

It was a quiet Sunday morning, around 11 a.m. Sunlight poured through the open kitchen window as Vera stood at the sink, scrubbing the last of the breakfast dishes. The sound of the doorbell echoed through the house, catching her attention. She quickly wiped her wet hands on a kitchen towel and made her way to the front door.

Upon opening it, she found a woman standing there—a stranger in her late forties, neatly dressed, with tired eyes but a warm smile.

“Yes? Who are you?” Vera asked, slightly puzzled.

“Hello,” the woman said. “My name is Anju. I’m looking for Gayatri. She’s an old friend of mine—we were childhood companions. I got this address from someone who knew where she used to live before she got married.”

Vera’s confusion softened. “Oh! I’m sorry, but she doesn’t live here anymore.” She paused. “I’m her daughter, Vera. Please, come inside.”

Anju stepped in and looked around the modest yet cozy living room.

“You’re Vera?” Anju asked, her eyes lighting up with curiosity.

“Yes,” Vera nodded, offering a polite smile. “Please, have a seat. I’ll get you something to drink.”

“No, no, please don’t trouble yourself. I’m actually in a bit of a hurry,” Anju said quickly, noticing Vera’s damp clothes and the half-done dishes in the kitchen. “I just need the address of where Gayatri lives now. That’ll be enough.”

“Oh, that’s no problem,” Vera replied. “She lives close by. I can even drop you there—it’s just walking distance.”

Anju shook her head gently. “I appreciate that, but I’d like to surprise her. I want to see the look on her face when she sees me after all these years.”

“Alright,” Vera said, stepping outside with her. She pointed down the street. “Go straight from here, then take a right. Cross three streets, and on the fourth, take a left. Her house is on the left-hand side—number 1447.”

Anju listened carefully, nodding. “Thank you, my child. You explained that beautifully. I’ll find it.”

“If you get confused or can’t find the house, you can come back and I’ll take you myself,” Vera offered kindly.

Anju smiled, visibly touched by her sincerity. “You’re very sweet. Just one more thing—please don’t tell your mother I’m coming. I want it to be a complete surprise.”

“Don’t worry, I won’t say a word,” Vera promised.

Anju gave her one last warm smile before heading down the road. Vera watched her for a moment, then turned and went back inside. She returned to the dishes, exhaled softly, and tried to shake off the strange feeling lingering from the unexpected visit.

A few streets away, Anju followed Vera's directions, her steps steady and filled with quiet anticipation.

She was about to knock on a door that hadn't been opened to her in decades.

Two Mothers of the Same Daughter

The doorbell rang just after 11 a.m. at Gayatri's home.

She set aside the book she was reading and made her way to the front gate. When she opened the door, her expression turned curious—then suddenly tense.

Standing there was the same woman who had accidentally bumped into her two days ago outside the college library.

"Did you recognize me?" the woman asked softly.

"Yes, I remember. You're the woman I ran into near the library. What brings you here?" Gayatri asked, clearly puzzled.

"We never introduced ourselves properly," the woman replied. "My name is Anju. I'm here to talk to you... about Vera, if you don't mind."

A deep, unsettling silence followed—but Gayatri eventually nodded. "Alright. Please, come in."

They sat across from each other in the modest living room. Gayatri studied Anju, her face unreadable, waiting for her to speak.

Anju finally said what she came to say. “I need to ask you something personal. Is Vera your biological daughter? Or... did you adopt her? Or find her somewhere?”

Gayatri blinked, stunned by the bluntness. Before she could say anything, Anju continued, her voice trembling.

“Twenty years ago, I left my infant daughter at a temple near the highway to Delhi. It was the biggest mistake of my life. I’ve been searching for her for the past six years. The only name I have... is Vera.”

Gayatri stood up. “I think we both need a glass of water before we go further.”

In the kitchen, she leaned against the counter, breathing heavily. *How could she know?* Gayatri thought. *Only Dev and I knew the truth.* She poured two glasses of water and returned to the living room, carefully composed.

They drank in silence. Then, with a heavy heart, Gayatri said, “Vera... is your daughter.”

Anju’s eyes welled up instantly.

“My husband—my ex-husband, Dev—found her at that temple. He brought her home and fought with the entire family to let her stay. We both loved her deeply, raised her as our own. But we’ve never told her the truth.”

Anju wiped her tears, whispering, “How did you find this place? Nobody knows I live here except Vera and a few friends.”

“I visited Vera before I came here,” Anju confessed. “I got her address from a student list in the college library—probably left there by investigators. I know I shouldn’t have looked, but when I saw the name ‘Vera,’ I just couldn’t stop myself.”

“What did you say to her?” Gayatri asked sharply.

“I told her I was your childhood friend,” Anju replied. “She was kind, polite... helpful. You’ve raised her well.”

Gayatri’s eyes softened.

“We always meant to tell her the truth on her eighteenth birthday. But things... didn’t go as planned,” she said quietly.

“I understand. I don’t want to cause chaos. I’ve already seen her—that was enough for now. But please, Gayatri... help me tell her the truth. I want to talk to her. I want to tell her who I am.”

Gayatri sighed and leaned back. “Before anything happens, I need to know more about you. Why did you abandon her? Why were you in jail?”

Anju’s face darkened. “My past is ugly... filled with pain. I went to prison for crimes I don’t want to relive. I’ve paid for them—fifteen years behind bars and six years searching for my daughter. I know I don’t deserve forgiveness... but I’m begging you. Please don’t judge me for what I was. Help me be a mother again.”

Tears streamed down her cheeks as she joined her hands in front of Gayatri.

Gayatri reached over and gently lowered her hands. “Please don’t beg. Don’t cry. Let me think about it.”

After a pause, she added, “Who am I to keep a mother from her child? I’ll introduce you... but not yet. I have to tell Vera first. She deserves to hear it from me.”

Anju nodded, grateful. “I’ve waited twenty years. I can wait a few more days.”

“Give me your number. I’ll let you know when it’s time. Please don’t rush this. Vera is sensitive, and this will shake her.”

They exchanged numbers, saving each other’s contact.

“I’d also like to thank Dev one day,” Anju added. “He fought for my daughter. I’d love to meet him.”

Gayatri looked down. “That won’t be possible. Dev has been in a coma for the past three years.”

Anju gasped. “What? How?”

“A brain tumor,” Gayatri said quietly. “That’s also why we never got to tell Vera the truth.”

“And... you mentioned he’s your ex-husband. When did you two separate? Why?”

“I’d rather not talk about that,” Gayatri replied, avoiding her gaze. Anju understood and didn’t press.

“What about Vera’s biological father?” Gayatri asked gently.

“He died of a heart attack when Vera was just a few months old,” Anju replied.

“I’m... sorry to hear that,” Gayatri said, though something about Anju’s answers didn’t sit right. A strange tension filled the room.

Anju noticed Gayatri's distant expression. "What's wrong?"

"Nothing. Just... wondering how I'll break this to Vera without Dev."

"I'll leave now," Anju said. "Take your time. I'll wait—just let me know when you're ready. I'm sorry for dropping this all on you."

Gayatri walked her to the gate, watching as Anju disappeared down the street.

Back inside, Gayatri collapsed on her bed, her head spinning with thoughts. She had just closed her eyes when her phone rang. She got up and found it buzzing on the kitchen counter. It was Vera.

"Hey, sweetheart," she answered, trying to sound normal.

"Hi, Mom. What were you up to?"

"Nothing much. Just about to take a nap."

"Did you meet your friend? She came here first, looking for you."

"Yes, I met her. She's gone now. It was... a surprise, indeed."

"I'll be at the shop for a while today, handling some accounts."

"Alright, love. Come over after you're done. Let's have dinner together tonight."

"Sure, Mom. Take care. See you in the evening."

As the call ended, Gayatri placed the phone down and returned to bed. But sleep wouldn't come easily—not with the weight of a twenty-year-old truth pressing against her chest.

Time for the Truth

Vera entered Gayatri's home through the front gate and found her in the kitchen, cooking dinner. Without a word, she stepped beside her mother and began helping.

"How's Tanya holding up?" Gayatri asked gently, glancing over while stirring the dal makhni. Her voice held a quiet sorrow, as though she understood the kind of pain Tanya was carrying.

"She's trying to be strong. Focusing on her studies mostly," Vera replied. "I stopped by her PG before coming here to spend some time with her, so she doesn't feel alone. When your friend came to the house looking for you, Tanya was there too—just in the shower at the time."

"Keep looking after her, Vera. She only has you," Gayatri said.

"Don't worry, Mom. She's my best friend. I told her she can come by anytime and ask me for anything. I'll always be there for her."

Gayatri looked at Vera with pride, quietly touched by her daughter's maturity and compassion.

After finishing the cooking, they moved their dinner to the living room—dal makhni and pooris. It was simple, comforting food. They chatted lightly at first, trying to keep things cheerful. Once they'd finished and washed the dishes,

Vera settled on the couch, scrolling her phone while Gayatri remained in the kitchen, deep in thought.

Her heart was pounding.

She knew the moment had come. The truth she had hidden for years—kept safe between her and Dev—could no longer stay buried.

She walked into the living room, her steps slow but determined, and sat beside Vera.

“Vera, I need to talk to you about something,” she said, her voice trembling. “Can you put your phone down for a moment?”

Vera looked up, concerned by the tone, and set her phone aside. “Of course, Mom. What is it?”

Gayatri hesitated, swallowed hard, and spoke.

“It’s not easy to say this. I wish Dev were here with me to tell you together.” Her voice cracked slightly.

Vera’s face turned serious. “You’re scaring me. What’s going on?”

Gayatri closed her eyes briefly, took a breath, and finally said it.

“Vera... me and Dev—we’re not your biological parents. The woman who came to your house looking for me... she’s your real mother. She left you at a temple when you were just a few months old. Dev found you and brought you home.”

Vera froze. Her mouth opened slightly, but no words came. She stared at Gayatri in disbelief.

“What?” she whispered. “Mom... you’re joking, right? This is a joke?”

“I wish it were,” Gayatri said softly. “But it’s the truth. I know it’s overwhelming.”

Vera’s hands trembled. Her voice rose, shaky and confused. “I’ve only ever known you and Dad. Why would you hide something like this from me?”

“We were going to tell you on your 18th birthday,” Gayatri explained, “but Dev fell into a coma that very day. After that... I didn’t have the strength to do it alone. And then life kept piling on.”

Vera leaned back, pressing her fingers to her temples. “So... what makes you so sure that this woman—Anju—is really my mother?”

Gayatri nodded slowly. “When Dev found you, there was a letter in the basket you were left in. Anju’s words today—they matched that letter. Every feeling, every detail. I still have that letter in the bank locker, untouched.”

Vera stared blankly ahead, her mind racing.

“Did she tell you why she left me?” she asked finally. “Why she disappeared for so many years and suddenly decided to come back?”

“She didn’t go into much detail,” Gayatri replied. “She only said she committed a crime that night and was sentenced to 15 years in prison. She’s spent the last six years searching for you. She also told me your biological father died when you were an infant—heart attack.”

“And now she wants to meet me,” Vera said flatly.

“She does. She begged me to arrange it. But something about her doesn’t feel right. I’m not sure we can trust her, Vera.”

Vera’s expression hardened. “Then why did you keep me? If you knew I belonged to someone like her—someone who abandoned me and went to jail?”

“Don’t say that,” Gayatri said quickly. “We kept you because... because we had just lost our unborn child. You were a blessing, Vera. A chance to heal. And we also understood that your birth mother must have been in deep pain to do what she did. We didn’t judge her then—but we were ready to face the consequences one day. That day is here now.”

Vera’s voice cracked. “So... you and Dad didn’t love me. I was just... a replacement. A hole-filler.”

Gayatri immediately wrapped her in her arms. “No, no! Never say that again. We loved you from the moment we saw you. You were our daughter in every way that mattered. We didn’t replace anyone. We embraced you.”

Vera started to cry, confused and heartbroken. Gayatri held her tighter and gently wiped her tears. Then brought her a glass of water from the kitchen.

“You and Dad hid everything from me,” Vera whispered, wiping her face. “It feels like my world is falling apart.”

Gayatri nodded. “Yes, we did. And I regret it. I’m so sorry. We only wanted to protect you.”

Vera looked into her mother’s eyes. “Then at least tell me why you and Dad separated.”

Gayatri looked away. “Not now, my child. That’s another story, and it’s not the most important one today. We need to focus on Anju—for now.”

Vera sighed. “So... what now?”

“She’s desperate to meet you. I’m afraid if we don’t handle this carefully, she might do something reckless. We need to be cautious. But you’re right—we also need to be open. She might have changed.”

Vera nodded slowly. “Please give me time to think, Mom. I need to wrap my head around this. Maybe... maybe she deserves a chance. But I’m also scared.”

“That’s wise, Vera. I’m proud of how you’re thinking,” Gayatri said, brushing her hair back. “Let’s not rush. Stay here tonight. Sleep on it. We’ll decide tomorrow.”

Vera agreed and they quietly made the bed.

But sleep did not come easily.

They lay awake for hours, shifting positions restlessly. Somewhere in the silence of the night, Vera’s thoughts spiraled—*Who was Anju? What was her crime? Why now?* But most of all: *Could I really look into the eyes of a stranger and believe she’s my mother?*

Despite the turmoil, a part of her heart—curious, aching—whispered: *You need to know.*

With a deep breath, Vera closed her eyes and let herself drift into uneasy sleep.

The Decision of Meeting

The morning sun filtered through the window curtains, casting a warm glow over Gayatri’s modest home. At

around 7:00 a.m., both mother and daughter stirred from their restless sleep. Neither had slept well—last night had been a turning point in both their lives.

They sat together at the dining table, silently sipping hot tea from ceramic cups. The silence was thick, thoughtful. It was Vera who broke it.

“Mom,” she said softly, “I’ve made up my mind. I want to meet her—my real mother.”

Gayatri looked up from her cup, concern flickering in her eyes. “You don’t have to rush, my child. We just woke up. Take some more time if you want. There’s no pressure.”

“I already thought about it all night,” Vera replied. “I barely slept. My mind kept going back and forth, but now I’m sure. I want to hear from her—why she left me, what really happened, and if there’s more to my family history than I’ve ever known.”

Gayatri nodded slowly, absorbing the weight of her daughter’s decision. “Alright,” she said after a pause. “When do you want to meet her? I’ll go with you.”

“I was thinking... maybe today?” Vera offered hesitantly. “Would that be possible?”

“I wish I could,” Gayatri said gently. “But I need to go to the bank today for some urgent work. Also, I want to get that letter from the locker—the one she left with you in the basket. I still have the blanket she wrapped you in... and even the basket itself. I thought it might mean something to her, to see those again.”

Vera's eyes softened. "That's a beautiful idea, Mom. Okay, then let's go tomorrow."

Gayatri reached across the table and squeezed Vera's hand. "Tomorrow it is. I'll also call Anju and let her know to be ready."

"I'll head over to Tanya's now," Vera said, standing up and stretching lightly. "She needs me. I told her I'd come by again."

Gayatri smiled faintly. "I'll inform my manager that I'm taking tomorrow off. You go now—but be careful."

"I will. Don't worry. And thanks, Mom... for everything," Vera said, pausing briefly at the door.

"You've always been my daughter, Vera. Nothing will ever change that," Gayatri replied with a warm firmness in her voice.

With that, Vera stepped out into the morning light, heading back toward Tanya's place—with a heavy heart, but a clearer mind.

Tomorrow, she would face a truth she had lived without for two decades.

Chapter 5

The Purpose of Life

Asking For Help from God

It was midnight. The sky roared with thunder, and lightning cracked the darkness open like jagged veins of light. Rain poured relentlessly, flooding the roads and drenching everything it touched.

Inside a small temple, lit only by the occasional flicker of lightning, a young man sat on the cold stone floor, his legs crossed, hands joined in silent prayer. Behind him lay a worn duffle bag, and on its keychain swung a name tag: **Dev.**

His eyes were cast down, but his heart was screaming. A single tear fell from his eye and landed on his bare knee, tracing the outline of a man breaking silently.

“Why have you brought me to this point?” Dev whispered, voice trembling. “Why place me in a situation with no escape?”

The storm raged outside, but inside the temple, there was only the stillness of despair.

“I started a business with the money my father gave me—money he earned by selling our ancestral farmland. I took loans, I believed in the work, I tried to make it succeed. And now... it’s all gone. The business collapsed. I repaid the market’s dues, but I couldn’t repay the bank. They’ll take the shop soon.”

He took a shaky breath.

“I’ve failed, God. Failed my father, who trusted me. Failed my wife, who stood by me. I have nothing left to offer them but shame. I don’t even have the courage to look them in the eyes anymore.”

His voice cracked. Another tear fell.

“I’m not here for miracles. I’m here for strength. To face this life with what little dignity I have left. And if I’ve sinned in dreaming too big, forgive me. Just... show me a direction. Give my life a purpose. Help me become the kind of man who can be proud of himself again.”

At that very moment, through the downpour, headlights cut across the temple’s outer gate. A car screeched to a halt.

The driver’s door creaked open and a woman stepped out, wrapped in a soaked shawl. Her eyes were anxious, her steps uncertain. In her arms was a large, covered basket, which she cradled close as she made her way toward the temple, seeking shelter beneath a large peepal tree beside the gate.

The woman glanced around nervously. She didn’t want anyone to see her. Her hands trembled as she slowly peeled back the shawl covering the basket.

Inside, wrapped in a warm, pink blanket, slept a baby girl—peaceful, unaware, untouched by the storm that swirled around her. The woman placed a kiss on her daughter’s forehead, her own tears mixing with the rain.

Then, with shaking hands, she reached into the folds of the blanket and pulled out a small, handwritten letter. She placed it beneath the baby’s tiny head, shielding it with the edge of the basket.

She looked toward the temple, her eyes pleading through the dark.

“Please, God,” she whispered, her voice cracking, “Protect her. If I can’t be the mother she needs, give her to someone who can be.”

She turned away, unable to look at the child for another second. Her car door slammed shut. The headlights dimmed as she drove off, disappearing into the stormy night.

Found a New Life

Thunder cracked across the sky, loud enough to shake the temple walls. Dev stirred from his sleep, his body cold against the stone floor where he’d spent the night. Blinking groggily, he sat up and rubbed his eyes. Outside, rain was still falling, but softer now—just a steady drizzle against the tiled roof.

He stepped out into the courtyard and inhaled deeply. The scent of wet earth and chilled breeze calmed his troubled thoughts. He glanced at his wristwatch—**3:00 AM**. The world was silent, save for the gentle patter of rain and the occasional groan of thunder rolling away in the distance.

Suddenly, a faint noise broke the stillness—a soft whimper.

At first, Dev ignored it, dismissing it as wind or a passing dog. But then the sound grew louder—more insistent.

A baby's cry.

Alert, Dev followed the sound. His feet carried him toward the peepal tree at the edge of the temple courtyard. There, half-hidden beneath the tree, lay a large wicker basket. Rainwater glistened off its edges.

He rushed to it and gently pulled back the damp shawl covering it.

Inside, nestled in a warm pink blanket, was a baby girl—her face red with tears, her fists balled tight.

Startled and moved, Dev picked her up in his arms and cradled her, gently patting her back, whispering words of comfort. He rocked her carefully, shielding her from the cold wind with his body. After a few minutes of quiet patience, her sobs softened, and her tiny body relaxed into sleep.

Still holding the baby, he looked back into the basket and noticed a folded piece of paper. He laid the baby down gently, picked up the letter, and unfolded it.

The handwriting was shaky, smudged by raindrops, but the words were clear and heavy with sorrow.

"To the one who finds this child... you are no less than God to me and to her. I am leaving her not out of hate, but out of helplessness. The sin I committed has taken me to a place no child should ever see. That place will be filled with people like me—criminals. I beg you, whoever you are, to take care of her. Do not

take her to the police or an orphanage. I fear where she might end up if you do that.

If you are in a temple this early, you must be a good person. Maybe God chose you for her. I have nothing more to give, but if I may ask for one last favor—please name her Vera. If someday I'm free, that name will be my only hope to find her. Tell her that her mother loved her deeply... and is sorry she had to leave."

Dev's hands trembled as he folded the note back.

He looked at the baby, now asleep, her breath soft and steady.

His eyes welled up.

He turned to the idol of the deity inside the temple and whispered, "I came here seeking guidance, not expecting you to place a life in my hands."

His voice cracked with emotion.

"I'm drowning in my own troubles. My business failed. I've lost my father's land, and the bank will soon take my shop. I have nothing left but a broken dream... and now you hand me a child?"

He laughed bitterly through tears. "Maybe you think I'm just here to complain. But this little girl—what did *she* do to deserve being abandoned on a stormy night?"

He looked up again.

"Is this your answer, God? Is this my new purpose? When I had money, I lost my unborn child. And when my wife and I tried again, the doctors told us it would never happen. And now, with nothing left... you give me *her*."

He knelt beside the basket, resting a hand on the baby's blanket.

"I don't know if my parents will understand. I don't know if my wife will accept her. But I will try. I will try to convince them. I will try to make this work. I promise."

He paused, staring at the baby—*Vera*.

There was something magnetic about her. A pull. As if the universe had silently tied an invisible thread between their souls.

He couldn't look away. And for the first time in many months, he didn't feel lost.

Eventually, he leaned back against the temple wall, the basket nestled between his legs, and drifted into a peaceful, strange sleep.

By dawn, the birds were chirping. The rain had stopped, and golden light filtered through the clouds.

Dev stirred. Still groggy, he reached for his bottle of water, took a sip, and washed his face with what remained. The baby was still asleep.

Time was running short. Soon people would arrive for morning prayers. He couldn't let anyone see her here.

He packed up his duffle bag, adjusted the shawl over the basket, and flagged down an auto-rickshaw on the road just beyond the temple gate.

"Drive slow. There's a baby inside," he instructed, gently placing the basket at his feet.

The driver nodded, understanding. But the ride home was bumpy, and with every jerk, Dev tensed. Each pothole made him glance down nervously, praying she wouldn't wake.

After a short but nerve-wracking ride, the auto pulled up outside Dev's modest home.

He handed the driver his fare, then paused.

The street was quiet. No neighbors in sight. He wrapped the shawl tightly around the basket again and approached the front gate, locked from the inside.

He rang the bell.

It was 6:30 AM.

A few seconds later, his wife came to the gate, half-asleep, hair tied in a loose bun. She opened the gate slowly and was surprised to see Dev standing there, soaked, with a basket in his hands.

"What's that?" she asked, her eyes still adjusting to the light.

Dev didn't speak.

He simply stepped forward, placed the basket gently on the ground between them, and said softly—

"Come inside. There's something I need to show you."

Baby's New Home

Gayatri froze at the gate, her eyes wide with shock when she saw the tiny baby nestled inside the basket. Before she could even speak, Dev walked past her, carrying the basket

inside. She quickly followed him, shutting the gate behind her.

“What is going on, Dev?” she whispered, her voice trembling. “Whose baby is this?”

Dev didn’t answer immediately. Instead, he placed the basket gently on the floor and said, “Call Maa and Papa. I’ll explain everything at once.”

Still confused, Gayatri rushed to the other room and gently woke her in-laws. “Dev is home... and there’s something you both need to see.”

A few minutes later, the whole family stood around the basket. The soft sound of the baby’s breathing filled the silence. Dev’s parents looked at him with disbelief.

“Dev, what is all this? Who is she?” his father demanded.

Dev sighed deeply. “I didn’t go to my friend’s place in Delhi yesterday. I couldn’t. I failed again, Papa. I couldn’t find a job. I was too ashamed to come home, so I went to the temple to clear my head.”

He paused, then continued.

“While I was there... around 3 a.m., I heard crying. I found this baby, left under a tree near the temple gate, inside this basket. There was a note too. Her mother... she’s gone. She left the baby behind because she’s going to jail. She begged whoever found the child not to hand her over to the police or an orphanage.”

Dev’s voice cracked.

“I didn’t know what to do. But I couldn’t walk away from her. I felt something... something pulling me toward her. So I brought her home.”

His father's face hardened. "How do you plan to raise a baby, Dev? You don't have a job. You've already lost your business, and we're barely managing on our savings. What if her mother comes back? She's a criminal—what if she brings danger to our door?"

Before Dev could respond, a soft cry came from the basket. The baby stirred, her eyes fluttering open as her cry grew louder.

Gayatri instinctively picked her up, cradling the baby in her arms, gently rocking her. The baby began to calm down.

"She must be hungry," Dev's mother said, stepping forward. "Gayatri, get some milk from the kitchen."

Gayatri nodded and handed the baby to her mother-in-law before rushing to the kitchen. While she prepared the milk, she listened silently to the conversation outside.

Dev, standing firm, addressed his father again. "I know I'm not in a position to take on this responsibility. But Papa, we lost our child. You remember what that did to us. This baby... she feels like a blessing in the middle of our darkness. I'll carry the burden, no matter how heavy it gets."

Gayatri returned with warm milk and handed it to her mother-in-law, who began feeding the baby. The tiny girl suckled quietly, her hands grasping Gayatri's fingers.

Gayatri turned to her father-in-law, her eyes pleading. "Papa, you know how we felt after my miscarriage. And then we found out I couldn't become a mother again. That pain never left me. But today... when I held her... I felt something I thought I'd never feel again. Hope."

Her voice softened. “Yes, maybe her mother made mistakes. But this child is innocent. We can raise her with love. Please... let us keep her.”

Dev’s father looked at his son and daughter-in-law. Their eyes burned with sincerity. After a long pause, he let out a sigh.

“You two are stubborn,” he said. “Fine. Keep the baby. But remember, from now on, you carry greater responsibilities. Raising a child isn’t easy. You’ll need income, discipline, and a lot of patience.”

Gayatri stepped forward again. “Dev won’t do it alone. I’ll look for work too. If both of us earn, we can manage better than Dev struggling alone in Delhi. We’ll stay here, where we have support.”

Dev looked at her, his eyes filled with admiration. He wanted to hug her right there—but thought better of it in front of everyone.

“That’s a good idea,” said Dev’s mother warmly. “Your father-in-law and I will stay home, care for the baby, and handle the house. We’ll make it work—together.”

“I wish I could go to work too,” Dev’s father added. “But I only know farming. Still, I’ll help at home in any way I can.”

Seeing his entire family coming together for this decision made Dev’s heart swell. Tears welled up in his eyes, and he sank to the floor, overcome.

“Thank you... all of you. For trusting me. I swear—I’ll work harder than I ever have. I’ll make sure this child never has to suffer.”

His father stepped forward, pulled him to his feet, and hugged him tightly.

“Just make sure your actions match your words, son,” he whispered.

Wiping her tears, Gayatri stood up. “Let me make breakfast for everyone. Then Dev and I will go out and look for work.”

She handed the now-sleeping baby back to her mother-in-law and walked into the kitchen.

“And after that, you two go focus on earning,” Dev’s mother said with a smile. “We’ll take care of everything else here.”

The tiny baby lay peacefully in the arms of her new grandmother, unaware of the storm that had brought her into this world—or the love that had already begun to surround her.

One Tough Decision for the Future

After breakfast, Dev and Gayatri retreated to their room to get ready. Today, they would step out into the world again—not just to find work, but to build a future that now included a fragile new life. In the other room, their parents tended to the baby, who was either softly cooing or curiously gazing around with wide, innocent eyes.

“I’m worried,” Dev’s father said, watching the baby from a distance. “What if that woman—the baby’s real mother—returns one day to claim her child? What if she demands her back and Dev and Gayatri refuse? They’re already getting attached. Children do that to you—they change your heart forever.”

Dev's mother, gently rocking the baby, replied with warmth and faith. "Everything happens for a reason. A little girl has come into our lives—it's like Goddess Lakshmi has blessed this home. Maybe this child was sent here to bring us peace. Let's welcome what the universe has given us and move forward without fear."

Back in their room, Dev sat on the bed, deep in thought.

"In the basket... there was a letter," he finally said. "From the baby's mother. She asked that her daughter be named Vera—so that if she ever tried to find her one day, she'd have a starting point. I was thinking... we should keep that letter safe. When Vera is old enough—maybe eighteen—we'll tell her the truth ourselves, before her mother ever shows up. She deserves to hear it from us."

Gayatri looked at him, a bit confused. "What did you say?"

Dev repeated himself, more clearly this time. The seriousness in his voice brought a heaviness to the air. Gayatri nodded slowly, taking in the weight of his words. Without another word, she stepped out of the room and returned moments later with the letter.

He handed it to her gently. "Read it. Try to understand her pain."

Gayatri unfolded the paper and read it carefully. Her expression softened as she imagined the desperate heart of a mother forced to abandon her child.

After a moment of silence, she said, "We've felt the pain of losing a child we never got to see... but she carried this baby, raised her for a few months, and still had to give her up. Imagine how hard that must've been. If she ever comes

back, we'll give her daughter back. Or, if Vera grows up and wants to meet her, we won't stop her. But this is not the time to decide. Right now, she's our daughter—and she needs us.”

Dev nodded, his voice quiet and steady. “Then let's keep this letter somewhere safe—somewhere it won't be lost.”

Gayatri paused, then said thoughtfully, “We'll put it in our bank locker, along with our gold. That way, no matter what happens, it'll be safe.”

“And let's make a promise,” Dev added. “When Vera turns eighteen, we'll tell her the truth—everything. If her real mother comes before that... we'll tell Vera first. She should never hear it from a stranger.”

Gayatri smiled gently. “Yes. We owe her that.”

They both looked at each other, eyes brimming with both fear and hope. In that quiet moment, an unspoken bond was sealed—a promise to raise this child with honesty, love, and dignity, no matter what the future held.

Dev carefully folded the letter again and placed it back in the envelope. The moment they finished at the bank today, it would go into the locker, protected like a treasure.

“Alright,” Dev said, standing up. “Let's get to the bank, and then we start our search for work.”

Gayatri adjusted her dupatta and stood beside him. “Whatever it takes, we'll make this work. For her... for us.”

And together, they stepped out into the morning sun—two hearts guided by one tough decision, ready to shape a new future.

Chapter 6

Meeting with Real Mother

Thankfulness and Gratitude

Gayatri sat quietly in the living room, waiting for Vera to get ready. In her hands rested a basket—old, worn, yet filled with pieces of a life left behind. Inside it were a warm blanket and a carefully folded letter. These were not just objects; they were symbols of a past Vera never knew, and of a decision Anju made with a heavy heart.

Vera soon stepped out of her room, dressed and composed on the outside, but Gayatri could sense the tension behind her daughter's eyes. She gently picked up the basket and stood.

“You need to be strong, my child. We’re just going to face the truth—no matter what it is,” Gayatri said softly.

Vera gave a slight nod but said nothing. Her throat was dry, and her heart was racing. She walked into the kitchen and poured herself a glass of water, trying to calm her nerves.

Once outside, Vera locked the gate behind them, the mid-day sun casting a soft shadow on the street. It was 12:30 PM.

As they walked toward the car, Gayatri's phone rang. She saw Anju's name on the screen and picked up the call while sliding into the passenger seat.

"We're on our way," she said. "Where are you now?"

"I've already reached," Anju replied. "I'm waiting in the hotel lobby. How long will you take?"

"Just ten minutes at most. See you soon."

Gayatri ended the call and looked at Vera. "She's already there."

"We'll be there soon, Mom," Vera said, focusing on the road.

Gayatri turned her gaze toward the sky, silently praying for strength—for herself, for Vera, and for whatever awaited them on the other side of this meeting.

Ten minutes later, they arrived at **D'Olivers Hotel**. The hotel lobby was quiet and well-lit, the hum of soft instrumental music playing in the background. They spotted Anju sitting alone, flipping through a magazine with her bag placed on the chair across from her.

As they approached slowly, Anju looked up and locked eyes with Vera. For a second, time seemed to freeze. She stood, eyes slightly moist, and walked toward them. Without hesitation, she wrapped her arms around Vera.

Vera responded with a soft but firm embrace. It was the first time they were holding each other not as strangers—but as mother and daughter. When they parted, Anju placed a

hand gently on Vera's head, her touch tender and full of emotion.

"Let's sit inside the restaurant," Anju said, pointing toward the adjoining space.

They entered the quiet, empty restaurant. Anju took the seat across from them, while Vera and Gayatri sat side by side. For a few moments, silence filled the space, heavy with unsaid words.

Then Gayatri leaned over and handed the basket to Anju.

The moment Anju saw it, a visible wave of emotion washed over her. Her hands trembled slightly as she touched the blanket, now faded with time. She opened the folded letter—the same one she had written all those years ago—and the sight of her own handwriting took her breath away.

Tears welled up in her eyes.

"Thank you, Gayatri," she said with a voice thick with emotion. "You kept all of this safe. You raised my daughter with love. I can never repay what you've done for both of us. I truly don't have the words to express how grateful I am."

Gayatri smiled, nodding gently. "It was never about repayment, Anju. I did what any mother would do."

Anju looked at Vera again, then back at Gayatri. "I know you've already done so much... but I'd like to talk to her alone. Just for a little while. If that's okay?"

Gayatri didn't hesitate. "Of course. I understand." She turned to Vera. "When you're done, just let me know."

Vera nodded silently.

Gayatri rose and quietly stepped out of the restaurant. She walked back into the lobby, her mind full of questions and emotions. Finding the exact spot where Anju had been sitting earlier, she sat down and folded her hands in her lap, trying not to let her thoughts wander too far.

Inside, mother and daughter were finally alone—for the first time.

Dark Family Secrets

Anju took a deep breath, her voice low and heavy with emotion.

“I’ve been waiting for this day for over two decades, Vera. You can’t imagine how much I’ve missed you, my child. Every single day, I lived in fear—wondering whether someone had found you, whether they’d accept you, love you. I spent years hoping, praying to see you again... just once, to know how you were doing without me.”

Vera looked at her biological mother, her heart thudding, emotions tangled between anger and empathy. “If all that is true,” she said, her voice trembling, “why did you leave me in the first place? What did you do that was so terrible you had to abandon your baby? Why didn’t you think of me before doing whatever it was you did?”

She paused and continued, her eyes brimming with confusion and hurt.

“Maybe you just didn’t want me, and now you’re making up excuses. You have to tell me the truth—everything. Only then will I be able to trust you.”

Anju nodded solemnly. “I understand, my child. And no, I haven’t made up anything. I’ve already paid for my

mistakes. But now... now is the time to answer for my sins, especially to you.”

She paused. Vera leaned forward.

“Then just say it. Tell me the truth. Who was my real father, and what happened to him when I was a baby?”

Anju exhaled. “Your father’s name was Aviyansh Apriyanti. At the time, we were living in Delhi—your real home.”

Before Anju could continue, a waiter approached their table. They paused the conversation and ordered two coffees. Gayatri’s order was passed along too, and the waiter left.

“As I was saying,” Anju resumed, “your father... he was a serial killer.”

Vera’s eyes widened, but she remained silent.

“He only targeted rapists. He believed he was delivering justice in a country where justice is often delayed. He had already killed nine men—each of them accused and guilty of rape. But his tenth victim... that was the one who changed everything.”

Anju’s voice quivered slightly. “His tenth victim, Mohammad, wasn’t guilty. He was actually related to one of your father’s previous victims. Mohammad came to our home, looking for Aviyansh. I answered the door. He tried to warn me about Aviyansh, said he was a murderer. I didn’t believe him. I threw him out. He grabbed my wrist, begging me to listen... and your father was watching everything from outside through the window.”

Vera listened intently, absorbing every word.

“That night, I told your father everything. He acted calm, even proud that I defended him. He told me I’d done the right thing and assured me he hadn’t killed anyone. But the next morning... Mohammad was found dead in his home. His head was smashed, and the word *RAPIST* was carved into his chest.”

Anju’s hands were shaking now. “That’s when I knew. I confronted Aviyansh. At first, he lied. But eventually, he admitted everything—including his first kill. He said he was cleansing the society, giving justice to victims who would otherwise wait for years. He believed he was a hero in a flawed system. He even said rapists were now afraid because of him.”

“And what did you do then?” Vera asked, her voice barely audible.

“I tried to make him understand. I told him he needed to surrender. That the law must be followed. But he just laughed. Said he couldn’t stop. He even hinted that if I tried to interfere, he would 'handle' us too. That’s when I knew the man I loved was gone. A monster had taken his place.”

Anju wiped her tears. “We were in the kitchen. I reached for a knife, hoping to protect us if things got worse. When I tried to run toward you, he pushed me again. I panicked. In the struggle... the knife went into his chest. He collapsed. He died on the spot.”

Vera gasped. She held her breath, unable to process what she’d just heard.

“I didn’t know what to do. So I took you, wrapped you in your blanket, placed you in the basket, and drove through the night. I ended up at a temple in Panipat. I

stayed there as long as I could, holding you. But I knew I had to turn myself in.”

Anju’s voice cracked as she continued, “I didn’t want the police to come later and take you away. I wanted to protect you, even if that meant leaving you. So I went back, surrendered myself to the police, and told them everything.”

Vera stared at her, stunned. Her breathing grew shallow as the weight of her family’s dark past settled in her chest. She picked up a glass of water and took a sip, trying to steady herself.

Anju got up and sat beside her, placing a gentle hand on her back. “I know this is overwhelming, Vera. No one should have to hear something like this about their own parents. I’m sorry.”

Vera sat still, eyes downcast. “How do I know you’re telling the truth?”

Anju opened her bag and pulled out a stack of documents. She laid them on the table. “These are photocopies of the police case files—mine and Aviyansh’s. They have everything, including statements, reports, and photos.”

Vera opened the folder and flipped through the pages, her hands shaking. Among the records, she found a photo of a baby—herself—with her real parents. She stared at it for a long moment.

“That’s me,” she whispered. “I have a similar photo... from when I was a baby. It matches. I believe you now.”

Anju looked relieved but still emotional.

“Why didn’t you just run away with me?” Vera asked softly. “We could’ve started a new life together.”

“I thought about it. I really did. But I wanted to do the right thing. I didn’t want to live in fear that one day the police would take you away from me. I believed that God would send someone to raise you with love and kindness. And He did—Gayatri and Dev.”

Vera smiled faintly. “Yes, they’re good to me.”

There was a moment of quiet between them. Then Vera looked down at her coffee and laughed softly.

“Well, this coffee’s gone cold,” she said.

Anju smiled through her tears. “Let’s order another round.”

They called the waiter, who cleared the cold cups and returned with fresh, hot ones. As they sipped in silence, the weight of the past hung between them, but so did something new—understanding.

Lost and Found Time

Gayatri sat anxiously in the hotel lobby, her legs bouncing as her mind raced. She glanced toward the restaurant door, catching sight of Vera and Anju still deep in conversation over coffee. She sighed, looked down at her phone, and tried to distract herself, but her thoughts kept circling back to what they might be talking about.

Inside, Vera sat across from her birth mother, still processing the shocking truths she had just heard. She cleared her throat and asked, “Your file said you were sentenced to twenty years in prison, but they let you go after fifteen. How is that possible? And how did you even

survive in that kind of place? I want to understand... all of it.”

Anju nodded, taking a deep breath. “The first few months were the worst. Every day, I thought of you. I couldn’t eat properly, couldn’t sleep. I was haunted by the thought—*Was someone feeding you? Were you safe? Did you end up in the right hands?* That pain... it never really left me.”

She paused, her eyes moistening. “To cope, I buried myself in prison work—cooking, cleaning, anything that kept my mind occupied. Twice a day, I prayed for you. The jailer must have noticed. Without telling me, he filed a petition for my early release. And when it was approved... that day felt like the first ray of hope I’d seen in fifteen years. I cried. Not because I was free, but because I was one step closer to finding you.”

A small smile tugged at Anju’s lips at the memory. Vera, for the first time, softly said,

“That’s good for you... *Mom.*”

Anju’s eyes widened. She froze, overwhelmed with emotion. That one word—*Mom*—felt like a lifetime’s worth of longing fulfilled in a second.

Vera caught herself. “I mean... it’s good. God really was on your side, and you stayed strong.”

Anju smiled warmly. “Yes. God has His own timing. But you must be strong, patient, and always keep walking in the right direction.”

Vera nodded, then asked, “After prison, how did you manage? And how did you even find me? You were starting from scratch.”

Anju leaned back in her chair. “The real struggle began after my release. The police returned my house keys and a small amount of money—probably from Aviyansh’s belongings. But when I got to our house... it was like a ruin. Everything had changed—the streets, the buildings... even the people. It took me three days to clean the place. But the money ran out within a week, and I had to sell the little gold I had stored in my bank locker.”

Just then, the waiter returned to clear their cups. He placed menus in front of them.

“Would you like something to eat?” he asked politely.

Anju turned to Vera. “Do you want anything, my child? You haven’t eaten.”

Vera shook her head. “No, I’m fine. You can order something if you want.”

Anju told the waiter, “Please check with the lady outside—Gayatri—and see if she’d like anything. We’ll let you know if we need something.”

The waiter nodded and left.

Vera prompted again, “You were saying...?”

Anju continued, “After selling the gold, I knew I couldn’t live like that forever. I had to stand on my own feet. So, I began teaching. I brushed up on my math skills and started working in a small school. After a year of experience, I set my eyes on Panipat. That’s where I’d left you, after all. I believed... if destiny had any mercy, you’d still be here.”

Vera tilted her head, curious. “But how did you plan to find me? You didn’t even know who adopted me.”

Anju sighed. “I didn’t. But I made a promise to myself before I turned myself in—I would die trying to find you. I calculated what grade you might be in based on your age and started applying to schools as a math teacher. I checked every student list for the name *Vera*—but nothing. I changed schools. Again and again. Years went by like that.”

Vera nodded slowly. “Panipat doesn’t have many colleges. Maybe 4 or 5. That must’ve made things easier eventually?”

Anju chuckled dryly. “You’d think so. But colleges here only offer contracts for a year. It broke my heart. I realized I’d have to give each college a year if I really wanted to find you. Still, I didn’t give up. Then... came the Rajat case at your college—SKPG. A murder, a rape case, unrest. The staff at IBPG, where I was teaching at the time, were sent as a gesture of solidarity.”

She smiled. “And that’s how I met Gayatri. One thing led to another. And... I found you.”

Vera leaned forward, tears filling her eyes. “You struggled so much, Mom. And you never gave up. You don’t even know how much you’ve inspired me. I wish I’d met you sooner.”

She stood up and wrapped her arms around Anju tightly. Anju held her close, tears rolling down her cheeks.

“This is the happiest day of my life, my sweet Vera,” she whispered. “I’ve waited for this moment for so long.”

Vera gently pulled back. “Mom... there’s one more thing I need to ask of you.”

“Anything, my child.”

“We... can’t tell Gayatri about all this. Not about Dad. Not about the knife. Not about your time in jail. She’s sensitive. She’s already done so much for me, and if she learns the truth, she might never let us meet again.”

Anju nodded instantly. “You have my word. I’ll never say anything to her. This stays between us. I respect Gayatri, and I would never want to hurt her.”

Vera smiled with relief. “Thank you.”

She grew thoughtful again and softly added, “What my father did... was horrible. But I understand that, in some twisted way, he thought he was helping society. It’s just... hard to believe. Maybe you could’ve tried to help him change?”

Anju lowered her eyes. “I thought about it every day. But the man I once loved had changed. He was angry, irrational, obsessed with justice. When I picked up that knife, I only wanted to protect us. I didn’t mean to kill him... but it happened.”

The pain in her voice was unmistakable.

Vera took her mother’s hand and held it gently. “You did what you had to do.”

The Lunch and The Phone Call

“Please give me your number, Mom. If we ever want to talk, we can call each other,” Vera said to Anju. They exchanged numbers and saved each other’s contact in their phones.

“I’ll call Gayatri Mom now. She can join us, and then we’ll have lunch together,” Vera continued. Anju agreed,

checking her watch—it was around 2:00 PM. Hunger was setting in for both of them.

“Sorry, Mom. You had to wait a long time. You can come in now, we’re done talking,” Vera said to Gayatri over the phone. While Anju tucked her files back into her bag, Gayatri entered the restaurant and joined them at their table. This time, Vera and Anju sat beside each other while Gayatri sat across from them, alone.

Vera called the waiter and asked for menus. The same waiter arrived, handing each of them a menu before stepping away.

“Have you guys decided?” Anju asked. “I think I’ll have some pav bhaji.”

“Vera loves pav bhaji too,” Gayatri added with a faint smile.

“Yes, I do. I can eat it any time,” Vera said, grinning at Anju. Gayatri noticed the growing bond between the two and felt a twinge of jealousy deep inside.

“I can have that too,” Gayatri said quickly. “Let’s all just get pav bhaji, then.” Vera nodded and called the waiter again to order pav bhaji for three—with extra pav.

Gayatri thought to herself, *They really do look alike. And in just a few hours, they’ve bonded so well. I wonder what Anju told Vera. Maybe I’ll try to find out once we leave this place. But for now, let’s focus on lunch.*

Soon, the waiter brought their order, set the plates in front of them, and left with a polite nod.

Vera took a bite and smiled. “It tastes better than it looks. This is even better than I expected.”

All three enjoyed the meal. Once they finished, they paid the bill and left a small tip before stepping out into the hotel lobby.

“Where do you live, Mom? We can drop you,” Vera offered Anju in front of Gayatri.

“It’s okay, you don’t have to. I can manage. Don’t worry about me,” Anju replied, but Gayatri insisted on Vera’s behalf.

Still, Anju declined, explaining she lived on the opposite side of the city. “Let’s plan it for another day. If you both want to come, we’ll make a proper plan.”

Vera and Gayatri accompanied Anju outside. Anju began looking for an auto-rickshaw, while Vera went to retrieve her car from the parking area. Gayatri got into the car, and both of them waved goodbye as Anju left in the rickshaw.

As they drove away, Gayatri turned to Vera. “Looks like you two have bonded really well. Did she tell you everything? What exactly did she say about her past?”

“She’s a good person, Mom. Whatever she did back then, she did it to protect me. And I confirmed that she wasn’t lying. Don’t worry. She’s harmless,” Vera replied calmly.

“Did she tell you what she did to protect you? I want the truth, Vera. My heart’s pounding,” Gayatri pressed, growing more agitated.

“You’re stressing yourself for no reason, Mom. Please, calm down.” Vera handed her a bottle of water. “Here, drink this.”

Gayatri took the bottle and finished it in one go.

“I’ll keep asking until I get the truth,” she warned. “I’m just as stubborn as you, Vera. Tell me now—or drop me here. I can go home alone.”

“Okay, okay,” Vera gave in. “Anju told me... two thieves broke into her house one night. In self-defense, she killed them. They were trying to harm me, too. That’s why she left me at the temple and surrendered to the police. That’s the truth. She even brought her case file. I only believed her after seeing it.”

“And your real father? What happened to him?” Gayatri asked.

“His name was Aviyansh. He died of a heart attack a few weeks before that night,” Vera lied again. But Gayatri believed her.

A few minutes later, Vera pulled up outside Gayatri’s house. She dropped her off, then headed back to her own home.

That night, around 10 PM, Vera finished her dinner and called Anju.

“Hello, Vera. How are you, my child?” Anju answered warmly.

“I’m doing fine. What about you?”

“I’m okay. You called this late—everything alright?”

“Yes, everything’s fine, Mom. I just wanted to let you know that Gayatri asked me about your past, so I made up a story,” Vera said. She told Anju the full version of the lie she’d fed Gayatri. “If she ever contacts you, I want you to stick to it. We need to be on the same page, or she’ll get suspicious.”

“Don’t worry, Vera. I’m with you. Gayatri won’t ever find out the truth from me.”

“Thanks, Mom. One more thing... I’ve been thinking about these recent killings. Do you think someone is copying Dad?”

“How would I know?” Anju replied. “But whoever it is must have read about your father. Maybe they got inspired by his ideas and now want to carry on the legacy in their own way.”

“There are some differences, though. It’s like they’re trying to make their own identity from all this, right?”

“Yes, that’s possible. The police and CBI are on the case. Let’s see if they can catch this new serial killer. Do you know who Rajat’s victim was?”

“I do,” Vera said. “But I promised her I’d never tell. She’s very close to me. I’m sorry, Mom—I can’t break that promise.”

“That’s okay, Vera. I understand. If you ever need to talk, I’m here for you. Anytime, any situation. Just know that.”

“I know, Mom. And now... you’re a part of my life too.”

Then Vera hesitated for a moment, gathering her thoughts. “Earlier, you said Dad confessed everything to you before he died. His first kill... Did he tell you how he did it? What made him do it? Did he feel anything after it—satisfaction, guilt? I just want to understand where it all started.”

Chapter 7

Where It All Started

The Letter

The doorbell rang.

Aviyansh sprinted toward the front door, hopeful and excited. When he opened it, he found the postman standing there with a single envelope in his hand.

“Thank you,” Aviyansh said, taking the letter politely. The postman nodded and left, and Aviyansh closed the door behind him.

His mother, Ravina, was in the kitchen chopping vegetables, the sound of the knife rhythmically hitting the cutting board. Aviyansh walked over, sat near her, and opened the envelope, unfolding the letter with a smile that faded as his eyes moved across the page.

Dear Aviyansh and Ravina,

I hope both of you are doing well. A few days ago, I received your letter asking me to come home for Diwali.

I'm truly sorry, and I don't even know how to say this, but I won't be able to make it home—again.

It's not because I don't want to. You both know how much I love you. But as a soldier, my duty on the border comes first, and I can't leave my post right now.

Please celebrate Diwali without me and try to be happy. I know it's been a year since I was last home, but I promise I'll come to see you both soon—just not this Diwali.

In the meantime, enjoy the festival, stay safe, stay healthy, and eat lots of sweets. But don't forget to save some for me.

Take care of each other.

Happy Diwali.

As he finished reading, Aviyansh's shoulders slumped. His young heart sank. He had been counting down the days, hoping for a warm embrace from his father this Diwali.

Ravina noticed the change on her son's face. She wiped her hands on her apron, walked over, and sat beside him. She gently wrapped her arms around her son, pulling him close into a mother's comforting hug.

"It's okay, beta," she whispered, her voice soft and steady. "We'll see him soon. He'll come back—he always does."

Aviyansh nodded and hugged her tightly in return. Her words didn't erase the disappointment, but they gave him something to hold on to.

A few quiet minutes passed, wrapped in that embrace. Then Ravina stood up and returned to the kitchen to prepare dinner. While cooking, tears welled up in her eyes. She wiped them away quickly, telling herself to stay strong—for her son, for her husband, and for the silent sacrifices that came with loving a man in uniform.

An hour later, dinner was ready. She called Aviyansh to the dining table. He emerged from his room and sat down, and soon Ravina joined him. They ate quietly. Between bites, she gently reminded him, “Tomorrow, we’ll start cleaning the house for Diwali. You’ll help me, right?”

Aviyansh looked up and nodded. “Of course, Mom.”

After finishing their meal, they took their plates to the sink. Aviyansh kissed his mother’s cheek goodnight and headed to his room. Ravina smiled and wished him goodnight in return before finishing the dishes and retreating to her room.

The Next Morning

Sunlight filtered into the house, spilling through the curtains.

By the time Aviyansh woke up, his mother had already started cleaning. The aroma of incense mixed with dust filled the air as he walked out of his room. Seeing her crouched in the corner of the living room, sweeping under the furniture, he rolled up his sleeves and joined her.

Together, they cleaned every corner of the house—first the living room, then the kitchen, and finally their

individual bedrooms. It was hard work, but it distracted them both from what was missing.

By the time they finished, Ravina moved back into the kitchen to prepare lunch. Aviyansh, sweating and a little tired, went for a bath, the memory of the letter still quietly weighing on his heart.

Diwali Day

The sun had barely risen when Aviyansh woke up, buzzing with excitement. Today was Diwali—the festival of lights, colors, joy, and togetherness. He quickly got ready and stepped into the living room where his mother, Ravina, had already begun her day.

The night before, she had carefully packed and labeled sweets and small gifts for their relatives and friends. Aviyansh loaded them into their old but reliable Maruti car. As he turned toward the door, he called out, “I’m heading out, Maa!”

“Drive safe, beta!” Ravina said, peeking out from the kitchen. She smiled as she watched her son pull out of the driveway.

Back inside, Ravina returned to the rhythm of her festive preparations. She swept the floors again, cleaned the brass diyas, and arranged them in neat rows around the small wooden temple in their home. The temple shelves were adorned with pictures of Goddess Lakshmi, Lord Ganesh, Hanuman, and Lord Rama with his brother Lakshman and Sita. She lit incense sticks and whispered her prayers, soaking in the sacred energy of the festival.

Next, she moved on to the kitchen. She began preparing *Aloo Puri* and *Sooji Halwa*—Aviyansh’s favorites. As the food simmered, she set her iron board and carefully pressed her festive saree and her son’s kurta-pajama set. By the time afternoon rolled around, everything was in place.

Just before sunset, Aviyansh returned home, beaming.

“All done?” Ravina asked, stepping out of the kitchen.

“Yes, Maa. Gifts, sweets, and even the smiles—all successfully delivered,” he said with a proud grin.

“What did you buy for bursting crackers?” she asked while handing him a glass of water.

“I picked some up while I was out. They’re in the car,” he said, and then peeked toward the kitchen. “What’s for dinner?”

“Aloo Puri and Halwa,” she replied.

“Oh Maa! You’re the best!” he exclaimed, almost drooling. “Let’s do the puja fast so we can eat. I can’t wait any longer!”

She gave him a teasing look. “You’re 19 now, not a child. Still acting like one.”

He laughed. “Some things never change.”

At 7 PM, the time for the evening *Lakshmi Puja* arrived. Both changed into their festive clothes—Aviyansh in a crisp white kurta and Ravina in a maroon and gold saree. Together, they lit the diyas and sat cross-legged in front of the temple. Ravina led the prayers, and they sang the *Aarti* together, their voices soft yet full of devotion.

After the puja, they placed the lit diyas all around the house—on windowsills, corners, and outside on the verandah. The entire house glowed in golden warmth, reflecting the spirit of Diwali.

Once the last diya was placed, Ravina called out, “Dinner’s ready!”

Aviyansh came in from placing diyas outside and sat eagerly at the table. As soon as he took the first bite, his eyes lit up.

“Maa, this is amazing. Seriously, how do you make food taste like this?”

Ravina smiled, watching him eat like he hadn’t in days. “Slow down, or you’ll get a stomach ache!”

Just as she said it, he let out a loud burp and laughed. “Well, now that was a meal worth remembering. Thank you, Maa.”

Together, they cleaned up the dishes and kitchen. As Ravina washed the utensils, she turned to him and said, “Now go enjoy with your friends. But be careful while bursting those crackers, okay?”

“Come with me, na. Burst a few with us.”

“You know I’m scared of those things. But I’ll come sit outside and watch.”

“Deal,” Aviyansh said with a smile.

He unlocked the car and took out the packets of crackers, then joined his waiting friends in the lane. Ravina took a seat on the front porch, watching her son with quiet joy as he laughed and lit sparklers with his friends.

Soon, a few women from the neighborhood came over and greeted her.

“Happy Diwali, Ravina ji!”

“Happy Diwali!” she said, standing to welcome them.

They exchanged greetings and soon got lost in festive conversation. The night sparkled with the sound of laughter, bursting crackers, and the golden glow of hundreds of flickering diyas.

It was a beautiful Diwali—a night that felt whole.

A Friend’s Sin

The night was alive with fireworks, laughter, and celebration. Children darted through the streets with sparklers, women gathered outside sharing stories, and the air smelled of sweets and smoke. Ravina sat among her neighbors, chatting and smiling, though a part of her heart still ached for her husband’s absence.

Suddenly, a white car pulled up in front of her house and stopped with a slight screech. A tall man stepped out, his thick beard and mustache made him instantly recognizable. He was slim, around forty-five, with curly hair. In his left hand, he carried a small gift box wrapped in shiny red paper.

Ravina stood up, surprised but polite. “Aman? What a surprise!”

The man gave a warm smile. “Happy Diwali, Ravina. I hope I’m not intruding.”

“Of course not. Come in,” she said, leading him into the house.

The neighborhood ladies politely took their leave, sensing Ravina had a guest to attend to. Ravina closed the door behind Aman to block out the fireworks' noise, but in her haste, she forgot to lock it.

Inside, Aman took a seat in the living room. "Is Aviyansh home? And Ritesh?"

"Aviyansh is outside with his friends, enjoying the night," she said. "And Ritesh... he's on duty, as always."

Aman nodded with a sigh. "Two Diwalis in a row he's missed. I came hoping to see him."

"You know how it is—his duty comes before everything," Ravina said gently, walking toward the kitchen. "Let me make you some tea. Please sit."

Aman sat back in the sofa, glancing around the room—at the family photos, the diya-lit temple, the flickering shadows on the walls. Something about his gaze seemed off, though Ravina didn't notice it just yet.

Ten minutes later, she returned with a tray holding a steaming cup of tea, some sweets, and snacks. She set it on the table and took a seat beside him.

"You brought only one cup?" he asked, his voice a little too smooth.

"I've already had dinner. I'm quite full," she replied politely.

He nodded and took the tea in his hands. After a sip, he reached for the wrapped box and offered it to her.

"A little something for Diwali. For you and Ritesh."

Ravina hesitated. "I can't—he's not even here."

“Then take it on his behalf,” Aman insisted. “It would hurt me more if you refused.”

Reluctantly, Ravina accepted the gift. “Thank you. I don’t have anything to give you in return, I’m sorry.”

“You’ve already given enough. This tea, this warmth... it means more than you know.”

He finished the tea and set the cup down. But then, without warning, he leaned toward her, his hand brushing against her thigh.

Ravina froze.

She immediately pulled back and stood up, her eyes wide in disbelief. “What are you doing?!”

Aman followed, rising slowly. “I’ve loved you since the first time I saw you. At your wedding to Ritesh. I was broken that day, Ravina.”

“I don’t want to hear this,” she said, her voice sharp and rising. “Get out of my house right now!”

He stepped closer, undeterred. “I’ve watched you for years... alone on every festival. I can make you happy. You don’t have to wait for someone who’s never here.”

Ravina backed away. “I love my husband. You are his friend—how dare you—?”

Before she could finish, Aman lunged forward, grabbing her wrist tightly.

“Let me go!” she cried, struggling against his grip.

The fireworks outside masked her scream. The house, closed up tightly for the festival, muffled all sound. She tried to twist free, tears forming in her eyes.

“You don’t need to be afraid of me!” Aman said, desperate. “I just want to love you!”

Ravina’s heart pounded. With all the strength she could muster, she yanked her arm free and ran toward the door—but Aman caught her again.

“No!” she screamed. “Help!”

But no one heard. The celebrations outside drowned out everything.

Aman dragged her backward—toward the bedroom.

And in that moment, as Ravina kicked, struggled, and sobbed, the light of Diwali—the festival of triumph over darkness—seemed far, far away from her home.

Murder or Justice

The firecrackers lit up the sky in bursts of gold and red. Laughter echoed through the streets as children and families celebrated Diwali with joy and noise. At the corner of the street, Aviyansh stood with his friends near a bike, their faces glowing under the fireworks.

But amid the cheer, something tugged at him.

He glanced toward his house and noticed a car parked outside. It wasn’t there earlier. His eyes narrowed.

The front door was shut, but something felt off—there was no sign of his mother in the doorway, no diya flickering in the window, no movement at all. A chill ran down his spine.

“Hey, I think I have guests at home,” he said to his friends.

“Come on, man! It’s Diwali!” one of them protested.

“I’ll catch you guys later,” he assured them, already walking toward his house.

As he approached the door, he noticed it was slightly ajar. He pushed it open slowly.

“Ma?” he called out. Silence.

He stepped inside, closing the door behind him, and looked around the empty living room. Something was wrong—deeply wrong. The house, once filled with warmth and light, now felt cold and hollow.

Then he heard a muffled sound. A struggle. It came from the bedroom.

He sprinted forward.

What he saw next shattered something inside him.

A man—**Aman**, his father's friend—was on top of his mother, forcing himself on her.

“NO!” Aviyansh roared, lunging at him.

He grabbed Aman by the collar and ripped him away from Ravina. The man stumbled and fell backward, shocked. Before he could react, Aviyansh struck—punch after punch, his fists raining down like thunder.

Aman tried to shield himself, but the rage in Aviyansh’s heart was uncontrollable. He saw nothing but red.

Ravina, trembling and broken, managed to gather herself and crawl out of the room, her saree torn, her spirit bruised. She stumbled into the kitchen, too stunned to speak, and collapsed in a corner.

Back in the bedroom, Aviyansh spotted his cricket bat leaning against the wall. He grabbed it.

Aman tried to crawl away, muttering pleas, bleeding from his nose and mouth.

Aviyansh didn't stop.

He lifted the bat and **swung it down** on Aman's head with every ounce of strength he had. Blood splattered. Aman cried out once—just once—before another blow silenced him.

Again.

And again.

Ten blows in total. All to the head. By the time Aviyansh stopped, the bat was dripping red, his hands and face stained with blood.

He stood there, heaving, the room soaked in silence and death.

Outside, fireworks continued to burst in the night sky—mocking the violence inside this quiet home.

Breathing heavily, he walked out of the room, leaving the bat behind.

“Mother...?” he called softly, unsure of where she had gone.

No answer.

Then, a clattering sound—metal against tile. A utensil fell in the kitchen.

He followed the sound and found her, curled up in the farthest corner, her knees drawn to her chest, her eyes filled with unspeakable fear and pain.

“Ma...” he knelt in front of her, blood still on his face. “I... I’m so sorry. I should’ve been here. I should’ve protected you.”

Ravina reached out with a trembling hand, touching his cheek gently, as if telling him: *This wasn’t your fault.*

He wiped away her tears, only to leave a streak of blood on her face—his sorrow painted in red.

He stood and fetched a glass of water, brought it back, and held it to her lips. Her hands were shaking too much to hold it, so he helped her drink. She swallowed slowly, trying to steady her breath.

And then came the silence. Thick. Suffocating.

The stench of blood from the other room began to seep into the kitchen, growing heavier, more metallic, making it hard to breathe.

Ravina shut her eyes and tried to focus. She had to think—**fast**.

Was Aman dead?

Could anyone have seen anything?

Would the police believe the truth?

Would they even *want* to?

Her thoughts spun in circles as the night outside roared on in celebration... and inside their home, something had forever broken.

The Escape

“Wash your hands and face,” Ravina said, her voice trembling yet urgent. “Then go upstairs and bring the tarpaulin from the storeroom.”

Aviyansh stared at her, stunned. “But... why, Mother?”

“Please, just do as I say,” she pleaded, her voice cracking. “I’m trying to protect you, my son. Listen to me.”

Still shaken, Aviyansh obeyed. As he ran upstairs, Ravina drew a deep, ragged breath, trying to steady herself. The metallic scent of blood was growing stronger—thick, suffocating.

She forced herself into the bedroom.

Aman lay sprawled on the floor, his body twisted grotesquely, his head unrecognizable—a shattered shell. Blood pooled beneath him, seeping into the floorboards. The sight made her stomach churn, but she clenched her jaw and moved forward.

He was dead. There was no doubt.

She rushed to the bathroom, filled a bucket with water, and grabbed a cloth.

Just then, Aviyansh returned, carrying the folded tarpaulin in his arms.

“Spread it out in the living room,” she instructed without looking at him.

He unfolded the sheet as she entered with the bucket. They didn’t speak. They couldn’t.

Together, they returned to the bedroom. Aviyansh gripped the body by the shoulders. Ravina held the legs.

They lifted the corpse and carried it out, careful not to leave another trail of blood. With a soft thud, they laid Aman's lifeless body at the center of the tarpaulin.

"I need some bedsheets. Cover him," she said.

He disappeared into a room and returned with old covers. Ravina, meanwhile, dipped the cloth into the water and began scrubbing the floor where blood had soaked into the wood. The water in the bucket quickly turned crimson. Her hands were red. Her breath shaky. Every motion felt like she was scrubbing not just the floor, but her soul.

She found the bat.

It was soaked in blood.

Wordlessly, she took it to the bathroom and scrubbed until every trace of red was gone.

By the time she returned, Aviyansh had covered Aman with bedsheets, dulling the stench of blood that was choking the air. Ravina moved through the house like a ghost, wiping up every spot she could find—around the bed, through the hallway, in the kitchen. Her back ached, but she didn't stop.

She couldn't.

When it was done, she stood over the body, barely able to breathe.

"We have to wrap him now," she whispered.

They rolled the tarpaulin tightly around the body. She fetched a rope from the kitchen and together, they tied it from the ankles to the neck. Every knot was a silent prayer. In her mind, Ravina cried out:

God, please... show us the way. My son did what he had to. For me. I must protect him now. He has his whole life ahead of him. I can't let this night destroy it.

She pulled the final knot tight.

"We need to get rid of the body," she said, breathless. "But where? How?"

They stared at each other. Silent. Panicked.

Then Aviyansh spoke. "Maybe... the river. It's 5–6 kilometers outside the city. I can drive Aman's car, dump the body there, and leave the car somewhere far from here. I'll come back by morning."

Ravina nodded, quickly. "Yes. That's our best chance."

"Where are his car keys?"

She remembered. "On the table, near the sofa."

She grabbed them, then glanced at the wall clock—**2:07 a.m.**

Aviyansh stepped outside, started Aman's car, and backed it up close to the front gate. He opened the rear door. Together, they carried the wrapped body and placed it gently on the back seat.

"Be careful," Ravina whispered, placing her hand on his cheek. "Don't let anyone see you. And clean the car when you're done."

"I will," he promised. "Lock the door behind me. I'll be back soon."

He kissed her forehead and got behind the wheel.

Ravina stood at the gate, watching him drive off into the dark, deserted road.

Then she turned around, walked back into the house, and locked the door with shaking hands.

Inside, everything was quiet now.

But the silence didn't bring peace. Only a haunting truth:

Their lives had changed forever.

The Rise of a Serial Killer

The streets lay quiet under the amber glow of fading fireworks. As Aviyansh drove, his eyes scanned every corner, every dark alley, every balcony. The city was half-asleep, still wrapped in Diwali's afterglow. Most homes had gone dark, and the ones still awake were too lost in celebration to notice a lone car rolling silently through the night.

He tightened his grip on the wheel. His knuckles turned white.

When he turned onto the main road leading toward the river, his breath caught—a **police jeep** appeared in the opposite lane, driving straight toward him.

His heartbeat thundered in his ears.

The headlights flooded his face. His hands tensed on the steering wheel, forcing himself not to flinch, not to panic. He prayed the cops would keep going.

And they did.

The jeep passed without slowing. No glances. No suspicion.

He exhaled slowly, the weight on his chest lifting—but only slightly.

The city's lights began to fade behind him as he turned onto a narrow, rough trail along the river. Sand crunched beneath the tires. He kept driving until the road disappeared into wilderness and silence. No one would come this far out.

This was the spot.

He turned off the ignition. The night air felt heavy, but the tension inside him was heavier still. He turned around and stared at the body wrapped in tarpaulin on the back seat.

His voice shook, but it was firm.

“Everyone needs to know what you did, Uncle. You will never be mourned. You’ll never be missed. And your shame—your sin—won’t stay hidden. Not anymore.”

He grabbed the rope and untied the wrap. Then he unzipped the tarpaulin and exposed the corpse.

The blood had dried into a dark crust. Aman’s face—smashed and disfigured—was beyond recognition.

With shaking hands, Aviyansh took a penknife from the dashboard, removed Aman’s shirt, and **carved a word into the chest** using a shard of the broken bat handle he had brought with him.

“RAPIST.”

The letters stood out in red, crude but clear.

He took out every form of identification from Aman's pockets—wallet, ID cards, license—and threw them, one by one, into the river.

Then he dragged the body out and laid it on the sandy road under the open sky, exposed for anyone to find.

“Let the world see what happens to people like you,” he muttered.

He stood over the body for a second longer, then turned and got back in the car. The adrenaline was wearing off, but his mission wasn't over.

Now, he had to abandon the car.

As he drove back into the city, trying to avoid traffic cameras and early risers, he noticed an old garage by the roadside—filled with rusted and abandoned cars. It looked like no one had touched it in years.

Perfect.

He turned in, parked Aman's car at the farthest corner, and got out. He began hunting for something heavy.

Behind a stack of tires, he found a metal rod.

He smashed every window. Broke the headlights. Shattered the mirrors. Then he stabbed the tires and poured dirt and sand into the seats and dashboard, making it look like the car had been rotting there for years.

He tossed the keys across the garage into a dark corner, broke the number plates, and shoved the pieces deep into the pile of wreckage.

Only when the car looked indistinguishable from the rest did he finally stop.

Satisfied, he slipped out of the garage quietly and began walking home.

He still had 3 kilometers to go.

Back at home, Ravina sat on the sofa, hands trembling, her eyes fixed on the clock. It was nearly **6:00 a.m.**

Her stomach twisted with fear. What if something had gone wrong?

Then—**the doorbell rang.**

She leapt up and ran to the door.

When she opened it, her son stood there, exhausted, pale, but alive.

Her face crumbled in relief. “Is everything okay?” she asked breathlessly. “Tell me—no one saw you?”

Aviyansh gave a tired nod. “No one, Maa. It’s done.”

Ravina looked to the sky and joined her hands. Her lips moved in a silent prayer, thanking God and asking for forgiveness.

But Aviyansh stopped her.

“No, Mother. We did nothing wrong,” he said firmly. “People like him... they deserve what he got. If we want change, someone has to start it. Let the world know—if you rape, you die. That’s the justice victims never get.”

Ravina’s eyes welled up with tears.

She nodded weakly, unable to respond. Her heart broke for her son, and yet, she understood what he meant. The

world had pushed him into darkness—and tonight, he had crossed a line from which there was no return.

“Go rest, beta. Clean yourself. I’ll be okay,” she whispered.

“And you rest too, Maa,” he said gently. “Don’t overthink it. It’s over now.”

But it wasn’t over.

This was just the beginning.

Chapter 8

The Cracks Begin

Anju's Arrest

"That's what he told me about his very first kill," Anju said softly over the phone.

On the other end, Vera sat silently, digesting every word.

"It's late. You should sleep. We've talked enough for tonight," Anju added, her voice heavy with fatigue.

"Okay, goodnight," Vera replied. The call ended.

Vera set her phone down but couldn't sleep. Her mind was racing. A few minutes later, the phone buzzed again.

It was a message from Tanya:

"Hey! Do you wanna come to my place? I'm having trouble sleeping."

Vera typed quickly:

"Me too. I have so much to tell you. I'll be there in five."

“Okay, I’m waiting.”

Vera changed and stepped out into the night.

2:00 A.M. – Anju’s Society

A police jeep rolled up in front of Anju’s building. Inside were three officers—one male and two females. The night watchman peeked from his chair.

“We’re looking for Anju. Flat number?” asked the male officer.

The watchman flipped through his register. “C-wing, flat no. 27,” he said.

The three officers marched through the building silently. They stopped outside the flat and rang the doorbell.

Anju, startled awake, sat up in bed, heart pounding. She looked at the time. *2:05 a.m.* Her instincts screamed. She picked up a heavy vase near the television, clutching it behind her as she tiptoed to the door.

She cracked it open, peeking outside. Police.

Confused and terrified, she put the vase down and opened the door fully.

Without a word, the female officers stepped in and immediately handcuffed her.

“What—what’s going on? Why are you arresting me?” Anju stammered, voice trembling.

“You’re under arrest for suspicion of being the serial killer who targets rapists,” the male officer replied curtly.

“What?! No! You’ve got the wrong person. I didn’t do anything! Please don’t take me!” Anju cried, resisting weakly as tears spilled down her face.

The male officer stepped inside and confiscated her mobile phone, sealing it into an evidence bag. He scanned her apartment and found two dusty case files tucked in a drawer. He took those too.

Anju kept pleading, “This can’t be happening... You’re doing this because of my past, aren’t you? You think dragging me back into this will help your current case! But I’ve already paid for that chapter of my life. I’m not that person anymore!”

They didn’t answer.

Outside, she was shoved into the police jeep, seated between the two female officers. Her eyes were red, her wrists aching in the cold steel cuffs.

At the Police Station

They locked Anju in a holding cell. Cold metal bars. Dim yellow light. A chill ran through her spine.

She sat on the concrete floor, back against the wall, knees to her chest.

This cell felt **too familiar**.

Her breathing grew shallow.

Not again... not this place... not this feeling...

Her chest tightened. She thought she might faint. Or die. Her mind spiraled:

What will Vera think? Will I survive this again? Is this my fate—to always be seen as a monster?

She didn't sleep all night.

10:00 A.M. – The Interrogation Room

CBI agents Runjish and Shiv arrived with swift steps. No time to waste.

Anju was already seated, wrists chained to the table. Her face was pale, her eyes hollow from the sleepless night.

They entered and sat across from her.

“According to your old case,” Shiv began coldly, “you made the police believe your husband was the serial killer. But the killings stopped only during your prison time. And now... they’ve started again. A year after you moved to Panipat.”

Anju’s voice cracked but remained steady. “I didn’t do anything. I don’t know who’s behind these murders. Maybe... someone trying to be like him.”

“We didn’t say you *did* do it,” Runjish said.

“But your actions speak otherwise,” Anju snapped, anger peeking through. “You arrested me without solid proof. Just because of *coincidence*?”

“Coincidence?” Shiv leaned forward. “You were released. The killings restarted. During your time in jail, not a single case emerged. Sounds more than coincidence to me.”

He pressed harder. “Right now, one of our agents is going through your phone, your files, your search history. If there’s even a scrap of evidence—you’re done.”

Anju stared at him. “Search all you want. I have nothing to hide. I came to Panipat to find my daughter. That’s it.”

“You found her?” Runjish asked.

“Yes,” Anju answered without hesitation.

A knock on the door interrupted the tension.

Vineet stepped in, looking concerned.

“We found something,” he said. “Anju has been in contact with Vera—Tanya’s best friend—and also Gayatri... who raised Vera.”

Runjish and Shiv exchanged glances. The air in the room thickened.

“Call them in,” Shiv ordered. “Vera, Tanya, and Gayatri. All of them. Tell them it’s about the Rajat case.”

“You got it,” Vineet said and stepped out.

Runjish and Shiv turned back toward Anju.

The look on her face told them **she knew what was coming next.**

And for the first time, they sensed **she wasn’t afraid anymore.**

A Good or A Bad News

Vera parked her car outside Tanya’s PG and called her.

“I’m here. Open the gate,” she said.

Tanya came running down and opened it with a faint smile. Vera stepped in. The moment she entered Tanya's room, she noticed how tidy it was—everything in its place, just like always. Tanya had always been like that, neat and organized, especially when her mind was in chaos.

They sat on the bed, and Tanya asked, "What's going on? You said you needed to talk."

Vera took a deep breath and began.

She told Tanya everything that had happened over the last three days—from the moment Anju knocked on her door to the emotional conversation they'd had earlier that evening. However, she left out the darker truths about her real family. Tanya, already fragile from the trauma of her assault, didn't need another heavy burden.

Vera repeated the same partial version of the truth she'd told Gayatri.

Tanya stared at her, stunned. "I... I don't even know what to say. That's so much to process. How are you handling it all? I should've been there for you."

"You don't have to say that," Vera smiled softly. "You've got your own battles. Honestly, I'm okay now. It was hard at first. But after getting to know her, piece by piece... I felt something connect. And it didn't feel forced."

Tanya shook her head in disbelief. "I swear, Vera, I don't know how you do it. Every time life throws something insane at you, you still manage to find your ground. Me? I break down the minute something serious happens."

“That’s what I love about you,” she added, smiling faintly. But her expression changed in an instant.

Her face went pale.

Tanya clutched her stomach and rushed to the washroom. Vera followed quickly.

Tanya knelt in front of the toilet, but the vomit wouldn’t come. She gagged, spitting instead. Vera rubbed her back gently.

“Are you okay?” she asked, concerned.

“I... I don’t know,” Tanya replied, panting. She got up, rinsed her mouth, and looked in the mirror. “I’ve felt nauseous all day. Couldn’t focus on anything. I just thought I needed rest, but now...”

They returned to the bedroom.

“Did you take any medicine? See a doctor?” Vera asked.

“No. I figured it’d pass. But it started again after I messaged you.”

“Alright. First thing in the morning, I’m taking you to a doctor. No excuses.”

“You don’t have to. I’ll go alone,” Tanya said weakly.

“Tomorrow’s Sunday. I’ve got nothing to do. And I want to be there with you.”

Tanya nodded.

They turned off the lights and tried to sleep, both with storm clouds in their heads.

Next Morning – 9:00 A.M.

They reached the hospital. After describing Tanya's symptoms, the doctor recommended a few tests. An hour later, they sat silently outside the doctor's office when he returned with the results.

"You're pregnant," the doctor said bluntly.

Vera and Tanya froze.

"What?" Vera stood up. "Are you sure? Could there be a mistake?"

"I'm sure," the doctor said gently. "These results are conclusive."

He handed them the reports and walked away.

Tanya didn't move. Her hands trembled.

Vera placed a hand on her shoulder. "It... it must've happened that day. At the farewell..."

Tanya didn't reply. Her eyes were glazed over.

"I tried so hard to bury what Rajat did," Tanya whispered. "Now this? What am I supposed to do? Hide a pregnancy?"

Vera sat beside her. "We have to tell my mom."

Tanya said nothing.

They walked to the car in silence. Vera drove straight to Gayatri's house. After helping Tanya to the sofa, she found her mom washing clothes in the bathroom.

"Mom, please. Come quickly. It's serious," she said.

Gayatri dropped what she was doing and followed Vera into the living room.

“What’s wrong?”

Tanya sat quietly, eyes on the table. Vera glanced at her—she still couldn’t speak. So Vera took the lead and explained everything.

Gayatri’s face went white.

She sat beside Tanya and gently touched her arm. “Tanya, look at me.”

Tanya looked up with tear-filled eyes.

“We can’t change what’s already happened,” Gayatri said softly.

“I want an abortion,” Tanya whispered.

Gayatri’s hand paused. “Are you sure?”

“I don’t know... I just can’t do this. I can’t.”

“Let’s take a moment,” Gayatri said. “No pressure, no rush. But maybe... maybe we should talk to your parents?”

“No!” Tanya snapped. Then, in a quieter voice, “I mean... I’m scared. Especially for my mom. Her health isn’t great.”

Vera joined in. “But they deserve to know. You shouldn’t go through this alone.”

Gayatri nodded. “Exactly. You’re strong, Tanya. But family... they matter the most in these moments. You need your parents.”

Tanya took a long breath. “Okay. I’ll tell them. But I’m not sure what their reaction will be.”

Gayatri added gently, “Maybe your father too. Last time you told me he still calls. If he’s reaching out, he might want to help. He deserves the chance.”

Tanya nodded again, slower this time. “I hope you’re both right.”

Vera looked at her mother. “And Rajat’s family? Should they know?”

Gayatri stared into space for a moment, thinking hard. “No. Not yet.”

She turned to Tanya. “Take your time, but not too much. The longer you wait, the harder the decision becomes.”

Just then, Tanya’s phone rang.

A moment later, Vera’s phone rang too.

Then Gayatri’s.

All three got the same message:

**They were being summoned to the police station.
In relation to Rajat’s murder.**

The Unending Traumas

Vera, Gayatri, and Tanya reached the police station and immediately approached the officials.

“We received your call. What’s going on?” Gayatri asked, concerned.

Standing beside a familiar face, Pooja—the same FBI officer they had met in the college library—Vinod Mehta from the Intelligence Bureau answered them.

“You’ve all been summoned because we found Vera’s and Gayatri’s call logs on the phone of our current suspect.”

“What’s the name of the suspect?” Gayatri asked.

“Anju Apriyanti,” Vinod replied. “And we know you both have been in touch with her. Gayatri, you and Anju exchanged four to five calls. Vera, you spoke to her just last night for nearly an hour. Tanya’s been called because she was Rajat’s victim and is also your best friend. We believe there’s more going on here than we know. It would be better for all of you if you told us the truth now.”

Gayatri blinked in confusion, then turned to Vera. “Vera... do you know anything about this?”

Tanya, already reeling from the shock of her pregnancy, stood silently beside them, her anxiety growing by the second.

Pooja stepped forward. “Sir, I think it’s best if we question them separately. Together, they’ll just confuse each other—and us.”

Vinod nodded. “Agreed.”

He decided to take Vera in for questioning himself. Pooja would question Gayatri, and Officer Prakash would handle Tanya. The three women were escorted into separate rooms.

Interrogation Room 1 – Tanya and Officer Prakash

“You and Vera are close friends, right?” Prakash began. “You told her about the rape the same night it happened?”

Tanya nodded, feeling a knot form in her stomach.

“Did either of you tell anyone else that night? Did you text or call someone—perhaps someone like Anju—who could’ve learned about the incident and taken matters into her own hands?”

“I didn’t tell anyone else. Just Vera. Not even my family,” Tanya replied, her voice tight. “I trust her. She wouldn’t have told anyone, not even her mother. When Gayatri asked her why we left the party early, Vera just told her I wasn’t feeling well.”

“Do you know who Anju is or what connection she has with Vera and Gayatri?” Prakash asked.

Tanya hesitated, then nodded. “Last night, Vera told me Anju is her biological mother.”

Tanya went on to tell Prakash everything she knew—truthfully and clearly, including her pregnancy, which she confessed out of fear, showing him the medical reports as proof.

Prakash was taken aback.

Interrogation Room 2 – Gayatri and Pooja

“So, Gayatri, how exactly do you know Anju Apriyanti?” Pooja asked.

Gayatri shared everything—how Anju had come to her house, how Vera gradually opened up about her connection with Anju, and how Anju had once killed her husband, allegedly to protect her daughter.

Pooja took detailed notes. “Do you know why Anju is a suspect again?”

“No, I don’t understand,” Gayatri said, troubled.

“A few decades ago, she confessed to killing her husband, whom she claimed was a serial killer. The pattern was similar to today’s murders. Then after years in jail, she moves to Panipat, and the killings resume—identical pattern, same motive. That’s not a coincidence.”

“But... she killed thieves to save Vera. That’s what Vera told me.”

“Either Vera lied to you, or Anju lied to Vera. Someone’s not telling the full truth.”

Gayatri went silent. Her mind flashed back to her conversation with Vera yesterday, when Vera had evaded her questions about Anju’s secret. Now she wasn’t so sure. Was Vera lying to her?

Interrogation Room 3 – Vera and Vinod Mehta

“Yesterday was the first time you ever called Anju, and you spoke for almost an hour. Can you explain how you two met and how you know each other?” Vinod asked.

Vera nodded and explained from the very beginning—how Anju had come to her door looking for Gayatri, how she later found out Anju was her biological mother, and

how they'd met in secret and decided to keep the truth from others.

“I lied to Tanya and Mom,” Vera admitted. “But only because I was scared. I didn’t want to lose the chance to know my real mother.”

“Why lie to Gayatri at all?”

“Because I knew she wouldn’t allow me to meet Anju if she knew the truth. But after meeting her and hearing her side, I just... I got attached.”

Vinod silently noted everything.

The Team Discussion

Once the interrogations were complete, Vinod, Pooja, and Prakash met with CBI officers Runjish and Shiv to debrief.

“The statements match up for the most part,” Pooja said. “Except Vera’s part about hiding the truth. It’s clear she and Anju were keeping something from Gayatri and Tanya.”

“They tried to hide the family’s dark history,” Runjish added. “But other than that, the facts line up.”

Vineet joined them with an update. “I reviewed Anju’s full call history. She hardly calls anyone, and most calls are under a minute. Nothing about her behavior screams ‘serial killer.’”

“So what now?” Shiv asked.

“I want to confirm the mother-daughter claim,” Runjish said.

“That can be done with hair samples,” Vineet said. “I’ll collect them.”

“Do it,” Runjish replied.

“But we can’t keep everyone here,” Vinod said. “We have no solid evidence.”

“Then just keep Anju,” Shiv suggested. “She has a criminal past, and she’s the only direct link to both Rajat and the new killings. Until the DNA results are in, she stays.”

“One more thing,” Prakash added, remembering suddenly. “Tanya is pregnant with Rajat’s child. She told me and gave me the reports.”

“What?” Vinod glared. “And you forgot to mention that?”

“Sorry,” Prakash said sheepishly and handed over the reports.

“Bring Tanya back. Pooja will question her again.”

Second Interrogation – Tanya and Pooja

Pooja asked gently, “Tanya, are you sure the baby is Rajat’s?”

“Yes,” Tanya whispered. “That day... it was the only time. I haven’t been with anyone else.”

“Do you want us to inform Rajat’s family? Or are you planning something else?”

“No, please don’t tell them. I haven’t made any decisions yet. I just need time. Please keep this private.”

“You have my word,” Pooja said and gave her a hug. “Be strong.”

Outside the Station

“I want to see my real mother,” Vera said softly to Gayatri.

“No. Not until you tell me *everything*. All of it. No more lies. We’ll talk at home.”

Tanya rejoined them and explained why she had been called back. Then the three of them left. Vera dropped Tanya at her PG and then drove back with Gayatri.

As soon as they stepped inside the house, Gayatri turned to her.

“Now tell me, Vera. Tell me the truth about Anju.”

Broken Trust

“I’m giving you one last chance, Vera,” Gayatri said, her voice trembling with hurt. “Tell me everything you know about Anju. Everything you both talked about at the restaurant and on the phone last night. I want the *whole* truth.”

Vera nodded solemnly. This time, she didn’t hold anything back. She told her mother every detail of her conversations with Anju—their meeting at the café, the emotional revelations, and their lengthy phone call.

“I just don’t believe she’s the one behind the recent murders,” Vera added. “I mean, if she really wanted to be

caught, why would she risk everything just when she found me again?"

Gayatri narrowed her eyes. "And how can you be so sure?"

"Because... I saw her desperation, Mom. I saw the happiness in her eyes. She's been waiting to meet me for twenty years. She wouldn't throw that away."

Gayatri's shoulders slumped as tears welled in her eyes. "But you *lied* to me, Vera. You kept this secret—a dark, dangerous one—about your real family. You broke my trust, my faith in you. I... I don't know how to handle this."

"No. No, Mom, please," Vera pleaded, rushing to her side. "I swear I've told you everything. Please don't cry. You know I can't bear to see you like this."

Gayatri wiped her tears. Vera went to the kitchen, poured a glass of water, and handed it to her.

After a few silent sips, Gayatri finally spoke. "If what you're saying is true... then we may be Anju's only hope. We need to help her. But to do that, we'll need a lawyer. And Vera..." She paused. "Helping someone with a criminal past is a huge risk. I don't think I can ever fully trust her."

"I understand, Mom," Vera said gently. "But she already paid the price for what she did. The new accusations are false. We can't let her go down again for something she didn't do."

Gayatri sighed deeply. "Alright. But I'm doing this *only* for you. We'll go to the police station in the evening with

my lawyer. For now, go home and get some rest—or stay here if you’d prefer.”

Vera decided to go home and return later.

Later That Evening

Vera returned to Gayatri’s place to accompany her to the police station. When they arrived, a suited man was already waiting.

“Hello, I’m Abhishek, legal counsel for Anju Apriyanti,” the lawyer introduced himself to the officials. “I understand my client is in your custody. On what legal grounds have you detained her? Please present the evidence that justifies her arrest.”

Runjish, from the CBI, responded. “Anju was involved in a serial killing case years ago. At that time, she claimed her husband, Aviyansh, was the killer—and she killed him. She served time for it. But after she was released and moved to Panipat, the murders began again—same motive, new method. And now, she’s connected to Rajat’s victim through her daughter Vera, who is best friends with Tanya. It’s too much to ignore.”

Abhishek nodded but replied calmly, “All of that is *circumstantial*. You’ve built a narrative on coincidence and suspicion. But there is *no* proof—nothing solid that links Anju to the current killings. Furthermore, her connection with Vera and Gayatri began *after* Rajat’s death, which is confirmed by phone records. If you wish to keep her in custody, get a court-issued arrest warrant. Otherwise, I demand her immediate release.”

Faced with no substantial evidence, the officials reluctantly agreed. Anju was released.

Outside the Police Station

As they walked out, Anju turned to Gayatri. “Thank you... for helping me. And I’m sorry—for hiding the truth from you. I only did it because I knew you’d never let Vera see me if you knew who I really was. But now... it’s your decision. Whether I get to see my daughter again or not is in your hands.”

Gayatri’s eyes were cold. “I didn’t do this for *you*. I did it for *Vera*—because you once saved her, and today, she asked me to save you. That makes us even. I don’t know if I can ever trust you, Anju. But if you want any future with Vera, I need your word.”

Anju stood tall. “I understand. I swear to you—I will never bring harm to Vera. I will protect her, no matter what.”

With nothing more to say, they each turned and went their separate ways.

Chapter 9

The Decision

Tanya's Home – 3:30 PM

Tanya rang the doorbell of her house under the scorching afternoon sun. Her mother, startled by the unexpected visit, got up from bed and opened the door.

“Tanya? What a surprise!” she said with a faint smile, but her face quickly shifted to concern. Tanya walked inside looking pale, exhausted, and overwhelmed.

“You didn’t say you were coming home today. Is everything alright?” her mother asked.

“No, Mom. I’m *not* alright,” Tanya said, her voice low and trembling. “Too much has happened in the past two weeks. I can’t carry it alone anymore. That’s why I came... I need to tell you—and Dad—everything.”

Her mother’s expression turned serious. “You don’t need to suffer in silence, Tanya. Talk to me, please. You’re scaring me.”

Tanya sat down slowly, her hands cold and clenched. “He’s called me a few times... Dad, I mean. I never picked

up until yesterday, when I felt like I couldn't breathe anymore. I begged him to come home... I need you both."

Her mother sat beside her and gently placed a hand on her shoulder. "He hasn't come home in so long... not even a call. But *I'm* here. You can talk to me."

"I know," Tanya said, trying to control the tears streaming down her face. "But I need both of you. He promised he would come. Let's wait until he arrives. Then I'll say it all, together."

Her mother nodded. "Okay, sweetheart. Stop crying. I'll get you some water."

She walked to the kitchen, and Tanya stared ahead blankly. A few minutes later, her mother returned with a glass and sat next to her.

"Is it because of your birthday?" her mother asked softly, smiling weakly. "Did you come to celebrate it with me today?"

Tanya looked up, confused. "What? No, Mom. It's not my birthday. That's not why I'm here."

Her smile faded. "Oh... I thought your father would bring your cake soon. He promised you, remember?"

Tanya's heart dropped. She realized her mother's Alzheimer's was surfacing again.

"Mom, please. Not now," Tanya whispered, her voice cracking. "I need your *attention*. I need *you*. Please snap out of it..."

Her mother's confused expression didn't change. Frustrated and defeated, Tanya stood up and walked to the other room. She shut the door and locked it from inside.

“Please open the door, Tanya. What happened?” her mother knocked softly. “Did I say something wrong?”

But Tanya didn’t respond. She sat on the bed, holding her knees to her chest. Her mind was a storm.

Thirty minutes later, the doorbell rang again.

Tanya came out of the room slowly, just as her mother opened the door. Standing there was **Amit**, her father.

Without a word, he stepped in and embraced his daughter. Tanya broke down in his arms.

“I don’t know what’s going on,” her mother said to Amit. “She told me to wait until you came before she said anything.”

They all sat down together. Amit looked at his daughter with a mix of guilt and tenderness. “Tell us, Tanya. Please.”

She hesitated, then looked down. “Dad... if you’ve been following the news, then you must know about what happened in my college.”

Amit nodded. “Yes. That boy—Rajat—he was found murdered. They’re saying it’s the work of the serial killer.”

Tanya took a deep breath and whispered, “He raped someone... and that someone was me. And now... I’m pregnant with his child.”

The room fell into stunned silence. Both parents were frozen in disbelief. Tanya couldn’t bear to look at them.

“Please... say something,” she whispered.

Her mother blinked, then slowly wrapped her arms around her. “You called me several times in the last two weeks... and I never noticed you were in such pain. I’m

sorry. I should've known. But you're not alone anymore. We're here now."

"It's okay, Mom," Tanya replied. "You don't even have a TV or a smartphone. You're already fighting your own battles. I didn't come here to blame you. I just want both of you to be my strength now."

"Oh, my strong daughter..." Amit said, his eyes brimming with tears. "I wish you'd told me sooner. I've regretted leaving you and your mother every day since I did. Not a single day has gone by when I haven't thought about both of you."

"I didn't pick up your calls because I was still angry... about everything. But Gayatri aunty talked some sense into me. I needed you both more than I realized."

Amit nodded. "You were right to be angry. I was wrong to abandon you. But from this moment on, I'm here. I'll be with you in every step, every decision. Just leave the rest to me."

Tanya looked at both her parents. "I just want one promise—that you'll help me figure out what to do. I don't know what to do with this... this life inside me."

"We'll figure it out, together," her mother said, placing a hand over hers.

Amit wiped his tears. "You're not alone anymore, Tanya. That's my promise."

Not an Easy Decision

Tanya sat with her parents in the living room, finally ready to reveal everything she'd been holding inside. Her voice trembled as she spoke, but she didn't leave out a single

detail. When she was done, there was a long silence. Amit leaned back, taking a deep breath, then spoke gently.

“Well... it’s a good thing that almost no one knows you were Rajat’s victim—or about your pregnancy. Apart from Vera, her mother, and the officials, it hasn’t reached anyone else. That gives us time and space to think clearly about the next steps.”

He looked directly into his daughter’s eyes. “Tanya, I know this has been crushing for you. I can’t even imagine what you’ve been going through. But no matter what, the final decision has to be yours. Do you want us to inform Rajat’s parents about this? Or... do you want to keep it private? And more importantly—do you even want to go through with this pregnancy?”

Tanya shook her head. Her voice was soft but certain. “Dad, I don’t want to tell anyone. Not about the rape... not about the pregnancy. I don’t want this baby. I need to focus on my life, my career... I’m not ready for this. I can’t carry a child that came from something so horrible.”

She hesitated. “But... what do *you* think, Dad? What would you do?”

Amit was quiet for a moment, choosing his words carefully. “If I’m honest, part of me thinks we should inform Rajat’s parents. They aren’t to blame for what their son did, but this child is connected to them by blood. I feel they deserve to know. But if you don’t want that—and I understand why you wouldn’t—I will stand by your side, no matter what.”

Tanya’s eyes filled with tears again. “No, Dad. We’re *not* telling them.”

Amit sighed. “I’m just worried the police might tell them first.”

“They won’t,” Tanya said firmly. “If they did, they’d be publicly identifying a rape survivor. That’s illegal. They wouldn’t take that risk.”

“I understand that. But what if the news comes out from somewhere else? We can’t control everything.”

“You promised to support my decision, Dad.”

“I did. And I meant it. But as your father, it’s my job to make sure you’ve thought it through—so you don’t end up regretting anything later.”

“I’ve thought about it. A lot. I’ve made my decision. I want an abortion. And I want you and Mom with me.”

Tanya’s mother, Kavi, who had been silent till now, nodded and spoke softly. “Yes, sweetheart. We’re with you.”

Amit nodded in agreement. “Tomorrow, we’ll go back to Panipat. We’ll visit the police station and get the documentation you’ll need for the abortion. As a rape survivor, you’ll require legal clearance—no doctor will proceed without it.”

He placed his hand on Tanya’s shoulder. “You’ve been strong all this time. You don’t have to fight this alone anymore.”

Tanya managed a small nod, then went to her room to rest. As she lay on the bed, she picked up her phone and messaged Vera:

Tanya: *“I’ve told my parents everything. They’re with me on my decision. It wasn’t easy... we talked a lot.”*

Vera: *“That’s good. You must feel relieved now, don’t you?”*

Tanya: *“Yes... so much. I should have told them sooner.”*

Vera: *“It’s never too late. Let them take over now. You’ve done enough. Everything will be okay.”*

Tanya: *“Tomorrow I’m coming back to Panipat with Dad for the paperwork and the procedure.”*

Vera: *“If you need anything—anything at all—I’m here.”*

Tanya: *“Thank you. I’ll rest now. Talk later.”*

Tanya switched off her phone, closed her eyes, and slowly drifted off to sleep.

Meanwhile, in the living room, Amit sat beside Kavi, visibly worried.

“Now that I’m here, please don’t stress yourself too much. It might affect your condition. I’ll take care of everything—just trust me.”

Kavi placed her hand over his. “I do trust you. You’ll go to any lengths for her, I know that. But she needs *both* of us now. We have to be her strength. Tomorrow... won’t be easy for her.”

Amit sighed. “Saying it is one thing. But tomorrow, when she walks into that clinic and signs those papers—when she realizes she’s ending a life that’s begun inside her—it won’t be easy. I just hope God gives her the strength to bear it.”

Kavi stood. “She hasn’t eaten since she got home. And neither have you. I’ll cook something—”

“No, don’t worry,” Amit interrupted gently. “I’ll go out and bring something she loves.”

Kavi smiled faintly. “Alright.”

An hour later, Amit returned with three packed meals in hand—**pani puri**, **pav bhaji**, and **pasta**—all from Tanya’s favorite place: **Haldiram’s**.

He set them on the table and called out, “Tanya, come out. I brought your favorites!”

Tanya emerged from her room, and the sight of the food made her eyes light up. She sat down immediately and started eating.

“I brought it all from Haldiram’s,” Amit said with a smile.

“Thank you, Dad,” Tanya said between bites, the first genuine smile on her face in days.

Seeing her eat lifted Amit and Kavi’s spirits too, and they joined her for dinner.

“For tomorrow, I’ll pack your lunch for school, and your dad will drop you off in the morning,” Kavi said.

Tanya exchanged a knowing glance with her father. The disease had kicked in again—her mother was momentarily confused. But Tanya smiled and said, “Okay, Mom.”

After dinner, Tanya cleaned up the table and threw the trash away. Kavi quietly slipped into her room and turned off the lights.

A few minutes later, Tanya and Amit entered the other room together and lay down to sleep.

Second Thoughts

Tanya sat by the window of the bus, watching the road blur past as she traveled with her father from their hometown, Shahbad, to Panipat. It was a partially cloudy April morning. Her father, Amit, had dozed off beside her, gently leaning against the seat. Tanya looked at him for a moment, then turned her gaze out of the window.

A soft, cold breeze brushed against her face as the bus sped along the highway. Her eyes caught glimpses of fields lining the road—farmers were deep in the rhythm of harvesting, their movements methodical and focused. Something about the simplicity of that life stirred something inside her.

That's when the doubt crept in.

“Do I really want this abortion?” she thought.
“Would it make me a murderer?”

She hadn't allowed herself to ask that question before—not seriously. But now, with everything moving so quickly, the uncertainty was louder than ever.

Then came the other reality—her *own* life. Her dreams. Her ambitions. She thought about college, her upcoming exams, the job she hoped to land someday, the financial independence she longed for—not just for herself, but for her mother too.

A child, especially under such circumstances, would bring all of that to a standstill.

Tanya closed her eyes and slowly rested her head on her father's shoulder, trying to quiet the storm inside her. The bus hit a few bumps along the way, occasionally waking

them both from light naps. Hours passed until the bus conductor announced, **“Next stop—Panipat Bus Stand!”**

Tanya and Amit gathered their things and got off the bus. From the terminal, they hired an electric rickshaw and headed straight to the police station.

At the station, Officer Prakash was the first to recognize them.

“Is everything alright, Tanya? Do you need to tell us something?” he asked gently.

Before Tanya could respond, Amit stepped forward.

“I’m her father,” he said. “We’re here to request an official document that will allow Tanya to undergo an abortion. As you already know, she is a rape survivor and has every legal right to terminate this unwanted pregnancy.”

Prakash nodded respectfully. “Let me speak to my superior first. Please have a seat.”

He stepped into the superior’s office and explained the situation.

“Go ahead and give her the clearance,” the superior said. “She’s within her rights.”

Prakash returned with the necessary document, stamped and signed. “This will allow any registered medical practitioner to perform the abortion. You’re good to go.”

“Also,” Tanya added hesitantly, “Could I get a copy of the pregnancy report I submitted when I was last here?”

“Of course,” Prakash said. He pulled out the case file, made a copy, and handed it to her.

With the paperwork complete, Tanya and Amit left for the hospital where she had first confirmed her pregnancy.

At the hospital, Amit went to the reception to book an appointment. The receptionist asked them to wait, so he returned to sit beside Tanya.

She looked pale. Her right leg bounced nervously—something Amit immediately noticed. He gently placed a hand on her leg to calm her.

“Take a deep breath,” he whispered. “You’re not alone in this.”

Tanya inhaled deeply, then exhaled slowly. But the closer they got to the procedure, the heavier her fear became.

A few minutes later, the receptionist called their names. Amit collected the documents and the report and they walked into the doctor’s office.

The doctor recognized Tanya instantly. “You came with a friend a few days ago, didn’t you?”

Tanya nodded.

After reviewing the paperwork, the doctor looked up and smiled reassuringly. “There’s nothing to worry about. You’re only about two weeks pregnant, so the abortion can be done with just a pill. It’s non-invasive, and you won’t feel much at all.”

Amit leaned forward. “Are there any side effects we should be concerned about?”

“None,” the doctor replied. “It’s safe and very commonly used.”

He scribbled the name of the pill on a prescription slip and handed it to them. “You can buy this from the pharmacy outside.”

They thanked the doctor and walked out.

As they left the pharmacy with the pill in hand, Tanya turned to her father.

“Maybe... maybe you should go home now, Dad. I can take care of things from here. My exams are coming up, and if I travel back and forth, it’ll waste so much time.”

Amit stopped walking and looked her in the eye. “No, Tanya. This isn’t something I’ll let you go through alone. You’re coming home with me. You can bring your study materials from your PG and prepare at home. When exams arrive, you can return to Panipat.”

Tanya hesitated but then nodded silently.

They found a quiet place nearby to eat the lunch Kavi had packed for them. Homemade food never tasted better—perhaps because of what it represented: love, comfort, and a little normalcy.

Once done, they made their way to Tanya’s PG to collect her things before heading back to Shahbad.

Hard to Swallow

Tanya and Amit reached home around 7:00 p.m., the sun already dipped below the horizon, casting a quiet melancholy through the streets of Shahbad.

As soon as she entered, Tanya received a message on her phone. It was from Vera.

“How did everything go? Are you done with the abortion thing?”

Tanya stared at the screen, expressionless. Her thumb hovered for a moment... then she locked the phone without replying. She wasn't ready to talk—*not yet*.

Inside, Kavi had already prepared dinner. She set the table and served the food without saying much, sensing her daughter's heavy silence. The three sat and ate with minimal conversation, the clinking of utensils the only sound breaking the tension.

Once dinner was done, Tanya quietly excused herself. She walked into her room and retrieved the small, white pill from the paper bag. Holding it in her hand, she made her way into the kitchen, filled a glass of water, and stood frozen.

Her eyes locked on the pill in her palm. Her parents watched from the doorway, silent, solemn, and full of concern. Tanya's body language said it all—she was struggling.

Amit stepped forward. “You're strong, Tanya,” he said gently. “If this is what you truly want, get on with it. The longer you wait, the harder it'll become. Doubt grows in silence.”

Tanya looked at him, her fingers slowly closing around the pill. “I’m *trying*, Dad,” she whispered, trembling. “But... I don’t know. It feels like something—like some invisible force—is warning me not to do this.” She gasped, her voice cracking, eyes welling up.

Kavi approached slowly, placing a hand on her daughter’s back. “It’s okay, baby. Whatever you decide, we’ll support you. Just breathe.”

But Tanya’s thoughts were spiraling. Her head spun with fear, regret, and confusion. For a moment, she looked like she was about to put the pill down. Then, with a sudden burst of resolve—or desperation—she pushed her mother gently aside, opened her fist, and placed the pill in her mouth.

With trembling hands, she brought the glass to her lips and swallowed it.

The moment it went down, the glass slipped from her fingers and crashed to the floor, water splashing everywhere.

She stood frozen, shaking, as tears streamed down her cheeks. Her voice broke into sobs.

“What did I just do? What did I just do?”

Amit rushed forward and wrapped his arms around her. “You did the right thing, my child,” he said firmly, holding her tightly. “It’s done now. Come on, let me take you to your room.”

He gently guided her to her bedroom and helped her lie down. Kavi followed and stood quietly at the door, her eyes red but dry.

Amit sat at Tanya's bedside, holding her hand. Tanya turned to him, eyes desperate for an answer she couldn't find.

**“Just tell me, Dad... did I do something wrong?”
“I don't know anymore. I just... I need to hear it from you.”**

Amit looked down, heartbroken. He opened his mouth, but no words came. He didn't have an answer. Not one that would bring peace to his daughter.

Kavi walked over and sat beside Tanya, brushing a hand across her forehead. “You're in shock, sweetheart,” she said softly. “You're overwhelmed. Right now, your heart and mind are too heavy. Let's talk in the morning, okay? For now, just try to rest.”

She leaned down and kissed Tanya's forehead, then gently stroked her hair in rhythm, trying to soothe her into sleep.

Amit and Kavi stayed with Tanya the entire time, not saying a word, not moving a muscle—just sitting in silence beside her bed, keeping her safe in the only way they could.

Outside, the night settled quietly around them.

Chapter 10

Welcome Back

The Wait is Finally Over

Vera's phone buzzed around 2:00 a.m., jolting her awake. She squinted in the dark, blindly fumbling for her phone on the nightstand, her fingers closing around it as the screen glowed.

"Hello... who is it?" she asked groggily.

A moment later, her eyes widened. She shot upright in bed.

"I'll be right there," she said quickly, hanging up.

Grabbing her car keys from the living room, Vera dashed out into the night. As she drove, she tried calling her mother, Gayatri, but her phone was unreachable. Minutes later, she reached Gayatri's house and rang the bell repeatedly until the lights came on inside.

Gayatri opened the front gate, alarmed. "What happened, Vera? What brings you here at this hour? Is everything okay?"

Vera's breath was shaky. "We need to go. Now. I just got a call from the hospital... it's about Dad. He's waking up."

Gayatri's eyes widened. Without a word, she locked the gate and got into the car.

"Is he okay? Did he come out of the coma?"

"Yes. A nurse said he regained consciousness and could be fully awake anytime now."

Gayatri let out a long, relieved sigh. "Finally... some good news."

Vera drove fast, the roads empty and quiet under the dim glow of streetlamps. Within minutes, they reached the hospital and rushed to the reception, where the nurse who had called Vera greeted them.

"Dev is awake," the nurse said with a smile. "He opened his eyes and showed some movement. Please come with me."

Vera and Gayatri instinctively hugged each other before following the nurse to the recovery room. When they stepped in, they saw Dev lying in bed—his eyes open, alert but tired.

Vera stepped closer, her voice shaking with emotion. "Welcome back, Dad. We missed you so much."

Tears welled in her eyes, and even Gayatri couldn't hold back the emotion. Dev blinked and turned his head slowly toward them.

"What... happened to me? Why am I in a hospital?" he asked weakly.

“You’ve been in a coma, Dad,” Vera said gently. “I’ll explain everything once you’ve rested more. Don’t push yourself right now.”

“I feel... so weak. I tried to move my legs... but I can’t. None of this makes sense.”

“I promise, it will,” Vera replied, taking his hand. “Just give yourself time. I’ll tell you everything when you’re ready.”

Dev’s gaze shifted to Gayatri. His voice cracked with guilt. “I’m sorry... for everything I did to you. I... I shouldn’t have—”

“Shhh,” Gayatri cut in gently. “Not now. You don’t have to say anything right now.”

The nurse stepped forward, noticing Dev’s growing strain. “I think we should let him rest now. You can see him again in the morning.”

Dev gave a small nod and closed his eyes. Vera and Gayatri stepped out of the room and sat on a bench just outside. Exhausted, Vera rested her head in her mother’s lap, while Gayatri dozed off in her chair, head bowed, their hands loosely intertwined in sleep.

They were woken at dawn by the cries of a couple nearby who had just lost their youngest son. The sound of grief cut through the early morning stillness like glass shattering. Gayatri quietly offered a prayer for the family and their unimaginable pain.

Hospitals are strange places, Vera thought as she stood. They make you see the raw, fragile truth of life—and how precious every breath really is.

They walked over to the nurse's station. Gayatri asked if they could see Dev again.

"He seems to be doing much better," the nurse replied. "His memory and mind appear stable now, but just be gentle with him."

Inside the room, Dev was awake, his eyes clearer now. Gayatri turned to Vera.

"You stay here with your father. I'll go home and bring breakfast for both of you."

"Are you sure? I can drop you off," Vera offered.

Gayatri smiled. "I'll manage. You just take care of him. I won't be long."

As Gayatri left, Vera sat beside Dev, smiling warmly at him. After three long years, he was finally back.

Dev looked at her, his brows furrowed in confusion. "Vera... would you tell me now? What happened to me? How did I end up in a hospital? Everything's so blurry."

Vera took his hand gently and nodded. "Alright, Dad. It's time you knew everything."

Vera's 18th Birthday

20th December 2021

Vera turned eighteen today.

She stepped out of her room in her college uniform, ready for an exam, her mind focused but light. In the living room, she saw her dad, Dev, placing breakfast on the dining table. He'd made scrambled eggs and sandwiches himself, just like he used to when she was a kid.

They sat down to eat together.

“So,” Dev said casually, “what do you have in mind for your birthday?”

Vera thought for a moment and replied, “Nothing special, Dad. After the exam, my friends and I might hang out, grab a bite somewhere. That’s it.”

“So you’ll be back home early in the evening. That’s good,” he said, almost too casually.

Vera narrowed her eyes, smiling. “Why? You’ve planned something, haven’t you?”

“Nope. Nothing fancy. Your mom’s coming over for dinner, that’s all. Just us three,” Dev said with a grin. “So don’t get your hopes up for a surprise party.”

Vera chuckled. “You guys don’t have to do anything. Just dinner with both of you is enough for me.”

Dev suddenly coughed and reached for water. After a moment, he recovered.

“Are you okay, Dad? You didn’t expect such a grown-up answer from me, did you?”

“That’s exactly it,” Dev laughed. “Hearing words like that on the day my daughter turns eighteen—it caught me off guard. Hard to swallow.”

After breakfast, Vera left for college, and Dev headed to his confectionery shop. When he arrived, his assistant Deepak had already opened up and was serving customers. Dev greeted him, then went to the back to check the inventory.

He updated the register, noticed some items were low in stock, and placed new orders. By midday, two trucks arrived with supplies. Dev supervised the unloading in the godown, directing the laborers where to place everything. Every now and then, he pressed his fingers to his temple—he'd been getting headaches since morning. Deepak noticed but didn't press too hard.

After the deliveries were done and bills settled, Deepak asked, "Sir, what would you like for lunch?"

Dev shook his head. "Nothing. I'll eat properly tonight. It's Vera's birthday—I'm planning to stuff myself."

"Still, you should eat something. You've been on your feet for hours. And honestly, you don't look great today."

"I'm fine, Deepak," Dev said, forcing a smile, but Deepak remained unconvinced.

That evening, Dev returned home just as Vera arrived. They both changed, and together they started preparing dinner. Just as they were chopping vegetables, the doorbell rang.

"That must be Gayatri," Dev guessed.

Vera opened the door and found her mother holding a cake. "Happy birthday, sweetheart," Gayatri said warmly, handing her the cake and embracing her daughter.

"Thanks, Mom," Vera said, her smile lighting up the room.

Gayatri joined them in the kitchen, offering to help with dinner. A few minutes later, Vera stepped out to take a phone call from a college friend, leaving Gayatri and Dev alone in the kitchen.

Gayatri lowered her voice. “When are you planning to tell her?”

“Tonight,” Dev replied quietly. “After dinner. We’ll tell her together. It’s time she knows the truth—about her real mother, about how we found her and decided to keep her.”

They quickly went silent as Vera returned.

Later, after the meal was ready, they moved to the living room to cut the cake. Gayatri placed the cake on the table, and Vera held the knife, ready to make a wish.

Just as she was about to cut it, Dev suddenly collapsed to the floor.

“Dad!” Vera screamed, rushing to his side.

Gayatri dropped to her knees, trying to wake him. “Dev! Dev, can you hear me?” He didn’t respond.

Gayatri ran to the kitchen, grabbed a glass of water, and sprinkled it on his face—but still, nothing. Vera dashed outside to call neighbors for help. Two men from the street came up immediately. With their help, they lifted Dev and placed him in the backseat of the car.

Gayatri sat with Dev in the car while Vera followed on her scooter. Neither of them knew how to drive, so they had no choice but to accept the neighbors’ offer to accompany them.

All along the way, Vera’s heart pounded. Her birthday had turned into a nightmare.

At the hospital, the men helped get Dev onto a stretcher. The nurses took him in while Vera stood at the entrance, waiting anxiously.

The doctor soon appeared and hurried into the examination room. Vera tried to follow, but he stopped her. “Please wait outside for now.”

Minutes felt like hours. Finally, the doctor called Vera and Gayatri into his office. His expression was grim.

“We’ve run some tests,” he said. “There’s a tumor in his brain. He’s slipped into a coma because of it.”

The room spun.

“What... how long will he be like this?” Gayatri asked, her voice shaking.

“It’s hard to say,” the doctor admitted. “If we’re lucky, he might wake up in a few hours... or days. But it could take months. Even years.”

Vera broke down, the tears coming fast. “How will I manage everything without my dad?”

Gayatri wrapped her arms around her. She had no real answer—only love to offer.

“You’re not alone, Vera,” she whispered. “We’ll figure this out together. I promise. We’ve got this.”

Learning to Manage

After spending a week at the hospital—waiting, hoping, and watching over her father day and night—Vera finally came to a painful realization: he might not wake up any time soon. Life, whether she was ready or not, had to go on.

She returned home late one evening. The house felt heavier than before, almost grieving in its silence. Every room whispered his absence. For hours, she sat in the living

room, unable to move, the emptiness pressing against her chest. Then, pushing herself forward, she prepared a simple lunch and forced it down. Afterward, she picked up a broom and began cleaning the house, hoping motion would soothe the ache.

That evening, Vera walked to her father's shop and found Deepak assisting customers behind the counter.

"Has there been any effect on the shop while Dad's been away?" she asked.

"Not yet," Deepak replied, "but in a few days, we'll be running low on stock. We'll need to reorder before then."

"Do you have the supplier contacts?"

Deepak shook his head. "No, your dad always handled that. Maybe check his phone?"

"I don't have it on me," Vera sighed. "No worries. Let's check the inventory and make a list together."

They walked into the godown, and Vera began noting down the items running low. Later, she reviewed the account books to get a grip on the shop's financials. After a long evening of assisting customers and scribbling notes, she finally went home around 10 p.m. Exhausted, she dug through a drawer and found her father's phone. She copied the supplier numbers into her own and, without dinner, collapsed into bed.

The next morning, after a quick breakfast, Vera returned to the shop and began making calls. One by one, she informed the suppliers of her father's condition and assured

them she would be handling things for now. Each person expressed genuine concern for Dev.

“Your father is a good man,” one of them said. “Tell him we’re praying for his recovery.”

Their warmth and support made the job a little easier.

Later, when deliveries began arriving, Vera hit a wall. She had no idea where certain items belonged in the godown. The unloading took all day, and she had to reorganize things by trial and error. By the end of it, her legs were shaking, and her hands were stained with sweat and dust.

The first few weeks were brutal.

Gayatri, her mother, stepped in whenever she could. She helped cook, ran errands, and reminded Vera to breathe. Vera balanced her life on a razor’s edge—one foot at home, the other at the shop. Meals were skipped. The house grew messy. College classes became optional. She learned to drive her father’s car to save time and juggle responsibilities.

That’s when the realization hit her: her father had been doing all of this silently, every single day, and never once complained.

Determined not to let the chaos drown her, Vera hired an accountant for the shop. Someone to manage inventory, place orders, handle records—so she could return to her studies and take care of the house more mindfully.

Slowly but surely, things began to fall into place.

By the end of the month, Vera had found her rhythm. She was managing the shop, the home, her studies—and still making time to visit the hospital regularly.

One afternoon, she sat by her father's bedside.

His chest rose and fell slowly under the white hospital sheets. Machines beeped rhythmically in the background. Vera took his hand and held it between both of hers.

"I miss you so much, Dad," she whispered. "Sometimes I feel like giving up. But then I think—what if you woke up on the same day I gave up? How could I ever face you?"

Tears welled in her eyes, but she didn't let them fall.

"I just want to make you proud. I want you to see that your daughter didn't fall apart. That she stood up when life tried to bring her down."

She leaned forward and gently rested her head on his palm, closing her eyes.

The silence was warm, gentle. And in that quiet moment, with her father still not responding, Vera found a different kind of strength—one that grows only through pain, love, and fierce perseverance.

The Present Day

After listening to everything Vera told him, Dev let out a deep sigh. His eyes, still a little sunken from weeks of weakness, softened with pride.

"You've worked so hard while I was gone, my child," he said, voice husky with emotion. "I'm truly proud of you, Vera. The way you managed everything... it's beyond what

anyone could've expected. You've become more mature, more responsible. And yet, none of this should have fallen on you. It was my failure to look after myself."

Vera smiled faintly, tears shimmering in her eyes. "It wasn't just your fault, Dad. I should've asked you about your health more often. I was so caught up in my own world, I didn't see what you were going through. I promise, from now on, I'll be more attentive. I'll take care of you."

Dev nodded gently. "Then let's promise to look after each other. From now on."

"That sounds perfect, Dad," Vera said. "Let's do it."

Just then, the door opened. Gayatri walked in, carrying a tiffin and a warm smile.

"Breakfast time," she said cheerfully, opening the containers and serving fresh aloo paratha and curd for the three of them. They sat together like old times—quiet, comforting, healing.

After breakfast, Vera excused herself to go home for a shower and some rest. Gayatri stayed behind, fluffing Dev's pillows and checking in with the nurse.

"Vera's really grown up," Dev said as Gayatri adjusted the sheets. "Maybe... maybe we should finally tell her about her real mother."

Gayatri's smile faded slightly. She placed a calming hand on his arm. "Not now, Dev. You've just woken up after nearly two and a half years in a coma. You need to focus on recovery. Vera is strong, yes—but let's not burden her just yet. Get better first. Then we can talk."

She left the room so Dev could rest. A little later, Gayatri approached the nurse.

“When do you think Dev will be discharged?” she asked.

The nurse shook her head gently. “Not anytime soon. Post-coma patients often struggle with motor function. He’ll need physical therapy to walk again—it could take a week or two. The good news is, therapy starts this afternoon.”

“Can the therapy be done at home?”

“Unfortunately, no. It needs supervision. But don’t worry—he’s showing good signs. Just give it time.”

Gayatri nodded, thanked the nurse, and returned to her seat outside the room.

Meanwhile, Vera had showered and changed. On her way back to the hospital, she called Tanya to share the good news.

“He’s awake, Tanya,” she said with a smile. “After all these years, he’s finally awake.”

“That’s amazing, Vera. I’m so happy for you.”

After hanging up, Vera called Anju, her biological mother. The call went to voicemail—but within seconds, Anju returned it.

“Hi Vera. Sorry, I was in the washroom when you called.”

“I just wanted to tell you—my dad woke up last night. He’s out of the coma.”

“That’s wonderful news,” Anju said. “I’d really love to meet him someday.”

“You will, I promise. But not just yet. We haven’t told him anything about you, and I don’t want to risk his health by overwhelming him right now.”

“I understand. Keep me updated, okay?”

“I will, Mom. Talk to you soon.” Vera ended the call and continued her drive.

At the hospital, she found Gayatri sitting quietly outside Dev’s room.

“He’s resting,” Gayatri said. “But he did mention wanting to tell you the truth—about your birth mother.”

“You didn’t say anything to him, right?”

“No, I didn’t. I told him the same thing—we wait until he’s fully recovered. There’s no need to rush.”

“Good. On the way here, I called Anju. She wants to meet Dad too, but I asked her to wait.”

“You did the right thing. For now, his recovery is our priority.” Gayatri paused. “Oh, and I spoke to the nurse while you were gone. Dev will need physical therapy before he can walk again. It starts this afternoon.”

“We’ll do whatever’s best for him. No shortcuts this time,” Vera said.

Just then, the doctor emerged from Dev’s room and asked them to follow him into his office. They sat across from him as he laid two brain scans on the table.

“Now that Dev is awake, we need to talk about the tumor,” the doctor began. “This scan on the left is from December 20, 2021—the day he fell into the coma. The one on the right is from last week. As you can see, the tumor has grown significantly.”

Gayatri’s heart skipped a beat. “What can we do, doctor? How do we treat it?”

“If he had woken up sooner, chemotherapy might have worked. But now, surgery is our only option. Delaying it further could risk another coma—or worse, brain death.”

“Can it be done here?” Gayatri asked.

“I don’t perform such surgeries myself, but I’ll refer you to the best neurosurgical hospital in Delhi,” the doctor said. He pulled a card from his drawer and handed it to Vera. “This team specializes in brain tumors. With Dev’s insurance, the costs will be covered.”

Vera took the card and nodded. “I’ll go see them tomorrow. I want my father healthy again—strong like before. We can’t afford to lose him again.”

The doctor nodded and dismissed them gently.

Back in the room, Dev was awake again. Vera rushed to his side and held his hand.

“You look like you’ve been running,” he said with a weak smile.

“I’ve been running after life, Dad,” she smiled back, brushing his hair. “But I’m not tired—not when you’re finally back.”

And in that quiet hospital room, as machines hummed softly and sunlight trickled in, hope felt like it was finally within reach.

Chapter 11

A Separation and a Proud Moment

The Apology

Dev had been recovering in his hospital bed for the past five days after his surgery. His daughter, Vera, sat beside him, scrolling idly through her phone, recording short videos of herself to escape the boredom. On the other side of the room, his ex-wife Gayatri sat quietly on a steel chair bolted to the floor, watching them in silence.

Suddenly, Dev stirred and spoke weakly, “Vera... could you get me a glass of water?”

Startled, Vera quickly set her phone aside and looked around for the bottle. She grabbed it, only to find it empty.

“Oh shit, it’s empty,” she muttered under her breath. Then turning to Dev, she said, “Wait, Dad. I’ll get some water from outside. Be right back.”

She walked out, forgetting to take her phone with her.

Inside the room, Dev turned his head slowly toward Gayatri. “Could you come sit beside me for a moment? There’s something I need to say to you.”

Gayatri’s eyes narrowed slightly in curiosity. She got up and moved to the chair next to his bed. “Yes? What is it?”

Dev exhaled deeply. His voice trembled. “I don’t know if this is the right time... but I’ve needed to say this for a long time.”

Gayatri’s heart skipped a beat.

“Six years ago... I did terrible things to you. I used to come home drunk every Saturday. I cursed you. I hit you. I forced myself on you,” he choked. “For four months... I broke you. And yet, you stayed.”

Gayatri sat frozen, her fingers clenched together tightly.

“I’ve lived with that guilt every single day,” Dev continued, his throat dry and eyes brimming. “Maybe... maybe that’s why I got this tumor. Maybe it’s punishment. I’ve been wanting to say sorry since the day I woke up. I know my apology can’t undo what I did, but—” He stopped, his voice cracking. “I’m sorry. I’m truly, deeply sorry.”

Dev broke down, crying silently as he folded his hands in shame before her.

Gayatri’s eyes welled up. A lump formed in her throat. She had long carried the burden of those memories—but in that moment, seeing Dev weak, remorseful, and human, something shifted inside her.

She gently took his hands and unfolded them. “Don’t... don’t join your hands in front of me, Dev,” she whispered.

“You’re already suffering. Talking about it again will only slow your healing. But... I forgive you.”

Dev blinked through his tears, not sure if he’d heard her right.

“You’re right,” she added softly. “What you did to me was inexcusable. But you’ve shown true remorse, and that counts for something. You’ve changed. That matters.”

He took a deep breath, wiping his tears. “You’re one in a million, Gayatri. Thank you... not just for forgiving me, but also for protecting Vera from all this. If she had ever found out what I did... I would’ve lost her too.”

Gayatri nodded. “She’s our daughter, Dev. Mine as much as yours. I raised her because it was the right thing to do—not because you weren’t around. And yes, I never told her... because she sees you as her hero. I couldn’t take that away from her.”

There was silence, heavy but full of mutual understanding.

Just then, the door creaked open. Vera returned, holding a cold bottle of water in one hand. She looked between the two of them, sensing a subtle emotional tension but not questioning it.

“I got the water,” she said cheerfully and poured some into a glass, helping her father sip.

Afterward, she noticed her phone still lying near Dev. She picked it up, locked the screen, and slipped it into her pocket.

As Gayatri began to rise from the bedside chair, Vera gently stopped her.

“Mom, sit here. This chair’s more comfortable. You’ve been sitting on that metal one all morning. You must be tired.”

Gayatri smiled at her daughter’s thoughtfulness.

“I’ll take the steel one,” Vera said warmly. “It’s no problem.”

The three of them sat there quietly—a daughter between the man she admired and the woman who had sacrificed everything to protect her from the truth. The past was scarred, but the present was healing. And sometimes, that was enough to begin again.

Home Sweet Home

After spending over two years in a coma and several more weeks in the hospital for recovery and surgery, **Dev was finally coming home.**

Gayatri entered the house first, turning on the lights. Vera followed closely behind, supporting her father gently as he stepped into the familiar space. The moment Dev crossed the threshold, he paused. The house had changed slightly—small differences in furniture, decorations, the scent of incense—but its essence remained. A deep sense of relief flowed through him. *After all, true rest only begins when you're back in a place you can call home.*

Gayatri disappeared into the kitchen to prepare tea while Dev settled himself on the sofa. Vera, needing a quick break, went to her room to use the washroom. She returned a few minutes later, just as Gayatri was entering the living room carrying a tray with three cups of tea.

Dev reached out to pick his cup at the same time Vera moved her hand toward it, and their hands brushed. The cup wobbled—then hot tea spilled on Dev’s hand.

“Oh no!” Vera exclaimed. “I’m so sorry, Dad! That must’ve burned.”

Dev winced and clenched his fist but tried to downplay it. “Yes, a little... but I’ll be fine.”

Gayatri quickly returned with a towel and handed it to him. Vera, feeling guilty, offered her own cup.

“Take mine. I’ll make another one.”

“You don’t need to,” Gayatri called from the kitchen. “There’s still some left in the kettle.”

Vera nodded and brought a new cup for herself, rejoining them in the living room. They sipped in silence, the warm tea a comfort.

After finishing, Gayatri stood up. “I’ll get going now,” she said.

“Okay, Mom. Thank you,” Vera replied.

As the door closed behind her, Vera turned to Dev. “I can take you to the shop this evening. Until then, rest and take your medicines, okay?”

Dev nodded, opened his medicine pouch, swallowed the tablets with some water, and went to his room for a nap.

That evening, Dev stepped out of the house, soaking in the fresh air while waiting for Vera. A few minutes later, she joined him at the front gate.

“Let’s go, Dad,” she said, and Dev got into the passenger seat.

As they drove toward the shop, Dev looked out the window, absorbing the view. “The streets and our neighborhood have changed a lot.”

“You noticed that too?” Vera smiled.

“Of course. I used this same route every day. The roads are better now, and there are so many new shops and restaurants.” He turned to her with a grin. “Don’t think I’ve gone old and forgetful. My memory is still sharp.”

Vera laughed. “Okay, okay! I admit it—you’re good at spotting changes.”

When they reached the shop, Deepak spotted the car and rushed over with a big smile. “Sir!” he called out, excited. Dev smiled back, warmed by the welcome.

Deepak helped Dev into the shop and escorted him to his old office. Vera followed closely.

Inside, Dev noticed a new face. “Who’s this young man?”

“Oh! I forgot to tell you,” Vera said. “That’s Ravi, the accountant I hired while you were in the hospital. He helps manage inventory, accounts, and order placement. It’s made handling things a lot easier.”

Ravi stood up and extended a polite greeting. “Hello, sir. I’m Ravi. I’ve heard a lot about you. How are you feeling now?”

“I’m getting better,” Dev said, nodding. “Please, carry on with your work.”

As Ravi returned to his desk and Deepak got busy with customers, Vera took Dev to the godown. Dev observed how neatly everything was organized and couldn't help but praise her.

"You've done a marvelous job here, Vera. I'm proud of you."

Vera smiled, her heart full.

Back in the office, Vera and Ravi reviewed the accounts while Dev watched quietly, impressed. After some time, Vera noticed it was getting late.

"You shouldn't stay at the shop too long, Dad. Let's go home."

Dev nodded in agreement.

On the way back, Vera received a message from Gayatri:
"Tonight's dinner will be at my place. It's ready."

Vera replied:
"Okay, Mom. We're just leaving the shop. We'll come directly."

Distracted by the text, she momentarily took her eyes off the road.

"Vera, stop!" Dev shouted.

She slammed on the brakes just in time, stopping behind a car at the red light.

"Vera," Dev said firmly, "one thing at a time. Never text while driving."

“I’m sorry,” she said quietly, still shaken. After a pause, she added, “Mom has invited us for dinner. That’s what I was replying to.”

They arrived at Gayatri’s house and had dinner quietly, without much conversation. It was a peaceful meal, marked by the comfort of shared presence rather than words.

Later that night, back at home, Vera handed Dev his medicine, helped him to bed, and then went to her own room. The day had been long—but filled with warmth, laughter, lessons, and healing.

For the first time in a long while, Dev fell asleep not in a sterile hospital bed, but in the soft embrace of home.

Chapter 12

The Serial Killer Strikes Again

It was 4:30 in the morning when a blood-curdling scream pierced the quiet neighborhood. A crowd began to gather outside Vera's house. Lying at the front gate was a lifeless body—Dev's. His chest bore the now-infamous word: **RAPIST**, carved in red. His heart was placed in his own hands, a stone resting atop it. His kidneys were missing. An envelope, neatly sealed, lay beside the body.

A neighbor dialed the police. Another contacted the media.

Soon, flashing red-blue lights lit up the street as Prakash arrived with his team. The moment they saw the body, their expressions darkened—same pattern, same calling card. The serial killer had returned.

They pushed through the crowd and stepped toward the house. The front door was wide open, the lock broken. They entered cautiously.

The living room was untouched. The kitchen, too. But in Dev's bedroom, things were off. The bedsheet was crumpled on the floor, and several napkins lay nearby—each

soaked in chloroform. He had been sedated and dragged out.

In the next room, they found Vera, unconscious in her bed. She was breathing but still under the effects of the drug.

Outside, media vans swarmed like vultures. Reporters shouted questions and flashed cameras. One stepped forward.

“Is this the work of the same serial killer, Officer Prakash?”

“By the look of it, yes. Same signs. Same message. We found Vera unconscious inside. She appears unharmed, but we’ll know more once she wakes up. Please stand back. Let us work.”

Prakash pulled out his phone and made two urgent calls—to the CBI and the Intelligence Bureau.

Across town, Gayatri was just waking up when a neighbor knocked frantically on her door. “Gayatri ji, there’s terrible news... Dev’s body was found outside Vera’s house. The serial killer—he struck again.”

Her vision blurred. Her breath caught. She grabbed her scooter keys with trembling hands and rushed to the scene.

When she reached the house, she saw Dev’s body. Her knees buckled. She fell, sobbing, and Prakash ran to steady her.

“Where’s Vera?” she gasped. “Please, tell me my daughter is safe.”

“She’s inside, unconscious but okay. No injuries,” Prakash reassured her.

As they entered, Vera stumbled out of her room, confused. “What’s going on? Why are you both here? Mom, why are you crying?”

Prakash hesitated, but then told her gently, “Vera... I’m sorry. Your father... he’s been murdered. His body was left outside.”

Vera froze. “No. That’s not possible.”

She bolted past them and ran outside. The sight hit her like a train. Her knees trembled as her eyes filled with disbelief.

“He can’t be...” she whispered. “He was a good man. A good father. He was just recovering. He didn’t deserve this.”

Gayatri stood beside her, placing a trembling hand on her shoulder. “Vera... come inside.”

Vera’s voice cracked. “How could the killer get in? How did I not wake up? How could I not know?”

Gayatri didn’t respond. Her heart was breaking—for Vera, and for what she was about to confess.

Inside, Vera asked the question she had been suppressing for years. “Why did you and Dad divorce? Did he hurt you? Did he... rape you?”

Gayatri looked away, silent. But her silence was answer enough.

“You should have told me,” Vera whispered. “All these years, I didn’t know. I defended him... I loved him...”

Gayatri hugged her tightly. “I couldn’t break you like that. He was your father. He raised you when I couldn’t. And I forgave him last week. He showed true remorse.”

Tears streamed down Vera’s face. “You’re stronger than anyone I’ve ever known. I could never forgive what he did to you. Maybe the serial killer was right—maybe he deserved to die.”

“Don’t say that,” Gayatri said sharply. “Yes, he was flawed. Yes, he did wrong. But justice isn’t murder. And who gave this killer the right to decide what punishment anyone deserves? What scares me more... is how did they know? I never told anyone. Not a soul.”

Just then, a knock. The CBI had arrived—Runjish, Pooja, and their team. They met Prakash, who briefed them before leading them to the crime scene. Wearing gloves, Runjish carefully opened the envelope found beside the body. Inside was a message:

He was called a husband. A father. A man of the house.

But behind closed doors, he was a predator. He didn’t break into her home—he was her home.

And that’s what made it worse.

She screamed into pillows.

Begged behind locked doors.

And the law looked away. Because marriage makes monsters invisible.

**How many men like him sit at dinner tables,
untouched by justice?**

**How many women live in fear, because the
government calls it “a domestic matter”?
How many rapists walk free because they wear a
wedding ring?**

**This wasn’t revenge. This was correction. This
was silence made visible.**

**To the lawmakers who protect rapists with
loopholes—**

**To the enforcers who bury screams beneath
files—Know this: if you won’t bring justice to these
women, someone else will. And you won’t see them
coming.**

Runjish placed the note back in an evidence bag. “Same signature. Same style,” he muttered.

Inside, Pooja questioned Gayatri and Vera. “Why did you and Dev separate?” she asked gently.

Gayatri hesitated, but Vera stepped forward. “Because he raped my mother. She never told anyone. Not until today.”

“Did anyone else hear this recently?” Pooja pressed.

“We spoke in the hospital, just once. No one else was there,” Gayatri replied.

Outside, the forensic team inspected the house.

“Front lock broken. Napkins with chloroform. He came in through the front,” Vinod observed.

“But everything’s clean. No mess, no struggle,” added Shiv.

“Smart killer,” Sheo Prasad nodded. “Came only for Dev. Didn’t touch anything else.”

Back with Gayatri and Vera, Pooja offered her condolences and asked no further questions—for now.

Outside, Runjish was deep in thought. “There’s something off. Gayatri was a victim. Vera was there both in this case and in Tanya’s. So was Anju. I have a feeling someone among them knows more.”

Pooja agreed. “We need to dig deeper. The killer’s first victim was also from this neighborhood. That can’t be coincidence.”

“We look at every case again,” Runjish said. “If one of them is the killer—or protecting them—we’ll find out.”

They informed Vera and Gayatri that the body would be taken for postmortem and left, heading back with the evidence in tow. Ambulance sirens wailed. The neighborhood watched in hushed silence.

Just after 9 a.m., Anju arrived, visibly shaken. As she entered the house, Gayatri’s fury erupted again.

“This is all because of you!” she shouted. “First your past dragged us into the police station—and now Dev is dead! You wanted Vera to yourself, didn’t you? Is that why you killed him?”

Vera tried to stop her, but Gayatri was inconsolable. “Did you hear us in the hospital? Were you following us? Are you planning to kill me next?”

Anju burst into tears. “I didn’t do this! I swear on my life! I wanted to thank Dev, not harm him.”

“Then leave. Now!” Gayatri screamed.

Anju looked at Vera, heartbroken. Vera nodded softly, urging her to go.

As she walked away in tears, Anju whispered to herself, “Once a criminal, always a criminal. No one ever forgets... even when you’ve changed.”

Later, Vera received a call from Tanya, which she ignored. But Tanya messaged:

“I’m on my way to Panipat. I saw the news. I’ll be with you soon.”

Vera finally replied:

“My dad wasn’t innocent. He used to rape my mom. That’s why they divorced. I’m breaking inside. I need you.”

Tanya responded immediately:

“I understand. Hold on. I’m coming.”

By 1:00 p.m., Tanya arrived, embracing Vera and Gayatri, offering comfort where words fell short. The house remained crowded with relatives and neighbors offering their condolences, but Vera took Tanya to her room—to finally speak in silence.

Chapter 13

The Trap Is Set

The Implementation Begins

Inside a tightly sealed operations room, Vinod Mehta stood in front of his team, a whiteboard behind him scribbled with two target zones, connection maps, and movement patterns of Vera and Anju.

“Today is the day,” he began, his voice steady. “Three weeks of prep, drills, surveillance, and theory. It all comes down to this. We’re going live. And this time, we’re not waiting for the serial killer to strike—we’re luring him into the open.”

He paused, letting the moment hang heavy.

“Saksham and Yashika will act as a newlywed couple in one location—just a flat away from Anju. Rahul and Priya will be at the other site, a few houses away from Vera’s house. Both teams will serve as bait. Our job is to make the killer curious... and reckless.”

Vinod leaned in, his tone sharp. “This needs to go exactly as planned. No improvisations. No mistakes. The

killer is smart—too smart—and one wrong step could cost us everything.”

The officers nodded. Everyone knew the stakes.

Vinod moved to the gear table. “Comms, laptops, surveillance feeds, weapons, tracking devices—everything is prepped and assigned. Move out and get in position.”

The core team split into two.

At Location One, Vinod headed toward Anju’s society along with Pooja, Prakash, and Sheo Prasad. They had rented a flat on the same floor as Anju’s. Saksham and Yashika were already there, set up as a young married couple. The flat had hidden cameras in all main rooms including one just outside Anju’s flat as well, microphones embedded in light fixtures, and their comms were synced directly to Vinod’s laptop in the surveillance van stationed just outside the building.

At Location Two, not far from Vera’s house, Runjish took position in a parked car with Vineet and Shiv Kumar. Inside the nearby rented house, Rahul and Priya—posing as newlyweds—were ready to play their roles. That house too was wired with high-grade surveillance tech. The plan was to stage interactions compelling enough to draw the attention of Vera, or—if they were lucky—whoever might be watching them.

Luring the Predator

Everyone was now in position.

Pooja, eyes fixed on the surveillance monitor, spotted Anju walking through the society compound, a bag slung

over her shoulder. “She’s entering the building now,” she said into the comms.

Vinod responded instantly. “Saksham, Yashika—she’s on her way in. Be ready.”

“Copy that, sir,” Saksham replied.

Inside their flat, Saksham adjusted the volume on the TV while Yashika touched up her face in the mirror—subtle things to appear natural, to act convincingly. As they heard the door to Anju’s flat close down the hall, they exchanged a brief look.

“Time to begin,” Saksham whispered.

Yashika gave a subtle nod. “I’m ready.”

Operation at Anju’s Location

Inside the dimly lit flat, Saksham took a deep breath, rolled his shoulders, and stepped into character.

“How many times do I have to tell you not to interrupt me while I’m working?!” he shouted, loud enough to be heard through the thin walls.

In the kitchen, Yashika flinched, then snapped back with an equally sharp tone. “You don’t need to yell at me like that! I just made lunch and wanted to serve you!”

“Your lunch can wait!” Saksham barked, slamming the table for effect. “My work is more important. If you bother me again, I swear it won’t end well for you.”

Yashika narrowed her eyes and slammed a plate onto the counter. “Fine! If that’s how you want to be—eat alone!” She stormed into the bedroom and slammed the door behind her.

Every word, every sound reverberated through the corridor—and into Anju’s flat next door.

Anju paused mid-sip of water, startled by the loud argument. She turned down her TV volume and listened closely, concern growing with every shout. “They just moved in,” she muttered to herself. “And they’re already at each other’s throats? That’s not a good sign...”

Suddenly, another loud crash.

Inside the bedroom, Saksham had smashed a flower vase. The shattering of glass made Anju flinch. She moved instinctively closer to her door, her heart thudding. The voices continued.

“How dare you speak to me like that?! I’ve had enough!” Saksham shouted violently.

Now truly alarmed, Anju bit her lip and hesitated. She didn’t want to interfere—it was none of her business. But something about this felt serious. Too serious to ignore.

She opened her flat’s door quietly and stepped into the hallway.

Eyes on the Target

From their surveillance van parked just outside, Vinod and his team watched the hallway camera feed closely. A red dot blinked on their screen—movement detected.

“She’s stepping out,” Pooja said, eyes on the monitor.

Vinod leaned forward. “Saksham, Yashika—she’s on the move. Heading toward your flat. Time to proceed with the next phase.”

“Understood,” Saksham responded into the comms. Yashika nodded silently.

The door to their flat had been left deliberately half-open. Just enough for someone peeking in to catch a glimpse of what they wanted them to see.

Anju approached hesitantly, her breath quick and shallow. She glanced left and right. The hallway was silent. Slowly, she edged closer to the door. From her angle, she had a partial view of the bedroom.

And what she saw made her freeze in horror.

Inside, Saksham had pinned Yashika down on the bed. Her wrists were restrained. Her cries for help sounded heartbreakingly real. The illusion was flawless.

Anju gasped. Her entire body locked up. She stumbled back, clutching the wall for support, her breathing growing fast and uneven. After a few seconds that felt like forever, she turned and rushed back to her flat, the door slamming shut behind her.

Phase One: Complete

Vinod exhaled slowly and keyed the comms.

“Excellent work. First phase of the operation is complete. You can stand down now.”

Inside the flat, Saksham immediately released Yashika’s wrists. She sat up, rubbing her temples, visibly shaken from the emotional toll of the act.

“That was intense,” she muttered.

“You were perfect,” Saksham said, giving her a soft nod.

Back in the van, the team reviewed the captured footage frame by frame. They had exactly what they needed: a terrified Anju reacting to what looked like a brutal domestic assault.

Operation at Vera’s Location

The sun had risen and set, and still there was no sign of movement.

Inside the surveillance van, parked discreetly near Vera’s neighborhood, Runjish sat on the edge of his seat, staring at the monitor with narrowing eyes. Next to him, Vineet and Shiv Kumar were just as tense—cameras were rolling, microphones were active, but nothing significant had happened.

Morning passed. Then the afternoon. Vera hadn’t even stepped outside.

“Maybe she’s just having an off day,” Vineet offered half-heartedly.

Runjish didn’t respond. His jaw tightened, eyes fixed on the feed.

He was sure—absolutely sure—that Vera had something to do with the serial killings. Tanya’s case, Dev’s death, the coincidence of every victim being somehow linked to her... it couldn’t be random.

Finally, around **7:00 PM**, Vera stepped out of her house.

“There she is,” Shiv said, sitting up straight.

Runjish leaned closer. “She’s heading to her car. Everyone on alert.”

Vera got into her car and drove off. The team quickly followed from a distance, keeping their surveillance van at a safe but steady tail.

But the destination was anticlimactic.

Vera arrived at her family shop and stepped inside. She wasn't meeting anyone suspicious, making any shady calls, or acting out of character. She spent the next **three hours** helping customers, organizing inventory, and chatting casually with the store worker, Deepak.

Just another quiet evening in retail.

"She's clean," Shiv finally said with a sigh.

"No one's clean," Runjish muttered, still watching the feed. "She's hiding something. She's too calm. Too calculated."

By the time Vera locked up and drove home for the night, the team had been on stakeout for nearly 14 hours.

No contact with strangers. No suspicious behavior. No reaction to the bait house nearby where Priya and Rahul had faked a scenario just like Vinod's team had done with Anju.

"Whole day wasted," Vineet said, pulling his earpiece off and stretching. "No movement. No red flags. We can't do anything without triggering her."

Runjish stayed silent, scrolling through camera footage just in case they'd missed something.

Then his phone rang.

He glanced at the caller ID: **Vinod Mehta.**

Finally—some progress.

Runjish picked up immediately. “Tell me you’ve got something.”

Operation Continues at Anju’s Location

An hour had passed since Phase One was executed. The surveillance van remained stationed, tension hanging thick in the air. Inside the vehicle, Vinod and his team monitored the live camera feeds when the unexpected happened.

A man rang the doorbell of Anju’s flat.

He wore a black cap pulled low, large sunglasses, and a black surgical mask that obscured most of his face. His posture was stiff. Cautious. Calculated.

Anju opened the door and—without hesitation—let him inside.

Pooja squinted at the screen, startled. “Who could that be? She just let him in like she knew him.”

“He looks shady,” Sheo Prasad added. “This guy could be the serial killer. Or worse—they could both be working together.”

“Let’s not jump to conclusions yet,” Vinod cut in, keeping his voice calm but focused. “We move when the second phase starts. Until then, we observe. No mistakes.”

They all fell silent again, watching the grainy black-and-white footage from the flat’s hallway camera.

Time ticked by.

Minutes stretched into hours.

Still, no movement. The man remained inside Anju’s flat. Neither of them stepped outside, not even once.

Meanwhile, in the adjoining flat, Saksham and Yashika remained alert. Glancing at the wall clock, they exchanged a quick nod.

“It’s time,” Saksham whispered into his comms. “We’re moving to Phase Two.”

Vinod’s voice came through instantly. “You know what to do. Keep it clean.”

Without another word, Vinod turned the key in the ignition and quietly moved the surveillance van out of the society compound. He parked it in front of another gated society farther down the same road—far enough to avoid suspicion, but close enough to keep a visual on Saksham.

Inside the flat, Saksham raised his voice again, loud enough to be heard by neighbors—and hopefully, by Anju and the man inside her flat.

“I’m going out. Don’t wait for me. Don’t text. Don’t call. I’ll be with my friends. Might even stay out all night.”

From inside the flat, Yashika snapped back with equal intensity. “After what you did to me today, I won’t be waiting anymore. Leave—and when you come back in the morning, I’ll be gone for good!”

Saksham slammed the front door shut, making sure the sound echoed down the hallway.

He walked downstairs calmly, then exited the building. He crossed the main gate and leaned against the wall just outside the society, acting casual. Pulling a pack of cigarettes from his pocket, he lit one and started smoking, glancing around as if bored.

The minutes dragged. Then the hours.

10:02 PM.

A black van rolled up slowly and came to a halt right in front of him.

The passenger side window slid down, revealing a man inside. “Hey, brother, can you help me with directions to Sector 17 Block C?” he asked.

Saksham stepped forward, just as planned. But what happened next was **not** part of the script.

The man suddenly grabbed Saksham’s collar.

The van doors flung open from the inside. Two more masked men pointed guns at him.

“Get in. Now,” one of them commanded.

Saksham’s heartbeat surged, but he kept his cool. Without resistance, he stepped inside and sat between the two men.

The doors slammed shut, and the van sped away—vanishing into the night.

Tailing

Vinod and his team watched in real-time as Saksham was forcefully abducted and shoved into a van. Despite the chaos, one question haunted them: Why hadn't Anju or the unknown man made a move yet?

Pooja, quick on her laptop, zoomed in on the van’s license plate and ran a trace.

“The number’s unregistered. Fake plate,” she confirmed. “This isn’t just some local thug—they’re organized.”

Vinod nodded grimly. “That van’s headed straight to whoever the serial killer is.”

He made a quick decision. “Pooja, you and Prakash stay here. If Anju or that man step out, tail them—discreetly. Sheo and I will follow the van. We need eyes on both.”

Without delay, Pooja and Prakash exited the surveillance vehicle and stationed themselves near the society entrance. Meanwhile, Sheo jumped into the driver’s seat, and Vinod took the passenger side, laptop open and recording as they followed the van from a safe distance.

Five minutes in, the screen blinked—then went dark.

“Just as I feared,” Vinod muttered. He quickly dialed Runjish. “Have your cameras gone dark too?”

Runjish, caught off guard, called out to Vineet, “Check our feeds!”

Vineet glanced at his screen. “All black. We’ve lost visuals.”

“Yes. They’re down,” Runjish confirmed. “Is the killer on the move?”

“Looks like it. The van took Saksham. We’re trailing it now. Anju and an unidentified man are still in the building, but Pooja’s team is watching them.”

“A new guy?” Runjish asked, surprised. “Who is he?”

“No time to explain. I’ll keep you updated,” Vinod said, cutting the call and refocusing on the road ahead.

Over comms, Saksham’s voice crackled through the feed. He was still in character. “Where are you taking me? What do you want from me?”

One of the kidnappers replied coldly, “Someone ordered your delivery.”

Saksham played along. “Who? What does this person want with me?”

“Too many questions,” the kidnapper snapped. “Shut up and sit still.”

Meanwhile, at the society gate, Pooja and Prakash spotted Anju and the unknown man finally stepping out. The pair flagged down an auto-rickshaw and got in. Without missing a beat, Pooja and Prakash jumped into another and followed at a safe distance.

Pooja texted Vinod:

"Anju and the man are on the move. We're tailing them."

Vinod responded:

"Good. They may be heading to take delivery of Saksham. Keep me posted."

As Vinod and Sheo continued tailing the van, they realized it had exited the Panipat city limits. Soon, it turned down a deserted road and came to a halt outside an old, abandoned government building.

Sheo parked the surveillance car a short distance away, killed the headlights, and both men stepped out, moving silently toward the building for a better vantage point.

Inside the van, Saksham's mic picked up more chatter.

“It's time for you to take a nap,” one kidnapper said.

Before Vinod could react, he heard the hiss of an injection—then Saksham's comms went silent.

Vinod's eyes widened. "They drugged him."

He and Sheo crept closer and watched as the kidnappers pulled an unconscious Saksham from the van, propped him against a wall, and waited—presumably for the 'buyer.'

Meanwhile...

Pooja and Prakash kept their distance, tracking the auto through narrow lanes. Eventually, it pulled up in front of a modest house. Anju and the man entered without hesitation.

Pooja's eyes narrowed as she looked around. The neighborhood seemed eerily familiar.

"Wait... this house is just a few streets away from Vera's," she realized aloud. She immediately called Runjish. "Is Vera at home right now?"

Runjish was confused. "Last I checked, yes. Why?"

"Please confirm again. Text me once you know," she said, and hung up before he could ask more.

Runjish sighed. "They all love hanging up mid-conversation." He turned to Vineet and Shiv Kumar. "Pooja wants to confirm whether Vera's still inside her house. Any ideas?"

Shiv pointed at Vera's home across the road. "All lights are off."

Vineet raised a finger. "I have an idea—but it'll sound childish."

“We don’t have time for modesty. Spit it out,” Shiv replied.

Vineet grinned sheepishly. “We ring her doorbell and run. If she opens, she’s home.”

Runjish scoffed, but after a beat of silence, he got out. “It’s dumb—but it might work.”

“I’ll go alone,” Vineet said. “No need for all of us to look suspicious.”

He approached Vera’s gate quietly and rang the bell—then bolted, hiding behind a neighbor’s parked car.

A few seconds later, Vera opened the door, annoyed. “Who’s playing games at this hour?” she muttered, scanning the empty street. After a few seconds, she went back inside.

Vineet returned to the car. “Confirmed. She’s home.”

Runjish texted Pooja:

"Vera is at her house."

Pooja read the message and replied:

"Copy. Wait for further instructions."

She and Prakash, still outside the house, saw the front gate open again. A car pulled out. Anju was behind the wheel.

“She’s on the move again,” Prakash said. “Let’s go!”

“Follow that car,” Pooja instructed their driver as the vehicle turned the corner.

She checked Vinod’s location via a live GPS link. Her eyes widened.

“They’re heading toward Vinod’s location,” she whispered.

She quickly texted Vinod:

“We’re on our way to you. You were right—they’re headed your way.”

Vinod received the message and relayed it to Sheo. “They’re coming. Get ready.”

The pieces of the trap were finally beginning to close in.

Let’s Catch Them

Fifteen minutes after Vinod had sent his coordinates, Anju’s car pulled up at the abandoned location where Saksham was being held. She and the man beside her got out and approached the kidnappers.

Anju examined Saksham, unconscious but alive, tied and slumped near the wall.

“Yes,” she said coldly, her voice sharp beneath her mask. “You got the right one.”

From a distance, Vinod, Sheo, Pooja, and Prakash observed the exchange from behind cover, listening to everything via Saksham’s still-active comms. Pooja had dismissed the rickshaw and rejoined the team.

The man with Anju pulled a bundle of cash from his pocket and handed it to one of the kidnappers. “Help me get him into the car,” he said.

The kidnapper nodded, and together, they carried Saksham to the vehicle, placing him on the backseat. Anju glanced at her wristwatch—it was 12:45 a.m.

Without another word, Anju and the man got into the car and drove away.

Vinod and his team rushed back to their surveillance car. Prakash jumped into the driver's seat and ignited the engine. They accelerated smoothly, keeping a cautious distance behind Anju's car.

"We're not letting them vanish now," Vinod said, eyes locked on the vehicle ahead.

As the tension thickened in the car, Pooja spoke up. "Sir, what about the kidnappers? We can't just let them go."

Vinod didn't hesitate. "Right now, the serial killer is our top priority. Once we have them in custody, we'll interrogate and find out how they made contact with the kidnappers. It's the same van used in Rajat's abduction too but with another fake number plate. There's a pattern—and a connection."

"Understood, sir," Pooja nodded.

Prakash noticed something as they drove. "They're retracing the exact route they took earlier."

Pooja looked at the GPS map. "They're heading back to that same house. The one they left earlier tonight."

Ten minutes later, Anju's car stopped in front of the house. Anju got out, opened the gate, and drove the car inside.

Vinod's team parked at the far end of the street this time. He, Pooja, and Sheo stepped out and approached the house on foot. By the time they reached the gate, Anju and her partner had already taken Saksham inside.

“We need to move in. This could be it,” Pooja said, tensed. “They’re probably planning to kill him—this is where they operate.”

Suddenly, a voice crackled in Vinod’s earpiece.

“Let’s put him on the table, face down,” the man said.

Vinod gestured for everyone to hold. He turned up the comms volume.

“We’ll wait until he wakes up,” the man continued. “He needs to feel everything... like the pain women feel when they’re raped by monsters like him.”

Vinod’s blood ran cold.

They heard ropes being tied, and then Anju’s voice: “We’ll start once he’s awake. They deserve to suffer the same way.”

Inside, the man removed his disguise—his cap, sunglasses, and mask—placing them on a nearby table. The room was a chilling sight: a medical table, an array of surgical tools, computers, a typewriter, a satellite phone, and a massive water canister—possibly for organ storage.

Vinod turned to Prakash. “Send our location to Runjish. Tell him we need backup immediately.”

Prakash fired off the message. Minutes later, Runjish’s car appeared at the far end of the street. He and his team joined Vinod outside the house.

Vinod briefed them quickly. “Once Saksham wakes up and gives the safe word, we go in.”

Runjish frowned. “Why wait? We know he’s with the serial killers. Every second we waste might be his last. Let’s go now.”

Vinod hesitated, but the urgency in Runjish’s voice convinced him. “Alright. We go in. Now.”

Prakash took the lead, scaling the gate with practiced ease. Pooja, Vinod, and Runjish followed close behind. The others stayed outside, weapons ready, covering all exits.

Once inside the compound, Prakash and Vinod reached the door. With a sharp nod, they kicked it open in unison and stormed the house.

“In the name of the law, hands in the air! Don’t move!” Vinod shouted.

Startled, Anju and the man obeyed instantly, raising their hands.

Pooja and Runjish rushed in behind them, weapons drawn. The team spread out, securing the room.

As they turned toward the man, Runjish’s expression changed. His eyes widened in disbelief.

He took a step forward and stared at the man’s face.

“...How the hell are you alive?” he whispered.

Chapter 14

After Effects

An Unexpected Face

The man standing beside Anju was none other than her husband—**Aviyansh**. The same Aviyansh she had claimed to have killed. The same man for whose murder she had served fifteen years in prison.

A stunned silence fell across the room.

Vinod, Runjish, and the rest of the team stood frozen, weapons still trained on the pair. The shock of Aviyansh's sudden appearance left everyone momentarily speechless. How was he alive? Why was he here?

On the operating table, Saksham stirred, groaning faintly.

“He’s coming around,” Vinod said quickly, regaining his composure. “Prakash, untie him.”

Prakash rushed over to Saksham and began unfastening the ropes binding him. Meanwhile, Runjish nodded at Pooja.

“Cuff her,” he ordered.

Pooja moved without hesitation and handcuffed Anju. Runjish did the same with Aviyansh, still baffled by the man's presence.

Saksham slowly sat up, his body still weak and his vision hazy from the sedatives. "What... what did I miss?" he mumbled.

Vinod walked over and gave him a reassuring pat on the shoulder. "Nothing much. You'll be fully briefed once you've recovered."

He turned to the others. "Let's move. We're taking them to the station. Runjish, Pooja—you're with me. You'll ride with the suspects. Prakash, you take Saksham in the second vehicle. Shiv, Sheo, Vineet—you go with him."

As they prepared to leave, Vinod remembered the front gate.

"We need the key," he said to Anju.

"It's on the TV panel," she answered coldly.

Vinod retrieved the key and led the group outside. They walked down the dim street to where their cars were parked. Vinod drove the lead vehicle with Runjish and Pooja, while Prakash followed closely behind in the second car with the rest of the team and Saksham.

At the Police Station

Back at the station, Runjish and Pooja escorted Anju and Aviyansh into a cell, locking them up without a word. The decision was made to begin interrogations in the morning.

Saksham slumped into a chair in the lobby, rubbing his temples.

“My head’s pounding... like someone’s been hammering inside it,” he muttered. He spotted an attendant. “Could I get a glass of water, please?”

Meanwhile, Prakash joined Vinod, Shiv, and Sheo in the office. Vinod took out his phone and dialed the Chief Ministers of Delhi and Haryana, placing the call on conference mode.

When both lines connected, he spoke. “Sorry to disturb you at this hour, but we’ve done it. We’ve caught the serial killers.”

“That’s fantastic news,” said **Rahul Shukla**, CM of Delhi. “The entire capital owes you.”

Ravinder Hooda, CM of Haryana, echoed the sentiment. “You and your team have done outstanding work, Vinod. Your professionalism and results will not go unrewarded. I assure you.”

Vinod smiled, deeply relieved. He looked at his teammates with pride. “Thank you, sirs. We’ll update you both again in the morning.”

The call ended shortly after, with both ministers eager to get back to sleep.

But not everyone was ready to rest.

“You let the kidnappers go?” Runjish asked abruptly, confronting Vinod. “Why would you make such a careless call?”

Vinod took a breath. “Relax. We made a breakthrough today. The kidnappers can wait—we’ll get them. Once

Anju and Aviyansh start talking, everything will unravel. And don't forget—we still have the hacker to track down. I'm not dropping the ball.”

Still unsatisfied, Runjish stood up and walked out of the room, clearly agitated. Pooja followed shortly after. They moved into an empty office down the hallway. A few minutes later, Vineet joined them.

“This case is far from over,” Runjish said, pacing. “There are too many unanswered questions. Anju said she killed her husband. Now he's here—alive and working with her. How? Why?”

“Yes, sir,” Pooja said. “We were so convinced Vera was the killer. The evidence kept circling back to her—links to the victims, her behavior after Dev's murder... it all made sense.”

“I was sure,” Runjish repeated, almost to himself. He dropped into a chair, agitated, bouncing his knee. “I don't know how Aviyansh fits into this. Or how he even survived.”

“It's been a long day, sir,” Vineet said gently. “Let's rest. We'll get the answers tomorrow.”

Pooja nodded. “Vineet's right. We need fresh minds to dig into this properly. Whatever secrets they're hiding... we'll crack them.”

Runjish let out a long breath, rubbing his temples. “Alright. Tomorrow, we end this mystery.”

They all stood in silence for a moment, the weight of the unanswered questions pressing down on them.

Because something still didn't add up.

And deep down, they all knew...

This wasn't the end.

Protest for Release

By 7:00 a.m., the entire country had exploded with the news: **the serial killers had been caught.**

But instead of relief, something unexpected unfolded.

Outside the police station, a massive crowd had gathered. Thousands of protesters stood shoulder to shoulder, holding placards, waving banners, and shouting slogans—not against the killers, but **for them.**

The chants were thunderous. The rage, real. The devotion, dangerous.

Police officers lined the gate, armed with shields and helmets, forming a human wall to stop the protesters from storming the station. But the crowd was relentless—furious, rebellious, and unwavering.

Placards read:

“Justice When the System Fails!”

“When Courts Sleep, Heroes Rise!”

“No Mercy for Monsters!”

“True Justice Has No Robes!”

“Better a Monster to Monsters!”

“Fear is for the Guilty!”

“Rapists Died Screaming – Justice Served!”

Then, from the crowd, a young woman stepped forward and recited a haunting poem:

“They preyed in the dark, so we sharpened the light.

No courts, no chains—only blood for the fight.

A scream for a scream, a grave for a grave, No monster walks free, no victim stays slave.”

The protestors erupted into chants.

“Heroes Don’t Belong in Cells!

Heroes Don’t Belong in Cells!★★

Heroes Don’t Belong in Cells!★★”

Inside the station, **Pooja peeked through the window.** Her breath caught. A wave of unease rippled down her spine, raising goosebumps across her arms. She backed away slowly and pulled the curtain shut.

“We have to face all those people today...” she whispered to herself.

Determined, she walked to the holding cells where Anju and Aviyansh sat, wide awake and eerily calm.

“You’ve got quite a fan club outside,” Pooja said bitterly. “But they won’t save you.”

Aviyansh looked up, his voice calm and steady. “We know. But they’re not fighting for us. They’re fighting for what we represent.”

Pooja frowned.

“A broken system,” he continued. “They’ve realized that change doesn’t come from the courts. It comes from action.”

Pooja scoffed and turned to walk away, but his next words made her stop.

“Don’t think you’ve won.”

She froze, still facing away.

“They’re angry. Inspired. Someone else out there is already thinking of becoming the next us.”

He chuckled—soft, chilling.

Pooja said nothing and walked away.

Inside Prakash’s Office

Vinod, Runjish, Sheo Prasad, and Shiv Kumar were already in discussion.

“The situation’s escalating,” Runjish said urgently. “We can’t stay locked in here. Sooner or later, they’ll push through.”

Vinod turned to him. “Then go out and calm them down. Make them understand we can’t release the suspects. That’s not how justice works.”

“You’ve been on this case longer than any of us. You’ve got credibility.”

Runjish stared at Vinod for a long second. *Coward*. The word echoed in his mind. Vinod had taken the credit, basked in the praise from the Chief Ministers... and now, when it came time to face public outrage, he was hiding behind a desk.

Still, Runjish nodded. “Fine. I’ll go.”

He stood up. Pooja silently joined him.

As they left the room, Shiv leaned closer to Vinod. “Sir, why are you letting him go out? He’ll get all the media attention now.”

“Exactly,” Sheo Prasad added. “He’ll steal the spotlight. You’re the one who made the final arrest.”

Vinod waved it off, smiling confidently. “Relax. Protesters and reporters don’t reward you—**the Chief Ministers do**. I’m not here to impress a crowd. I’m here for results. Stick with me, and your rewards will come.”

Outside the Police Station

As Runjish and Pooja approached the exit, she whispered, “Do you even have a plan? What will you say to them?”

Runjish gave a tight smile. “No idea. We’ll find out when I get there.”

Just a few steps from the door, he paused, took a deep breath, and pushed it open.

The roar hit him like a wave.

Hundreds of faces turned toward him. Protesters screamed, cameras flashed, microphones stretched toward his face.

For a second, **he panicked**. He wanted to turn back.

But there was no going back.

Police formed a protective wall around him and Pooja, keeping the angry crowd at bay. Protesters surged forward, shouting questions, shouting demands.

“Why are you arresting heroes?”

“They did what the courts couldn’t!”

“Do rapists deserve your protection?”

“Is this how the law treats those who give justice?”

Pooja looked at Runjish.

This was his moment.

He stepped forward, cleared his throat, and raised both hands to speak.

The chaos fell into an expectant hush.

And with the weight of a nation’s rage on his shoulders... **Runjish spoke.**

Law on Trial

The deafening chants of the protesters dulled to a low roar as they caught sight of two figures stepping out of the police station—**CBI Officer Runjish and Inspector Pooja**. Their appearance brought a sudden, charged hush over the crowd.

Then, a voice rang out.

“Well, well... look who finally decided to show up.”

A young man, eyes ablaze with fury, stepped forward. He turned slowly to address the crowd, his voice rising.

“Typical, isn’t it? Slow to catch real criminals. Slower to deliver justice. But lightning-fast when it comes to arresting the only people who did what our so-called justice system never could. **Anju and Aviyansh aren’t criminals—**

they're heroes. These are your 'law enforcers'? What a joke."

The crowd erupted into applause and angry cheers.

"Every citizen standing here, and millions across this country, demand their release—**now!**" he shouted, pointing at the police station.

Runjish took a breath, straightened his spine, and stepped forward.

"I understand your anger," he began. "But your demand cannot be fulfilled. You must try to see this clearly. Yes, those they killed were rapists. Yes, those men were guilty. But we do not live in a land where individuals decide who lives and who dies. If we abandon the law, we invite chaos."

A woman in the crowd fired back immediately.

"You speak of law—but where was the law when our daughters were crying for help? Where was justice when rape victims had to wait years for verdicts—**if they even lived long enough to get them?** Your law didn't stop the rapes. They did."

The crowd clapped again.

Another protester, a middle-aged man, took the baton.

"Two years. That's all it took them to scare the hell out of rapists. Two years of fear that the law never delivered in seventy-five. Isn't that proof enough? Efficient. Ruthless. But **effective.**"

Runjish stood firm. "Law doesn't fail. It simply works within the limits of a democracy. **Justice takes time—but it comes.** Vigilantism is not justice. If we allow individuals

to take the law into their hands, we risk disorder on a national scale.”

“And what about laws that don’t scare rapists?” the man challenged. “When will you fix that?”

“That’s not something a CBI officer can decide,” Runjish replied. “Strengthening laws is the role of legislators and parliament. Change takes time. We are working towards it, but it won’t happen overnight.”

“Seventy-five years isn’t overnight!” someone yelled. “We’ve had more than enough time to fix this broken system!”

“Maybe you’re not corrupt—but your silence keeps corruption alive!”

The crowd’s anger intensified. For a moment, **Runjish faltered**. His job had always been about evidence, investigation, enforcement—not standing here, facing a nation’s disillusionment.

Then an old man, his voice heavy with memory, stepped forward.

“That man you arrested—Aviyansh—I remember him. Decades ago, he cleaned the filth from our streets. Ten rapists. Gone. And then what? You people declared him dead. Said his wife killed him. Now he’s back. Alive. Killing again. So who lied to us back then? Was it the police? The courts? Or were you all just covering your failure?”

The crowd went silent, hanging on Runjish’s reply.

“We were shocked too,” Runjish admitted. “We believed the official report, like everyone else. But now that he’s alive, we’ll uncover the truth. That’s our

responsibility—and we will fulfill it. But for now, I ask you—**let us do our job.**"

He turned, ready to walk away, when another protester's voice pierced the moment.

"Last time they acted, rape cases dropped. Then you locked them up and the crimes came back. History won't repeat itself. This time, we demand guarantees. **If you can't promise protection, you have no right to keep our protectors in chains.**"

Runjish paused. The demand echoed in the silence.

A guarantee?

There was **no such thing** in his world. Not against crime. Not against corruption. And certainly not against **human nature.**

Without replying, he walked away.

The crowd took it as an answer.

"Cage the Rapists, Not the Heroes!"

"Cage the Rapists, Not the Heroes!"

"Cage the Rapists, Not the Heroes!"

The chant grew louder, angrier, more unified.

Inside, Pooja closed the station doors behind them, her face pale.

"This... this is not over," she said softly.

And she was right.

The country was on edge.

And the law?

The law itself was now on trial.

A Never Ending Nightmare

From the day Dev was murdered, **Gayatri had moved in with Vera permanently.** Grief bound them tightly, each becoming the other's lifeline through trauma neither could fully process. But neither of them had any idea the worst was yet to come.

It was around 9:30 a.m. when Gayatri, packing two lunchboxes in the kitchen, called out:

“Vera! Are you ready?”

“Just a minute, Mom!” Vera shouted from her room.

Soon after, Vera stepped out, dressed and quiet. They got into her car—Vera driving, Gayatri riding shotgun—and set off. First stop: the bank where Gayatri worked. Then Vera would head to her shop.

But on their way, they noticed something strange.

Crowds. Huge crowds.

Everywhere they turned, people filled the streets holding placards with bold slogans. Vera squinted at a few signs as they passed:

“When courts sleep, heroes rise!”

“True justice has no robes!”

“No tears for rapists!”

She frowned.

“I think they caught the serial killer, Mom,” she muttered.

“We didn’t even turn on the news this morning.” Gayatri pulled her phone from her handbag and began scrolling. Vera, curious, unlocked her own phone and searched too.

“It’s everywhere,” she whispered. “The arrests... the protests... all over the country.”

Gayatri gasped.

“It says here—they’ve arrested **two killers. Husband and wife.**”

Vera’s foot slammed the brake.

Gayatri jerked forward, nearly hitting the dashboard. “What the—? Vera, what’s wrong?”

Vera’s face had drained of all color.

“I just saw their names,” she said, voice barely above a whisper. “**Anju and Aviyansh.**”

Gayatri froze.

“What?” she whispered in disbelief. “That woman... that lying, cursed woman. She’s nothing but trouble. From the moment she stepped into our lives, it’s been one nightmare after another.”

Vera stared straight ahead, lips trembling. “She showed me his death file, Mom. She said he was dead. **How is he alive?**”

Gayatri leaned back, her voice bitter. “Because she’s a manipulator. A liar. I told you we can’t trust her. And now... the police know. The whole damn world knows that those two are your real parents.”

Vera let out a scream of frustration and slammed her palm against the steering wheel—once, twice, four times—until her hand stung.

“It’s like life won’t let us breathe!” she cried. “Just when I thought we were moving forward... this. Another mess. Another storm.”

Gayatri reached over and held her daughter’s hand.

“Hey, hey... pull yourself together. You are stronger than this. That strength—you need to hold it inside you. Save it. Use it when it counts. Understand?”

Vera nodded slowly, swallowing her rage.

They sat in silence for a moment, then Gayatri softly said:

“I’m taking leave from the bank. I’ll come to the shop with you today.”

“It’s okay, Mom. I’ll be fine. Go to work. If anything happens, we’ll stay in touch.”

“You sure?”

“Yes. Go.”

Vera dropped Gayatri off at the bank. Gayatri gave her one last concerned look before heading inside. Vera turned the car around—but a sudden thought flashed in her mind.

Should I go to the police station? See them for myself?

She changed direction.

As she neared the station, however, her car came to a halt again. **The area was completely blocked off.** Protesters had surrounded the police station from every

corner, shouting, waving signs, chanting. Police stood on guard, forming barricades.

There was no way in.

Vera sighed and turned the car back toward her shop. When she arrived, she walked straight into her office, shut the door, and turned on the television. The news channels were running non-stop coverage—**Anju and Aviyansh**, their crimes, the protests, the arrests.

She messaged Gayatri:

“Just saw on the news—a huge crowd is protesting outside the police station.”

Gayatri responded instantly:

“Everyone in the bank’s talking about it too. It’s not going to end soon.”

Vera typed again:

“Good for us. Gives us time. If the police come knocking... we’ll be ready.”

“Exactly. And this protest isn’t just in Panipat—it’s spreading to other major cities. Like wildfire.”

“Even our work’s affected. Deepak told me hardly any customers came in today. I guess the whole country’s watching to see what happens next.”

“The officials won’t give in. They can’t. The law won’t let them.”

“And this time, they have hard proof. I think it’s over for them.”

Vera locked her phone, leaned back in her chair, and closed her eyes. Her mind spiraled through memories, fears, half-truths, and broken trust.

In that moment of silence, she whispered to herself:

“It never ends... does it?”

Victims Stand Against Rapists

A group of determined women—and a few men—marched toward the police station where **Anju and Aviyansh** were being held. The crowd of protesters outside the gates began to murmur as they approached, carrying quiet pain but strong voices.

One woman stepped forward, standing tall and confident. The media immediately began live-streaming.

“Please,” she said, loud and clear, “we need to get inside. We’re all survivors of sexual assault. We didn’t come to protest—we came to demand justice, like the justice the serial killers used to deliver.”

The protesters went quiet for a moment and then respectfully parted, making way for the group to pass. As they moved forward, a reporter called out:

“Why now? Why didn’t you come forward earlier? What changed your minds?”

The woman replied without stopping:

“Because no assault is too small to matter. Every wound leaves a scar. When the news broke about the serial killers being arrested, everything changed. The people who hurt us—our rapists, our harassers—they’d gone quiet for years

because they were afraid. But now, the fear is gone... and they've started again."

At the front gate, the guards blocked their entry.

"We're here to file official complaints," the woman declared. "You cannot deny rape survivors entry into a police station!"

One protester shouted angrily:

"Unbelievable! You won't even let **victims** file complaints now? What kind of law enforcement are you?"

A hesitant guard raised his hand. "Let me check with my superior."

Inside, the guard approached the senior officers. "Sir, there's a group of survivors at the gate. They say they want to register complaints."

Runjish immediately nodded. "Let them in."

Pooja, alarmed, turned to him. "Sir, are you sure? What if this is a trap? What if Anju and Aviyansh planned this? Earlier today, he told me—'It's not over yet.'"

"If they're real victims, then we must let them speak. And if anything goes wrong, we have enough police presence to control the situation," Runjish replied firmly.

The guard returned and opened the gate.

The group walked in, chanting in unison:

"Silenced no more. Justice starts here."

Media tried to follow, but the gate closed behind the victims, blocking reporters.

Inside, the woman who had spoken earlier stepped forward.

“My name is **Apoorva**. I’ve been sexually harassed by my cousin for years. Also, One of my colleagues at work tried to force himself on me. No one ever listened. But I won’t stay silent anymore.”

Another woman stepped up.

“I’m **Harshita**. I was raped by my neighbor. I was home alone... and he forced his way in.”

“I’m **Ruhani**. My husband rapes me every night when he comes home drunk.”

“I’m **Aradhya**, a college student. My professor touches me, corners me... instead of teaching.”

A young man followed.

“I’m **Vishal**. When I was a child, my classmates assaulted me in the school restroom.”

Another man added,

“I’m **Gourav**. I came home early one day during my wife’s kitty party. Her friends... they forced me to strip. They laughed while I cried. I’ve never told anyone until now.”

“I’m **Ruhi**,” said a girl in her teens. “My uncle touches me every time he visits. I used to dread weekends.”

One by one, the survivors came forward and filed their complaints. The room fell silent, heavy with emotion and unspoken pain. When the last complaint was logged, **Apoorva** stepped forward again.

“Did you just see how many of us came today?” she said, glaring at the officers. “This is only a drop in the ocean. When Anju and Aviyansh were free, there was fear in the air. Now, that fear is gone—and the monsters are back.”

She continued, her voice rising:

“This city alone has this many victims. What happens when we include villages? Towns? Major metros? The number becomes unthinkable. You arrested two people who gave us hope—and you’ve left us helpless again.”

Runjish tried to maintain calm.

“I understand what you’re saying. We will investigate every complaint. Justice will be delivered.”

“**When?**” Apoorva snapped. “In ten years? Twenty? You want us to wait again while the courts sleep? We don’t want vague promises. We want **guarantees**. We want fast justice—like they gave us. If you can’t give that, how will you stop the next monster?”

Runjish sighed. “We’ve registered every complaint. Arrests will be made, and trials will follow. Yes, it will take time. But that’s how our system works. You must have faith in the process.”

Apoorva stared at him coldly.

“You keep hiding behind the law. But that law never shielded us. Your promises mean nothing. We trusted the law once. We won’t make that mistake again.”

With that, she turned and led the group outside. The survivors exited the station, the pain in their hearts now mixed with rage.

Outside, the media swarmed them. One reporter asked:

“What happened inside? Did the police listen?”

Apoorva answered, clear and loud:

“They took our complaints, yes. But gave us the same excuses—trials, courts, time. They’re hiding behind laws that never protected us. So I say this now to everyone watching: **It’s time we take matters into our own hands.** If the law won’t protect us, we’ll protect ourselves.”

The protesters cheered.

The group of survivors joined them, chanting together:

“We want justice, not excuses. Believe us. Protect us. Fight for us.”

“We want justice, not excuses. Believe us. Protect us. Fight for us.”

“We want justice, not excuses. Believe us. Protect us. Fight for us.”

And just like that, **the protest evolved into a movement.**

Chapter 15

Reborn

Hard to Be Killed

“Don’t come near me. That’s my last warning.” Anju’s voice trembled, fragile with fear, as she clutched a sharp kitchen knife. Her hands shook, her breath shallow.

From the next room, two-month-old Vera stirred from her sleep. The loud voices echoing from the kitchen startled her, and she began to cry, her wails cutting through the rising tension.

“You don’t understand,” Anju said, backing away from her husband. “Mohammad didn’t do anything wrong. He was only trying to show me the truth about you... about your crimes.”

“Put the knife down,” Aviyansh pleaded, inching toward her. “We can talk this through.”

Anju’s eyes widened with disbelief. “Talk? After everything I’ve just heard from your own mouth? You murdered him—and the others. Rapists or not, you broke the law. You bathed in blood and called it justice.” Her

voice cracked. “God will never forgive you. And neither can I. I’m terrified of you. For me... for Vera.”

She raised the knife, her grip tightening. “You need to go. Leave us. Or don’t force me to do something I’ll regret forever.”

“No,” Aviyansh snapped. “Vera is *my* daughter too. You don’t get to decide that I’m gone.”

Fueled by desperation, he lunged forward and grabbed her wrist, struggling to wrest the knife from her grasp. He seized her other hand too, trying to overpower her. In the scuffle, they crashed into the kitchen counter. The knife twisted downward—then upward again in the chaos.

Suddenly, a warm spray hit Anju’s hand. She froze.

Blood.

Aviyansh staggered, his grip weakening. He looked at her with wide eyes as blood trickled from his mouth. The knife had pierced his chest. He collapsed, hitting the floor hard—his body limp, the blade still lodged in him.

Anju stared at her blood-soaked hands. She couldn’t feel her legs. Her world stood still.

In the next room, Vera’s cries grew louder—sharper. That cry brought Anju back to herself. She stumbled to the sink, frantically scrubbing her hands, but the blood refused to leave her skin, staining her palms and soul alike.

She wrapped her infant daughter in a blanket and gently placed her in a basket. Then, with trembling fingers, she wrote a letter—folded it, sealed it in an envelope, and placed it beside the child.

Clutching Aviyansh’s car keys, she fled the house.

Inside, minutes passed. Then an hour.

Aviyansh's fingers twitched. His eyelids fluttered open. He heard the sound of a car engine starting and tires screeching from outside. His car. She had taken his car.

He was still alive. Barely. The knife remained embedded in his chest—ironically the very thing that kept him from bleeding out faster. His breathing was shallow, labored. Pain radiated through his body like fire.

Time blurred. He fought to stay conscious.

Nearly four hours later, Anju returned.

She stepped into the kitchen, assuming silence meant death. She stared at his still body. Her hands trembled as she fetched a bedsheet and gently draped it over him, believing she was covering a corpse. She sank to the floor beside him.

“I have to pay for my sin... even if I never meant to commit it,” she whispered to herself. “Running is not an option. It never was. If God wants me to meet my daughter again someday... then He'll find a way.”

She reached for her phone and dialed the police.

“I need to report a murder,” she said softly. “My name is Anju. I killed my husband. Please come... I'll be waiting.”

Then she hung up and sat quietly. Her arms folded around her knees, her head bowed low. Tears spilled silently down her face.

“What have I done?” she whispered. “I tore my family apart in one night. A woman is supposed to hold her family together... but I destroyed mine.”

Moments later, the distant wail of a police siren cut through the air, growing louder and louder as it neared her home.

Longer the Wait, Lesser the Chances

The front door of Anju’s house stood ajar.

A police jeep screeched to a halt outside, an ambulance tailing closely behind. The wail of sirens faded as curious neighbors peeked from behind their curtains, already disturbed by the noise. Street dogs barked furiously in the background.

Four police officers stepped out—two men, two women—while paramedics prepared a stretcher at the back of the ambulance. The officers entered the house cautiously, scanning each room for signs of life.

Anju, seated on the cold kitchen floor, heard the footsteps approaching. She exhaled deeply and mustered the strength to stand. In one swift motion, she pushed a stack of metal utensils from the counter, sending them clattering to the ground.

The officers followed the sound and found her standing near Aviyansh’s blood-soaked body.

Without resistance, Anju raised her hands. The two lady officers quickly cuffed her. As they escorted her out, a male officer radioed for the stretcher.

“Body confirmed,” he said into the walkie. “Call it in. High-profile case. Maintain full discretion.”

Outside, neighbors had gathered, murmuring anxiously as Anju was led to the police jeep. She kept her head down.

“Take the body straight to the hospital,” the senior male officer instructed his colleague. “Sashi, stay with it at all times. Don’t take your eyes off it. This isn’t just another case. It’s him—Aviyansh.”

Sashi nodded. “Understood, sir.”

As the crowd watched silently, the body was lifted onto the stretcher and wheeled into the ambulance. Sashi got in, sitting beside it. The doors shut, and the vehicle sped off.

Fifteen minutes later – City Hospital

The ambulance arrived at the emergency bay. The paramedics rolled the stretcher into the hospital as Sashi rushed inside to find the attending doctor. He spotted an elderly man in his fifties stepping out of an operation theatre.

“We need an immediate postmortem,” Sashi ordered. “High priority. Do it now.”

The doctor, who happened to be the owner of the hospital, recognized Sashi’s urgency and led them to the nearest operation theatre. A young female trainee accompanied him.

Sashi attempted to enter with them, but the doctor stopped him. “Standard protocol, officer. Please wait outside. We’ll call you when we have something.”

Reluctantly, Sashi waited in the hallway.

Inside, the doctor pulled back the white sheet covering the body—and his eyes widened.

“Aviyansh?” he whispered, stunned.

He knew him well. Years ago, this man and his wife had been his regular patients. He had even delivered their baby. And now he was lying here, presumed dead?

With gloved hands, the doctor carefully removed the knife lodged in Aviyansh’s chest and handed it to the trainee. “Place it in a biohazard bag. Label it: *murder weapon*. Go and do that now.”

She nodded, complying. As the blade left his body, blood gushed out—followed by a twitch.

Then... a gasp.

Aviyansh opened his eyes.

The doctor jumped back in shock. “Oh my god...”

With trembling hands, Aviyansh grabbed the doctor’s wrist. “You need to help me escape. Now. There won’t be another chance.”

The doctor hesitated, horrified. “You’re... you’re alive. But this is impossible. The police—”

“I know who you are, Doctor,” Aviyansh whispered through clenched teeth. “You think I don’t? Your hospital sells unclaimed bodies on the black market. I’ve kept quiet... until now.”

The doctor froze.

“If you help me,” Aviyansh continued, his grip tightening, “your secret is safe. But if you don’t—I expose you. Fully. Publicly. It’s your call.”

The doctor swallowed. “And the officer outside?”

“Start treating me. Don’t even think about killing me. You know who I am. I’m *that* serial killer. Try anything stupid, and you’ll be next.”

The doctor exhaled shakily and turned back to his patient. “Fine. Let’s begin.”

He worked quickly, stabilizing Aviyansh. The trainee returned moments later with new instruments and on her way in she let Sashi know about the continuation of postmortem process. Together, they stitched his wound and cleaned the blood from his chest and lips.

When they were done, Aviyansh gave his next order.

“Now, tell your trainee to call the police officer inside.”

The doctor stiffened. “What?! He’ll see you alive. He’ll arrest us all!”

Aviyansh smirked faintly, still in pain. “There’s no cop who can’t be bought. Trust me. Just do what I say.”

The doctor nodded hesitantly and gave the trainee a subtle signal.

She stepped out, confused and shaken, and called out to Sashi.

“Sir... the doctor wants to speak to you. You can come in now.”

Death Wears a Mask

Sashi stepped into the operation theatre—and froze.

There he was. **Aviyansh. Alive. Sitting up.**

His hand instinctively went to his holster. He drew his pistol and pointed it at the man everyone believed to be dead. The female trainee yelped and ducked behind the doctor, who stepped back, positioning himself at a cautious distance from both men.

Sashi's voice was a mix of disbelief and suspicion. "How the hell are you still breathing? That knife went straight through your heart."

Aviyansh gave a dry, exhausted chuckle. "Well, *technically*, it missed the heart. Got lodged in my chest. Don't ask me how—I'm not a biologist. Let the doc explain. Guess I just got lucky."

Sashi kept the gun steady and shifted his focus to the doctor. "You knew he was alive. Why didn't you come to me immediately?"

The doctor replied calmly, "He regained consciousness just after I pulled the knife out. Blood was gushing. My priority was saving his life, officer—not protocol."

"Then why did your trainee tell me you were still doing the postmortem?" Sashi demanded.

"Because *at that point*, we hadn't removed the knife," the doctor said firmly. "We genuinely didn't know."

Aviyansh raised his hand slowly, grimacing. "Hey, hey—enough of the interrogation, Sherlock." He struggled upright. "How much money would it take for you to look the other way and let me walk out of here?"

Sashi blinked, stunned. "Did you just try to bribe me?"

"I'm not trying to," Aviyansh said plainly. "I *am* bribing you."

“I’m not like the others,” Sashi said, his voice rising with conviction. “I joined the force to *fix* this broken system.”

Aviyansh met his eyes. “And what if I told you the system can’t be fixed from the inside? You’ve seen it. Your superiors are corrupt. The law is slow, outdated, and toothless. But me? I’ve made a difference. You’ve *seen* the drop in rape cases.”

Sashi didn’t reply—but he didn’t lower the gun either.

“Just name your price,” Aviyansh continued. “Deep down, you know I’m right.”

The silence stretched.

Finally, Sashi sighed—and slowly lowered his weapon.

“I don’t want your money,” he said. “But I *do* want change. If you’re going to keep killing, stay in the shadows. If this gets out, we’re all finished.”

Aviyansh nodded, a flicker of relief in his bloodshot eyes.

He turned to the doctor. “What about your trainee? Can we trust her?”

Before the doctor could respond, the trainee stepped forward.

“I won’t say a word,” she said. “I’m a woman. I know what it’s like to walk out every day afraid something might go wrong. If you can make this place safer—for us—I’m in.”

Aviyansh’s voice softened. “I have a daughter. Two months old. Everything I’m doing... it’s for her too.”

The trainee nodded. She believed him.

Sashi stepped closer, speaking low and firm. “From this moment on, nothing leaves this room. This stays between the four of us. Understood?”

They all agreed.

Sashi turned to the doctor. “So, how do we get him out of here?”

Aviyansh smirked. “I’m sure the doc has a plan.”

The doctor gave a reluctant nod. “I do.”

He motioned for the trainee to follow. “We’ll need a body. One that matches his height and build.”

In the **hospital morgue**, the doctor and trainee examined the unclaimed bodies. After checking half a dozen, they selected one—similar enough in frame to fool anyone, especially under a white sheet with blood smudges.

Back in the operation theatre, Sashi was on a call.

“Yes sir,” he said, keeping his voice neutral. “The postmortem report will be ready in thirty minutes.”

“Good,” said the voice on the other end. “I’ll be there soon to collect it myself.”

Sashi hung up and pocketed his phone, glancing at the door just as the doctor and trainee returned—pushing a gurney with the substitute body.

“This one will work,” the doctor said, wiping his forehead. “He’ll be *you*, now.”

Aviyansh examined the dead man. “Close enough.”

The doctor looked to Sashi. “We’ll finalize the death certificate under this body’s name—claim it’s Aviyansh. We’ll burn the real documents.”

“Where do we stash the real one?” Sashi asked.

“I have a spare room on the upper floor. No one ever goes there,” the doctor replied. “He’ll be safe.”

The trainee helped Aviyansh up. He winced but kept his balance. Quietly, the two disappeared down the hallway.

The doctor and Sashi headed toward his office to forge the necessary paperwork.

In the silence of the corridor, a new reality settled over them all:

Death wore a mask.

And for the first time in his life, **Aviyansh had just escaped it.**

Paper Deaths, Real Escape

The doctor and Sashi sat across from each other in the office. The silence between them was only broken by the shuffle of papers as the doctor handed over the postmortem report.

Sashi scanned it quickly.

“Heart punctured by a knife,” he mumbled aloud. “Time of death approximately 10 p.m. Signs of struggle... likely defensive wounds.”

The doctor pulled out a fresh form, his pen hovering over the page. “Who should I list as the person claiming the

body? A family member, or should I put someone from the police department?”

Sashi scratched his head, thinking for a moment. “Hold on,” he said, reaching for his phone. He dialed his superior, and after a few rings, the call was picked up.

“Sir, doctor needs a name for the body claim form,” Sashi said.

There was a pause. Then his superior answered, “Write down *Anju*, wife of Aviyansh. Also—what did the postmortem say?”

“Confirmed death by stabbing. Knife to the heart. Time of death around 10. Some signs of a scuffle, possibly while resisting.”

“Good. I’m ten minutes away from the hospital. We’ll discuss the rest in person.”

The call ended.

“Write *Anju*, wife of the deceased,” Sashi instructed the doctor. “And hurry. My superior is almost here.”

The doctor’s hand moved faster, his script hurried but precise. Within minutes, the paperwork was complete.

Back in the operation theatre, Sashi and the doctor carefully wrapped the substitute corpse. They bound it tightly from head to toe in a thick white cloth, concealing the face and torso.

“If anyone wants to unwrap it,” the doctor said, “they’ll have to go through layers. This should buy us time.”

Just as they stepped out, a tall, broad-shouldered man walked through the front doors.

“Jignesh,” Sashi whispered, spotting his superior.

Jignesh marched in briskly, nodding at the doctor as Sashi introduced them.

“We’ll also need the murder weapon for fingerprint analysis,” Jignesh said.

“Of course,” the doctor replied. “It’s still in the operation theatre. I’ll show you.”

On the way, Sashi handed him both the report and the claim form.

Inside the theatre, Jignesh eyed the tightly wrapped body, raising a brow, but said nothing. The doctor handed him the bloodstained knife, carefully sealed in a plastic evidence pouch.

“Everything’s in the report,” the doctor assured. “You’ll find all the forensic details there.”

Jignesh flipped through the documents, then gave a nod. “Looks complete.”

He looked again at the shrouded corpse. “In the morning, at 10 a.m., two of my officers will come to transport the body to the crematorium. Anju will be there to perform the last rites.”

“No problem,” the doctor said. “I’ll be here to assist.”

“One thing though,” Jignesh added as they exited. “There was no need to wrap the body like that. What if Anju wants to see his face one last time?”

The doctor thought quickly. “Honestly, I don’t think she will. She’s the one who killed him. She’s probably riddled with guilt—haunted by the fact that she murdered

the man she once loved... and that he turned out to be a notorious serial killer.”

Jignesh was silent for a moment, then nodded. “Fair point.”

He turned to leave. “We’ll see you in the morning, then.”

“I’ll be waiting,” said the doctor.

The Next Morning – Crematorium Grounds

A gray dawn hung heavy over the city. Smoke curled from nearby chimneys as two police officers carried the wrapped body to the pyre. Anju was already there, dressed in dull, oversized prison clothes. Her face was pale, dark circles under her eyes. Her hands trembled as she held the burning stick.

She looked like a shell—hollowed by pain, guilt, and fatigue.

Jignesh approached her gently. “Anju. Do you want to see Aviyansh’s face one last time... or do you want to proceed with the ritual?”

She didn’t speak. Her lips parted, but no words came out. She only gave a slight nod—uncertain, broken.

Jignesh turned to his men. “Make a small slit in the cloth. Just enough for her to see his face.”

The two officers moved forward, knives in hand, and began to cut through the tightly wound cloth near the head.

Suddenly—Anju’s voice rang out, loud and sharp:

“No! Don’t do that. Please.”

Everyone paused.

She stepped forward with trembling legs and touched the edge of the pyre. Without waiting for anyone else, she lowered the burning stick to the dry wood beneath the body.

Flames caught quickly.

The cloth, the body, the truth—all ignited together.

The crowd stood in silence, watching the fire consume what they believed to be *Aviyansh*.

But only a few knew the truth.

He wasn’t dead.

He had slipped past death’s door.

And now, somewhere out there—**he was free again.**

Chapter 16

The Face That Wasn't Expected

No One Will Be Forgiven

The air in the interrogation room felt thick—tension woven into every breath, every glance.

Aviyansh looked up with a devilish smile as Runjish and Pooja entered. “I’ve been waiting,” he said coolly. “Done cleaning up the mess you created by arresting me and my wife?”

Pooja tossed an old file on the table with a dull *thud*. “Don’t flatter yourself. We’re handling it,” she said, her tone sharp.

Aviyansh chuckled. “You can try. But you’ll fail. Spectacularly.”

Runjish leaned forward. “Do you remember the doctor who conducted your so-called postmortem? And his trainee?”

“Of course,” Aviyansh said without hesitation. “They gave me a second life.”

“And Officer Sashi?” Pooja asked, eyes locked onto his.

A flicker of emotion crossed Aviyansh's face. "Sashi... he was one of the good ones. Fierce. Honest. We shared the same fire—to cleanse this society. He risked everything for me. I was with him when he took his last breath. He died chasing scum."

Pooja's expression hardened. "That confirms you stayed in contact with him all these years."

Runjish added, "The trainee disappeared—but we caught the doctor. He's in custody now, undergoing interrogation."

Aviyansh smiled faintly. "She'll be long gone by now. I told her—if I ever got arrested, she should vanish. She listened."

"And the doctor?" Runjish pressed. "You paid him off, didn't you? Or did you have something on him?"

Aviyansh shrugged. "Money. Secrets. Fear. Everyone has a price. As for the body swap, I don't know how he managed it. I just know he said it could be done, and I trusted him. That was enough."

Pooja leaned forward. "Let's see what he says under pressure. You pulled off an insane plan, Aviyansh. I'll give you that. Faking your death, manipulating the system—it was risky."

"I had to take that risk," he said quietly. "For Vera."

Runjish tilted his head. "What I don't get is *Anju*. She swore she killed you. She confessed. She served fifteen years in prison for it. And now she's working with you?"

Pooja nodded. "She lived half her life behind bars because of you. Why would she ever help you?"

Aviyansh looked down at the steel table for a moment, then back up. “I hated her at first. For tearing our family apart. But the truth is—I was the one who broke it in the first place. She reacted out of fear... fear I caused.”

He paused, took a sip of water, then continued, voice lower now.

“I spent years trying to get her out. Sashi helped. He had a contact—a guard in her prison. That guard started speaking well of Anju to his superior. Eventually, a case was made for early release. Good behavior. Five years shaved off.”

Pooja folded her arms. “That still doesn’t explain why she joined you.”

“I didn’t go to her directly,” Aviyansh said. “I waited. I watched. I needed to know where she left Vera. But I wasn’t ready to face her... not until I found our daughter.”

Runjish’s eyes narrowed. “So *you* found Vera before Anju did?”

“With Sashi’s help,” Aviyansh nodded. “We combed through Panipat’s population database. Filtered by name. One by one, we traced down every Vera in the city... until I found *her*.”

“And then you told Anju,” Pooja said, piecing it together.

“Yes. That’s when everything shifted. I showed her that nothing had changed. That rapists still walked free. That the justice system was still broken. And that Vera—our Vera—deserved a safer world.”

His voice had gone darker now. Edged with cold resolve.

“That’s when Anju understood. That’s when she joined me.”

Runjish leaned back, staring at him. “You raised a monster... and then you brought another into the darkness.”

“No,” Aviyansh replied calmly. “I created balance. And this time, no one will be forgiven.”

A Father’s Silent Watch

The Past Stalks in the Present

Runjish sat across from Aviyansh, studying him like a puzzle finally taking shape.

“I’ll admit,” he said, “we didn’t expect to catch you and Anju. Our focus was completely on Vera. For the past two years, every clue pointed toward her... or your wife.”

Pooja nodded, arms crossed. “We dissected every killing, every timeline. Vera was the common link. But Anju’s past made it hard to ignore her either.”

Runjish leaned forward, tapping the file on the desk. “You say you followed Vera like a shadow. That’s not easy. Keeping tabs on her *and* stalking your victims? Feels damn near impossible.”

Aviyansh gave a short, humorless laugh. “It was easy. Because whatever Vera saw—we saw too.”

He met their eyes, a bitter glint in his own. “Tell me... what was the link that led you to Vera? I know it. I just want to hear it from you.”

Runjish smirked. “You said it yourself. You followed her. It’s not rocket science.”

Pooja cut in, flipping through her notes. “Let’s go one case at a time. The first killing: Vera’s own neighborhood. How’d you pick your victim?”

Aviyansh’s expression darkened. “She was out on a night walk, headphones in. I saw a house with its lights on. Inside, a man was whipping his wife with a belt. Later, the lights were off—but he was still abusing her. I watched him rape her. She was trying to fight back. I killed him. But I did it carefully, methodically. Left no trace. That neighborhood has been safer ever since.”

Runjish leaned back. “The second one... the family function in Karnal. Vera attended that with Gayatri. How’d you get in without an invite?”

“I already knew about the function,” Aviyansh replied, calm. “Heard it through my recording devices—installed them in every room of Vera’s house. I tailed their car in a suit. At the venue, I got close enough behind her that the guard thought I was her father. Got right in.”

“And the victim?” Pooja asked.

“A waiter. He brushed up against every woman there. Tried it on my daughter too. I stepped between them. He smirked. That was enough. He didn’t walk out of that function.”

Pooja looked stunned. “You broke into Vera’s home... and bugged it?”

“I had no choice,” Aviyansh said. “She was living with strangers. I had to be sure she was safe.”

Runjish picked up from there. “So that’s how you found out about Rajat—the one who raped Tanya. And then about Dev, her adoptive father, who raped Gayatri.”

Aviyansh clenched his fists. “When I heard that... I nearly lost it. My daughter lived under the same roof as that monster. If I’d known earlier—he wouldn’t have survived this long.”

Pooja softened slightly. “But you didn’t know. Back then, you were in Delhi, still trying to get Anju out.”

Runjish nodded. “And the remaining victims—Akshardham Temple, the Delhi book fair, the Kurukshetra University professor, and that politician at the rally—they were all around Vera, just like the others.”

“She went to Akshardham on a college trip. She was at the book fair. She filled a rechecking form at that campus. The rally? Her college forced them to attend. All of it matched.”

Aviyansh sat back. “You see now? You built a case against her... but it was always *me*. I followed her to protect her. And wherever I saw evil—I removed it.”

He spat on the floor. “Your law is useless. Women aren’t safe at home, at school, in temples, on the street. Your system doesn’t protect them—it waits until after the damage is done. I *acted*. And when I did, the rape stats dropped. Fear worked.”

The room fell into a heavy silence. Runjish and Pooja didn’t respond. Maybe they couldn’t. Maybe, deep down, they agreed.

But Pooja shifted the conversation. “Fine. Let’s talk about your *network*. The hacker. The kidney sellers. The kidnappers. We want names.”

“You won’t get them,” Aviyansh replied coolly. “I don’t know who they are. Only ever contacted them through one person.”

“Who?” Runjish asked sharply.

“The hacker. He handled everything—kidnappers, buyers, fake IDs, black-market surgeries. All of it.”

Pooja frowned. “Then give us something. A phone. A lead. Anything.”

Aviyansh scratched behind his ear. “You can try my satellite phone. It won’t work anymore. He’ll know I’ve been caught. But it’s worth a shot.”

He rattled off a number. Pooja wrote it down, snapped a photo, and texted it to Vineet.

“This is the hacker’s number. See what you can get.”

She stood, Runjish following. The door creaked open.

“Where are you going now?” Aviyansh asked.

“To visit your wife,” Pooja said over her shoulder. “Let’s see if her story matches yours.”

Partner in Crime?

“The blood wasn’t just on his hands—it was on mine too.”

The interrogation room’s fan buzzed overhead as Runjish slammed his palm down on the table, glaring at Anju.

“You lied to us,” he said, his voice cracking with fury. “Back when you came in last time—you acted innocent. I knew something was off. But never—never—did I imagine your husband was alive and right beside you the whole time.”

Pooja leaned forward, her voice cold and steady. “How did he convince you to join him again? After everything?”

Anju looked up slowly. Her eyes held no fear—only exhaustion.

“I didn’t know he was alive,” she said. “Not until a few months after I moved to Panipat. One night... he showed up at my doorstep. Told me he had found our daughter.” Her voice trembled. “He said we could build a better world for her—a safer one. And at that moment, I would have done anything just to see Vera once.”

Pooja opened her mouth to respond, but Anju kept going, her voice growing stronger. “Your laws evolve. Your tech advances. But your minds?” She shook her head. “Still chained to shame. You mourn a shattered window louder than a shattered girl. What justice can grow in a country that punishes the protectors and lets the predators walk free?”

Runjish narrowed his eyes. “If that’s how you felt... then why wait years to meet Vera? And why use Gayatri to get close to your own daughter?”

The question struck home. Anju’s composure faltered; sweat beaded her forehead. But she steadied herself and answered, “She wasn’t ready. She was too young to handle a truth like ours—about who we really were. Then Dev

went into a coma, and Vera... she fell apart. We couldn't burden her with more."

Pooja wasn't convinced. "That coma didn't last forever. You had *years* afterward. Don't tell me Vera was too fragile all that time."

"You're right," Anju admitted. "But by then, we'd gone too far. Aviyansh had started finding men—monsters—around her. Rapists. Abusers. Harassers. He watched. He followed. And he started killing again. I helped. Once we started... how could we just show our faces to Vera? We weren't parents anymore—we were shadows. Ghosts making her world safer."

"But you still contacted her," Pooja pressed. "Why?"

Anju's eyes brimmed with unshed tears. "Because I'm a mother. Watching her every day, hearing her voice, seeing her smile... and not being able to touch her, talk to her, hold her? It was killing me. So I made a plan. I had to tell her the truth about her real family—about us."

She took a deep breath, then gave them the same timeline of victims that Aviyansh had shared. From Vera's neighborhood, to the temple, the rally, the university, the fair... and finally, to Dev.

Runjish listened, arms folded. Then asked, "Aviyansh got the victims, made the deals, sold the kidneys. What was *your* role in all this?"

Anju's voice went flat. "I handled the organs. Once the victims were restrained—still alive—I made the incisions. I removed the kidneys. The heart too. That was my job."

Pooja flinched slightly. "And the messages?"

“I typed them on an old machine. Warnings. Promises. Truths.” She reached for a glass of water and drank. Her throat had gone dry.

When she set the glass down, her voice came back low but certain.

“You call it murder. I call it surgery on a diseased society. We didn’t create the sickness. We only started cutting it out.”

Hunting Ghosts in the Code

“Sometimes the ghosts we chase are smarter than the living.”

In a dimly lit room filled with humming electronics and the sharp scent of solder, Vineet sat hunched over his laptop, eyes scanning strings of code and decrypted fragments. Devices from Aviyansh’s hideout were strewn across the desk.

Runjish entered briskly, with Pooja right behind. “Did you find anything?” he asked.

Vineet didn’t look up. “Still working. Whoever handled their digital trail was meticulous. No dark web history. No logs. Satellite mobile’s wiped clean. No recoverable files.” He paused. “It’s like the system never even existed.”

Disappointed, Runjish and Pooja turned to leave. “Keep going,” Pooja said.

Vineet nodded, muttering to himself as they walked out, “I’m not giving up. Not until I find something.”

He took a sip from his coffee and stared at the screen. “Gotta hand it to them... these bastards cleaned up like professionals.”

Just then, Prakash walked in, arms full of tangled wires and plastic bags. “Found these in a box from Aviyansh’s storeroom. Figured they might connect to that setup.”

He placed the box beside Vineet, then reached into his jacket pocket and handed over a small evidence bag. “Also, these. Voice recorders from Vera’s house—Pooja said Aviyansh planted them. Took me forever to find the damn things.”

Vineet barely heard him. His eyes were locked on a specific wire in the pile. A thick, black cable, with subtle ridges along its length—encrypted, shielded, purpose-built.

“Well, look at this little nightmare,” he muttered. “This just made my life harder.”

He connected one end of the encrypted cable to the PC and the other into the satellite phone. The system blinked to life. Vineet took a breath.

“Alright, ghost... let’s see if you answer.”

He dialed the number Aviyansh had given. It rang. Once. Twice. No answer. He tried again.

Nothing.

“Feels like I’m chasing smoke in a thunderstorm,” he said under his breath.

Meanwhile, across the building, a storm of another kind was raging.

Runjish burst into a meeting room where Vinod Mehta sat with Shiv Kumar and Sheo Prasad.

“Why the hell did you let go those kidnappers?!” he shouted. “They were our only link to the hacker!”

Vinod didn't flinch. "We got the killers. Isn't that enough for your *résumé*, Officer?"

"This isn't about *résumés*, it's about public safety!" Runjish fired back. "You let a critical lead vanish into thin air!"

From the hallway, Pooja and Vineet heard the shouting and rushed in. Pooja stepped between them, trying to cool the fire. "Sir, please... we're better than this. Let's go."

Vinod's voice turned cold. "Get out. Before I make a call that stains *your* record."

Pooja gently pulled Runjish away as Vineet lingered just outside the door. The tension still clung to the air like static.

Outside, Runjish collapsed onto Vineet's chair, seething. "They have power... and no damn clue how to use it."

"We'll find them," Pooja said calmly. "With or without them. The case isn't over until we say it is."

Vineet stepped forward. "Actually... I was just about to tell you something. Before the shouting match."

Runjish straightened. "What is it? A lead?"

Vineet exhaled. "More like the opposite."

He held up the encrypted wire. "This cable connected Aviyansh's system to the satellite phone. It's a dedicated encrypted line—military grade. Calls routed through this can't be traced or logged."

Pooja frowned. "And the hacker's number?"

"Belongs to a dead man," Vineet said. "Literally. No social activity. No location. I tried calling—it rang, but no one picked up. Twice."

“So, the hacker’s off-grid. He’s watching us, but we can’t see him.” Runjish sighed. “We’re chasing a ghost.”

“That’s why,” Vineet said, “I think I need a second opinion. Someone in my field. Smarter. Deeper into cyberforensics. I’m not offended, sir—I get it. We’re running out of time.”

Runjish nodded. “Do it.”

Pooja stepped in. “Check the voice recorders too. Every detail counts now. Somewhere in that mess—there’s a thread. We just need to pull the right one.”

Vineet nodded. “I’ll dig harder. I promise.”

Pooja turned to Runjish. “You stay here and cool down. I’m going back to the interrogation cells. If there’s even a shred of doubt in Aviansh or Anju, I’ll find it before we present this case in courtroom.”

As she walked away, Vineet sat back down at his laptop.

Outside, the night deepened. But inside the system, somewhere in the silence of the encrypted lines—something was waiting.

Chapter 17

Echoes of a Better World

Chains of Glory

The police jeep rolled to a halt outside the courthouse. The sun hung low but sharp, casting long shadows across the concrete steps. The back doors opened.

Out stepped **Aviyansh** and **Anju**, bound in handcuffs, their wrists glinting with steel, chains dragging like ghosts behind them. Their faces were pale but unreadable — stoic, almost serene, like saints walking to their execution.

Beyond the barricades, the crowd erupted.

Protesters swarmed against the metal fencing, shouting, chanting, weeping. Placards danced in the air like flags at war:

“Free Our Saviours!”

“Sometimes, the Law Needs a Killer.”

“Not All Heroes Follow Rules.”

“Fear the System, Not Them.”

“They Did What the Law Wouldn’t.”

A little girl sitting on her father's shoulders held up a crayon-drawn sign:

“Thank you, Aviyansh and Anju.”

In the midst of the chaos, a man vaulted over the barricade, dodging the media scrum. He ran toward the couple, desperate, wild-eyed. The crowd gasped. Officers lunged forward.

The man crashed to the ground with a cop on his back but managed to cry out:

“You’re not killers — you’re the cure! This world needs more like you!”

Aviyansh locked eyes with him and roared back for everyone to hear:

“My friend, it’s not over. Justice will continue — better, stronger. Even if I’m gone, don’t let your faith die. Be ready for a big change.”

The crowd erupted again, louder this time, a wall of sound that made the walls of the courthouse tremble.

Anju leaned closer and whispered sharply, **“You’re inviting more trouble. Keep your mouth shut.”**

But Aviyansh stood tall, drinking in the chants, the cries, the faces. For once in his life, he was not a shadow — he was the storm.

Inside the courtroom, silence returned like a curtain falling.

The walls were cold. The air, tense. Victims’ families from past and recent cases filled the benches — some with

anger in their eyes, others with tears, confusion, heartbreak. Justice, here, was both sword and mirror.

And in the last row, barely breathing, sat **Vera** beside **Gayatri**.

Their daughter.

The moment Aviyansh and Anju saw her, something broke inside. Their chained hands ached to reach out, but all they could do was stare — silently memorizing her face, possibly for the last time.

Vera's eyes filled with tears. A single drop slipped down her cheek and landed on her jeans. Her parents — the real ones — stood in chains, branded criminals, worshipped as heroes. Her world was shattering in paradoxes.

She wiped her tear before Gayatri noticed. Her face remained still, but inside — chaos.

Do I hate them? Or do I understand them?

Am I a reflection of them? Or something else entirely?

All she knew was — she didn't want the judge to be harsh.

She couldn't bear it.

A door opened.

Runjish entered with **Vinod Mehta** and the rest of the team — except Vineet. A lawyer followed closely behind them. No one spoke.

Tension sat on every shoulder like a weight.

From the corner of his eye, Aviyansh saw Vera again and thought:

This might be the last time I ever see her. I don't even know what her voice sounds like when she says my name. I've memorized her face from afar. But I have no memories of her laugh, her anger, her dreams.

Still, I must stay away. I did everything for her. She must understand that...

Beside Vera, **Gayatri** sat stiff, hands clenched in her lap. The blood connection between Vera and the two on trial was a silent wound she couldn't ignore. And now, it felt like the wound might start bleeding again — in the public eye, under courtroom lights.

The bailiff's voice rang out: **"All rise."**

Everyone stood.

The **judge** entered, a figure cloaked in black, face unreadable. He walked with gravity, like someone aware that whatever he said today — would ripple across a nation.

The judge took his seat. **"You may sit."**

Everyone did — except **Aviyansh** and **Anju**.

They remained standing, hands chained, bodies straight. Eyes forward.

This was more than a trial.

This was a reckoning.

Confessions of the Unrepentant

The courtroom was a vault of silence.

Rituraj, the lawyer representing the CBI, stood and handed over the case file to the judge—a thick dossier packed with statements, forensic reports, timelines, digital evidence, and the raw confessions of **Aviyansh** and **Anju**.

The judge, stern and methodical, flipped through the pages with slow precision. Each word he read was a nail in the coffin—of the case, of freedom, of legacy.

Then, he looked up.

“Aviyansh and Anju, please step into the witness box.”

A shiver passed through the room. Reporters stopped scribbling. Phones froze mid-record. Even the rustle of breath held back.

The chains on their wrists clinked like soft bells in the dead silence as they stepped forward.

The judge peered at them. “Don’t you have legal representation?”

“No, Your Honor,” Aviyansh answered calmly.

“Would you like one? For a fair trial?”

“We don’t want one,” he repeated.

The judge gave a subtle nod. “Very well. Is there anything you wish to say in your defense?”

All eyes turned to them. **Vera** held her breath. **Gayatri** clenched the armrest of her bench. The moment teetered between collapse and confession.

Aviyansh exhaled. “Your Honor, we’re not here to defend ourselves.”

Gasps swept across the courtroom. Murmurs rose like whispers in a storm.

He continued, voice steady: “We admit to every crime. I alone killed ten rapists twenty years ago. And these last eight killings—my wife and I did them together. Willingly. Silently. Without remorse.”

Anju stepped in, her eyes glistening but firm. “We did it to protect our daughter. To give her a world where no man could violate her, mock her, or reduce her to silence. We did it because the system wouldn’t. We are guilty—but not ashamed.”

Aviyansh’s tone grew heavier, breaking slightly: “We ask for no leniency. We ask for nothing. Only that you bring this to an end. Here and now. We have no strength left to fight or to pretend.”

They both folded their hands, their chained wrists trembling as they bowed before the judge.

The silence was now thick with tension. Some wiped tears. Others looked down, disturbed. But one man stood.

Rituraj, now somber, spoke: “Your Honor, the families of the victims wish to speak. One by one.”

The judge nodded.

What followed was an hour of pain and paradox.

One by one, people came forward—not to praise the killers, but to question the irreversible. “We deserved a chance to make them better,” one mother cried.

“You took away their right to redemption,” said a sister.

“They were monsters, yes. But they were still human. Couldn’t they have been changed?”

Pain came not from sympathy—but from a robbed opportunity to heal. The courtroom, once split, now blurred in moral ambiguity.

And then—**Vera stood up.**

“Your Honor, may I speak?”

Everyone turned. Gayatri grabbed her wrist, whispering, “No, don’t.” But it was too late.

Vera’s steps echoed like thunder. She entered the opposite witness box and turned to the judge.

“I’m Vera. Their daughter.”

A moment froze.

“I never got to know them. Not even as voices. Not as memories. But what they did, they did for me. I know that now. I didn’t ask for protection, but I’m still grateful they tried. I am not here to justify murder. But I am here to ask—please... show them mercy.”

Aviyansh shook his head from across the room. “Please, Vera. Stop. You don’t belong here. This place will never protect you.”

Anju’s voice cracked. “Please... go back to your seat. Don’t say another word.”

The judge raised his hand gently. “That’s enough. Thank you.”

Vera returned to her seat, her lips pressed shut, her eyes wet with impossible grief.

The judge scribbled something on the sentencing sheet. Then he spoke.

“After reviewing the confessions, the evidence, and the testimonies of all present, I hereby find both Aviyansh and Anju guilty of eight counts of murder, conspiracy, organ trafficking, and obstruction of justice.

The sentence is as follows:

Ten years of imprisonment. Followed by execution by hanging.”

The gavel came down like thunder.

It was over.

Aviyansh didn’t flinch.

Anju closed her eyes but didn’t weep.

Vera couldn’t breathe.

As the guards approached to escort them out, **Aviyansh turned to one officer and whispered**, “Please... just ten minutes. Let us talk to our daughter... one last time.”

Prakash, who had been observing silently beside Runjish, stepped forward.

He looked at Vera, then at the judge’s empty chair. And finally, back at the guards.

He gave a nod.

“Make it quick,” he said.

The Twist in the Thread

Vineet burst into the courtroom, breathless, hair sticking to his forehead with sweat.

“**Vineet! Easy—what’s going on?**” Runjish asked, rising to meet him.

“Thank God I made it! Has the session started yet?”

Vinod scoffed from nearby. “You’re late. It *ended* a few minutes ago.”

“What?” Vineet froze. “Already? But—how?”

“It started on time. Aviyansh and Anju refused legal defense, confessed everything. The judge passed the sentence,” Vinod replied, indifferent.

Vineet’s face twisted in disbelief, but he pushed forward. “Fine. Doesn’t matter. I found something important. You all need to hear this.”

Prakash, having just returned after allowing Aviyansh and Anju a final talk with Vera, overheard the urgency in Vineet’s tone and joined the group.

“Speak,” said Runjish. “Quickly.”

Vineet glanced around and spoke low, serious. “**The entire computer setup at Aviyansh’s house—it’s a decoy. A distraction. It was *never used*. All of it was brought in after the first killing two years ago.**”

“What are you saying?” Runjish asked, leaning in.

“I mean the whole tech setup is a *fake lead*. You remember when I said their systems were too clean? Now I

know why. We were chasing ghosts. Everything we were trying to trace... never existed.”

A heavy silence fell.

Vineet continued, “It gets worse. I contacted the hospital. The intern who helped Aviyansh escape twenty years ago? She still worked there. Became a doctor. But on the *same night* we caught Aviyansh and Anju... she disappeared.”

“What?!” Pooja gasped.

“She vanished mid-shift—*before* the arrests even happened.”

Runjish’s expression darkened. “That means... she knew they were going to be caught. She knew about our trap. Which also means—**someone leaked it to her.**”

“And that computer setup being untouched means...” Pooja trailed off, eyes widening.

“They’ve been covering for someone else,” Vineet finished.

Vinod stepped forward, arms crossed. “We have a **mole** in our team. That’s how they found out about the trap. The question is—*who are they protecting?*”

Pooja’s voice cut in, quiet but firm. “There’s only one answer. **Vera.**”

Everyone went silent.

“But now we’ve got another problem,” Vinod added. “There’s a mole among us. That changes everything.”

All eyes turned toward Vinod himself.

He noticed. “What? Don’t look at me like that.”

“Then why did you let the kidnappers go?” Runjish snapped. “That was our best lead.”

“I already answered that during the police station argument. I’m not repeating myself,” Vinod said, defensive.

Shiv Kumar interjected, siding with Vinod. “What if those kidnappers were *decoys* too? Just like the van. Maybe Aviyansh and Anju copied everything. The real ones could still be out there.”

Sheo Prasad now turned the tables. “We could say the same about *you*, Runjish. You’ve been obsessed with finding the kidnappers. Maybe you’re the one feeding them information to cover the real killer.”

Runjish stiffened. His mouth opened to argue—but no words came.

Vinod raised an eyebrow. “Well? Anything to say about that?”

Runjish slowly turned toward Shiv Kumar. “What about *you*? You’re the one who first brought up revisiting the past. Maybe that was your way of buying time—while the real killer continued.”

The room filled with charged silence.

Vinod folded his arms. “And let’s not forget Vineet. He knew what time court started, yet only showed up after the sentence was passed. Convenient.”

Vineet’s face went cold. “You think I’m the mole? I’ve been neck-deep in code and evidence while you all played politics.”

Pooja stepped in, raising her voice, slicing through the tension.

“Enough! This isn’t the time to turn on each other. We need clarity, not chaos. Everything we thought was resolved—it’s *not*. We need to regroup.”

Everyone hesitated. Breathing slowed. Words held back.

Prakash broke the silence. “If this gets out—that Aviyansh and Anju weren’t the real killers this time... that there’s a bigger player, a mole inside our team—our *entire reputation* will crumble.”

Runjish’s eyes swept the room. His team. His case. His country’s justice system—**on the edge of collapse.**

Mistrust flickered between every pair of eyes.

Confusion clouded every mind.

And as the room fell into uneasy quiet... **no one knew who to trust anymore.**

The First and The Last Talk

Aviyansh and Anju, shackled in chains, stepped toward Vera. As they neared her, she too took a step forward. Gayatri followed close behind, tense with worry.

“Hi... Dad,” Vera said, her voice cracking. She turned to Anju. “Hi, Mom.”

“Hello, my daughter,” Aviyansh replied, emotion swelling in his chest. It was the first time he had heard her voice in person since she was just a crying infant. A tear slipped from his eye.

Anju only nodded, eyes misting, unable to speak.

Gayatri whispered urgently, “This isn’t a good idea, Vera. Let’s go.” She gripped her daughter’s hand, trying to pull her away.

But Vera didn’t move. She gently slipped out of Gayatri’s grasp. Gayatri stood frozen, stunned by her daughter’s silent rejection.

Feeling the tension, Aviyansh addressed Gayatri, his voice respectful. “I owe you everything. You raised our daughter with love, and I’ll always be grateful. But... this might be the last time we ever speak to her. Please. Just give us a moment.”

Gayatri’s expression hardened. “No. Whatever you want to say, say it in front of me. You killed my husband. I forgave him. You had no right to interfere in our lives.”

Aviyansh turned to the officers standing nearby and raised his cuffed hands slightly. “Please. All I ask is five minutes alone with my daughter. It’s my last wish.”

The officers hesitated, then moved Gayatri aside. She resisted briefly but gave up and returned to her seat, anxiously watching from a distance.

Vera didn’t protest. She didn’t even glance at Gayatri.

“Thank you for saving me, Dad,” Vera said softly. “I won’t let you down. I’ll continue your work—make this country safer for women.”

Anju’s eyes widened in panic. “No, Vera. You won’t. Not again. We saved you this time, but we may not be there next time.”

But Aviyansh smiled at Vera. “Don’t listen to your mother. I can see it in your eyes—you’re ready for

something big. Something this broken society isn't prepared for." He glanced over his shoulder at the officers and agents nearby, then looked back at Vera. "If you ever need help... *he* can guide you."

Vera followed his gaze. It landed on **Prakash**, deep in discussion across the room. She understood the signal.

Anju couldn't believe what she was hearing. "You're still encouraging her? After everything? You've lost yourself in this obsession."

She turned to Vera, her voice pleading. "Please. Don't follow in his footsteps. Don't let this darkness swallow your life like it did ours."

Vera didn't blink. "Mom... you're not seeing what's right in front of you. When Dad was active, rapists lived in fear. But when everyone thought he was dead, those same monsters came back. If we don't act, history repeats. Someone has to keep rising. Even if it means... killing the ones who raised you."

Anju lowered her gaze, unable to respond. Whatever connection she hoped to build with her daughter had dissolved. Vera was no longer looking at her—only at her father.

Aviyansh gently cupped Vera's face with his chained hands. "I was reborn with a purpose, and I now know what it was—to protect *you*."

His voice dropped. "Be careful. They'll soon realize we fooled them. They'll hunt for the mole. I did everything to cover your tracks... but from here, it's your game. Leave no evidence."

Vera nodded. “The faster we serve justice, the faster we bring change. Because justice delayed... is no justice at all.”

Aviyansh smiled faintly. “People are with you. They’ll guide you to the next predator.”

He stepped back, motioning to the officers. “It’s time. Take care of yourself. Don’t get caught.”

Vera watched them walk away, eyes burning with a new purpose.

Moments later, she turned and walked away silently. Gayatri followed, her face filled with pain and fear.

The first conversation between Vera and her real parents...

Was also the last.

Chapter 18

Blood over Bars

Redemption by Proxy

After faking his own death, Aviyansh was discharged from the hospital within a week. Before he left, the doctor who had helped falsify his death records handed him a small bag containing fresh clothes, a fake mustache, and a worn-out cap—just enough for him to blend into a world that now believed him to be dead. He could no longer afford to be recognized. One wrong glance could cost him everything.

Inside the hospital, he used a dusty landline phone at the reception and dialed a number from memory. Sashi picked up.

“I need the house keys,” Aviyansh said. “Meet me at the tea stall around the corner. Seven tonight.”

By evening, Aviyansh stood outside the hospital, blending in with the small crowd at the roadside stall. At exactly 7:00 PM, Sashi arrived, ordered a tea, and sat beside him without a word. Quietly, casually, he passed the keys under the table. No one noticed.

Aviyansh left without finishing his chai. Sashi sipped slowly, waited a few minutes, and then walked away in the opposite direction.

That night, under the cover of darkness, Aviyansh unlocked the door to his old house. The silence inside felt like a grave. From a locked almirah, he took out a bundle of cash—money Anju had saved years ago during her pregnancy for their baby's future. He lay on the bed, eyes open, haunted, until morning came.

At 8:00 AM, he called Sashi again—this time from a PCO booth. “I need a SIM card,” he said. “Use your ID. Meet me at Sahara Bar tonight.”

After the call, Aviyansh bought a cheap phone with the cash and spent the rest of the day searching for a place to live. By dusk, he had a small room on rent. Bare bones, but enough.

Later that evening at Sahara Bar, the music blared and neon lights flickered as Sashi greeted him at the counter. “Hey, my friend,” Aviyansh said, tapping his shoulder.

“Hey!” Sashi replied. He ordered two beers.

When the bartender served them, Sashi slid a SIM card across the table. Aviyansh popped it into his new phone, powered it on, and nodded in approval.

“So,” Sashi leaned in, raising his voice over the music, “what’s the plan for this second life of yours?”

“Find my daughter. Fulfill the promise I made—to you, and to the trainee,” Aviyansh answered.

“Any idea where she is?”

“That’s what I was going to ask you. When you interrogated Anju... did she mention where she left the baby?”

“All she said was that she left her with someone she trusted more than anyone. No names. No clues.”

Aviyansh clenched his jaw. “She’ll be in prison for the next two decades. I can’t wait that long.”

Sashi hesitated. “I might have something... Instead of twenty years, you might only have to wait fifteen.”

Aviyansh leaned in. “I’m listening.”

“I have a friend working guard duty in the same prison where Anju’s being held. Every year, they submit behavioral reports to the judge who sentenced the inmate. I can ask him to forge glowing reports—make it look like Anju’s been a model prisoner. That could get her five years off her sentence.”

“Do it. And tell him, if anyone ever comes to meet her—*anyone*—he needs to notify us immediately. In the meantime, I’ll check with every friend, every relative. Maybe someone out there has Vera.”

They clinked their beer glasses together and kept drinking until the neon lights blurred into a haze.

As they stepped out of the bar, Aviyansh handed the keys back to Sashi.

“Almost forgot. And... I’ll need to find a job now. The rent won’t pay itself.”

“Good luck,” Sashi smiled. “I hope you find what you’re looking for.”

Ten Years Later

The years passed in quiet desperation. Aviyansh knocked on every door, asked every friend, every distant cousin. Nothing. No clue. No call came from the prison either. No visitor ever came to see Anju.

The silence began to crush him. A decade of failure dulled his hope. He stopped searching for a while—just to protect what was left of his sanity.

Then one evening, Sashi called.

“It worked,” he said. “The judge reduced Anju’s sentence by five years. She’ll be out soon.”

Aviyansh didn’t respond at first. He just stood in silence, phone in hand, staring at the wall. Slowly, hope began to creep back in. Days became weeks, weeks felt like months.

And then... the day came. Anju was released.

Aviyansh watched from a distance as she stepped outside the prison gates. He followed her like a shadow—never too close, never far. He thought she would go straight to their daughter.

But days passed.

Then weeks.

Instead of finding Vera, Anju enrolled in a mathematics teaching program. She kept a routine, lived quietly, stayed off the radar. It made no sense.

Frustrated, Aviyansh's mind teetered on the edge. One part of him screamed to confront her. Another told him to wait—just a little longer.

He had waited over a decade already. What were a few more weeks?

But deep down, he feared something he wasn't ready to admit:

What if Anju didn't want him to find Vera at all?

The Game of Hope and Desperate Obsessions

A year had passed since Anju walked out of prison, yet she had shown no signs—no subtle clues, no slip-ups—that could give Aviyansh even a sliver of hope about their daughter's whereabouts.

And still, he followed her.

Lurking in the shadows of her new routine, he noticed something different: Anju was preparing to move out of Delhi. When the day finally arrived, she rented a small moving truck. Aviyansh, riding his bike from a safe distance, followed her convoy out of the city like a ghost from her past.

Where was she going?

Why now?

Was this finally a lead... or another dead end?

Two hours later, the truck entered **Panipat**, slipping past the city's modest skyline and into a middle-class residential society. Anju and two laborers began unloading her belongings. With urgency pressing in his chest, Aviyansh wasted no time. He too began searching for a

place to stay—somewhere close enough to watch, but not enough to draw attention.

Within a week, he had rented a small apartment nearby. And so began another chapter in his quiet obsession.

That night, just as sleep started to pull at his weary mind, his phone rang. It was Sashi.

“Hello?”

“Hi, Aviyansh. Just checking—did you manage to move to Panipat?”

“Yes, I did, brother. But I’m losing hope again. Anju’s the only lead I have, and from what I see... she isn’t even trying to find Vera.”

“She’s a mother,” Sashi replied. “I doubt she’d move here without a good reason. Maybe we’re missing something. It’s possible... she doesn’t even know where Vera is.”

“That doesn’t make sense. She’s the one who handed Vera over to someone.”

“Maybe she meant something else. During the interrogation, when she said she left Vera with someone she trusted more than anyone... maybe it wasn’t a person. Maybe she meant *God*. People say things like that when they’re desperate.”

Aviyansh went quiet. His brain, numb with doubt, suddenly snapped into clarity.

“You might be right,” he said slowly. “Maybe... she left Vera somewhere near here. That’s why she’s come back. It’s starting to make sense now. Thanks, Sashi. Really.”

“Anytime, man. I’m always here to help.”

There was a pause.

“Hello?” Sashi asked.

“I’m here,” Aviyansh said, mind spinning with fresh energy. “Tell me something—don’t you guys have access to any government portal or database? Something with citizen records?”

“What are you thinking?”

“If we narrow down the search by **age** and **location**, maybe we’ll find someone. We don’t know Vera’s name, or how she looks now, but there has to be *something*—maybe her face, maybe a school record. Anything.”

Sashi paused.

“It’s a long shot,” Aviyansh admitted. “But it’s better than waiting.”

“It’s... possible,” Sashi finally said. “I’ll need time. But let me try.”

“You’re a lifesaver,” Aviyansh said, smiling faintly for the first time in months. “While you work on that, I’ll keep my eyes on Anju. Maybe she’ll lead me to something too.”

“You just needed a clearer mind. Obsession and desperation cloud your thinking. Now you’ve got a lead. Get some sleep.”

“Goodnight,” Aviyansh said, and hung up.

That night, he finally slept like a man with a purpose.

Two Days Later

Aviyansh's phone buzzed.

It was a message from Sashi.

Four possible addresses. Found them through recent family IDs issued by the government. Sent you the images of the girls too—check your WhatsApp.

Excited, Aviyansh jumped on his bike and rode to the first address. From a distance, he saw the girl and discreetly took a picture of her. Then he rode to the second—same process. Within three hours, he had pictures of both girls saved in his phone.

Sashi soon sent him official government pictures for cross-verification.

The first two were **exact matches**.

But something felt off. His gut told him—**neither was Vera**.

He opened the third image—a *boy*. Skipped.

Then came the **fourth**.

The moment he saw it, his breath caught in his throat. There was something in that girl's face... a quiet fire, the same fierce eyes Anju had. She wasn't identical—but she had the look.

He sped to the address and waited.

Two hours passed.

Just as the sun began to fall below the rooftops, a car pulled up to the house. The girl stepped out with a man—

possibly her adoptive father. They were laughing, arms full of grocery bags.

They went inside.

In their rush, they forgot to lock the car.

Aviyansh moved fast. He slipped to the car and scanned the passenger seat where the girl had been sitting. And then—a **single hair**. Long. Thin.

He carefully collected it, tucked it in a paper napkin, and fled.

At the nearest hospital, he approached a nurse at the front desk.

“I want a DNA test. Compare this hair to mine,” he said, handing over the samples.

The nurse raised an eyebrow, but nodded. “It’ll cost you.”

“I’ll pay,” he said, digging cash from his pocket.

She left for the lab. The minutes crawled.

Fifteen agonizing minutes later, the nurse returned with a sealed envelope.

He opened it with trembling hands.

MATCH: 99.87% probability of biological relation.

His heart exploded with joy. He stood up, yelling “YES!” without realizing it.

People stared.

He quickly gathered himself, offered an awkward smile, and walked out into the night.

He didn't need confirmation anymore. He didn't need theories or guesses.

He had found Vera.

Now came the next challenge:

Would she ever accept the man who brought her into this world... and into its darkness?

The Curse and The Purpose

One year had passed since Dev fell into a coma.

In that time, life in Panipat changed—quietly at first, then drastically.

Aviyansh had never imagined that his own daughter would one day follow in his footsteps—not as a citizen, not as a student, but as a **serial killer**.

It started close to home.

A man in Vera's neighborhood—known for abusing his wife—had caught her attention. Aviyansh noticed how often she watched him, how she adjusted her routes to pass near his house. Still, he dismissed it as concern. Vigilance, perhaps. After all, Vera had always shown empathy toward victims of violence.

But when that man was found **brutally murdered**, with a public message echoing the justice-driven language Aviyansh once used—his heart dropped.

She had done it.

And she had done it in the same signature style.

Shock and fear clashed inside him. He was stunned by her boldness, but even more terrified that she might get caught.

From that day forward, Aviyansh became a man with a singular purpose: **not to stop Vera, but to protect her.**

Vera's second target didn't appear immediately.

She returned to her normal life, almost too seamlessly. But Aviyansh wasn't fooled. He knew this wasn't a one-time act. It was only a matter of time.

Desperate to stay a step ahead, he turned to **Prakash**, Sashi's replacement and a trusted ally, and together they placed **voice recording devices** in both Vera's and Gayatri's homes. It was invasive. It was wrong.

But to him, it was necessary.

He needed to know her process, her planning, her patterns—anything that could help him understand how far she was willing to go.

Weeks passed with no leads. Then, a break.

He overheard Vera mentioning a **rented house**—just a few kilometers away from her own. She casually referred to going there to clean, but something in her voice, something in her guarded tone, caught his attention.

He followed her. She left the place spotless and locked the door.

That night, Aviyansh returned—this time with Prakash by his side. They broke the lock and stepped inside.

What they found left them speechless.

A full-scale operation was set up inside.

Medical tools. Restraints. Industrial-grade cleaning equipment. A **typewriter**, a **computer connected to the dark web**, and even a **satellite phone**—every detail chillingly precise.

Aviyansh stood frozen in the doorway.

“How... How did I miss this?” he whispered. “When did she even build all this?”

Prakash silently scanned the room, letting his superior process the gravity of the scene.

Aviyansh took out his phone and began taking pictures.

Prakash frowned. “Why are you doing that? Shouldn’t we destroy this instead?”

Aviyansh shook his head. “No. I’m going to **recreate** this. Every single item. In my own house.”

Prakash looked stunned. “What?”

Aviyansh’s voice was calm but resolved. “If she ever gets caught, **I’ll take the fall**. That’s my purpose now. To make sure she doesn’t suffer the way I did. If that means becoming the villain again, I’ll do it.”

Over the next week, with Prakash’s help, Aviyansh built **an exact replica** of Vera’s setup.

The medical supplies were arranged by the same corrupt doctor who had once faked his death. The satellite phone came through Prakash’s police contacts. The rest—

computers, the typewriter, furniture—were all sourced from the open market. With the help of guides and internet forums, they connected the system to the dark web just as Vera had.

It was meticulous, grim work.

But it was done with one thing in mind:

Redemption—by deception.

Meanwhile, Vera had begun hunting again.

Her second target. Then her third. And as her list grew, so did Aviyansh's understanding of her methods. He observed her closely—how she made contact, how she vanished without leaving a trace, and most importantly, **how calculated** she had become.

She wasn't killing in rage. She was executing **strategy**.

And that both frightened and amazed him.

"She's better than I ever was," he told Prakash one day.

"But she's walking a thinner line. One mistake, and it's over."

From that point on, Prakash stayed permanently active on the serial killer investigation. Every police report, every rumor, every whisper that could lead to Vera—he filtered it. He erased trails. He bought time.

Because now both of them understood:

This wasn't just Vera's war anymore. It was theirs.

Setting the Trap for the Trapist

The night was quiet—too quiet for a house where two men plotted a war against the most powerful agencies in the country.

Aviyansh and Prakash sat in the living room, sipping tea beneath a flickering bulb. The silence between them was broken only when Prakash spoke.

“The CBI and Intelligence Bureau have set their sights on Vera and Anju. They suspect them of being the serial killers. A joint trap is being laid. It’ll be sprung in ten days.”

Aviyansh didn’t flinch. He calmly took another sip from his cup.

“Good. It’s time we launch our plan too.”

Prakash looked up, surprised. “You already have something in mind?”

“I’ve been planning this for two years,” Aviyansh said, his voice steady but grim. “Now, it’s time to execute. I’m going to meet Anju—and tell her everything. About Vera. About the agencies. About what her daughter has become.”

Prakash hesitated. “What if she panics? What if she turns you in? You know she tried to kill you once.”

“She won’t,” Aviyansh said coldly. “Not when she realizes the risk Vera is in. She’s a mother before anything else.”

After they finished their tea, Prakash left around 9 PM. Aviyansh didn’t sleep that night.

The next morning, just after sunrise, Aviyansh mounted his bike and rode through the awakening city to Anju's flat. He stood at her door, took a breath, and pulled off his fake mustache and cap.

The past was about to walk back into her life.

The door creaked open.

Anju stood on the other side—still in her night clothes, her eyes half-lidded from sleep. But when she saw him, time stopped. Her entire body froze. Her face turned pale. Her lips parted, but no sound came out.

She looked like she had seen a ghost.

"Close the door," Aviyansh said. "We need to talk. It's about Vera."

She obeyed without a word. As the door shut behind them, her legs almost gave in beneath her.

"How are you alive?" she whispered, stunned. "I killed you... I cremated you... I saw your body burn—"

Aviyansh calmly explained everything. His faked death. Sashi's help. Her early release from prison. How he found Vera. And finally, the darkest truth of all—that Vera had become a killer, just like him.

Anju sat down, trembling. "She's... she's doing this?"

"Yes. And the CBI and Intelligence Bureau are closing in. We don't have time. If we don't act now, they'll catch her."

"Tell me what to do. I'll do anything to protect her," Anju said, eyes blazing now with urgency.

Aviyansh smirked bitterly. “I wish you had this faith in me twenty years ago.”

She looked down. Guilty. Silent.

He continued, “Here’s the plan: they’ll send two decoys. One for you. One for Vera. Our job is to take the bait—make them believe their trap has worked. That means we must act first.”

“But how do we warn Vera?” Anju asked.

“I’ll send her a message. She doesn’t need to know everything—just enough to play her part. She’ll arrange the kidnappers and the hacker.”

“So you are in touch with her?” she narrowed her eyes.

“No,” he said firmly. “But I will be. Once. Just for this.”

He leaned forward. “Here’s what you must do. On the day of the trap, you’ll witness something. A fake incident, meant to bait you. Follow it. Play along. Then call me. I’ll arrive shortly after. Once the fake rapist is taken by the kidnappers, all attention will shift to us.”

“But what if they interrogate us separately?”

“They will. That’s why we need a single version of the story.”

He recited it calmly, and Anju listened carefully:

“Tell them I found you just after your release and told you I had tracked down Vera. Say you didn’t contact her at first because she seemed happy with Dev and Gayatri. But when Dev went into a coma, you got desperate and finally reached out to her.”

Anju raised a concern. “But in my last interrogation, I already told them that I contacted her just after a day when Rajat was found dead.”

“Then say you lied out of maternal instinct. To protect her. Tell them the truth now, and they’ll think you lied then, not now.”

“Fine. And if they ask about the killings?”

“Say I handled the kidnappers, the dark web contacts, and the organ buyers. You handled the execution and the messages.”

Anju nodded. “Alright. I understand.”

“Good,” Aviyansh said, rising. “Now I’ll go prepare the letter for Vera. You stay quiet. Don’t contact her. Don’t move unless I say.”

Before leaving, he saved Anju’s number and gave her a missed call. As she stood behind the door, she locked it slowly, her heart pounding.

She sat on the edge of her bed, staring into nothing.

The weight of the past and the future now pressed on her chest like a vice.

Back at his place, Aviyansh sat at his desk with a pen and paper. He wrote the letter in long, careful strokes:

{Letter}

Dear Vera,

I am Aviyansh—your real father. And yes, I'm alive. Even your mother didn't know until today.

This letter is not to explain my survival. It's to warn you: the CBI and Intelligence Bureau are setting a trap to catch you and your mother red-handed.

We know what you've done. We've seen it. And we understand why. But now, everything's at risk.

Me and Anju are planning to draw their attention to ourselves—to protect you. But we need your help.

Your job is simple: contact your usual kidnappers. Send them after the man in the attached photograph—he's a decoy. After he's taken, have your hacker disable the surveillance cameras temporarily.

With this letter, I've included your satellite phone. Be cautious. Use it only for this. Do not return to the rented house for now. You're under surveillance. And don't reach out to your mother. They're watching everything.

Until the trap is done, maintain your normal routine. We'll handle the rest.

Be safe. And above all—be invisible.

—Aviyansh

At midnight, dressed like a shadow, Aviyansh slipped into Vera's kill-house, retrieved the satellite phone, and exited unnoticed.

The next morning, dressed as a delivery man, he walked into Vera's workplace and handed a package to Deepak.

"This is for Vera. Give it to her personally," he said.

Deepak nodded and took the parcel to the back office.

Moments later, Vera tore open the envelope. Her eyes widened. She stared at the letter, the phone, the photo.

Her hands trembled.

She didn't know what terrified her more—that someone knew everything... or that the one who did...

...was her father.

Chapter:19

The First Kill

It was 9:30 p.m.

The street was dimly lit, the glow of the streetlamps barely spilling over the cracked pavement. Vera walked alone, her earbuds in but playing nothing. She liked the illusion of sound—it made people leave her alone. But her eyes... they were always wide open.

As she passed a narrow lane near her home, something caught her eye. A flicker of movement. A muffled cry.

She turned her head toward a modest house just a few doors down. Through the partially open window, she saw a man raising a belt high, slashing it down mercilessly onto a woman who clutched her arms in defense. Vera froze. The woman whimpered something—pleading, apologizing, breaking. The man didn't stop.

Vera took a step forward instinctively. But then—he unbuckled his pants.

Her stomach turned.

What followed was too brutal for her to keep watching. She rushed forward, her breath unsteady, heart pounding against her ribs like a drum of war. She didn't stop until she reached her own home and slammed the door behind her.

She leaned against it for a moment, her eyes wide, breathing sharp. The silence in her house was too loud. Her hands shook—not from fear, but from rage.

She knew that feeling.

She had lived that feeling.

Vera paced back and forth for minutes before finally collapsing onto her bed. She stared at the ceiling, letting the silence settle in, but her mind wouldn't rest.

“A home is supposed to be safe. It's supposed to be where love lives. When it turns into a place of fear... it becomes a cage. A personal hell.”

The image of the battered woman clawed at her mind like nails on glass.

No.

She sat up, walked to her desk, and pulled out a blank page.

She didn't even know what she was writing at first—only that she had to. Words poured out like lava:

Justice isn't always legal.

A man who rapes his own wife doesn't deserve mercy.

Some people need to be erased—not for revenge... but for repair.

It wasn't just anger anymore. It was purpose.

She didn't sleep that night. Instead, she mapped out her first kill—slowly, methodically, like an artist planning her masterpiece. She wrote everything—what the message would be, how she'd deliver it, how to never get caught.

The fire inside her wasn't impulsive. It was calculated.

By sunrise, she was ready to move.

She didn't go home. She didn't need rest. She needed knowledge.

Vera walked straight into her college library. Her professors would assume she was absent; they were used to her silence. She found the darkest corner of the library, sat down, and pulled out books—thick ones, technical ones.

The Dark Web: An Introduction

Medical Equipment and Field Surgery

VPN Networks and Data Obfuscation

End-to-End Encryption Protocols

She devoured them like scripture. She didn't just want to kill. She wanted to kill like a ghost—leave no trail, no fingerprints, no echoes.

By the time the librarian started dimming the lights, Vera had covered an entire notebook with handwritten notes, diagrams, and code sketches. Other students packed up lazily, yawning and chatting. Vera walked out last—eyes sharper than when she'd entered.

From the library, she drove straight to her shop. Her hands still smelled faintly of the old paper and ink. She took out some cash from the safe and scribbled down a list.

She moved like someone possessed.

By 8:00 p.m., she had filled the trunk of her car with:

A new computer with privacy-based operating system

A portable Wi-Fi router with custom VPN configurations

A used typewriter from a junk dealer

A pre-activated satellite phone, bought from a contact who asked no questions

She stopped only when everything was loaded.

The final step would be acquiring medical supplies, but that would take finesse—and time. First, she needed a base.

For a moment, she considered her own home. Her bedroom had space. But the risk was too high. Gayatri came and went unexpectedly. And if Dev ever came out of his coma...

She couldn't take that chance.

Vera looked at herself in the rearview mirror. Her reflection didn't flinch. She looked into her own eyes and whispered:

“Let's build your kingdom, executioner.”

Then she started driving—toward darkness, toward secrecy, and toward justice that the law could never give.

House of Shadows

The decision had been made.

Vera knew she couldn't carry out her mission from home. Too risky. Gayatri came and went without notice. And if Dev ever woke from his coma, he would see everything—her equipment, her intent, her transformation.

She needed a new space. A sanctuary. A surgical theatre for justice.

The next morning, she began the search.

Vera scoured online listings and called local rental agencies. She didn't want a secluded place outside the city—that would raise suspicion. Instead, she chose to hide in plain sight. Somewhere nestled inside a regular residential neighborhood. Quiet. Overlooked. Invisible.

By the end of the day, she found the perfect house: A small single-floor home about 3.5 kilometers from hers, tucked within a sleepy lane where no one knew her. It was aged but clean, and most importantly—the landlord lived in another city.

The next day, she signed a **five-year rental agreement** and paid the entire rent in advance. The landlord didn't ask questions—money has a way of silencing curiosity. With full control of the house, Vera secured her secrecy.

That night, as the city slept, she moved her gear.

With the headlights dimmed and her heartbeat steady, Vera parked near the house at midnight. She entered silently

with the key, carrying boxes of equipment: the computer, the VPN-configured router, the typewriter, the satellite phone. She arranged everything in one room, connecting wires, adjusting positions, setting up her war room.

She covered all the windows with heavy curtains so no outsider could see inside.

She wasn't building a crime scene.

She was building a temple of retribution.

The next day, Vera visited a medical supplier across town using a fake name. She purchased the tools she needed—used surgical items, sterilizing gear, gloves, syringes, restraints. Expensive, but she had saved enough. She took Dev's old SIM card from his documents and inserted it into her satellite phone—just for temporary use, until she found a more secure number.

That night, again under darkness, she returned to her rented house and set the stage. Everything had its place. Clean. Efficient. Cold.

The girl who once flinched at blood had now designed her own operating room.

The setup was complete. Now came the web.

Back at her rented house, she opened her computer and launched the VPN. With a deep breath, she opened **TorBrowser**, the gateway to the dark web.

She browsed forums, lurked in encrypted chatrooms, and filtered through posts like:

“Need a dead drop in South Asia?”

“Black Market Pharmacies”

“Hackers for hire | No upfront fee | Only serious clients”

One particular thread stood out. A profile named **“RootAssassin_404”** claimed to be a specialist in hacking live CCTV and traffic cams.

She initiated a chat.

Vera: “Hey. I’m looking for a hacker.”

RootAssassin_404: “Then today’s your lucky day. How can we help each other?”

Vera: “I want someone who can hack into public and private security cams. Specific locations. Clean and fast.”

RootAssassin_404: “Huh. You’ve got a hidden IP. Bounced from three continents. Even I can’t see your origin. Where did you learn that?”

Vera: “Books. That, and desperation.”

RootAssassin_404: “Impressive. Most people come here asking stupid questions. So—what’s your gig? Robbing a bank? Kidnapping? Or are we doing something darker?”

Vera: “That’s not your concern. Can you hack or not?”

RootAssassin_404: “I can. But I don’t want money.”

Vera: “Then what do you want?”

RootAssassin_404: “Human kidneys.”

Vera blinked.

RootAssassin_404: “Yeah, you read that right. I supply to illegal organ chains. I need one fresh kidney per contract. You deliver—I deliver.”

She stared at the screen. Her hands tightened into fists.

She wanted justice. Not organ trade.

But this was the dark web. Morality didn’t live here. And she had to think like a ghost.

After a moment, she replied:

Vera: “Deal. But we never speak in voice. No real names. One pair of kidneys per hack. I’ll send you the first target soon.”

RootAssassin_404: “Smart girl. Welcome to the pit.”

The Deal with the Dark

Vera stared at the screen.

The hacker’s message—“*I want human kidneys in exchange.*”—sent a ripple of unease through her spine. It felt off. Disturbing. But she wasn’t naïve. The dark web wasn’t built on morals—it ran on depravity, desperation, and the untraceable. And she was now a part of it.

"To punish monsters, I may need to shake hands with them first."

She took a deep breath, cleared her mind, and typed:

Vera: “I can arrange that. But only if we meet in person. Are you willing to take that risk?”

RootAssassin_404: “I don’t meet anyone. Ever. You’ll drop the package to a third party. But let’s get to the real

question—how are you even planning to get a live subject to harvest from?”

Vera: “I don’t know. Not yet.”

There was a pause. Then the typing bubble appeared again.

RootAssassin_404: “I can help with that. I have people who specialize in *discreet abductions*. You send the target’s info—picture, location—they’ll deliver him to you. You do your work, and I get my kidney.”

Vera: “The person will be of *my* choice. I send the picture and the address. Nothing else.”

RootAssassin_404: “Fine by me. Makes my job easier.”

Another pause. Then the next message dropped.

RootAssassin_404: “One more thing—you won’t be able to contact me again through this website. I go dark after this chat. If you want to talk again, you’ll need a satellite phone and an encrypted cable to connect it to your system. My sat-number is: +91678*****. And when you send the picture and address, type *Password: SLAYER* at the end of the message. Exactly as it is.”

Vera: “Got it. I already have a satellite phone. I’ll get the cable tomorrow. Once I do, I’ll send you everything. This chat ends here.”

Without waiting for a reply, she logged out, closed Tor, and shut down her computer. The faint hum of the system faded, but the fire inside her only burned brighter.

She stood in silence, the weight of what she had just agreed to pressing down on her chest.

A kill in exchange for a kidney. A hacker bought with blood.

The world was filthier than she thought—so be it.

That night, she tucked the satellite phone in her hoodie pocket and returned home. She barely slept. Her dreams were fragments—belts cracking skin, screams behind windows, her own hands trembling with rage.

The Mark

Morning broke with gray clouds.

Vera stepped out onto the street, eyes cold, focused. She began pacing her block with casual intent, her hoodie up, satellite phone gripped loosely in her hand. She wasn't walking for exercise—she was hunting.

Thirty minutes later, she saw him.

The man.

Jogging out of the same house where she had witnessed the horror just nights ago. His face carried no guilt. No shame. Just sweat and ego. The same monster who had raped his wife in silence behind concrete walls.

Vera's hand moved.

She flipped her satellite phone's camera. Pretended to take a selfie. But the rear lens caught his face perfectly. One click. One shot.

Evidence.

She turned and walked home like nothing happened. The picture now lived in her gallery—like a trophy or a trigger.

That night, she returned to her secret house. Her sanctuary. The curtains drawn. The silence absolute.

She sat at her desk and connected the encrypted cable from the satellite phone to her system. Fingers moved with calm purpose.

She opened a secure terminal, typed in the hacker's contact number, and prepared the data packet.

Attached:

Picture of the rapist.

His full address.

One single line: **Password: SLAYER**

She hit send.

Then leaned back in her chair, breathing in the quiet before the storm.

This was it.

No turning back now.

Her justice was set in motion.

And the man who hid behind closed doors would soon learn what it meant to be truly afraid.

The Exchange

A message blinked on Vera's screen.

Hacker: *"Tomorrow night you will be getting your package."*

Vera replied instantly, fingers moving with mechanical precision.

Vera: *"I want him around 00:30 at the location I'm sending now."*

She attached the pinned Google Maps location—an abandoned government office on the city's edge, a building forgotten by everyone except the kind of people who needed places like that.

Then she sent another message.

Vera: *"Also, you want the kidneys. Can I deliver them at the same spot?"*

Hacker: *"Yes. Same location works."*

Vera: *"And take care of the cameras across the entire city. I don't want one single angle working until I tell you to restore them. I'm trusting you big time."*

Hacker: *"You won't be disappointed. Let's make our first exchange tomorrow."*

And just like that, the chat ended.

Vera leaned back in her chair. Her heart wasn't racing—yet something inside her stirred violently, like a cage rattling from the inside.

She wasn't entirely sure what was driving her to this extent. Maybe it was rage. Maybe it was justice. Or

maybe... it was simply that something broken inside her had found a dark way to survive.

Whatever it was—there was no turning back now.

She sent a message to Gayatri in the morning, around 7:45 a.m.

“I’m at Tanya’s place. Working on a college project. I’ll be back day after tomorrow. Just letting you know in case you drop by.”

Fifteen minutes later, the reply came:

“Okay. That’s good. Keep it going.”

Vera stared at the text for a second longer than she should have, then tossed her phone aside and went for a shower.

She spent the rest of the day in her rented house—reading, waiting, listening to the hollow silence that echoed through its empty rooms. At 8 p.m., she ordered food but barely touched it. Her stomach wasn’t built for eating tonight.

At 11:43 p.m., her satellite phone buzzed again.

Hacker: *“Kidnappers have eyes on him. They’ll move when they get the window. You’ll receive him at the time we discussed.”*

Vera: *“I’m ready. Let me know when I need to pick him up.”*

Hacker: *“Stand by.”*

She sat on the edge of her bed, fully dressed in black: hoodie, gloves, shoes, cap, and a sleek mask that covered half her face. She looked like a ghost preparing to haunt the world that birthed monsters.

At 12:15 a.m., her phone blinked again.

Hacker: *“Cameras are out. Kidnappers are at the drop point. You can move.”*

Vera stepped outside, slipping through the night like a shadow. Her car—unassuming and quiet—was parked a few feet from the door. She pulled out, driving slowly through the empty roads, her eyes scanning every corner for movement, any threat.

No cops. No headlights. No street noise. Just her, her thoughts, and the mission.

The abandoned government office came into view. Cracked windows. Faded signage. A black Omni van was parked outside like a scene from a crime novel.

Vera pulled over, cut the engine, stepped out.

The moment she walked up, the van’s side door slid open.

Inside were three men. And in the middle of them—slumped and unconscious—was the rapist. The man she had seen destroying his own wife in silence and power.

She leaned forward. Took one look at his face.

“It’s him.” Her voice was flat, mechanical.

The men nodded, lifted him out, and helped her carry the body to her car's backseat.

Back at the rented house, the street was dead quiet. Not a single window flicked with curiosity. No dogs barking. No human eyes on her.

She opened the gates, pulled the car in, shut the gates, and locked them.

Then she dragged the man's limp body out of the backseat. His head lolled to the side. She didn't flinch. She grabbed him by the arms and half-carried, half-dragged him through the hallway into the prepared room.

The metal table stood like an altar under a single overhead light.

She flipped him onto his stomach. The thud echoed in the silent room.

Then she tied him down—wrists first, then ankles, then the waist. Tight. Secure. No chance of escape.

She stepped back, took a deep breath, and wiped sweat from her brow.

Tomorrow would be a different kind of dawn. A darker one.

The Reckoning

The man stirred on the metal table. His eyes fluttered open, confusion clouding his expression—until fear took over. His body jolted against the restraints. The more he pulled, the tighter they bit into his skin.

Vera stepped into the light.

She removed her cap. Then the mask.

Her face—cold, unreadable—leaned in close to his.

“Look at me,” she said, voice calm but razor-sharp.
**“This is the last face I want you to remember.
Because I’m the one who’s going to end you.”**

He gasped for air. Panic settled into his bones.

“Wh—why are you doing this to me? I don’t even know you!” His voice cracked, drenched in sweat and terror.

Vera’s expression didn’t change. Her eyes, unblinking, stared into his soul.

“You think I don’t know you? I watched you beat your wife with a belt. I watched you force yourself on her while she cried for you to stop. She begged. The same way you’re begging me right now.” Her voice didn’t rise. It didn’t need to.

He shook his head frantically, trying to speak, to explain—but the time for words was over.

Vera grabbed a cloth, shoved it into his mouth, and sealed it with duct tape. Then she circled behind him.

With a swift motion, she tore open the back of his shirt.

He writhed violently. She didn’t flinch.

Vera picked up a scalpel. Her gloved hand was steady.

And then she cut.

The blade opened his back in one clean, practiced line.

He screamed through the gag, but it came out as a muffled, desperate whimper. His body convulsed under the

pain. Blood pooled, and Vera moved quickly—surgical, clinical.

She extracted one kidney, then the other. Both were sealed in a sterile water solution she had prepared hours ago. She worked like someone possessed—purposeful, unshaken.

Then, her hand shifted lower.

His heartbeat was weak.

With no hesitation, she took out his heart as well, angled the blade, and carved until his heart stopped beating in her hands.

He died slowly. Staring into the void.

Vera stood still, catching her breath. Her eyes didn't blink.

Then she turned his body over.

And with the same scalpel, she carved one final word deep into his lifeless chest:

R A P I S T

Blood oozed from the wound, but Vera had already moved on. The ritual was only half done.

She began to clean.

The blood was everywhere. Splattered on the table, the floor, even the walls. She worked quickly, precisely, wiping, scrubbing, disinfecting. Every drop, every trace—erased.

Once the scene was spotless, she wrapped the body in a thick tarp and dragged it to the trunk of her car.

The kidneys, in their water solution, were placed carefully beside it.

Back inside, Vera removed her gloves, dropped them into a black polybag, tied it shut, and stashed it in a separate garbage bin she had prepared for biological waste. Then she sprayed the air with lavender and citrus—no blood, no death, just the scent of cleanliness and silence.

Finally, she returned to her desk.

She rolled in a piece of paper into the typewriter and began to write:

{ Message to the World }

To those who prey on the innocent:

I am the reckoning you never saw coming. For every woman silenced by fear, for every victim whose cries were ignored—I am their voice. I am their justice.

You believed your actions would go unpunished, hidden behind a flawed system. But know this: I see you. I know your sins. And I will not rest until you face the consequences.

This is not a threat. It's a promise.

Continue down your dark path, and you will find me waiting at its end.

Beware, for justice walks among you.

She took the paper. Folded it once. And placed it inside an envelope.

The Delivery

Vera typed quickly on her satellite phone:

“Kidneys are ready. Now I’m on my way to the delivery point.”

The reply came seconds later.

“A man in a red hoodie will be there to collect them.”

Vera’s fingers paused over the keyboard.

“How did you get him kidnapped?”

The hacker responded almost instantly.

“Around 11 p.m., everyone in the neighborhood was asleep. The team broke into the house, drugged the couple, and quietly removed him.”

Vera stared at the screen for a moment.

It was happening. It had already happened.

“Okay,” she replied, then added another message. **“Turn the city’s cameras back on one hour after I’ve delivered the kidneys. I don’t want any trace of my movement caught.”**

“Understood. Be careful,” came the hacker’s final message.

Vera double-checked the house—everything was in order. Her tools were clean, the blood had been erased, the evidence packed or destroyed.

Then she stepped outside.

The night was quiet—dead quiet. The kind of silence only a criminal or a ghost would cherish.

She drove her car slowly, cautiously through the sleeping city, until she reached her own neighborhood.

No streetlights. The power was out, just like she had hoped.

The darkness cloaked her like a shroud.

She parked silently a few houses away from the target's home—the place where the nightmare began.

Vera opened her trunk.

The body lay still, wrapped tightly in the tarp.

Next to it: the sealed water container with the kidneys, the letter she typed hours earlier, a human heart wrapped in cloth, and a jagged piece of stone.

This was her final message to the world.

She took a deep breath, lifted the corpse with a strength that came more from rage than muscle, and carried it to the front gate of the street.

There, under the veil of darkness, she laid the body down gently, almost ceremonially.

She placed the container of kidneys near the body for a while.

Then, with a slow, purposeful motion, she unwrapped the bloodied heart and laid it in front of the body. She set the jagged stone beside it.

Finally, she placed the letter.

It was positioned carefully—like a calling card. A warning.

Vera stepped back. She placed the kidney container back in her car trunk.

One last look. One final moment of silence.

Then she turned, returned to her car, and vanished into the night before a single curtain could twitch open.

Fifteen minutes later, Vera arrived at the delivery point—an old, abandoned government building on the outskirts of the city.

There he was.

A man in a red hoodie, standing like a shadow against the crumbling concrete.

No words.

No nod.

No questions.

Vera handed him the container. Cold. Heavy.

He took it without hesitation and turned away, disappearing into the darkness as if he was never there.

She lingered for a second—just long enough to feel her pulse slow.

Then she turned back toward her car.

The job was done.

The message delivered.

Justice, in her own brutal language, had been spoken.

But deep down, Vera knew this was only the beginning.

There would be others.

And she would be watching.

Chapter 20

Seven other Kills

The Second Kill

Vera stood in front of the mirror, fixing her earrings, her expression calm—masking the storm within. Tonight, she had to attend a family function in **Karnal**, a city in Haryana. Gayatri was already waiting for her. Vera picked her up, and together, they drove into the warm-lit chaos of wedding music, laughter, and tradition.

They showed their invitation card at the palace gates and were let in.

What neither of them noticed was the quiet man on a bike, dressed casually, following behind.

Aviyansh.

Her real father. Her silent protector. Still unseen. Still keeping watch.

The grand banquet hall buzzed with noise and music. Vera mingled with distant relatives, exchanged polite smiles, posed for a few pictures.

But something was wrong.

Her gaze fell on a **waiter**—his hands brushed too many women. Too long. Too deliberately.

She watched carefully. His movements were practiced. Calculated. He didn't leer. He didn't stare. But every time he passed a woman, his fingers "accidentally" touched their backs, their waists, their arms. He blended the perversion into the crowd.

Then he moved toward **Vera**.

But just as his hand reached for her, **Aviyansh** brushed past, stepping in between them. The waiter stumbled, muttered an apology, and moved away. Vera gave the man in front of her a quick glance, but she didn't recognize him.

Still, something in her gut twisted.

Two hours later, during dinner, Vera discreetly filmed a slow pan of the hall. She zoomed in casually—capturing the waiter mid-movement.

Back in Panipat that night, after dropping Gayatri home, Vera changed and headed straight to her **rented house**.

She transferred the video from her phone to her computer, paused it at the perfect frame, and took a screenshot.

A clean, clear image of the predator.

Then, as the clock neared midnight, she connected her **satellite phone** and messaged the hacker:

[Image Attached]

Location: XYZ Palace, Karnal.

Password: SLAYER

His reply came within moments.

“Tomorrow night. Same place. Same time. Same deal.”

Vera added one more thing:

“You need to hack the CCTV grid of Karnal city until morning.”

“Of course. Anything for kidneys.” The hacker’s reply was chillingly cheerful.

She disconnected, hid the equipment, and returned home to sleep.

The following night, Vera was ready again.

Black hoodie. Black gloves. Same car. Same routine.

The **kidnappers** did their job. The delivery was clean.

But this time was different—**riskier**.

The wedding palace was alive again, flooded with guests. Lights everywhere. Laughter echoing through walls.

And in her **trunk**, a body waited.

Her hands trembled for the first time since this all began.

She couldn’t leave him out front—too many eyes.

So she circled the palace’s perimeter slowly, lights dimmed, anxiety rising.

Then she saw it: a **narrow backside corner near the parking area**. Dimly lit. Shielded by walls. Hidden from the main cameras.

She parked quickly. Stepped out. Scanned the surroundings.

All clear.

Vera opened her trunk, lifted the body carefully, and dragged it against the rear wall. His shirt was torn open. His chest bore the blood-carved word: **RAPIST**.

Beside him, she placed the human heart wrapped in cloth, a jagged stone, and a typed letter folded neatly in an envelope.

She pinned it gently beneath the heart so it wouldn't blow away.

The letter read:

★★{ You walk freely, thinking no one sees the darkness you leave behind.

You smile in the mirror, believing your sins are buried, your victims silenced. But I see you.

I hear the screams you forced into silence. I trace the shadows you thought you escaped.

You think you're safe because the law failed them—but I am not the law.

I am the consequence.

Each breath you take is borrowed time. Every moment you laugh is a mockery I won't let stand.

I don't forget. I do not forgive. And I do not miss.

Sleep lightly. I am closer than you think. }★★

Vera exhaled.

She walked back to her car with cold efficiency, wiped the steering wheel, and drove away.

An hour later, she handed the container with the man's **kidneys** to the same man in the **red hoodie** at the abandoned government building.

No words. No questions.

Just shadows and silence.

The Third Kill

8:00 a.m.

Tanya messaged: "**Are you on your way?**"

Vera replied: "**Come outside and you'll find me.**"

Tanya stepped out of her PG and found Vera's car parked at the curb. They exchanged a smile and drove together to college, where the **college bus** was waiting to take the group on a field trip to **Akshardham Mandir**.

The ride was filled with music, laughter, and the unfiltered joy of youth. Students played *Antakshari*, clapping and singing old Bollywood songs. Vera stood in the aisle with a group, clapping along to the beat.

That's when **Rajat** slid in next to **Tanya**—pretending to be part of the fun but clearly looking for an excuse to sit close.

Tanya shifted uncomfortably. She looked around and finally caught Vera's eye. She mouthed, "*What?*"

Tanya signaled Vera with her eyes—*Help me*.

Vera walked over casually.

"Hey Rajat, that's my seat," she said coolly.

Rajat gave a forced laugh and got up, returning to his friends. Vera leaned in toward Tanya.

"Come join us," she encouraged, but Tanya shook her head.

She preferred to stay out of the spotlight. Vera respected that.

Akshardham Mandir was majestic. As they entered, a hush fell upon them. Carved stone pillars rose like frozen waves. The serenity was almost physical.

The girls wandered through the exhibits, mesmerized by India's ancient glory. A boat ride through 10,000 years of heritage left them awestruck. Vera felt something shift inside her—something quiet, reflective.

But that peace didn't last long.

That evening, they gathered to watch the **Sahaj Anand Water Show**—a breathtaking spectacle of water, fire, music, and light. Students settled in rows. Vera sat several rows behind Tanya and some faculty.

That's when she saw **him**.

A temple *pundit*.

His robe brushed gently against a female colleague beside him—*too gently, too intentionally*. His hand lingered on her arm as he leaned to "explain" something about the show. She shifted, uncomfortable. His palm ghosted over her lower back. She flinched.

Vera's jaw clenched.

She moved quickly—slipping through the crowd, positioning herself between them. She sat in the row ahead, blocking his view. The female colleague took the cue and slipped away.

The show ended.

The crowd began to disperse.

But Vera stayed behind—her eyes locked on the **pundit**.

She followed him silently through the temple's shadowed corridors. Ornate carvings and flickering lights cloaked her approach. The pundit paused to adjust his robes near a dimly lit pillar.

Vera pulled out her phone.

Click.

A muted shot—a perfect side profile.

By the time he turned, sensing something, she was already gone—blended back into the dissolving crowd.

Tanya was scanning the crowd.

"Who are you looking for?" Vera said from behind, tapping her shoulder.

Tanya jumped, then smiled.

“I was looking for *you*.”

Together, they boarded the bus and returned to Panipat.

10:30 p.m.

Back home, Vera moved fast.

She transferred the photo to her laptop, connected the **satellite phone** via encrypted cable, and sent the image to the hacker along with the **address of Akshardham Mandir**.

Password: SLAYER

Her message:

“Same time. Same place. Tomorrow. Cameras too.”

The hacker replied:

“Understood.”

The next night

The pundit woke up tied to a table. His eyes wide. His limbs trembling.

Vera stood over him, dressed in black—hood up, gloves on, voice cold.

“I saw what you did during the water show,” she said quietly.

“You thought the crowd would shield your actions. That her silence would protect you. But I was there. I saw everything.”

He whimpered behind the gag.

“Now it’s time you pay for what you did.”

She sliced open his back.

He screamed into the cloth as she removed his kidneys—*alive*. The pain broke his mind before his body. She took his heart last. He died staring into her unflinching eyes.

Then, like before, she carved **RAPIST** into his chest.

She delivered the **organs** to the man in the red hoodie, same abandoned building, same silence.

Then she drove to Akshardham Mandir with the body in her trunk—wrapped in **tarpaulin**.

The hacker had already killed the cameras. The outer lights were out. The temple slept.

Vera lifted the body. Dragged it to the front gate. Propped it up. Laid a blood-soaked **heart** and a stone in its hands. Then left behind the letter—typed and folded in a crisp envelope.

★★{You wore robes of a holy man,

Preached purity with sins soaked into your soul.

You dared to stand before gods

While defiling the innocent behind closed doors.

You thought the sacred protected you.

That no one would see what you did.

But I saw.

You died afraid. Alone. As you deserved.

Let this be a message to all of you

Hiding behind power, behind temples, behind fake holiness:

No robe.

No title.

No god

Will protect you from me.

You violate one more soul—

And I will turn your sanctuaries into tombs. }★★

Vera drove away, disappearing into the night—her face unreadable, her purpose more focused than ever.

The Fourth Kill

The Delhi Book Fair buzzed with voices and pages, a living labyrinth of stories. Vera moved through the crowd, aloof among her college peers, her fingers brushing the edges of books she didn't want to read.

At Stall B-17, something stopped her.

A man in his late forties stood behind the table, surrounded by stacks of poetry chapbooks and obscure fiction. He was smiling at a young woman across the counter—*too* warmly. The girl—maybe nineteen—nodded nervously, clutching a book he'd signed for her.

Their interaction lasted seconds, but something about it stuck in Vera's throat like broken glass.

Vera spotted the girl from Stall B-17 sitting alone near a wall, half-hidden behind a banner advertising a poetry contest. Her eyes were downcast, fingers nervously turning the pages of a book she wasn't reading.

Vera approached slowly, with the ease of someone who knew how not to startle trauma.

"Mind if I sit?" she asked.

The girl looked up, startled. "Um... sure."

Vera sat, letting a beat of silence settle between them before speaking again.

"You were at that stall earlier. B-17. I saw you with the man there."

Priya's fingers froze on the page.

"He seemed... friendly," Vera said, her voice neutral.

Priya gave a tight nod. "Yeah. He always is. Been buying books from him since last year."

Another pause.

"I'm Vera," she said softly. "Literature?"

Priya hesitated, then nodded. "English Honours. First year. From DU."

Vera watched her closely. "You looked uncomfortable."

Priya's eyes darted. "No, it's nothing."

"You don't have to lie," Vera said, still gentle. "Not to me."

Silence stretched between them. Then Priya's voice broke, small and cracked.

"He used to be nice. Gave me discounts, remembered my favorite authors. Said I had a sharp mind. I thought... I thought he was just kind."

Vera didn't interrupt.

"Then last month," Priya whispered, "he said he had a rare book he wanted to show me. Said it wasn't available at the stall. Asked if we could meet for coffee near his warehouse."

Her hands started to shake.

"I didn't think anything of it. I went. I didn't even finish my coffee. I remember getting dizzy, confused... and then—" her breath caught, "—I woke up on a couch. My shirt was on backward. My undergarments were missing."

Vera's jaw clenched, but her voice stayed calm.

"Did you go to the police?"

Priya shook her head quickly. "No one would believe me. There were no marks. No proof. He's respected in his little publishing circle. They'd say I wanted attention. Or a job."

Vera's voice turned to steel beneath her calm surface. "Do you remember his name?"

"Sagar," Priya said, almost like she regretted knowing it. "Sagar Malhotra."

Vera nodded slowly. She reached into her bag, pulled out a sealed water bottle, and handed it to her.

"You did nothing wrong," she said.

Priya didn't speak. Her eyes brimmed, but she didn't cry. She drank the water in silence.

Then Vera stood.

"Take care of yourself, Priya," she said, her voice low, almost too quiet to hear. "He won't hurt anyone again."

She turned and walked back toward the crowd. Toward Stall B-17.

Her phone was already in her hand.

Camera open. Clicks picture of Dev in front of his face and blended in the crowd afterwards.

After returning from the book fair, **Vera** didn't waste a second.

She drove straight to her **rented house**, her face blank, her mind burning with only one goal. Inside, she powered on her laptop, connected her **satellite phone** with the encrypted cable, and uploaded the **image of Sagar Malhotra**, the man she'd discreetly photographed at the fair.

She added the **address** of the publishing firm he worked for.

And typed the required signal:

Password: SLAYER

She hit *send*. And waited.

A few hours later, in a dark, hidden room drenched in silence, **Sagar Malhotra** stirred.

His limbs wouldn't move. Panic shot through his chest. He was tied—*chained down*—on a cold metal table.

Then he saw her.

Vera stepped forward, slowly, purposefully. Her hoodie still on, but her face now visible.

His eyes widened.

“You... you were at the book fair,” Sagar stammered.
“You... you took my picture. Without asking.”
His voice cracked.
“What are you doing? I didn’t do anything wrong!”

Vera said nothing for a second. Then her fury broke through.

***“I know you didn’t do anything wrong to me, Sagar.”
She walked to his side and yanked his hair back with force.
“But Priya—she was just nineteen. Just like me. Just like
your own daughter, if you had one. It’s good you don’t.”***

Her voice was sharp. Icy.

“You would’ve raped her too.”

Sagar started begging. His body trembled. But Vera had already heard every excuse, every lie, every fake cry for mercy before.

She shoved a cloth into his mouth and sealed it with tape.

Then she looked into his eyes—eyes now swimming in tears—and said:

“Now, it’s time you pay for your sin.”

With cold precision, she drove the knife into his back.

Sagar’s body convulsed in shock, muffled screams echoing through the walls. Vera’s movements were exact,

practiced. She tore into his flesh, exposing the organs beneath. One by one, she removed his **kidneys**, and finally his **heart**, holding it for a moment before dropping it into the solution container beside her.

Blood soaked the table. The floor. Her gloves. But Vera didn't flinch.

She turned his body over and **carved a single word across his chest** with her knife:

RAPIST

After thoroughly **cleaning the room**, she placed his organs in a sealed solution and loaded the corpse into her car—wrapped, bound, and silent.

She then delivered the **kidneys** to the man in the red hoodie at the usual location—no words, no expressions exchanged.

Then she made her way to the **book fair** grounds once again—this time at **3:00 a.m.** The street lights flickered. The city slept.

Vera opened her trunk, dragged Sagar's lifeless body to the **main entrance gate**, and arranged the scene:

- His **heart** placed in his open palm
- A **stone** gripped in his other hand
- And a neatly typed **message**, placed at his feet in a sealed envelope

{ You thought her silence meant safety. You mistook her shaking hands for surrender. You believed that fear would keep her quiet forever.

But fear has a voice now. And it speaks through me.

I've seen the bruises they hide. The eyes that don't meet yours anymore. The way she walks faster at night, keys clenched in her fist like a weapon. All of it... I carry with me.

I don't wear a badge. I don't ask for court dates or cross examination. I don't care what lies you have told to save your face, your job, your filthy reputation.

You raped her. And world moved on. But I didn't.

I remember names. I follow patterns. I wait for the moment you are alone.

And when it comes, you will hear nothing, just the silence of something ancient, something final.

Call me monster. Call me murderer.

But know this—she will sleep peacefully tonight. And you never will again.

I am justice, born from the blood you spilled. }

Vera stepped back, looked at the body one last time, then vanished into the shadows of the night.

No camera. No witnesses.

Only a body. A message.

And a ghost the city couldn't catch.

The Fifth Kill

The corridors of Kurukshetra University were alive with the dull hum of fans and distant chatter. Students moved in and out of the administrative block, their forms clutched

like lifelines. Vera walked among them, a re-checking form folded neatly in her hand, eyes scanning everything, yet meeting no one's.

She had failed *Modern Indian Literature*—on paper, at least. The mark didn't match her exam. She wasn't here for sympathy. Just a correction.

Room 207 was up the stairs, left corner. A bored clerk behind the glass pointed lazily. "Form's fine. Get it signed by Professor Arvind. He's inside."

Vera pushed the wooden door open.

Professor Arvind Singh sat behind a large desk cluttered with files. Early 50s. Clean-shaven. A little too well-groomed for a literature teacher. He looked up with a smile that felt like a stain.

"You must be Vera," he said. "SKPG College?"

She gave a slight nod, handing over the form.

As he scanned it, his eyes flicked up once—lingering too long.

"You've got sharp handwriting," he said, scribbling his signature. "Girls like you don't usually fail literature."

"I didn't," Vera replied flatly.

He laughed. "We all think that sometimes."

As she turned to leave, a flash drive slipped off his pile of files and hit the floor near her foot.

"I've got it," she said, bending to pick it up.

"Leave it," he snapped, standing abruptly. "That's not for students."

Vera raised an eyebrow, slipping the drive into her coat pocket anyway.

“You shouldn’t—”

But she was already walking out.

Later that night in Vera’s room. Vera locked her door, pulled the curtains tight, and plugged the flash drive into her laptop.

Most of the folders were administrative junk. But one was labeled: **Lectures – Private.**

Inside were dozens of video files. Not lectures. Surveillance footage. The thumbnails alone made her skin crawl. She opened one.

A girl sat on a chair in what looked like an empty classroom. Crying. Professor Arvind’s voice filled the room, low and threatening. He stood in front of her, pacing, towering.

Vera didn’t look away. She clicked another file. A different girl. Same setting. Same horror. Then she noticed the names. Each file was named after a student’s roll number.

She searched one of the names online—Rashmi, third-year. Officially dropped out two weeks ago. No one had asked why. But Vera already knew.

The next night – outside Arvind’s Bungalow. The street was quiet, a faint yellow streetlight buzzing above. Vera stood beside her car, hood up, gloves on. Her face was blank.

In her hand: the same flash drive, now broken, its metal casing twisted. In her other hand: a note. Five words, written in red ink on plain paper. *I saw what you did.*

She walked to the front door, silent as smoke, and slid the note through the gap beneath it. No need to wait. No need to speak.

Professor Arvind Singh would find it in the morning. Maybe sooner. Maybe tonight, when he came home from pretending to be someone he wasn't.

And when he did—He'd know the game was over.

Vera walked into the night, the wind at her back. Another predator marked. Another silence broken. She wasn't a savior. She was a shadow with a purpose. And she never missed once.

The next afternoon, **Vera** returned to her rented house with a chilling sense of purpose.

She powered on her system, connected the **satellite phone** through the encrypted cable, and uploaded the **image of Arvind**—the man who had once tried to outsmart her. She added his **work and home address**.

She typed the final word: **Password: SLAYER**

And hit send.

A few seconds later, she sent another message:

"I want him tonight. And be warned—he might know something is coming. He's not dumb."

The hacker replied almost instantly:

"Thanks for the heads up. I'll get him arranged. You'll have your package tonight."

Midnight.

The room was still. Cold. Sterile.

Arvind lay strapped tightly on the metal table—bound by thick rope, drenched in sweat, and barely conscious.

When his eyes fluttered open, they landed on **Vera**—standing over him in silence, a shadow in black.

Recognition struck his face.

“You’re the one...” he stammered, voice hoarse, fear creeping into every syllable.

“The one who took my flash drive...”

Vera stepped closer, calm and composed.

“Then I guess you already know what’s coming next.” She tilted her head, giving him a faint, almost eerie smile.

“Ever heard of the serial killer who only kills rapists?”

His eyes widened. His lips trembled.

“So it’s you,” he whispered.

Fear swept over his face like a tide. He started tugging violently at the ropes, but they held tight. His breathing turned erratic.

Vera said nothing.

She simply took a piece of cloth, shoved it into his mouth, and taped it shut.

Then, slowly, she picked up the **knife**.

His heart pounded. So loud. So sharp. Like a bass drop in a nightclub.

With methodical precision, she **cut open the skin on his back**, peeled it apart, and **removed both kidneys**. The pain made his whole body seize. His muffled cries were raw, guttural—drenched in horror.

Finally, with a quick, deep plunge, she tore out his **heart**.

He went still.

She turned the body over.

Carved one word deep into his chest:

RAPIST

Vera moved quickly now.

She wrapped the kidneys in solution and **sealed them in a container**, placing it carefully in the trunk of her car beside the corpse, **tarp-wrapped and unrecognizable**.

She drove to the **abandoned government building**—the same place as before—and found the man in the **red hoodie** waiting in the shadows.

Not a word was exchanged. She handed him the container.

And vanished.

Her next destination: **Kurukshetra University**.

At around **3:00 a.m.**, the campus slept beneath faint streetlights and a moonless sky.

Vera parked silently near the **main gate**. Her movements were fluid, purposeful. She dragged Arvind's lifeless body from the trunk and positioned it upright against the **university's entrance gate**.

Then she added the usual elements:

- The **heart**, placed neatly in his palm
- A **stone**, clenched in his other hand
- And an **envelope**—sealed, typed on her old typewriter

{ He was yours to stop. You had the reports. The rumors. The girls who vanished, dropped out, broke down in silence. You did nothing.

So I did something.

This isn't vengeance. This is repair.

One less predator in your system. One less uniformed coward hiding behind tenure and titles.

I didn't need a warrant. I needed the truth. And I found it, where you refused to look.

Don't waste time chasing me.
Save it for the next girl crying in your precinct.

Or don't.

And I'll be there before you can blink.

Your system is broken. I'm just the crack spreading through it. }

The Sixth Kill

The sun blazed overhead, and the crowd churned like a restless sea—waving flags, chanting slogans, some genuinely inspired, others just following orders. Vera stood among them, arms crossed, her black kurta sticking slightly to her skin. She didn't want to be here. None of this was her fight. But attendance had been *mandatory*, as her computer science professor Rajbir had made clear.

“Students of the future must understand politics!” he had declared. Vera had only smirked. *The future doesn't need another rapist in a white kurta giving speeches.*

The stage was set with garlands and plastic chairs. Loudspeakers screamed patriotic songs. Local politicians flanked a tall man stepping up to the mic—**MLA Satyaveer Duhan from Delhi**. A former teacher-turned-public leader. Charismatic. Smiling. Dangerous.

Vera knew the type. Men who used power like perfume to hide the stink of rot underneath.

She tuned out his speech, letting her eyes drift through the crowd. The excitement made people careless. That's when secrets often slipped. That's when she noticed the girl.

She stood at the edge of the barricade, no older than 17, her schoolbag hugged to her chest like armor. She flinched every time someone clapped. Something was wrong in her posture. Vera could see the silence in her eyes. She recognized it. That haunted stiffness. Like her skin wasn't hers anymore. Vera moved closer. Slowly.

When the crowd shifted, she slid up beside the girl and whispered, “You okay?” The girl jolted, eyes wide.

“I saw you shaking,” Vera added calmly. “You're not just cold.”

“I—I'm fine,” the girl said, stepping back.

Vera didn't push. “You know the man speaking?”

The girl swallowed hard. “Yes. He comes to our school sometimes. Says he funds the girls' hostel.”

“That's generous,” Vera said, tone flat. “But you don't like him.”

The girl's eyes darted left and right. She leaned in, voice a trembling whisper. “He calls some of us for interviews... alone. He said it's for scholarships.” Vera didn't need the rest spelled out.

“How long ago?”

“Last month,” the girl whispered. “He said if I told anyone, he'd cancel my hostel seat. I haven't told anyone. I just... come to all his rallies now. Pretend.”

Vera nodded, heart steady.

“What's your name?”

The girl hesitated. “Meena.”

“You did the right thing, Meena,” Vera said gently, her eyes already locking onto Satyaveer again.

He was smiling for cameras now, waving to the crowd like a man bathed in glory. Vera had seen that kind of smile before—on photos nailed to police bulletin boards, on missing girls' last birthday selfies.

Later, as the rally dispersed, Vera stayed behind, blending in with the event staff. She watched Satyaveer exit behind the stage, flanked by two men who looked more like bouncers than aides. He lit a cigarette casually, talking to them as he climbed into his private car.

Vera memorized the license plate. She'd follow from a distance. She always did. She never rushed. She stalked.

That night—Vera's room. She sat cross-legged on the floor, the lights off. Her laptop glowed faintly as she scrolled through newspaper archives.

Satyaveer Duhan. Celebrated youth leader. Once accused of misconduct at a private coaching institute in 2015—case quietly closed, victim recanted. Donor to two girls' schools. Frequently praised for “uplifting rural daughters.”

Vera clenched her jaw. They always hid behind “noble causes.”

She opened a small black notebook and added his name to a list. Below Arvind Singh. Beside others she never needed to forget.

“When power protects the guilty, justice has to come wearing shadows.”

Back at her rented house, **Vera** sat in the dark, her eyes reflecting the faint blue glow of the screen. She uploaded the **image of Satyaveer Duhan**, a powerful politician known for his media-friendly smiles and darker secrets behind closed doors.

She sent the picture and two addresses—his home and guesthouse—along with the line:

“He’s a politician. Travels with bouncers. Just letting you know.”

A few minutes later, the hacker responded:

“You’re making the kidnappers work overtime every time you pick a new victim. But I’ll do anything for kidneys.”

Then another message blinked in:

“We’ll need a clean window—one where he’s alone. Might take a few days. I’ll text you the moment he’s grabbed. For now, keep your satellite phone close.”

Vera nodded to herself, leaned back in the chair, and let the silence wrap around her like armor.

The next morning, she texted Gayatri:

“Tanya’s forcing me to go with her to Shahbad and stay at her home for a few days. Can I go, Mom?”

Half an hour passed before the reply buzzed in:

“That’s okay. You can go.”

No further words were needed. Vera already knew where she’d be staying.

Guesthouse. Delhi. 11:43 PM.

The **black van** had been parked outside for twenty minutes—unmarked, tinted windows, engine low and steady. Three men sat inside, still as stone. No chatter. No music. Just a picture and a mission.

The iron gate creaked open.

MLA Satyaveer Duhan emerged, phone pressed to his ear, his jacket flung casually over his shoulder. Alone. Unprotected. He thought this guesthouse was discreet. Safe. It had always been—until now.

One of the kidnappers stepped out, pretending to smoke by the curb.

Satyaveer slowed. “You lost?”

The man shrugged. “No.”

From the darkness behind, another man emerged—fast, precise—chloroform rag clamped over the politician’s face.

The MLA gasped, tried to scream, but it was too late.

In less than **ten seconds**, he was unconscious—dragged, folded, and thrown into the back of the van. Gone.

The guard at the gate would later claim he never saw a thing.

An hour later.

Satyaveer’s eyelids flickered. His head throbbed. His limbs were numb.

He tried to move—but couldn’t.

Then he saw **her**.

Vera. Standing by his side. Unblinking. Unforgiving.

Her voice was low and lethal:

“You stood behind podiums preaching morality...
Funded schools to hide your filth...
Thought your power made you untouchable.

But justice doesn't knock, Satyaveer.
Sometimes it breaks in. Wearing silence.
And finishes what the law was too afraid to begin.”

His eyes widened. He tried to plead—but a piece of
cloth was forced into his mouth, and taped shut.

Then came the knife.

It carved down his back, precise and cruel.
His kidneys came out first, soaked in blood.
Then **his heart**.

His silent screams echoed louder than any rally he'd ever
delivered.

Finally, she flipped his lifeless body and etched the word
into his chest with surgical accuracy:

RAPIST

The final act.

At **4:00 AM**, Vera pulled up near the **guesthouse** again.

The night was still. Silent.

The security guard was asleep at his post, snoring softly
under dim yellow lights.

She opened the trunk, pulled out the tarp-covered
corpse, and dragged it quietly across the road.

She leaned the body against the guesthouse gate.

Then, as always, she left:

- **The heart**, placed neatly in his palm
- **A smooth stone**, in the other
- **A sealed envelope**, tucked under his folded arm

{ He promised them scholarships. He gave them scars. Your leaders wear white, but their hands are soaked in silence.

He wasn't the first. He won't be the last.

But he's the one who paid today. This is not a warning.

This is a pattern.

Every time the system protects a predator, I'll carve justice where your laws won't.

Stop hiding them behind podiums. Stop calling it a scandal when it's a crime. You failed those girls. I won't. }

By the time dawn cracked over Delhi, a new story had begun to bleed into headlines.

Not just a killing.

A warning.

Justice was hunting in shadows. And her name was Vera.

The Seventh Kill

Vera moved silently through the kitchen, the glow of the refrigerator casting long shadows across the floor. She grabbed a **carton of apple juice** and a small plate of **sandwiches** from the shelf.

Two glasses. One of them held **more than just juice**.

As she stirred the sleeping pill into the left glass, her hands didn't tremble.

Not anymore.

In her room, **Tanya** sat cross-legged on the bed, scrolling through her phone. Vera handed her a glass and a sandwich, sitting beside her as they quietly ate.

She watched Tanya closely—every sip, every bite.

When the glass was empty, Vera finally let herself breathe.

Thirty minutes later, Tanya dozed off, her head gently falling to the side.

Vera moved the moment her breathing softened.

She opened her bedside drawer and pulled out an old **photo album**, flipping to the **freshers' party** group shot from college. There he was—**Rajat**, smiling, arm around another guy, confidence plastered across his face.

She folded the photo and slipped it into her pocket.

Then, quietly, she left her **cellphone on the bed**, exited the house, and locked the door from the outside.

By **7:15 PM**, Vera was at her **rented house**, hunched over the screen in the glow of her computer. She connected her **satellite phone** to the encrypted system and uploaded **Rajat's image** along with the **college address**.

Her fingers danced over the keyboard:

“I want him today.”

A pause.

Then the hacker’s reply came in:

“Give me a minute.”

Each second felt like a lifetime.

Finally, the message appeared:

“We both just got lucky. And yes, it can be done.”

At exactly **10:17 PM**, **Rajat coughed** and jerked awake.

His limbs were restrained. The table beneath him was cold. And above him stood **Vera**.

No mask.

No mercy.

His voice cracked. “What the hell—what are you doing? Vera?! Let me go!”

He squirmed, struggling violently against the ropes. His eyes darted to the **knife** in her hand.

“Tell me this is a joke, Vera. Please...”

But she didn’t flinch. She didn’t blink.

She stuffed a cloth into his mouth and sealed it with tape.

Just before the first cut, her voice came like a blade:

“This is for Tanya. The girl you raped and thought would stay silent.”

The knife slid through skin. His muffled screams were raw and desperate.

His **kidneys** came out first, followed by the **heart**—now useless.

Vera didn’t shed a tear.

When it was done, she turned him over and carved the word into his chest with slow, precise strokes:

RAPIST

Later, Vera delivered the **organs** to the usual contact—the man in red, standing in the shadows of the abandoned office building.

No words were exchanged.

Just a transaction between justice and retribution.

Then came the final act.

Near midnight, Vera drove to **her college**.

The night was quiet, the streetlights flickering like nervous candles.

She pulled the tarp back, revealing Rajat’s lifeless body.

She positioned him carefully against the **college gate**, just beneath the stone carving of the institution’s motto.

In one hand, she placed his **heart**.

In the other, a **stone**.

At his feet, a **sealed envelope** with a message.

She left him there—a warning in flesh and blood.

Then Vera returned home, quietly unlocked the door, and slipped back into bed beside Tanya, who was still peacefully asleep.

She lay there in silence, her eyes wide open.

Another scream had been silenced.

And the war was far from over.

The Eighth Kill

Forgiveness had just been granted.

Gayatri's heart, worn and weathered by years of betrayal, had somehow found the strength to let go. She forgave Dev.

And in that fragile moment of reconciliation, **Vera stepped into the hospital room**, a glass of water in her hand.

Dev gave her a soft smile—the kind of smile she used to treasure.

She handed him the water silently, her eyes scanning the room until they landed on her phone lying at the corner of his hospital bed. She picked it up, having forgotten it in her rush.

Later that night, long after Gayatri had left for Panipat and Dev had fallen into a deep sleep, Vera lay beside him in

the sterile silence of the hospital room. She picked up her phone and began scrolling through Instagram reels—funny clips, music overlays, filters, faces.

But none of it held her attention.

She switched to her gallery to post something—anything—to feel normal again. That’s when she noticed a **video she didn’t remember recording**.

Curious, she tapped it open.

At first, all she could see was a ceiling fan spinning lazily above. But then, **voices** began to bleed through the hum.

She froze.

Dev’s voice. Gayatri’s.

“Yes... I did those things... I raped you... I hit you...”

Vera’s breath hitched in her throat.

She sat motionless as the words clawed at her skin. The room spun. The man lying beside her—the man who had held her hand through scraped knees and math tests—was a **monster**.

She locked her phone and stood up abruptly, choking on the air.

Outside, beneath the hospital’s flickering streetlamp, she gasped in long, desperate breaths. Her hands gripped the cold railing. Rage burned in her chest, but beneath that fire was grief—a deep, shattering grief.

Her father was not who she thought he was.

He never had been.

When Dev was discharged two days later, Vera drove him back to Gayatri's for dinner. She smiled. She listened. She even helped him walk to the car.

But **the only thing on her mind was justice.**

Later that night, after bringing Dev home and helping him into bed, Vera prepared his medicine—just like always. But tonight, the glass of water was laced with a **strong sleeping pill.**

Thirty minutes later, he was out cold.

At **11 PM**, Vera slipped out of bed and left her phone behind. No calls. No messages. No trace.

She drove to her rented house and powered up the encrypted satellite system. The message was brief:

“Take care of the cameras. No kidnapping this time. I'll deliver the kidneys.”

The hacker replied:

“Saves me money. Cameras are handled. Do your thing.”

Back at her own house, Vera didn't use her key.

Instead, she broke in through the back—just as any intruder would.

She carried a backpack.

Inside it: two napkins, both soaked with **chloroform.**

She placed the first one on the floor beside Dev's bed.

Within moments, his breathing slowed. Deepened.

Then she **dragged him out**, wrapped in a blanket, into the car.

Back inside, she placed the second napkin beside **her own bed**, as if an intruder had tried to silence her too.

It was all part of the illusion.

At the rented house, Vera tied Dev to the table—the same table where **justice had been served seven times before**.

But tonight was different.

This wasn't a stranger. This was **her father**.

Her hands trembled as she held the knife.

Dev was still unconscious. He'd never know she was the one who ended him.

Maybe that was a mercy. Maybe it wasn't.

She leaned in, whispered:

“I will never forgive you for what you did to my mother.”

“You were my hero. And now you're just another rapist.”

A single tear slipped from her eye as she pressed the blade into his back.

Her hands shook violently as she removed his **kidneys**, and then his **heart**.

The room was silent—except for the faint buzz of a fly and the hum of her guilt.

Two hours later, Vera had cleaned the blood, sterilized the tools, and packed the organs.

First, she made the **delivery**—same man, same handshake of silence.

Then she returned to her neighborhood.

It was just past 4 AM.

She parked far from the house, dragged Dev's lifeless body to the front gate, and arranged it with precision:

- The **heart** in one hand
- A **stone** in the other
- An envelope sealed tightly

She drove away before the sun rose.

Slipped back into her bed, beside the scent of her own staged chloroform trap.

When the city woke up, they'd find **Dev Malhotra**, once a respected man, **marked with truth**:

RAPIST

And no one—not even Vera herself—would be able to pretend the past hadn't happened.

Chapter 21

The Return of The Unseen

The rain fell in relentless sheets, hammering against the rusted metal of the abandoned shipping container like a thousand whispered confessions. The air was thick with the scent of damp earth and something far more sinister—something chemical, something fatal.

Runjish Kapoor, a CBI officer, pulled his coat tighter around himself as he approached the scene, his boots sinking slightly into the mud. His breath fogged in the cold night air, and the distant flicker of police lights painted the scene in jagged flashes of blue and red. The container had been found on the outskirts of the Panipat city, its doors welded shut from the outside. The anonymous tip had been chillingly brief—just GPS coordinates and two words:

"Justice delivered."

He didn't need to see inside to know what awaited him. The media vans were already there, cameras rolling, reporters speaking in hushed, excited tones. This wasn't just another crime scene. This was a spectacle. A statement.

And Runjish knew, deep in his bones, that this was *her* work.

The Container

The forensic team moved in first, masks secured over their faces. The moment the blowtorch cut through the last of the welds and the doors groaned open, the stench hit like a physical force—a sickly-sweet, acrid odor that made even the most hardened officers recoil.

Inside, the bodies were piled like discarded mannequins, limbs tangled in grotesque embraces. Twenty-three men, their faces frozen in silent screams, their skin tinged an unnatural blue. Poison gas. A slow, agonizing death.

Runjish clenched his jaw. He recognized some of them from old case files—repeat offenders, men who had walked free on technicalities, men whose victims had never seen justice.

And then there was the one on *top* of the container.

The Signature

A single victim had been placed above the rest, positioned like a macabre trophy. His back was torn apart—a clean, precise cut, with the victim's heart and a stone placed in the hands. No hesitation. No mistakes.

Runjish's stomach twisted.

He had seen this exact cut before.

A Year ago, during the "*Aviyansh and Anju's*" killings, that's what everyone believed at that time but he and his team knew they got wrong people and yet they choosed to remain silent. People moved on. The media had moved on.

But Runjish had always doubted and couldn't be able to sleep at night because of the truth that may come in front of everyone one day.

Because the real killer—the one they had never caught—had left notes.

And now, taped to the victim's chest with **RAPIST** written on his chest, was a folded piece of paper, sealed in plastic.

The Message

Runjish didn't need to open it to know who it was from.

"To the rapists who thought the law would never touch them—

To the judges who looked the other way—

To the system that failed the broken and the bruised—

You told the world I was caught. You lied.

These men died because you set them free. Their blood is on your hands as much as mine.

And if you think this is the end, you're wrong.

This is justice.

This is mercy.

This is only the beginning."

Runjish exhaled slowly, the weight of the truth pressing down on him like a physical force.

Vera had never been caught.

She had been *waiting*.

The Media Frenzy

The cameras zoomed in, the headlines already writing themselves.

"MASSACRE IN THE DOCKS—SERIAL KILLER RETURNS?"

"23 DEAD IN SUSPECTED VIGILANTE ATTACK"

"IS THE SERIAL KILLER STILL OUT THERE?"

Reporters shouted questions, their voices overlapping in a chaotic din. Runjish ignored them, his mind racing. Vera had chosen this location deliberately—isolated enough to ensure no witnesses, public enough to guarantee maximum exposure.

She *wanted* the world to see.

And worse—she wanted them to know she had won.

The Unfinished Case

Back at the precinct, the files from the old cases were spread across Runjish's desk. He had reviewed them a hundred times, always circling back to the same inconsistencies.

One man and one woman arrested who were husband and wife but this time they weren't the ones who did the killings but they were saving Vera, real masterminds. Their confessions had been shaky, coerced.

Because Vera had *stopped*.

Or so they thought.

Now, she was back. And this time, she wasn't hiding.

The Trap

Runjish knew one thing for certain—Vera wasn't done.

This wasn't just about killing rapists. It was about exposing the failures of the system. About humiliating the authorities who had declared victory too soon.

And worst of all—she was *enjoying* it.

Somewhere out there, she was watching. Waiting for the next move.

And Runjish had no doubt—

She had already chosen her next victims.

The End... Or The Beginning?

The rain had stopped by the time Runjish left the station, but the air still felt heavy, charged with something unspoken.

He looked up at the darkened sky, the city lights reflecting off the low-hanging clouds.

Vera was out there.

And this time, he wouldn't let her disappear.